The lock, the key and the sacrifice

by LetheSomething

Summary

Yachi's life is nice, stable and utterly boring until a strange book takes her to Vaeda, a sprawling city full of witches and magical creatures from all over the world. It is home to magic coffee shop owners, budding artists, talking cats, radiant host club owners and a mysterious nurse in an improbable van.

It is also, as a young warrior named Kageyama finds out, in big, big trouble.

An urban fantasy AU story in which half the Haikyuu cast has to band together to save the world.

Finished!

Notes
Hi and welcome to my sprawling urban fantasy story. This AU is vaguely inspired by things like Fables, Sandman or Buffy, worlds where the supernatural exists, but most people are just kind of unaware of it. Feel free to comment, review, criticize or... theorize. I'd love to hear your opinion.
February 11 th, 9:03 pm, Light District, Vaeda

Yachi Hitoka ran through rain soaked streets, occasionally brushing a stray strand of blond hair out of her face. She was going to die. She was certain. She was already completely out of breath and there was a sharp pain in her sides. She was definitely going to die. Whenever she looked back, he was there. 'It' was there, ignored by the other pedestrians, just casually strolling along at a speed that was definitely not human.

From afar, he looked like a bug with the way the orange street lights glinted off his sunglasses. Close up, where she certainly didn't want him to be, he looked like a normal guy. He was taller than her, like most people were, and he was dressed in jeans, sneakers and a white shirt. He had a perpetual smile on his face and he followed, apparently unaffected by stop lights, or cars, or pedestrians. An unstoppable force. “Like a terminator”, Yachi thought. She could only wish it was something like that. At least Hollywood had taught her how to deal with a robot. It involved smelting plants and guns and it was completely impossible, but she'd know what she was supposed to do. This thing was completely new.

She ducked into an alley and fumbled in her pocket for the book.

“Tell me something! Anything!” she prayed while taking it out.

“It's your fault I'm here!” she thought, before throwing in a quick “Sorry!”

With a deep breath she opened the book, it's thin, transparent pages fluttering in the wind. After a few seconds, it fell open on a list of addresses. The top of the page read 'Sanctuary'. Well, that was convenient. Yachi stared at it, slowing down to squint at the pages in the low light. There were places in Paris, Moscow, Beijing, a single one in Canberra. She scanned the page as quickly as she could.

“Please, please, please,” she whispered to herself. Somewhere near the bottom were the addresses for the city she was in. There were a lot of them, mostly near the Old Quarter. That was halfway across town. She'd never make it. But then there it was, almost at the edge of the page: 'Avenue of Light 15'. The main street of the block she was on, an asphalt river of clubs, bars and casinos, shooting neon light into the night sky. All she had to do was look for the pink glow.

The sound of footsteps made her look up and she squeaked, nearly dropping her book. The man in sunglasses smiled at her, hands tucked in the pockets of his jeans.

It was not a friendly smile.

January 3 rd, 8:25 pm, Sendai, Japan

She never really knew where it had come from. It just showed up one day, sitting on the shelf between a book full of chocolate based recipes and a sappy novel some misguided aunt had given
her for a birthday. It was old, bound in fine leather, and it was unmistakably pretty. It was the kind of book Yachi would be tempted to buy just because she liked the look of it. But she certainly didn't remember ever buying it, not on any of her trips to garage sales and second hand stores. Through no fault of hers, the book was just there. It had taken up residence, like a cat that starts hanging out in your yard and decides that, yes, this is the human it will be living with from now on.

The leather bound book had adopted her.

The book had traveled with her for several years before she ever decided to read it. It moved from her first dorm room to her very first apartment. It inexplicably found a seat on a shelf filled to the brim with design books and treatises on volleyball, in the living room she shared with Kiyoko.

And while the volleyball books were now gone, moved away along with her partner, the leather bound book that had adopted her had found its way into the right moving box. It currently sat on the bookshelf by the door to her tiny new living room, next to the chocolate book, its recipes still untried after all these years. She'd occasionally glance at it and its companion, telling herself that really, she should at least make the chocolate cookies. But the thought of getting up and doing something was usually quickly abandoned. Instead, she'd curl up on the couch, hug a pillow and watch cartoons until she fell asleep.

That was how it went until one day, the book demanded to be read.

That night she came home from work, exhausted after a long day of dealing with irate clients changing their design demands at the last minute, when she nearly tripped into the wardrobe. Her foot had struck the leather bound book, laying on the floor in front of the bookcase. Yachi took off her coat and brought the book to her couch, where she crawled under a blanket and decided that she may as well find out what it was about.

On the first page, the author or previous owner had scrawled something in wide, luxurious pen strokes.

'Let's go on an adventure,' it said.
A different world

Chapter Summary

After four nights of staying up way too late to read the strange book, things around Yachi started to change.

January 4th, 3:55 am, Sendai, Japan

The book turned out to be the weirdest thing Yachi had ever read. It wasn't a particularly large book, but it seemed to have an infinite amount of extremely thin, almost transparent pages. And it wasn't really a novel, so much as a collection of completely fictitious knowledge. It had history chapters about things she was sure never happened, it featured lists of addresses and strange drawings. Parts of it looked like a bestiary for mythological beasts, while other parts talked about which of two restaurants to go to if you ever found yourself in a particular small village in eastern Tibet. It had maps and strange formulas and what looked like encoded diary entries. And every time she opened it, there seemed to be new and previously unseen pages. It made zero sense.

It was fascinating.

The first night she opened it, Yachi was still wide awake at four in the morning, engrossed in the politics of a city she'd never visited.

When she sat on the train to work the next day, blearily staring at the fogged up buildings rushing by, Yachi found herself thinking about books and adventures. She'd never really been the adventurous type, but part of her had always wanted to be. And now that the life she always thought she'd lead was upended and broken, that part became stronger. She ached for something new. Something different.

When the train arrived, she shuffled to her office and put on her professional face. At noon, she walked down the steps and crossed the street to the noodle shop. She allowed herself to briefly glance into the window of the café she passed on the way, only to see a flash of dark hair. Kiyoko was working the noon shift. She quickly averted her eyes and stared at the ground in front of her feet while rushing past.

“I don't need coffee today,” Yachi told herself.

That night, she walked through the door to her tiny apartment with a spring in her step. She flung off her coat, not even caring to change into pajamas before curling up on the couch with the leather bound book. It told of worlds unknown and adventures waiting for the intrepid. It spoke of monsters and heroes and magic. All of it in such vivid detail that it seemed real and attainable.

It was exactly what she needed.
January 7th, 7:30 am, Sendai, Japan

After four nights of staying up way too late, things around Yachi started to change. She would occasionally see things from the corner of her eye. Odd things. A small man with pointy ears walking down the street, completely ignored by anyone else. A dog with no shadow. Two pigeons sitting on a roof, talking about soap operas. Every time something like that happened, she would blink and turn her head, and the world would go back to normal.

Yachi decided that she would go to bed a bit earlier.

Excerpt from the leather bound book

The world of magic folk is largely hidden from the general populace. Lack of belief in the idea of magic appears to cause an effective form of misdirection, nicknamed the Veil, making most magic folk invisible to non-magic adults and allowing them to walk and work in conventional society. It is important to note that this does not include children. Magic folk, especially the animalistic ones, are advised against approaching young humans.

It is estimated that the Veil is a product of the Age of Reason, or the focus of society on science and progress. Many consider it to be a blessing (see chapter 153 B.8, Inquisition).

“The best thing that ever happened for magic folk, is science.” (Amina Nejem Al-Haytham, tenth century witch).

January 12th, 12:24 am, Sendai, Japan

Yachi walked down the stairs of her office and crossed the street to the noodle shop. She jostled for attention, ordered a bowl of karamiso ramen and took it with her to the park. It was a nice windless day, the first rays of winter sun warming the ground and teasing life out of the dead trees. But it was still cold, and Yachi had the walking lanes all to herself. She huddled her thick coat around her and sat down happily on a bench in the sun. When she blew on her noodles, they created a little cloud of steam around her.

“Did you see last night’s show?”, a sliver of conversation flowed through the air near her.

“Yeah, watched it through the window of old man Han,” another voice piped up.

Yachi looked up from her Styrofoam bowl.

“Man, I loved it when they dunked them in the water! That part always gets me,” giggled the first voice.

Yachi scanned the lanes and fields around her. There was no one there.
“The bit with the cockroaches was good,” the second voice said.

Yachi was really searching now. She seemed to be alone. Was this some weird candid camera show? Oh god, were they going to make fun of her on national television?

“You would like those, wouldn't you. But man, hahaha. Did you see the look on that one woman’s face? Didya see it didya see it?”

A movement caught Yachi’s eye. In the tree above her head, a pigeon was hopping excitedly from one foot to the other.

“She was all 'aaaaah',” the bird opened its wings, “and then the other guy screamed like a banshee, 'EEEEEEEK', and man, that was so good.”

The pigeon was now flapping its wings and the one next to it nodded its head, until it noticed it was being watched. Yachi stared open mouthed at the birds. The one that had been hopping up and down turned its head, so it could glare at her with one red eye. It somehow looked offended.

“What?” it said, “I like my game shows, ok?”

Yachi blinked.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered. “I'm very sorry but... pigeons don't... talk?” She closed her eyes and shook her head. Usually things went back to normal when she did that, but when she looked back at the birds, they were still there. Still glaring at her.

“Uh,” the less offended bird said. “Rooooo?”

His buddy snickered.

Yachi stared. She was officially going out of her mind. One: these pigeons were talking, which was highly illogical. Two: now that she got a good look at them, they didn't look like pigeons at all. One of them looked more like a greyish crow, with sharp talons and beady dark brown eyes. His buddy, the snickering one, was much larger than any pigeon, or even any bird she'd ever seen outside of a zoo. It had a hawk beak and glowing red eyes with silver, kite-like wings.

How did she ever mistake that thing for a pigeon? And what was she thinking offending something like that? This creature was terrifying and if it wanted to, it could easily kill her. She started inching away from it, slowly sliding to the edge of the bench.

“Uh, ss-sorry,” she squeaked, “I, uh, didn't mean to bother you. I'll, uh, I'll be off now.”

“What about your lunch?” the crow thing asked.

“Uh, uhhhh, you have it. I'm not hungry anymore,” Yachi mumbled and with that, she ran off.

The larger bird let out a sharp laugh.

“Idiot,” it said and it fluttered to the bench to scarf down Yachi's noodles.

“You have a bad personality,” his friend said. The larger bird merely gave him a look.

“What? It's always cute to see newbies,” the crow thing shot back: “It's like watching a chick hatch.”
It jumped down and approached the Styrofoam bowl. “Now share, ya big bully.”
Chapter Summary

Yachi found herself with a talking bird sprawled across the back of her armchair.

Excerpt from the leather bound book

Traumatic experiences or prolonged exposure to magic can break the Veil for non-magic folk, causing them to see what is there and not merely what is expected. This process can cause heavy mental strain on the patient. Symptoms of Pierced Veil Syndrome include nightmares, self-doubt and paranoia, with a heightened risk of alcoholism and drug abuse. It is estimated that 1.5 percent of patients in psychiatry are, in fact, experiencing a tear in the Veil.

January 15th, 19:21 am, Sendai, Japan

Yachi walked home from the train station, utterly exhausted. She carefully checked both ways before turning into her street and took off her bag to rummage for her keys.

Nothing weird had happened for a couple of days, but then again, Yachi had basically refused to look at anything or anyone. She had walked to work with headphones on and had not left her office for lunch. She had gone to bed super early and most of all, she hadn't touched the book. It lay buried in a shoebox at the bottom of her closet. It pained her to do this, but really, the thing had a terrible influence on her and 'insane' was a bad thing to have on your medical record or resume.

“Uh, lady?,” a strangely familiar voice called as she was about to climb the steps to her apartment building. “You got any bread on you? Some noodles maybe?”

Slowly, carefully, she turned around. On the fence next to her building, obscured by shadows made by the harsh streetlight, sat the silhouette of a bird.

Yachi squeaked and froze in her tracks.

“Jeez, lady, calm down,” the bird said. “I'm not going to eat you.”

“How do you know where I live?” Yachi started, “How do you know where I live?”

“Uh,” the voice sounded sheepish, “I kinda followed you?”

She gave a small shriek and started running up the stairs, while nervously digging through her bag for the keys.

“Just to look after you, mind,” the bird said, “You look like you're new to this thing.”
“Wh- what thing?” Yachi managed.

“The talking bird thing?” it said, “the part where there's creatures like me, and magic and ghosts?”

“Gh-ghosts?!,” she held on to the railing of the staircase to keep her balance, since her knees suddenly decided they were made of rubber.

“They're mostly harmless,” he added quickly. “Jeez, will you calm down? This is exactly why I've been trying to keep an eye on you.”

He hopped a little closer. Now that the grey crow was visible in the street light, he was a lot less scary. He was smaller than she remembered but most of all, he looked absolutely pitiful. A lot of his feathers were gone and he had large red gashes on the side of one wing.

“What happened to you?” she said, torn between fear and worry for the poor thing.

“Oh this,” the bird answered, “I kinda got in a fight.” If birds could shrug, that's what he'd be doing now. Instead, it looked like he just fluttered a little.

“With your friend?” Yachi asked, wide-eyed, wondering how he'd ever survive claws that large.

“You think I'd be that stupid?” the crow answered, “Nah, he's out of town and I may or may not have stolen some food from a rook. It turned out he had back-up.”

Yachi blinked while the bird did his flutter-shrug again.

“Anyway, it's been kinda hard to find food like this. So, uh, about that bread...”

As he awkwardly hopped along on the fence, Yachi could see that one of his talons was also bent at a painful looking angle. She sighed. He looked really, really beat-up. As much as she wanted to run and ignore everything that had just happened here, the part of her that worried about scraped knees and rescue kittens took over. There was no way she could leave him like this.

“Uh, can you fly up to my window?” she said, before she could even stop herself, “It's at the back, second floor.”

The bird nodded and took off, while Yachi looked around, hoping no one had just seen her invite an animal into her very strict no-pet apartment building. She quickly made her way up the steps and ran to her flat.

When she walked into her little kitchen, the bird was sitting on the windowsill outside. She opened the window.

“Mind if I come in? It's bloody cold out here,” the bird said.

Yachi nodded and the bird hopped through the window with a gruff 'Sorry to intrude'.

He sat on top of the faucet and watched her rifle through kitchen cupboards.

“Do you, uh, have a name? Mister crow?” Yachi babbled, trying to keep herself from thinking about
this situation and how completely insane it was, “I'm Yachi.”

“Ukai,” the crow responded. “I remember that one.”

“Remember?” Yachi frowned, while she dug out an old box of cereal.

“Uh, I lost a lot in the... transition.” The bird flutter-shrugged.

Yachi turned around to tilt her head at the strange bird.

“What? You think I was born like this?”

“I'm... sorry?”

“I was a regular guy. I remember going to school and sneaking cigs behind the bicycle racks. But one day I woke up like this. Must have pissed off the wrong dude.”

Yachi poured the cereal into a bowl and placed it on the counter. She was about to ask if he wanted milk, but the bird was already inhaling the dry contents, little mumbles of 'Aww man, muesli!' escaping him between gulps.

Yachi smiled and watched the crow thing eat until he looked up.

“What?”

“Shouldn't we take you to a... vet?” she asked.

“Not sure they'd know what to do,” the bird replied.

“Well, I do have disinfectant, and bandages, and dressings, and a hot pack and probably some ointment,” Yachi trailed off and started walking towards the bathroom.

Ukai noticed a tiny, fiery glint in her eye before she left the kitchen.

Then he remembered that the window was closed.

“Well shit,” he mumbled to himself.

Half an hour later, the bird had been washed, disinfected and bandaged up, mostly against his will. He sat on the kitchen table and looked up at Yachi with one eye, while she washed her hands.

“Oi, lady,” the bird said, “How am I supposed to fly like this?” He lifted up a fully bandaged wing.

“You really shouldn't strain a limb with wounds like that,” Yachi replied.

“Does that mean you're going to take care of me?” his voice had a slight mocking tone, but apparently, she was. That evening, despite the fact that she was going to get in so much trouble if anyone were to see him, Yachi found herself with a talking bird sprawled across the back of her armchair. He was audibly snoring.
Chapter Summary

Yachi stared at her computer screen, fighting the growing sadness inside, before printing the article and pretending to get back to work.

January 16th, 06:42 am, Sendai, Japan

When Yachi got up the next morning, Ukai had made himself comfortable between two cushions in the armchair. He was still fast asleep. She pulled out an old blanket and settled it over him, before setting out another bowl of cereal and some water. Softly treading out of the apartment, she hoped to god he wouldn't poop all over the place.

She had trouble focusing on her work that day. Occasionally she'd find herself on a search engine, looking for people called Ukai. A large part of her assumed she wouldn't find anything. Things like this did not exist. Surely this was a weird dream and when she came back home, he'd be gone.

But she did find a man called Ukai.

It was a small blurb in the local newspaper from two years ago. He had been missing for more than a week when the article was published. It had all the symptoms of a cold case. The 30-year old had disappeared without a trace. The police were baffled. No leads. There was a picture of a gruff looking man with dyed blond hair and sharp eyebrows and a telephone number for sending in tips.

Two years.

Yachi stared at her screen, fighting the growing sadness inside, before printing the article and pretending to get back to work.

That evening, the sound of the tv greeted her as soon as she opened the door to her flat. Ukai sat in a nest of cushions and blankets on her armchair, watching a soap opera.

“Welcome back,” he said while she shrugged off her coat.

“Uhh, hi,” Yachi answered. “I brought some food.” She lifted the plastic bag she'd been carrying.

“I was thinking of making beef rice, but I don't really know what you... eat though.”

“Everything,” the bird said immediately, “You ever had a worm? Those things look gross, but it turns out they're amazing. I also ate that fly in your window. Don't know if you were saving it for anything.”

Yachi shook her head quickly. “That's, uh, fine.”
The bird hopped behind her to the kitchen and jumped up to the back of a chair while she unpacked her groceries.

“So... Ukai-san,” Yachi started, carefully choosing her words, “Do you... remember what happened to you?”

“Oh boy.” She had always assumed birds couldn't sigh, but at this point, nothing much about Ukai surprised her. And he definitely sighed. “Not really,” he mumbled.

“Or... who you are?” Yachi kept her gaze on her hands while she washed them and started cutting beef.

“My brain shrunk to the size of a peanut, Yachi-san,” Ukai grumbled. “A lot of stuff got... lost.”

“I'm sorry,” Yachi said, “I... um, I found this.” She fished a folded piece of paper out of her back pocket and straightened it on the kitchen table. The bird hopped closer, pecking the picture printed next to the article.

”’Who's this? He looks familiar,” he said, excitedly.

Yachi blinked. “Oh, you don't, uh, read, do you.”

“Peanut,” the bird repeated, “What does it say?”

Yachi wrung her hands. “That guy is Ukai Keishin,” she said, softly.

“Wait, that's me?” He kept looking at the picture, with one eye, and then the other.

“And he owned a convenience store...” Yachi continued.

“Really? A store? Huh.” Ukai was hopping around the piece of paper now, seemingly trying to take it in from all angles.

“And he went missing two years ago....”

The bird looked up. “That's me,” he said, “You found me.” His voice was a strange mixture of awe and sadness. “That's me! Are they looking for me? Is there someone you can call?”

“What, uh, would we tell them?” Yachi asked.

There was a short silence while the bird stopped hopping and looked at her.

“Oh. Right,” he said, the excitement visibly draining from his little body.

“I'm gonna let you cook,” he added, fluttering off the chair and out of the kitchen.

When she came into the living room twenty minutes later, she found Ukai in his little nest, quietly watching a game show on tv. She delicately placed a beef bowl on the floor before taking her own meal to the couch. They silently ate, watching people somehow volunteer to be hit in the nuts on tv.

“This is good. You're a good cook, Yachi-san,” Ukai said, after a while, “And, uh, thanks.”

Not sure if she wanted a compliment from someone who liked worms and flies, Yachi smiled at him before clearing off the dishes. She put them in the sink and padded into her bedroom, to the closet
where she dug out the leather bound book. If she was going to help this poor birdman, she needed a place to start.

It occurred to Yachi that she’d never seen such a thing as an index in the book. She'd always just skimmed through it, reading little excerpts. Now that she was actually looking for something, she was lost.

She randomly opened it and the pages flitted to a section on the different properties of beef.

Huh.

Was that how that worked? She looked at Ukai, dejectedly watching tv.

She flipped through the book again, letting it fall open on a random page.

'Tengu', the header read. 'A large, silver bird with kite-like wings.' There was a picture of Ukai's bird friend. Yachi frowned at the page. Well, she was getting warmer.

Nothing about this made any sense, but she may as well try.

“Ukai-san? Could you help me for a second?” she called to the bird.

Ukai looked up. “Whatcha reading?” he asked.

“Um,” Yachi said, “It's, sort of, a magic book? I know it sounds weird but I think it's why I can talk to you.”

“Huh.” The bird hopped up to the back of the sofa and came to look over her shoulder. He didn't even seem to question the concept of a magic book.

“Who wrote it?” he asked.

“I... don't know?” Yachi said. The book didn't even have a title, let alone an author. From the writing style and sheer volume of it, there could very well be many.

“I was hoping it may have some advice on what to do here,” she explained.

“You're gonna trust a random book?” Ukai asked.

“Well, it's all I have,” Yachi pouted, “And look, it has a picture of your friend.”

She showed him the tengu. He seemed mildly impressed.

“Does it say anything about crows?” he asked. But turning pages back and forth through the bestiary didn't seem to make them any wiser. She'd have to try something else.

She closed the book, took a deep breath and let it fall open.

'Transmogrification', the title of the page said.

Yachi shrieked in victory, causing Ukai to awkwardly float off the back of the sofa.
Excerpt from the leather bound book

Transmogrification is the art of changing a person or creature's form. These types of spells are common in the mythology of non-magic folk, which speaks of witches turning themselves and others into toads or pigs. However, such cases are rare and mostly undocumented.

During the spell, a link to the original form always remains. Because it takes great amounts of power to keep the alternate form, transmogrifying spells usually wear off after a few hours or days. Should the condition persist, it is advised to trigger the body's memory.

Please note that transmogrification is not the same as being biformal, where a body switches between two natural states (see: Ch. 76-15 Lycanthropy) or illusion, where the image of a different form is projected (see: 4X986 Mimic).
A small bell tingly as she stepped into the building. The plaque above the door read 'Foothill store'. The place was tiny and clean, but smelled of cigarettes.

January 19th, 08:22 am, Sendai, Japan

Yachi got off the bus and nervously checked her map. The street should be around here somewhere. Looking up the address had taken several days. It had involved a lot of internet searching and one extremely frightening call to the tip line on Ukai's poster, which turned out to just be the phone number of the local police station. She had blacked out and Ukai ended up taking over. But now they knew where to go and the convenience store should be close by.

They were in one of the more rural, mountainous parts of the prefecture and Yachi strained to climb a steep slope under the weight of her backpack.

A group of teenagers rushed past her on the way to school and one of them knocked into her with a smirk.

"Watch where you're going!" he shouted.

Yachi bowed and started to apologize, when a gruff voice came from her backpack. "No, you watch where you're going, asshole."

The boy frowned but picked up his pace and joined his friends down the road.

"Ukai-san, you're supposed to be quiet," Yachi whispered.

"He was bullying you! You were just gonna let him do that?" the backpack answered, a beady brown eye peeking menacingly through an open zipper near the top. "Besides, it's stuffy in here. Open the flap thingy."

"You'll be seen!" she said and she kept walking, ignoring the occasional whine from her bag.

When she finally found the address, Yachi was happy to see that the store was still there. She had feared to find a run-down ruin or worse, a new building project. Instead, the small, wooden building seemed in decent condition. If they were going to 'trigger' Ukai's memory, the sight of his old haunts was probably a good start.

She stepped into a small copse of trees and took off her backpack, letting the still injured bird out. He ruffled his feathers and let out a relieved sigh.

"It looks like it's open," Yachi told him. "Want to go in and buy something?"

"Lady, I am NOT going back in that backpack for a while," the bird answered. "You go in and I'll
take a look around.”

He hopped off into the underbrush.

“Be careful!” Yachi whispered after him.

She picked up the bag and straightened her shoulders.

“Right. Here goes,” she thought.

A small bell tugged as she stepped into the building. The plaque above the door read 'Foothill store'. The place was tiny and clean, but smelled of cigarettes. Racks of snacks, drinks and magazines filled the room, with a fridge of cans near the door.

“Welcome! Let me know if you need anything.” The voice of a woman came from an open doorway in the back, accompanied by the smell of steamed buns.

Yachi picked up a can of iced coffee and walked over to the counter. Posters filled the back wall. A local festival, a volleyball club asking for donations, that sort of thing. But at least half of the wall was dedicated exclusively to missing persons posters. Yachi recognized a few from her daily commute through the train station. And of course there was Ukai. He was there a lot, his gruff face grumpily staring at the camera.

A stern looking, middle aged woman stepped through the door and nodded at her.

“Will that be all, miss?” she asked.

“And a steamed pork bun, please,” Yachi said.

The woman walked into the back room and returned with a paper bag while Yachi read the poster wall. She silently typed the transaction into her register and waited for the younger woman to pay.

“That's, uh, a lot of missing people,” Yachi observed, fishing for coins in her wallet.

The woman nodded grimly. “You'd think they'd try harder to find them,” she said, averting her eyes.

Yachi looked at her while she counted out her change. There were definite hints of the missing man's features in her face. And she looked so sad, Yachi had to swallow down a lump in her throat. There was no way she was going to press that subject further. Yachi thanked the woman and walked out of the store, abandoning any plans she may have had of questioning her.

Instead, she returned to the copse of trees and sat on the cold grass, opening her drink. Taking in the calm winter day, she slumped back and sighed. This was entirely too much emotion for one Yachi, she decided. It was going to break her heart. She inhaled deeply, only to feel the lump return to her throat. The coffee was not helping and she really shouldn't have bought it. It always made her feel nostalgic. The aroma would take her back to a previous apartment, to warm arms and the most beautiful woman she'd ever laid eyes on. Yachi shook her head and took a sip, scrunching her face at the sudden bitterness on her tongue.

It was ten more minutes before a rustling in the bush next to her woke Yachi from her daydreams.
“Find anything?” she asked the bird, as he hopped in front of her.

“Well, the place feels familiar...” Ukai replied, “but it's not really doing anything. You?”

“I think I met your mom,” she said, carefully.

The bird looked at her, before returning his gaze to the ground.

“Oh, and I got this!” She opened the paper bag and produced the bun she'd bought. It was still warm to the touch.

“Want a piece?” she said, splitting it in half.

The smell of it immediately hit her. It was a spicy scent, meaty and light at the same time. It smelled like something your grandma would make.

She went to offer Ukai his piece, but shrank back when it became apparent that something was very, very wrong with the bird. He made a low, growling noise and the feathers on his back were rippling. His skin stretched and crashed like waves on an ocean, before his whole body became distorted. Yachi shrieked, averting her eyes and scrambling behind a tree where she hid, head between her knees, waiting for the rumbling sound to disappear.

Time seemed to stretch forever while she sat trembling against that tree trunk. When she heard coughing, she carefully lifted up her head.

“Ukai-san?” she whispered.

“Bloody hell,” came the reply. The voice sounded the same, if a little deeper. Yachi peeked around the tree and immediately shot back to her position, head now bright red.

There was a man on the other side. A naked man.

“I think we have a bit of a problem,” he said.

Yachi rummaged through her backpack looking for something to cover him with, when a new voice approached the trees.

“What the hell is going on here?”

Yachi froze. The woman from the store was coming their way.

“Are you kids making a ruckus in here again? I'm gonna...”

The woman fell silent when she reached the copse.

From her hiding place, Yachi couldn't see what was happening, but she could hear the sound.

A sharp intake of breath, halfway between a gasp and a sob.

It was dead silent for a few seconds, before the woman spoke again.

“Keishin?” she said, almost whispering.
“Uh, hi mom.” Ukai sounded sheepish, probably embarrassed.

“What are you doing here?” his mother said, slowly, with a voice that sounded like it was on the verge of tears, “Where have you been?”

“That's, uh, hard to explain,” came the voice of Ukai. There was a rustling noise and Yachi peeked around the trunk to see the woman wordlessly drape her apron over her son.

Her mouth was set in a thin line, face impenetrable as she knelt down and touched Ukai's hair, rubbing it softly between her fingers, as if to discern whether it was real.

“Mom, I...” he started, scratching the back of his neck

She shushed him with a wave of her hand, eyes scanning his body, frowning at the gashes on his arm and the bruise on his foot.

“Let's get you inside,” she murmured before helping him up and walking him back to the store.

Yachi pondered going after them, but she suspected he'd be fine. Her presence would probably complicate things.

She picked up her backpack and returned to the bus stop with a big grin on her face.

She'd done it.
A decision

Chapter Summary

“I'm nobody, I know that,” Yachi said, wringing her hands, “but even a nobody can make a difference sometimes.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Excerpt from the leather bound book

The magic population has been relatively stable since the sixteenth century AD. In general, magic folk make up about 0.7% of a given region’s citizen count, with peaks in New Orleans, Cairo, Lima, the Himalaya region and central parts of Ireland. The highest concentration of magic folk in the world can currently be found in Vaeda. Its extremely lax immigrant laws and seeming lack of border control make it a haven to people from all over the globe, including many of the magical persuasion.

Magic population in Vaeda is estimated to be thirty percent higher than elsewhere, with numbers of up to 2.4% citizens with magic affiliation. The highest concentrations of Folk can be found in the boroughs of the Old Quarter, the Harbour District and the Light District.

Due to its large amount of Folk, Vaeda has become the unofficial capital of the magic world. It houses the international headquarters of the Folk Specialized Police Unit and a number of amenities geared towards those of a magic persuasion. There are, for instance, no less than fifteen recorded sanctuaries, as well as specialized shops and service providers.

January 26th, 21:15 am, Sendai, Japan

Yachi felt oddly light the next few days.

She'd done good. She had made a difference.

The local newspaper had published an article on the Foothill store, a follow-up to their missing person case from two years earlier. It described how the young man was found, wounded and with a spotty memory. A number of questions regarding his disappearance remained unanswered, but a blood test had identified him as the real deal. It was a mystery, the paper wrote, but one with a happy ending.

Yachi was always a sucker for happy endings.

And now she sat on the couch, talking to Ukai on her phone. He was slowly healing and regaining his memory. The general consensus seemed to be that he’d gone on a very long bender or something. He was fine with that. It was better than telling the truth and being committed to a psych ward.
He was telling her the story of how he found out that the dog that had been hanging out in the woods behind his house for most of his life wasn't actually a dog at all, when he noticed that she had gone quiet.

“So what's up,” he asked.

“Have you ever been to Vaeda?” she replied.

“Nope,” he answered, gruffly, “Why?”

“I kind of want to go there.”

She could hear him sigh on the other side.

“Is this because of the weird shit?” Ukai asked.

“Don't you want to know more, see more? Don't you want to figure out who did this to you?”

The answer came quickly: “I've seen quite enough thankyouverymuch. I'm staying as far away from magic as I possibly can and you should, too. I appreciate you helping me out, but you're going to be in way over your head,” he said, “Getting turned into a bird might be the least of your problems.”

“I think, if I got used to it, I might be able to help more people,” Yachi whispered, more to herself than to the phone.

It was quiet for a few seconds.

“Go talk to my buddy in the park,” Ukai grumbled, “He should be back by now and he has relatives there. Hopefully he'll talk you out of this stupid idea.”

“The.. the tengu?” she asked, remembering mostly claws.

“He doesn't bite,” Ukai replied with another sigh, “and besides, if you're going there, you'll see a lot worse.”

When Yachi hung up, she almost unconsciously turned to the book in her lap, like she'd done the last four nights. She didn't even think to turn on the tv.

The book had a pull on her, occupying her thoughts even when she was supposed to do something else.

She wondered if there was more she could do, more people she could help.

What if all this was a sign of some sort? What if it was her destiny?

The world that the book showed her was big and scary but Yachi found herself drawn to it. She could make a difference.

Yachi hadn't felt like this in a very long time and it was exhilarating.

She wanted to be part of this strange world and every night, the book pulled her a bit closer.
**Excerpt from the leather bound book**

Citizens of Vaeda like to refer to it as a working contradiction.

The island city-state grew from a fairly small colonial town to a metropolis in a span of a three decades. Its rise started when the city gained self-governance. This appears to have happened by accident, due to a typo in an official document that was then passed through parliament. Once his new power was discovered, the mayor of Vaeda passed several laws on trade, building regulations and, specifically, immigration. This political course has caused population to explode from 62,000 citizens to four million. The figures are estimates, since the city does not have population polls. It also does not have an official language, or a dedicated social system. Each of the 12 recognized boroughs elects its own representatives, with the mayor-president overseeing all.

Due to its rapid growth and unique position, Vaeda has been the subject of many studies by political and economic scientists, all of which have failed to draw any conclusions. It remains a mystery how the city manages to work. It simply does.

Efforts have been made to bring Vaeda back under jurisdiction of its previous country, but in the last ten years those have been abandoned. It appears no one wants to deal with the possible chaos of governing it.

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**January 27th, 12:33 am, Sendai, Japan**

Yachi walked down the steps of her office building and crossed the street. She quickly passed the café and made her way to the noodle shop, where she bought two steaming bowls of ramen.

She had a plan.

It was a cold day, with a rough northern wind, meaning the park was fairly empty. She gathered all her courage and made her way to the place where she first met the talking birds, checking trees along the way.

She had to stop to take a breath when she noticed he was there.

The tengu sat on a large branch by one of the walking lanes, preening his feathers with his enormous beak. Yachi cautiously approached him.

“Mister tengu, sir?” her voice was shaky and small, but two piercing red eyes immediately homed in on her.

“It’s scaredy cat,” he huffed.

“My name is Yachi, sir,” she walked to the nearest bench and set one of the bowls down on a corner, while she gingerly took a seat on the opposite side. “I, uh, brought you some noodles.”
The bird studied her with one eye, then the other. He unfolded two huge wings and floated down to the bench, where he eyed the bowl suspiciously. He sniffed it and looked up at her.

“OK, what do you want?” he asked.

“I was hoping you could tell me about Vaeda,” Yachi said, almost hiding her face behind a Styrofoam bowl. The bird took a careful peck at his offered meal.

“It's a hell-hole,” he said, “Attracts magic folk like ants to honey. Mostly idiots who can't even control themselves yet. Lots of explosions and... accidents. Why?”

Yachi looked down at her ramen. “I was thinking of visiting,” she said, slowly, while the bird started making loud slurping noises on the far side of the bench.

“The hell you wanna go there for?” he asked, looking up from his meal for a second.

“It seems... exciting. I may be able to help people,” her voice grew smaller and smaller while she averted her eyes.

The bird hopped closer, causing her to lean back.

“I know you're the one that fixed my buddy's... problem,” he said, “but look at you. You're scared of a god damn bird. What makes you think you'll like being a magic healer or whatever?”

“Sometimes you have to try something to see if you like it,” Yachi mumbled.

“Haahh?”

“It's... something someone once told me,” she added, “and this is something I would like to try.”

“And you think you can do that? Help people and stuff?” The bird was awfully close now and his clear red eyes seemed like they were trying to bore through her skull.

“I'm nobody, I know that,” Yachi said, wringing her hands, “but even a nobody can make a difference sometimes.”

The bird hopped back to his meal. “Then what are you waiting for?” he said, before gulping down his noodles.

February 6th, 07:06 am, Sendai, Japan

Yachi made a final mental check. Windows: closed. Gas and electricity: off. She'd paid her rent and cable bills several months up front and had requested a sabbatical at work. She would call her mom when she had actually arrived.

Her backpack was stuffed with one magic book and way too much food. The small trolley at her feet held most of her clothes. She quickly scanned the room before wheeling it out and locking the door behind her.

She closed her hand into a fist to keep her heart from bursting out of her chest.
“Let's go on an adventure,” she thought.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaandd that's the end of the introductory part.
Let me know what you think!
Comments, questions or criticism is welcome.
"Welcome to the King's Court. We entertain young ladies such as yourself, with the company of perfect gentlemen, such as me."

Excerpt from the leather bound book

Sanctuaries are safe houses governed by powerful beings or groups. Depending on the sanctuary, it is impossible for hostile or magic creatures to enter without the explicit permission of the host. Anyone seeking sanctuary is at the mercy of said host and can be be turned away at any time. They may also be asked to pay a fee. It is considered polite to bring a gift or offer assistance to the host of a sanctuary.

February 11th, 9:07 pm, Light District, Vaeda

Yachi ran through the Avenue of Light, rain sticking her blond hair to her face. She probably looked like a drowned rat, she thought. Her jumper and slacks were soaked through, the flats on her feet made unpleasant sloshing noises while she ran.

The street was crowded and she had to dodge several drunken people, toppling at least one irate girl in high heels. Yachi shouted apologies behind her but she didn't stop until she found number 15.

It was a ... club of some sort? The front was entirely black, with swooping teal lettering spelling out 'The King's Court'. She halted before the entrance, trying to catch her breath. Two men were hanging out near the doors, wearing matching teal jackets and white pants. One was a pretty man with carefully coiffed straw blond hair, probably a manager or a greeter tasked with getting people in. His colleague was beefier, with short, prickly brown hair and a pout. He had the look of a bouncer and it struck Yachi that she did not have entrance money. Not for a place like this.

It was never going to work.

It shouldn't work, Yachi knew.

These guys were scary and they would turn her away and she would die. She should never have come here.

But the book had not failed her yet.

She took a deep breath and walked up to the men.

"Hello, young lady," the pretty one said, "are you looking for a good time? Something to take the weight off your shoulders?"
"Uh," Yachi found her voice struggling to get out of her throat, "Uh, s- sanctuary?"

The pretty one blinked at her. "I don't think we offer that service, ma'am," he said with a smile, stepping back a little. She could clearly see the judgement in his eyes, this drowned little girl making crazy demands.

The beefy one came closer. She couldn't let him turn her away. Not now.

"Please," Yachi managed, voice trembling with desperation, "please! I need... sanctuary."

"Yahaba, go get him," the bouncer grunted at his colleague, who lifted his eyebrows and walked into the club without another word.

Yachi looked behind her, panicking even more when she saw the silhouette halfway down the street.

"Please!" she tried again, "I know this sounds crazy, but there's a man or a... thing, and I can't get away from him, and..." She paused. The bouncer was not looking at her, but at the creature behind her. There was something hard in his expression.

He grabbed her wrist and dragged her closer to the club.

"How did you find us?" he said.

Before Yachi could answer, the club's door opened and a drawl wafted through the air.

"Iwaizumi, is that any way to treat guests?"

The bouncer let go and scowled at the figure that had appeared behind him.

If Yahaba had been pretty, this man was godly. His skin was flawlessly pale and he had the deepest brown eyes she'd ever seen, peeking out from under immaculate light brown hair. He smiled at her, and it seemed like the skies opened, beautiful pearly teeth glinting in the neon light.

"Come in, young lady," he said, holding out a hand, "Someone like you shouldn't be running through the streets at night."

Yachi blinked, stunned for a second while the handsome man walked back inside. She looked at the bouncer, who made a short gesture with his head, motioning her inside.

When she stepped through the door, her stalker was mere meters away. She wondered for a moment if mister Iwaizumi knew what he was getting himself into. But before she could see or say anything more, the heavy doors fell shut behind her.

The godly man lead Yachi through the hallway and into the club. T he décor looked expensive but borderline tacky. The colour scheme involved a lot of teal for some reason, and way more plants than were practical for a club with no windows. Several small tables dotted the large room, each accompanied by a white curved sofa. Men in sharp suits sat at the tables, chatting amicably with giggling, dolled up girls and women. There was something odd about the atmosphere.

"What is this place?" Yachi whispered, mostly to herself.

"Come now, darling, you're Japanese aren't you? Surely you know what a host club is?" the man
grinned at her, before flinging his arms out in a dramatic flourish.

"Welcome to the King's Court. We entertain young ladies such as yourself, with the company of perfect gentlemen, such as me. I'm the owner, Oikawa Tooru."

He took a small bow. One of the girls at the next table squealed.

Yachi bowed in response. "Yachi Hitoka, sir, thank you for having me."

She'd be blushing, if her face wasn't already red from the exertion.

Oikawa threw her a towel and motioned her to follow him. She did so, trying hard to blend into the background. This place was much too fancy for a little drowned rat, she thought, but she didn't have to worry. All eyes were on Oikawa while he fluttered through the wide room, complimenting guests at some of the tables and ushering over waiters at others. As they passed the bar, he requested green tea for the both of them and then he walked up the wide, winding staircase.

"Let's talk, Yachi-san."

Outside, the bouncer folded his arms and stood up straight, surveying the figure in sunglasses with a look of mild disinterest.

"Iwaizzzzzumi," the man said, walking up and smiling an unfriendly smile.

"Get lost, Makki," Iwaizumi answered. He stood there like a statue, not moving, never taking his eyes off the other man.

"Tsssss," the creature grinned, "And after I went through all that trouble."

"It appears she's found herself sanctuary," the bouncer said, a small hint of satisfaction in his voice.

"But she's on the very cusssssp," Makki hissed and it seemed like he wasn't even moving his lips, "I like thozze the bessst."

He, or it, paused for a second, before adding: "You would know."

"Get. Lost." The bouncer glared.

The creature sighed and shrugged.

"I'll find another. They arrive every day," he said, before calmly walking down the street with its blinking neon lights reflecting off his sunglasses. Iwaizumi stared at his back until he disappeared in the crowd. When he was certain that Makki was gone, he relaxed his shoulders and grimaced, opening his hands at the sudden pain. He'd clenched his fists so hard that his nails had formed bleeding half moons in his palm.

"Fuck this," he grumbled to himself and walked into the club.

"I'm going on break. You take over out front," he called to Yahaba.
Chapter Summary

Kuroo scratched the back of his neck.
“Never a dull moment,” he sighed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March 25th, 8:15 am, Financial District, Vaeda

“The End Times are near!”

The familiar shouts of a street preacher floated through the air as Sawamura Daichi ran up the steps from the subway station.

“The dragon at the gate has taken flight! The guardians have fallen!” The old man stood on a chair, shouting at the commuters spilling out of the stairwell. Daichi quickly made her way across the square and stepped into the Old Quarter. It was starting to get warm outside and some waiters were already setting up tables on the sidewalk. She hurried past a busload of tourists, dressed in bright colours and sports shoes, taking pictures of the old temple and the front of the Nekomata Museum.

“In this spot,” the plaque next to the door read, “the Workers Revolution of 1756 took its final stand.”

Daichi ducked into the street next to the museum. It was quieter here. The stores were a little smaller, a little dingier and, she had to admit, a lot more affordable. She passed a small gallery and several empty stores to finally reach the café she and her friend owned. The paint was starting to chip again, but it still looked pretty classy: a black carved wooden storefront with large windows that were somehow hard to look through. Above the door was a sign with swooping copper lettering: The Crow’s Roost . And underneath that: Specialty Tea and Coffee .

The bell tinkled brightly as she pushed open the heavy door and stepped into the warm air of the café, letting the scent of cinnamon and ground coffee wash over her. The place was calm, she noticed, with three regulars at a table in the back squibbling about movies.

The young man behind the counter looked up from his notes when she walked in.

“Well, look who finally showed up,” he said, wiping light grey hair out of his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Sorry Suga! I overslept.” Daichi rushed into the back room and took off her coat. She checked her reflection in the mirror, straightening her skirt and blouse before covering the whole thing in a long black apron. When she returned, she found Suga leaning against the counter, arms folded and one eyebrow cocked, a tiny smile playing on his lips.
“It’s not what you think,” Daichi scowled.

“You mean, it’s not who I think,” the young man quipped.

“Well, it’s not!”

He gave her the Look.

“I swear,” Daichi huffed, “I just got caught up in things.” She deftly tied her long black hair into a neat ponytail and took stock of the place. The espresso machine was a mess and several of the tea tins on the shelf behind the counter were open or empty. Most of the pastry was gone and even the tins under the counter looked like they had been thrown in from a distance. By Suga’s hand was a list of items they were running out of: Mint, Lapsang Souchong, Arrowroot, Houndstongue, Fairy dust (organic), Maragogype beans, Belladonna... It was surprisingly long.

“Tough shift?”, she asked tilting her head.

“Daichi, darling, it was the night shift,” her friend pointed out with a sigh.

“I'm sorry,” she whined, “Why don’t you go to bed and I'll wrap this up, ok?”

The man named Sugawara took a deep breath and looked at his friend through hooded eyes. She smiled brightly, patting him on the shoulder and gently pushing him towards the back room.

“Off you go!”

“Fine, fine,” he grumbled, “But please finish ordering supplies. I have been shouted at by three different people for our lack of Belladonna.” She nodded as her friend shuffled off to the back room.

“And make sure Asahi doesn’t destroy the kitchen or something,” he shouted from the stairs as he made his way up to his apartment above the shop.

“Right,” Daichi huffed, glancing at the door in the back. The sweet smell of cinnamon came seeping into the café. Asahi seemed fine, so far.

She reached for a rag to clean up the mess that was once a working coffee machine when a dark shadow passed over the street outside, blocking out all natural light in the room.

March 25th, 7:52 am, Old Quarter in the City

“Oi, I'm hungry.” A soft, almost bored sounding voice spoke up near Kuroo Tetsurou's ear.

The young man groaned and wedged his head between two pillows, trying to hold on to the last slivers of sleep. Morning light came dribbling into the studio through lace curtains, dappling the piles of clothes strewn across the floor, the result of one too many late nights stumbling into bed.
A light breeze from the open window blew goosebumps onto the exposed skin of his back, raising the ink depicting flames across his shoulders. He shivered slightly.

Something soft pushed into his side.

“Oi, Kuro”, the voice said again.

He whined. “What time is it?”

“Ten to eight. Don't you have work today?”

Shit. Kuroo turned around with a jerk and sat bolt upright, bleary in the morning light.

“Kenma, why didn’t you tell me,” he said, struggling to kick off the tangle of sheets that held his legs in a vice grip.

Next to him on the bed sat a small cat, white with patches of light orange and black. “I did,” it said in a slow voice and it looked away with a movement that could only be described as a shrug. The little calico jumped off the bed and padded towards the kitchen, tail high with a slight crook at the end, making soft jingly noises as it did. Around Kenma's neck was a red collar with an ID tag that Kuroo made him wear and a small, simple pendant that he'd picked out himself.

Both were meant to keep him safe.

Kuroo finally escaped from his bed and followed, yawning widely and scratching the hair on his lower belly, just above the waistband of his boxers. He hummed a little tune while he rifled through his kitchen cupboards and lazily opened a can of cat food. The cat sat on the counter, staring at him with increasing impatience while he fiddled with bowls and spoons.

“Hey Kenma.”

“Whaaat,” the cat trilled, turning around in his spot once before sitting back down.

“Do you also want a belly rub while I'm at it?”

Kenma let out a long, low growling sound. “You know I don't like that.”

“Sure you do,” Kuroo said. He put down the bowl and started walking around the room, occasionally picking up pieces of clothing and sniffing them.

“I don’t,” the cat said, in between bites. Kuroo had found a pair of ripped jeans and a t-shirt that smelled satisfactory and had draped them over one shoulder. He was now rummaging through his underwear drawer.

“You do,” he grinned, closing it.

“I don’t,” muttered the cat, but Kuroo had already disappeared into the bathroom and turned on the shower. It only took a minute before the young man started wailing a bad rendition of an old Ramones song, featuring extra gurgling noises. Kenma sighed, licking his paw and wishing his hearing wasn't quite so good.
Several minutes later, Kuroo emerged from the bathroom, the chocolatey smell of his body wash spreading through the studio. Kenma sat on the counter and observed his housemate while he rifled through piles of possessions, picking up his keys, wallet and phone.

“Don’t forget this,” the cat nodded toward a silver necklace laying next to him, a small crystal pendant in a simple setting. It was a protection charm Sawamura had made not too long ago.

Kuroo blinked, hesitating a moment before slipping it over his neck.

“Aww, are you worried about me, Kenma?” he said with a sly smile.

“No really,” the cat muttered, looking away towards the window.

Kuroo chuckled and scratched him behind the ears, eliciting a soft, embarrassed purr from his friend.

The cat watched his companion walk out of their home and stretched luxuriously before making his way through the open window. Moving to the Old Quarter after squatting in a warehouse by the harbour for so long had been a godsend. There were no loud men or heavy machines here, the old brick buildings contained a million hiding places and the balconies and trees made for easy climbing. Kenma jumped up to the fire escape and leisurely strolled across the shingled roofs of this ancient borough. Occasionally he would stop to sniff at an interesting spot or to mark it. He soon found his way to his favourite lounging place: one of the highest roofs in the quarter, a vantage point that offered a good view of the surrounding streets and sun for most of the morning. In one of the corners grew a patch of weeds that was remarkably comfortable. He snuffled at it and pawed the ground, ready to settle down, when he heard a rushing sound that was entirely wrong.

In the east, there was something in the sky. It made a flapping movement like a bat, but it was much, much too big. Before Kenma could have a good look, however, his instincts took over. His pupils dilated and all the hair on his body stood on end. He streaked across the roof and ducked into the pipe of an abandoned chimney. He sat there, shaking, ears flat against his head, while the giant shadow passed, blotting out the sun for what seemed like hours.

March 25th, 8:26 am, Old Quarter in the City

Kuroo walked up to the side door of the Nekomata museum, a croissant between his teeth. He unlocked the door and stuffed the rest of his breakfast in his mouth, before wiping the crumbs off his leather jacket. The place was dead silent, as usual. Kuroo hurriedly changed into his uniform and stepped out into the museum proper.

The old woman hovered by a window, looking at the street outside.

“Morning madam Nekomata,” Kuroo greeted. She waved at him.

“Hello, Kuroo dear.” She smiled distractedly and turned her attention outside again, her soft, wrinkled features contorted into a frown.

“Something up, ma'am?” Kuroo grabbed a large key chain and started to go around the small
museum, checking the displays and opening the shutters.

“I have a bad feeling about this day,” the old woman whispered.

Kuroo lifted an eyebrow at her, but went about his business, opening the fuse box and turning on the lights. He was about to go to the vault to get change for the cash register, when the old woman waved him toward the window.

“Ma'am?” he said, stretching his neck to see what she was staring at. It wasn't hard to figure out.

The thing was huge. A large, slender body was flying across the sky on enormous wings, scales glinting in the early sunlight. It was gorgeous, but something in the back of Kuroo's mind wanted nothing to do with it. It made its way from the mountains in the east, gliding over the Old Quarter towards the harbour in the west.

“Fuuuuuuuck,” Kuroo mumbled, “What the hell is that thing?”

“That's a dragon, Kuroo,” Nekomata explained, as if she was a teacher showing her class to the zoo.

“What's it doing here?” he asked.

“I don't know,” the woman said, “but it cannot be good.”

She moved away from the window.

“Not good at all,” she said, before gliding across the room and fading into a wall.

He silently watched her go. He looked outside again, his eyes following the dragon as it slowly disappeared from view. Kuroo scratched the back of his neck.

“Never a dull moment,” he sighed.

Chapter End Notes

Hello and welcome to the part where I start rapidly introducing characters. I did promise a lot of people would show up...
As always, feel free to let me know what you think or what could be better.
March 25<sup>th</sup>, 8:52, Unknown

Kageyama Tobio was falling.

March 25<sup>th</sup>, 8:33, Unknown

Kageyama ran up to the entrance of the cave and found that everything was wrong. The hut where she had sat drinking milk the day before was deserted. The people that were supposed to be there, idly chatting and serving coffee, were gone. She ran, panicked, past several overturned fences and what looked like scorch marks as she stepped into the cave.

It was eerily quiet in here, the regular hubbub replaced with only the echoing sound of her heavy boots. She contemplated the merit of calling out, wondering if that would make it worse or not. Her hand was unconsciously reaching for the weapon on her back when she rounded a corner and saw it.

A body, lying to the side of the cave.

And then another

And another.

Shit.

The floor of this large room was littered with people. Mostly guards, but some of them were pilgrims.

Like her, she thought.

Not one of them stirred.

Kageyama's breath hitched in her throat. She wanted to walk up to one of them, to check a pulse, to see what had happened, but her body refused.

Some warrior she was.

It took every inch of her being to slowly walk on until she could see the dragon's room.

Of course it wasn't there.

She had hoped that all of this was not real. That she imagined the shadow passing overhead while she climbed up the mountain. And that the booming sounds in the distance were some sort of practice or joke.

They weren't.
The dragon was gone. Its companions were dead. The nest where it usually sat was empty and emanating smoke.

Kageyama tried to keep her lungs going while she patted her long coat with trembling fingers, looking for her phone.

“Just stay calm. Breathe. Call someone, anyone.” Not that she could think of a single person that would know what to do in this situation. This sort of thing wasn't supposed to happen. That's what all these people were *here* for.

She looked at the tiny device in her hand and cursed loudly. Ancient magical caves on mountainsides don't have reception.

“Ok, ok. Breathe. Stay calm,” she whispered to herself, if only to hear a single friendly voice.

“Get help.”

She slipped the phone into her pocket and sprinted out of the cave, tears streaking from her eyes. Fighting for breath, she reached the entrance and kept running, down the path to the cliff side.

She was almost past the guard hut when the air grew colder and mist rose around her feet, quickly blanketing the world in a thick fog that made her stop in her tracks.

“Oh, Kageyama,” a leering, lazy voice said, “Where do you think you're going?”

Kageyama whirled around, trying to figure out where the sound was coming from, but the blood rushing through her ears made it hard to listen and the fog coated her eyes in white noise and her heart was beating in her chest like a jack hammer.

“What's wrong? Lost your amazing powers?” a second voice piped up, mocking.

She recognized that voice. “K...Kindaichi?” She hadn't seen him among the bodies, but then, she hadn't really looked. He was new, as far as dragon guards went, but he should know what to do, at least.

“Kindaichi, what the hell are you doing out here?” she shouted, “There are people in the cave that are hurt and...”

*Slap.*

Her pleading was cut short when a hand, *her hand*, struck her across the face.

“Stop hitting yourself,” the leering voice said, sniggering.

“Dumbass!” Kageyama hissed, “Stop it! Do you even...”

*Slap.*

And it dawned on Kageyama that even if Kindaichi knew what to do, he wouldn't tell her.
She fell silent and tried to focus.

The power of compulsion, making people move in ways they may not want, was something Kindaichi was very good at. She'd always thought it was pretty lame, as far as powers went, but right now it was the worst. Still, she refused to be beaten by it. She had practised for moments like these.

But the mist had never been there before.

It was worrying her to no end.

She breathed, in and out, in and out, fighting the urge in her arm. She felt it trying to come up and hit her again, but it didn't.

She didn't.

“You're not so great, Kageyama,” Kindaichi sounded closer now. He sounded angry.

She took a step back, carefully, trying to keep every part of her body under control.

She could fight this. She had to fight this.

But her heart skipped and her stomach turned when the fog, the blinding fog, began to form shadows. This was somehow worse than not seeing anything. Something slithered to her right, dark, heaving coils coming her way with a wet, sickening noise.

Nonononono.

She had to breathe. She had to stay in control.

But the tendrils brushed against her arm and her heart beat in a panic and her feet just wanted to run. As she fought, kicking, screaming and flailing at the air around her, those feet kicked off and suddenly she was sliding off the side of the path, down a steep cliff, trying to grasp at the branches around her, desperate to slow down. But the trees merely streaked bloody gashes across her arms as she slid and she finally reached the spot where the plateau gave way and the side of the mountain dropped in earnest, a wall of rock with nothing to hold her for several hundred meters, and she found herself falling.

March 25th, 8:52:15, Unknown

Kageyama fell.

Her arms bled, her skin was scraped raw and covered in dirt and pine needles. Her feet stung, little pinpricks coursing up and down her legs as if they had been asleep. But they were hers again. The fog had lifted and her mind was clear. With the wind rushing her slick black hair up in front of her face, she was eerily calm.

If anyone were to watch her drop through the air, they would see that her bluish grey eyes were glowing.
In the few seconds it would take her to hit the ground, Kageyama saw the options before her, clearly visible in her mind as diverging paths.

She could continue falling backwards: this would result in death.

She could flip her body, hold her legs tight and brace for impact: this would break her spine and, if no one found her in the next few days, death.

She could try to veer closer to the cliff: this would slow her fall but result in many broken bones and, ultimately, death.

*She could change her course. Results: unknown.*

That was new.

The option popped up almost as an afterthought. Kageyama flipped her body and saw a small black star form in front of her, whirling and moving like a miniature version of a cartoon fight cloud. The ground was speeding in on her and she reached out to the ball.

The moment she touched it, the world jerked, blinking out of existence before immediately springing back into view.

March 25\textsuperscript{th}, 8:53:19, Unknown

Kageyama was no longer falling down.

She was flying sideways, half a meter above a grass field and losing height fast.

This time, she did choose to brace for impact.

“Oof.” Her left hip made contact with the ground and Kageyama tumbled, rolling sideways three times before she finally came to a stop. She lay on the grass, blinking at the clouded sky. Little lights danced endlessly in front of her eyes.

After a few seconds, every part of her body started screaming in unison. The pain in her head, her arms, her legs and her hip was cold and sharp. It was so strong that it left her awestruck. She was very, very much alive and she couldn't help but giggle at that.

“No, hahaha, hahahahaaaAAAAAAA ow fuck.”

Kageyama closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, hoping for the pain to die down.

Slowly, carefully, she sat up and looked around. She recognized this place as a small meadow down the path of the mountain. She was about a kilometre away from the cave, and three kilometres away
from anything resembling civilization. The chance of any pilgrims still passing by at this hour was slim to none. She would have to do this alone.

She gingerly patted herself. Everything hurt, but it didn’t look like she had broken any bones. A sad jingling sound in her pocket told her that her phone, however, was shattered. She took off her bag, swearing profusely at the pain of moving, and opened it.

Shit.

Her water bottle had cracked during the fall, drenching several of her notebooks.

In one of the side pockets she found some tissues and the nearly empty box of painkillers she carried for her headaches. She took the pills, drank the rest of the water and hoped they would kick in fast.

Then, she cleared her mind and tried to consider the options before her.
Chapter Summary

Sawamura Daichi listened intently to the next few news bulletins. There was a worry in her gut that wouldn't go away. She needed to do something.

Excerpt from the leather bound book

To this day, it is unclear whether or not witchcraft is a genetic condition. An estimated 60% of those in the magic community are human beings with magic power, colloquially known as witches and wizards. It is assumed that more exist, but remain dormant. The majority of magic humans have a single power, unique to that individual. Examples include the ability to float up to half a meter above ground, communication with crustaceans, small bursts of hyper speed or the conjuring of flames.

Similar to piercing the Veil, finding one's power is usually the result of a traumatic experience. In many cases, both events happen in the same instance, leading newly awakened magic folk to believe they are dreaming or hallucinating. Please observe caution when dealing with inexperienced witches and wizards, as they can pose a danger to themselves and others due to a lack of control or mental preparation. In extreme cases, the intervention of the Folk Specialised Police Unit may be required.

March 25th, 8:27, Old Quarter, Vaeda

Sawamura Daichi stood on the cobbled street in front of her coffee shop and watched a giant body glide overhead, golden scales glinting in the early sunlight.

A few dogs howled in panic and several customers stepped into the café, thinking it was a storm cloud. But most people in the street just ignored it. It was times like these that always made Daichi feel strange and out of touch. Like this world wasn't entirely hers. When she came back in, the three regulars were staring out of the window. They were talking about omens.

“Alright, alright, calm down,” she murmured to no one in particular. She turned on the radio and went back to sweeping up the shop. The soft melodies and the familiar work of her hands soothed the chatter in her mind, if only a little. She listened intently to the next few news bulletins. There was no mention of monsters, of course, but the news also didn't report the city being on fire, which was a relief. Still, she felt restless. There was a worry in her gut that wouldn't go away.

She needed to do something.

March 25th, 10:03, Old Quarter, Vaeda

Daichi carefully opened the door to the coffee shop's small kitchen, trying not to startle the girl working there. Her employee was meticulously piping out some éclairs, tip of her tongue poking out
between her lips. It looked pretty good, though Daichi could see two pans of messed up shapes in the sink, and a bowl of dough in the corner that looked like it was frozen into a solid block of ice. She frowned and waited for the girl to finish before speaking.

"Asahi, can you take over at the counter for a bit?"

"M-me?" the girl stared at her as if she was just asked to shoot a hostage.

"It's calm out there and you know what to do," Daichi patted her on the shoulder, slightly too hard, "I want to go downstairs and try something," she added.

Asahi nodded, swallowing heavily. She slid the pan into the oven and switched aprons before pulling her spiky brown hair into a messy bun. She hated doing that, because it took away from her 'wild' look, but honestly, it suited her, Daichi thought. Most things did. The girl was tall and curvy. She had the body of a damn supermodel, but inside that body beat the heart of a very small and very frightened squirrel. One rude customer could shatter it and Asahi's fingers trembled at the very thought.

"Oh, and do you still have that book I lent you?" Daichi asked.

The girl walked over to her bag and pulled out a yellow paperback, the spine almost broken and the pages smudged from use. 'Witchcraft for dummies', the title read in big blocky letters, 'How to control your magic without blowing stuff up'.

"Thanks," Daichi said, taking the old book and thumbing through it, "I think I almost cracked it. It's in the back of my head. I just need to... pull it out."

The girl nodded. "I'll, uh, let you get to it, then."

She took a deep breath and stepped out of the kitchen, into the coffee shop proper.

Daichi checked a few of the passages she'd underlined. She had been up all night rereading the small library of 'basic witchcraft' books she'd so far collected, from a bulky classic called 'Applied magic' to a five page tract on breathing techniques. All of them said something different and most of it failed to click with her. The books talked of lofty concepts like projection and focus, but Daichi was a practical sort of woman. She wanted clear, concise instructions and that was apparently not an option. Even Kuroo, whose skill she would never to admit being in awe of, had told her to just go with her gut.

Her gut could only manage the very basics, Daichi knew.

It wasn't enough. Not when she was feeling this uneasy.

She needed to figure this out.

Fast.

She took a key from the cupboard by the kitchen door and walked to the basement, down the old stone steps, into the pantry and across the storage room. At the back was another door, heavy and
locked, with more steps leading down to what she liked to call the 'practice room'. It was big and old, a relic of some structure people had just built on top of. The room was round, about ten metres across, with a domed roof and walls made of ancient brickwork and crumbling plaster. Two bare light bulbs hung from the ceiling, bathing the place in a minimal golden sheen. Someone had used it for storing furniture long ago, and a bunch of planks and chair legs lay in a large pile to one side.

But it was soundproof and she couldn't really destroy anything in here. It was perfect.

She walked to the centre of the room and pulled down a net she'd suspended from the ceiling, tipping a large jar of pebbles into it. The net went back up and Daichi carefully drew a circle in the sand.

She stood right in the centre, feet slightly apart, and inhaled deeply. Then she closed her eyes, keeping her breathing steady, and visualized the circle around her. Just like the books told her.

She kicked the rope holding up the net, releasing the little stones. For a second it seemed like something was happening, as if their trajectory slowed down and they were suspended in a small bubble around her.

Then the whole thing burst and a rain of pebbles fell on the young witch.

“Ow.” Daichi rubbed the top of her head and sighed.

“Let's try this again,” she said, grabbing a rake to collect the pebbles once more.

Seven years ago, 23:03, Oregon, US

Magic never left. People just stopped believing in it.

Sawamura Daichi's vision was blurry and for a second it felt like she had just woken up from a bad dream. Then the realization of what happened hit her. She pushed herself up, dirt and wet grass slithering through her fingers as she clawed at the embankment.

“Sugaaaa!” she crawled up the hill, breath uneven and eyes wide. A tangle of torn metal, hissing and leaking in the night air, came into view.

“Suga? Ohgodohgodohgod.”

Daichi's car was crushed between a large tree and a truck. The front of the truck had collapsed, the wind shield broken. The car was mangled almost beyond recognition, now little more than a pile of folded metal and plastic.

“Ohgodohgodohgod.”

Her body was numb, she couldn’t feel her fingers or her feet. She couldn’t feel anything. The only thing flashing through her mind were images Suga. If he was still in there…

“Daichi,” Suga’s voice was soft like a whisper and oddly flat. She looked behind her and saw her
best friend sitting there, unharmed, elbows resting on his knees. He looked at her, his whole body entirely too calm.

“Suga! Thank god, I thought you would…” She fell silent. He was staring at her, his eyes big and glinting in the soft blue glow illuminating his face.

“Daichi, are we... dead?” he asked it slowly, carefully forming the words as if they would break.

She blinked. Why would he think something like that? They were right here, talking. She was about to reassure him when her friend spoke again.

“Daichi,” he said, voice laced with sadness and fear, “Daichi, you’re glowing.”

She looked at her hands and it now dawned on her that the light illuminating this night, the blue glow that lit up Suga’s face and turned the glass littering the scene into a pool of stars, was her.

“Wh… what?”

Her skin was translucent. A pattern of blue swirls danced across her arms, forming knots and ornate motifs before rushing off and whirling together somewhere else.

Daichi’s mind went blank and she felt hot tears welling up. Anger, shock and regret coursed through her body. Images popped up in her head of all the things she still wanted to do, all the places she wanted to see, all the harsh words she’d ever said, the eyes of her mother… She sobbed.

Her friend got up, stretching out his hand. He touched her shoulder and Daichi had never felt so grateful in her life when he pulled her into a hug.

“It’s ok,” he murmured in her ear, voice fraying at the edges, “It’s going to be ok.”

Magic never left.
Daichi discovered it that evening, when she was standing in a ditch by the road, the glow from her skin fading slowly into the warmth of Suga’s arms. She discovered it when the ambulance showed up ten minutes later, finding the two of them completely unscathed but needing nearly an hour to extract the unconscious truck driver. She discovered it when she sat in the hospital bed, holding the hand of her crying mother, flashes from the accident flitting across her mind. She discovered it when she silently watched the police officer close his notebook, proclamation their survival a miracle.

She discovered it the next morning when she lay in her bed staring at a Veronicas poster on the wall and the memories of what had happened came flooding back.

It was dark and wet on the road, and when she braked for a crossing hare, the truck behind her didn’t. It swerved instead, losing control and hitting the tail end of her car. The force of the collision sent both vehicles careening off the asphalt and down the embankment towards a copse of trees. And in that very moment, with a thick tree trunk coming into view and a screaming Suga next to her, Daichi’s very soul had exploded. A soft glow had spread from her chest through her skin with the speed of a racing fire. And when she grabbed Suga’s hand, his eyes blank with horror, it enveloped the both of them, forming a tight ball that held them, safe and sound when the car hit the tree, snapping the old seatbelts and hurling them through the broken wind shield.

Magic never left.
It ran through Daichi’s veins.
Chapter Summary

“Let's talk, Yachi-san.”
The godly man walked up the wide staircase of his host club and motioned a thoroughly soaked and physically exhausted Yachi Hitoka to join him.

February 11th, 9:11 pm, Light District, Vaeda

“Let's talk, Yachi-san.”

The godly man walked up the wide staircase of his host club and motioned a thoroughly soaked and physically exhausted Yachi Hitoka to join him. Her rabbit heart still beating fast from being chased by the man in sunglasses, she carefully climbed the steps. The jealous stares of several of the club's clients followed with her. Oikawa took her to a booth overlooking the place and sat down like a prince taking his throne. Yachi nervously slinked into her seat, trying to touch the white sofa with as little of her squelchy body as possible.

“Are you hurt?” Oikawa asked.

She quickly shook her head, vaguely aware of a waiter placing a cup in front of her.

This sort of thing was not supposed to happen, she knew. This man oozed grace. He effortlessly held the gaze of an entire room and she really, really shouldn't be here, making him worry about her.

Maybe this was a weird dream. Maybe she was delirious from running.

“Have some tea,” Oikawa interrupted her train of thought. She curled her fingers around the warm cup but didn't dare lift it, lest she spill the whole thing. The host's eyes were scanning her while she sat there, trembling and trying her hardest to keep her heart from stopping altogether.

They kept doing so while he asked her about the monster.

The story came out in short bursts.

She'd been on her way back from a job interview. She'd stopped at a fry shop when the thing addressed her, asking for directions. She was about to apologize for being new here, herself, when she caught a glimpse of his eyes.

And then she ran.

Yachi looked up at the godly man, who sat back and sipped tea.

She probably shouldn't have told him about the eyes. He was going to think she was crazy. But he didn't flinch, did not judge. She felt like she could tell him anything. Everything. She had to stop
herself from blurting out her entire life story.

“And now you’re here,” he said, calmly, “May I ask how you ended up in this very club, requesting sanctuary?”

Yachi swallowed and looked down at her cup.

She owed this man her life. Then again, she wasn't sure if he was going to, you know, let her live.

“I, uh, read it somewhere,” she stuttered, silently cursing herself for being the absolute worst spy in the history of everything.

A flicker of a frown passed over the godly man's face, nothing more.

“Your clients are getting restless, Oikawa.” Iwaizumi the bouncer came up the stairs. He was carrying a fluffy bathrobe, which he handed to Yachi.

“You're gonna catch a cold,” he grumbled.

“Uh, thank you, that's very kind, but...” she started.

He cut her off: “And you should stay here for a while. Go back home in the morning.”

Yachi blinked at the bouncer.

“Iwa-chan, we were in the middle of a conversation,” Oikawa pouted at him.

“And the girl is in the middle of freezing to death,” Iwaizumi shot back.

“Oh, please don't worry about me, I'm.. I'm fine,” Yachi squeaked, but they paid her no mind.

The two men were glaring at each other, an unspoken conversation that she was no part of. She turned away and wrapped the robe around her, gradually feeling the warmth return to her clammy skin. She carefully took a sip of the tea.

“You're new here, aren't you?” Iwaizumi addressed her, almost making her drop the cup.

She nodded.

“Do you have a place to say? An income?” the bouncer continued.

“Yes! No! … sir.”

He frowned at her. “Which one is it?”

“I've found a boarding house,” Yachi explained, “but I'm working on the, uh, income part.”

The host was tugging at his bouncer's shirt.

“Iwaizumi,” Oikawa's voice was stern, but filled with resignation, as if he was chastising a dog he had long since lost control of.

“Tell me something,” Iwaizumi said, paying his boss no mind, “what were you before you came
March 25th, 8:47, Light District, Vaeda

Iwaizumi Hajime kicked open the door and let the cold air wash over him, soothing the heat in his gut. “Fuck, what a night,” he grumbled under his breath.

The alley behind the club was empty and narrow, illuminated by a thin sliver of early morning light climbing down between the tall buildings. He breathed deeply and rubbed his eyes, trying to keep them open. A few more double shifts like these and they could take him home in a coffin.

He patted his pockets, pulled out a packet of cigarettes and lighted one with shaking fingers, shoulders hunched over the small flame. The bouncer rested his back against the wall and inhaled, bitter smoke and clear morning air filling his lungs. He looked down at his right hand, knuckles still stinging from where they connected to some drunk punk’s jaw. The red glow on his rough skin was quickly fading. Honestly, how hard was it to get through to some people?

“Iwa-chan?” The club's owner appeared behind him, leaning casually against the doorway.

“I convinced our guests not to press charges,” he said with a soft smile.

“They were threatening you,” Iwaizumi answered gruffly.

“He just didn't understand my profession,” Oikawa sighed dramatically, “I made it clear that I'm not trying to steal his fiancée. But honestly, if he has that little faith in the woman, they're not meant to last.”

Oikawa stepped out into the alley and gazed at the sky. Even here, with just his old friend, he seemed to strike a pose: hands on his hips, shoulders back and head held high. Glamour clung to Oikawa Tooru like ivy to an old wall. It was part of him. In places, it may be what kept him from crumbling.

The club owner turned to face his friend.

“That's bad for you, you know,” he said in a singsong voice.

Iwaizumi inhaled loudly and blew smoke at the sky. “Shut up.”

“So rude, Iwa-chan, is that any way to talk to your boss?” Oikawa pouted and he stepped closer. Iwaizumi felt his friend's deep brown eyes flick from his hands to the ripped lapel of his jacket and the scraped skin on his chin.

“I'm fine,” Iwaizumi grunted.

The host's eyes snapped back up, not a trace of worry left in them.

“Of course you are, what else do I pay you for?”

Oikawa laughed, barely a crack in his voice.
“If you make me pull any more double night shifts, you won’t have to pay me anymore, Shittykawa,” Iwaizumi grumbled.

Oikawa tilted his head, brows knotted together for a second. “My staff not showing up isn’t anything I can do much about, Iwai-chan,” he said, “But I've scheduled some interviews for today. Why don't you get some rest?”

“I was trying to, before you came to bother me,” the bouncer mumbled.

Oikawa smoothed his friend’s shirt before turning to the door.

“Make sure to sleep once you're done with your filthy habit, ok?”

“Yeah, yeah.” The bouncer flicked the ashes off his cigarette and watched the glowing embers fall to the ground.

“Oh, and Iwa-chan?” Iwaizumi looked up, blinking as Oikawa lay a hand lightly at the back of his neck and placed the softest of kisses on his forehead: “Thank you.”

March 25th, 8:56, Light District, Vaeda

Yachi Hitoka, after leaving her boring life as a graphics designer in Sendai, had somehow found herself a job creating flyers and business cards for a host club in Vaeda.

She walked up to the back door of the club, smiling brightly when she found her colleague stomping out his cigarette.

“Good morning Iwaizumi-san!” she said.

“Hey,” he grunted. His face was an odd shade of pink.

“Are you alright?” Yachi asked, suddenly full of worry.

He looked up. “Uh, yeah,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “It's just been a tough night.”

“I'm sorry to hear that, Iwaizumi-san.”

He smiled weakly and held the door open for her.

“Oh! Did you see the thing?” she asked him, “There was something in the sky when I walked over. Like an airplane, but bigger. It was too far for me to see though.”

The bouncer just shrugged, obviously too tired to care. Yachi bid him goodnight and watched him shuffle off to his living quarters somewhere in the back of the club. The place was calm at this time of day, with just the cleaning crew rubbing everything down and the kitchen staff sorting through supplies.

Yachi greeted them politely and made her way up to the little office. Her boss sat at a desk frowning at a pile of bills, pair of glasses balanced elegantly on his nose. He, too, had failed to see the giant thing in the sky, but he was willing to hazard a few guesses as to what it could be: stray plane, dragons, aliens, a very big bird, that sort of thing.
“Probably aliens,” he smiled. She wasn't entirely sure if he was joking.

During her lunch break, she resorted to what was quickly becoming a habit of hers, every time she was unsure about something. She snuck into the bathroom to read the book.

**Excerpt from the leather bound book**

*Dragons are large winged reptilians that have been on the verge of extinction for almost 1,000 years. Representing a symbol of corruption in several religions, they were regularly sought out and killed by humans from 200 BC to 1200 AD. There are currently 63 dragons known to exist. They are tracked by the Mythological Wildlife Fund, which also makes attempts at conservation through a breeding program. To help in this effort, the MWF heads a division of ‘dragon guards’, a group of trained magic users charged with protecting the remaining creatures.*

*Powers associated with dragons are harmful breath and the ability to control weather conditions or natural disasters. Several are known to have second sight. Dragons are protectors by instinct and they seek out important places in which to nest. Many of the gates to the Underworld, for instance, have a draconic keeper.*
A meeting

Chapter Summary

Hinata blinked.
It was like talking to a frightened cat. He was good with cats.
“Look,” he said, calmly taking a step back, “do you want help or not? Because it seems like you could at least use a snack or a drink or something, and I'm willing to share.”

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

March 25th, 9:12, Unknown

The wisps were the first ones to make it through. Spirits thin as smoke and so old they no longer remembered if they were once gods or mortals. They could barely form thoughts but they still knew anger. They knew despair. They knew desire. They squeezed through the cracks, finally unguarded. They found the bodies of the fallen and greedily took them as their own.

March 25th, 9:42, Garden district

Hinata Shouyou was in an excellent mood as he strolled through the wide suburban street on his way back from the convenience store.

“Cookies, cookies, 1,2,3, one for you and one for me,” he sang, practically skipping up the tree-lined hill to his house. The sun was out, he was brimming with energy and he had the whole day to himself. This was awesome. He wandered past a little park when he noticed a girl sitting on a low wall, loudly cursing to herself.

She looked like a weird delinquent: long black hair with blunt bangs, heavy boots and the kind of very wide trousers that made it look like she wore a long skirt. She had rolled her sleeves up to her elbows and was rinsing her arms in a drinking fountain, hissing under her breath.

“Hey,” Hinata smiled as he bounced towards her, “Are you lost?”

“No,” the girl grumbled, never looking up from what she was doing.

Hinata came closer and his eyes widened when he got a good look at her. Her arms were scratched to the point of bleeding, her clothes were torn in several places and she looked very much like she was about to cry.

“Are you ok?”

“Does it look like I'm ok, dumbass?” she shot back, glaring at him. A blade of grass fell from her hair
into her lap. She took out some tissues and dabbed at her arms, wincing.

“Would you like me to...” Hinata started, but the girl shot him a warning look.

“No.”

Hinata blinked.

It was like talking to a frightened cat. He was good with cats.

“Look,” he said, calmly taking a step back, “do you want help or not? Because it seems like you could at least use a snack or a drink or something, and I'm willing to share.”

The girl stopped for a second and closed her eyes, breathing deeply.

“I need painkillers. That's what I need,” she muttered, but she grumpily held out a hand when he offered her a cookie.

March 25th, 9:45, Garden district

Kageyama Tobio groaned. The pain in her head was overwhelming and it was irritating her to no end. Furthermore, she couldn't get the tree sap off her god damn arms no matter how hard she tried. And what was the deal with this stupid boy? The very last thing she needed was some useless no-magic kid bothering her. If she could just get rid of him and make it to the centre of town she...

She shifted her weight and a thousand needles coursed through her veins.

Fuck.

She sighed, swallowing away a lump in her throat.

“You're not from around here, are you?” the boy babbled, his bright orange hair glinting in the sun. He was quite a bit smaller than her and annoyingly cheerful, all wide smiles and big brown eyes. Kageyama blinked at him and bit into the chocolate chip cookie he'd given her, somehow managing to pout while chewing.

“Not a lot of people are,” he continued, “I've lived here for three years now.”

He rummaged through his shopping bag and held up two drinking boxes.

“Want one?”

She quietly grabbed the milk drink and mumbled a soft 'thanks' before looking away.

“What's your name?” he went on, “I'm Hinata.”

“Kageyama,” she said and sucked angrily at the straw.
This was deeply confusing. Most people would have given up trying to talk to her long ago.

Hinata sat down on the ground and crossed his legs. He leaned back and noticed the books in her open backpack.

“Ooooh, you read kanji?” he said, suddenly even brighter, “that's cool! I try to keep up with that but it's so hard. What does that even say?”

He tilted his head and frowned at the notebook in front. Kageyama moved to stop him, but her hip was having none of it.

“Dragon.... something something?”

“Dragon tales,” Kageyama said quickly. “It's a... story book.”

“You're writing a fairy tale?” Hinata asked.

“No! I mean yes! I mean, how is this any of your business?” She was blushing now, trying to hide the backpack and her oracle notes. The last thing she wanted was to introduce this silly little boy to magic.

Protect the innocent. Uphold the Veil.

Don't drag random people into a world they're not prepared for.

She closed her eyes while the boy chatted about how his grandfather had always told tales of witches and monsters. She let the friendly banter wash over her. Maybe if she sat here for a little while longer she would be prepared for her trip. Maybe, if she could get a word in edgewise, he would let her borrow his phone.

When she opened her eyes, she saw with some relief that the boy had stopped chattering. He was frowning into the middle distance instead.

“Huh,” Hinata said, tilting his head.

Kageyama followed his gaze and saw a fog rolling down the hill.

Oh.

Shit.

“Hinata,” Kageyama spoke in the kindest voice she could muster, “you need to go. Thank you for the cookie. It helped. And the milk. Also. I'm fine now, thanks. Please go.”

The boy looked at her, brows knit together. There was no way to mask the panic in her eyes and the idiot was less stupid than he looked.

His gaze became wide. “Are you in trouble?” he whispered, but Kageyama shot up, ignoring a searing pain in her side, and pushed him away. In the corner of her eye, she could see two figures coming down the hill, while the fog crept ever closer.

“Go,” she snarled at him, “NOW.”
Hinata took a few steps back and watched a weird mist envelop the girl, whose loud curses could be heard from within. He'd read about low hanging clouds, but this one was oddly localized. He could walk around it to the other side, where two men stood hurling obscenities at Kageyama. The taller one had black hair that stood up, making his head look like a turnip.

“Never thought someone as weak as you would be this hard to get rid of,” he growled.

“ Fuck you, Kindaichi!” the girl shouted from inside the cloud.

“So troublesome,” his companion stated in a lazy drawl. He was smaller, with greasy dark locks plastered to his head, parted just enough to let him see through. His skin had an unpleasant greenish tint to it.

There was a thud and both boys laughed at the pained cry that followed it.

“If we don't do something, that ego of yours will get completely out of hand,” turnip boy said, sneering.

Another thud came from the cloud.

Hinata watched the scene with growing anger. He didn't exactly understand what was going on, but he knew bullying when he saw it. He looked around. There was no one to help him this time of day.

Oh boy.

He swallowed hard and stepped up.

“O-oi, what's going on here?” he shouted in his most menacing voice, shivering with a mixture of fear and rage.

“Hinata, will you fucking run!” the girl shrieked from inside the mist.

“Oho? The great Kageyama made a friend? It is a very strange day indeed.” A wide grin appeared on the green guy's face as he turned to Hinata.

“Y-you wanna go?” Hinata felt himself backing away. He tried hard to keep his face in a scowl and to stop his hands from trembling.

He wasn't feeling too well. His vision kept shifting. One second the turnip boy was playing with the bright screen of a phone and the next moment it looked like his hands themselves were glowing. The greasy guy's face, too, kept flickering in a weird blur. It gave Hinata a headache.

And now turnip head turned his attention to him.

Inside the thinning fog, Kageyama finally managed to gain some control over her limbs. She looked up to see what was going on.

Oh.

Her tormentors had gotten into an argument with the redhead.
Of course.

That stupid boy. The idiot was going to get himself killed.

And in a second, accompanied by a sharp sting in her skull, the options floated into her vision.

They could beat him, resulting in death.

They could beat him, resulting in serious injury.

She could help him: results unknown.

“Oh for fuck's sake.”

Chapter End Notes

I swear I'm finally done introducing protagonists.
Thanks for reading, and for your kind comments!
Hinata's body moved on its own. A voice in the back of his head was screaming at him to run away but something much stronger and much angrier was propelling him forward instead.

March 25th, 9:53, Garden district

Hinata Shouyou had made a mistake. He could see that now. He should have gone for help instead of trying to be a hero. Big mistake.

He was standing in between the two weird men, face red in embarrassment and fear, while his arms were doing weird things all on their own. Hinata's legs, too, were proving obstinate. Much as he wanted to run or jump or do anything, he was rooted to the asphalt. The whole confusing mess made Hinata's headache that much worse, while the panic now firmly lodged in his throat made it hard to breathe. Kindaichi, with his weird turnip hair, glowed behind Hinata's back while the greasy haired boy was bent over double with laughter. None of them paid any attention to the figure limping out of the fog towards them.

They were awfully quick to forget about her, Kageyama Tobio thought. Did they really think she'd give up that easily?

She grimaced at the pain in her... everything, but wasn't about to let that stop her. Her face was a storm cloud, her eyes pure hatred.

“You fucking bastards,” she snarled as she walked up and kicked the green guy in the back of the knees.

He dropped to the ground before even realizing she was there.

“Don't you know the first, fucking rule of our society?”

She growled while she limped towards the young dragon guard.

“Is to leave.”

She threw her weight into his side, catching him by surprise and toppling him over.

“The innocent.”

She stomped on his leg.

“Alone.”

She tried to kick Kindaichi in the head, but only managed to graze his forehead when her hip simply
refused to bend with any force.

He groaned, rolling away from her.

Hinata, suddenly master of his own limbs again, scrambled backwards. The girl stood over the two men, heaving with effort, one arm placed painfully on her hip. Her face was bruised, more so than before, and a small streak of blood came from her mouth.

She looked furious and fragile and utterly terrifying.

And now she turned to glare at Hinata.

“Didn’t I tell you to run, dumbass?” she snapped.

The redhead swallowed and nodded, stepping back and tripping over his own feet. He stopped when he saw the green boy rise again. In Hinata’s vision he kept flickering between a young man and something much more menacing and wet. And much to Hinata’s dismay, it became harder and harder to see him as a human being.

He pointed behind Kageyama, struggling to produce sound.

“Ka-kage-!” he finally yelled, but he was too late. The green thing slammed into her back and she fell like a doll, any energy she had left evaporating in an instant.

In the flickers before Hinata’s eyes something long and slick moved toward the girl, coiling itself around her waist with a sickening wet sound. The tendrils grew longer and longer, inching towards her neck and winding themselves around her throat.

Hinata’s body moved on its own. A voice in the back of his head was screaming at him to run away but something much stronger and much angrier was propelling him forward instead.

“Oi!” he shouted, running at the monster. The thing glared at him and a coil came his way. He slapped at it and kept going, attacking the limb around Kageyama’s neck with all his might. He tugged, he kicked, he scratched, to no avail. He wasn’t strong enough. He heard the girl whispering his name in a desperate plea and punched the coil in pure frustration.

And the next moment, everything stopped. The green boy let out a high pitched howl and fell backwards, the tendrils shrinking and returning to the body they came from. The thing lay there shivering while his friend cautiously scrambled to his side, eyes wide and confused.

Hinata stepped back, staring at his palm in wonderment. It was glowing.

Kageyama felt the air return to her lungs in big, heaving gulps. She rolled onto her side coughing, almost vomiting.

“Wow, are you ok?” Hinata snapped out of his trance to kneel down.

“What the FUCK was that?” she said hoarsely.
The boy shrugged.

“You could have fucking told me you were.. you were,” she waved her arm around vaguely.

“I was what?” Hinata said, eyebrows knit together in a frown.

The girl glared at him for a few seconds.

“Powerful,” she finally replied.

He stared at her.

“But it's apparently wasted on you. What the hell have you been doing all these years?”

She grumbled something under her breath and looked up at the redhead, who was staring in wonderment at his own hand again.

Hinata's head hurt, he just saw a bunch of... things, and he was pretty sure he had saved this girl, who was anything but thankful for it. But that felt nice, whatever it was.

He looked up to the find the guy he had punched, only to notice that he was no longer there. He was several metres away, being carried back up the hill by his turnip friend.

“Hey Kageyama,” the boy said, “Are those guys gonna come back?”

She sat up painfully and watched them shuffle off for a few seconds. She nodded.

“Help me up,” she said. “I need to get to the Old Quarter.”

“What you need is to go to the hospital. Oof,” Hinata stumbled trying to get the girl into a standing position. She was heavier than she looked.

“There's no time for that, I need to...” she took a step and almost collapsed onto the boy.

“Ok, so I may need some medical attention,” she conceded.

Hinata tried to think through the fuzziness in his head. The girl's face was bruised and scratched. She was bleeding heavily, part of her jacket wet with a dark liquid. Not good. Vaeda was not known for its speedy ambulance service, even in the richer districts.

“We'll go to the manor,” the boy said.

Kageyama frowned at him. He lifted her arm over his shoulder and started down the hill, struggling to keep her up.

“Is that a hospital?”

“No, but Akaashi should be there around this time of day,” Hinata replied. “It's just down the street from here, it's the closest place I can think of.”

Kageyama, leaning heavily on the redhead and trying her best not to fall apart, was in no mood to argue.
The manor was an old sandstone building of the kind that made architecture students weep. It appeared to be built out of spare parts from twenty other buildings. A friendly person might call it eccentric. Hinata had always just thought it looked weird, with its greek columns and gothic turrets and dragon-tipped roofs.

A small van was parked in the street next to the front gate. It was painted white, with a grey-and-gold logo of an owl on the side. 'Akaashi Keiji', it said, 'Mobile Nurse'.

“I wonder how long we have to wait,” Hinata mumbled to himself, craning his neck to look up the driveway. He had leaned the girl against the spiked iron fence, where she had immediately sagged down to the ground.

“Hey Kageyama? You think I should ring the bell again?”

The girl didn't answer. She'd closed her eyes and for the first time since Hinata had met her, she looked peaceful. In a fit of panic, he poked her cheek.

“Kageyama? Are you still alive?”

The girl slapped at his hand weakly. “Dumbass,” she muttered.

Well, that was a relief. Hinata looked around, fidgeting. Maybe he should ring the bell again. Maybe he should call an ambulance after all. Maybe he should have done that fifteen minutes ago.

Then the wind picked up and someone called his name.

“Mister Hinata?”

The nurse stepped through the gate and walked towards him, hips swaying ever so slightly under flawlessly crisp white linen.

Akaashi Keiji was... pretty. Intimidatingly so. They had wavy black hair and large, almond shaped eyes with a gaze in them that always seemed just this side of bored.

“Akaashi!” Hinata shouted, “You're here! You have to help her! We got in a fight and there were weird guys and low clouds and, and tentacles and I punched something REALLY hard but she's hurt and I don't really know what to do.”

The nurse frowned at the wounded girl. Thin fingers softly brushed her injured face, while storm grey eyes scanned her skin, from the bruises on her throat to the scratches on her arms. The nurse sniffed, taking in the smell of blood, pine needles and a hint of a damp swamp lingering in the air.

“Mister Hinata,” Akaashi said in a soft, monotone voice, “Help me get her into the van, please.”
Four kilometres away, a figure had reached the entrance to the dragon's cave. It moved with halted, wooden motions, like the doll of an apprentice puppeteer. It was wearing the uniform of a dragon guard and had a large open wound in its abdomen. It didn't appear bothered by this. With milk clouded eyes it blinked at the sky and then it twitched. Its shoulders shuddered, jerking up and down rapidly until it produced a sound. Laughter, high and shrill like a hyena's, rolled over the small grass field with its broken fence and bounced off the walls of the shack before dissipating into the trees. Wisps of smoke streamed past the figure, dancing, gathering and forming a cloud that oozed out of the cave and down the hill.
A swarm of clouds

Chapter Summary

Hinata's had about enough of clouds.

March 25th, 10:35, Garden District

Hinata Shouyou tapped his foot and pouted, leaning against the side of the van. He'd helped Akaashi haul the wounded girl onto a stretcher and into the vehicle. And then they'd politely but firmly kicked him out. Bored, he was watching a little bird streak across the sky when he noticed it was not the only thing flying overhead. A small plume of smoke moved across his vision with the kind of deliberation and speed that you'd never associate with water vapour.

"Huh," he said and stood up straight. He wasn't too fond of clouds today. This could just be another weird thing that was about to attack him.

He walked around to the back of the van and tentatively knocked on the door.

"Akaashi?"

The little plume turned back and started circling round. Hinata watched it for a few moments. It reminded him of a vulture and he had the sinking feeling that the prey was him.

He knocked again, more urgent this time.

"Akaashi...shii?" he squeaked and the door finally opened. He rushed in before the nurse could even say anything.

The inside of the van looked positively cosy, with gold trimmed wooden cabinets of bandages and medicine lining the walls, a stretcher in the middle and, somehow, room for a small leather armchair, a little table and a kitchen so small it could be one of his little sister's toys.

Kageyama lay on the stretcher with her eyes closed, wearing a white t-shirt with a little owl logo on it. She already looked much better. The dirt was gone and colour had returned to her face. Akaashi sat on a bench next to her, busily putting the finishing touches on her bandages. A little waste basket next to their feet was overflowing with red stained cotton wipes.

"Wow, Akaashi, you're good," Hinata said, surprised at the change.

The nurse nodded.

"Can I do anything?" He asked, trying to keep his mind occupied.

Akaashi motioned to the cabinet. "Could you grab some more disinfectant? "
Hinata carefully started opening drawers and doors.

“Hey Kageyama,” he chattered, “who were those guys anyway? Should we call someone?”

“She's unconscious, mister Hinata,” the nurse spoke softly without looking up from their work.

“That's bad, isn't it? Is that bad, Akaashi?” He handed them a small bottle, eyes worriedly scanning the girl.

“Not necessarily, mister Hinata,” the nurse droned, “She needs to rest or she won't heal. And she will not rest as long as she's awake.”

Hinata sat there for a minute, watching them work. It was quiet in the van, nothing breaking the silence but the soft sound of cotton wrappings and the drum of Hinata's feet tapping the floor.

“Akaashi?” he finally said, the random thoughts gnawing on his mind finally spilling over, “Is Kageyama a criminal?”

The nurse looked up at him.

“It's just that... you know. They just attacked her. And she knew how to fight back and everything. Maybe she's in a gang or something?”

“No,” Akaashi sighed. The nurse glanced over the pile of clothes in the corner, the weapon they'd taken off the girl's back and the markings on the sheath. “No, she's not.”

“But then those guys...” Hinata asked, “Shouldn't we call the police or something.”

“I've already called the proper authorities, mister Hinata,” the nurse said, returning their gaze to their work.

Hinata pursed his lips, drumming his fingers on his knee.

“Oh!” He crawled to the pile of clothes and lifted out Kageyama's backpack.

“Mister Hinata, what are you doing?”

“She said she had to go to the Old Quarter. I'm trying to figure out if she has family there or something.” He opened the bag and started taking out the water stained notebooks.

“That's rather rude, mister Hinata,” the nurse began, but he had already opened one, a small black notebook, worn with use.

On the very first page was a mantra of sorts.

'Uphold the Veil
Protect the innocent,
Destroy those that would break us.'
He blinked at the words. Weird.

The next page started with 'Dear diary' and Hinata felt his face heating up. He quickly slammed the book shut and moved on to the next one. It was filled with breathing techniques and focusing stances. There were at least twenty pages worth of meditation exercises, accompanied by badly drawn stick figures doing the poses. Maybe Kageyama was some kind of martial artist, he decided. She certainly looked like one.

That only left the dragon story one. And that one was pure chaos. It mostly featured mystical speak and riddles. It spoke of monsters and gifts and something called 'the threads of destiny'. Kageyama had written down the word 'catalyst' at least five times, usually underlined and circled, with arrows pointing to it. The book wasn't very helpful but something about it tugged at the little voice at the back of Hinata's mind.

He looked at the nurse, who was calmly wiping their hands.

“Akaashi,” Hinata muttered, “do you believe in magic?”

They glanced at him, apparently pondering the question. It was always so hard to figure out what they were thinking.

“Mister Hinata,” Akaashi finally said, “What happened?”

“I'm not sure,” Hinata mumbled, hugging his knees. The nurse merely nodded.

They got up from the bench and swung the back doors of the van open.

“So what do we do now?” Hinata started, getting up, “Do we take her to the hospital? I can always put her on the couch at my place for now, we ca-”

Akaashi’s hand gripped his arm, holding him back.

On the street, about two meters from the van, hovering just above the ground, was a cloud. If that's what he could call it, at least. It was more like a nest or something. A swarm of clouds. They moved and whirled, restlessly flying over and through each other.

Hinata stared wide-eyed, the feeling of dread that had been pushed to the back of his mind returning in full force.

“Are you seeing this?” he squeaked.

The nurse nodded and Hinata couldn't help but stare. Akaashi's usually impassive face was set in a scowl, brows knit together.

“Akaashi, what is that?”

“Wisps,” the nurse said in a low, dark voice.

“What, uh, are wisps?” Hinata asked slowly.

“The spirits of the tormented.”
Akaashi's hand gripped harder as one of the plumes detached from its tribe and hovered closer.

“What do they want?”

“A body,” Akaashi muttered. A gust of wind blew the one closest to them off track.

“Stay in the van and close the doors, mister Hinata,” the nurse said as the wind started whipping around them. “We're leaving.”

Akaashi hopped out and helped him close the van just as a blast of wind scattered the swarm, sending them tumbling in every direction. Hinata sat back and stared at the doors, heart beating in his throat while the nurse got into driver's seat. A small window at the front slid open.

“Mister Hinata?”

“Yes?!”

“Please make sure the girl doesn't fall off the stretcher,” Akaashi said, starting up the motor, “I can't promise you that this will be a smooth or safe ride.”
**March 25th, 13:44 pm, Old Quarter in the City**

Kuroo Tetsurou had been enjoying a relatively quiet day in the museum so far. This early in the year, the crowd was always sparse, mostly older people from China and the US, with a few groups of Russians thrown in. He had his little talk prepared in a number of languages and had gotten quite good at the flourishes and gestures that made his guests giggle. But mostly he'd gotten good at receiving tips. His sly smile never failed to make the older ladies blush.

He was letting a small group of guests out when the heavy bass line of his ring tone pierced the quiet dignity of the museum.

"Kuroo, you gotta help me," a voice shouted at him the second he picked up.

"Bokuto? What's up? I'm at work," Kuroo replied. It was a subtle hint and he was fairly certain that the man on the other end of the line wouldn't pick up on it.

"Akaashi is gone," his friend continued, "Bro, Akaashi's gone, weird shit is happening. There's... things on the street. It doesn't look like I can punch them and I swear they chased me. I'm getting really worried and... and... Have you seen Akaashi? They've never been late before."

Kuroo blinked. "Bo, calm down," he said, "Where are you?"

"Huh?" the voice on the other end sputtered, "I'm home, and Akaashi isn't. Listen, Kuroo..."

Bokuto was interrupted by some loud noises and what sounded like swearing.

"Hello?" Kuroo yelled into the phone, "Bokuto? Talk to me."

The call disconnected, leaving Kuroo to stare at the device.

He took a deep breath. Ok, not good, he thought.

"Nekomata madam?" Kuroo called down to the basement, where his boss usually hung out during the day. There was no reply.

Odd. Worrying even. First dragons, then 'things' and now the damn boss was gone. What was this, the end of the world?

Just calm down, Kuroo thought, fingers drumming mindlessly on the wall. Assume the worst. What
do I do?

He mentally listed the people in his vicinity. Kenma? Probably fine, he was good at hiding. Nekomata? Already dead, nothing much to protect on that end. Sawamura? Strong enough to handle herself, plus she had a bunch of friends.

But Bokuto had sounded scared. Really scared.

Right.

“Ma'am?” he called down again out of a sense of decorum: “It looks like we're taking the day off.”

He tore open an envelope and flattened it, using the inside to devise a makeshift placard: 'Closed', he wrote in big, sharp letters, trying to make it look as professional as possible, 'Due to unforeseen circumstances'.

And then, as an afterthought: 'Please come back soon!'

When he stepped out of the back door of the museum, shrugging on his leather jacket, he could feel a weird tension in the air that ran straight to the pit of his stomach and set up camp there. The atmosphere felt heavy and dense, as if the city was holding its breath.

He quickly locked up and made his way to the small art gallery down the street. He had a deal with the owner to use part of the basement as a workshop, so obviously he used it to stash his most prized possession. He slid through the garage door and flipped on the light switch. The room hit him with the smell of ash and paint. In one corner stood the sculpture he was working on, a portrait made of melted rubber. There was a pile of unfinished and discarded pieces on a large table in the middle: basic wax work, metal blocks that had melted down into an unmanageable puddle, planks of wood with black marks portraying scenes and animals.

Cats, mostly.

One looked vaguely like his friend Kenma, but not enough for Kuroo to be proud of it.

And near one wall, safely stashed under a dust sheet, was the Bike. Black, gleaming, gorgeous, the most expensive thing Kuroo had ever owned. He'd bought it with the money from his first big art sale.

“Hey baby,” he whispered softly, sliding off the sheet and running his fingers over the curves of the gas tank. Carefully he took it off the stand and walked it out the door.

Kuroo slowly drove out of the alley and into the main street of the Old Quarter, past the temple. The tourists were still here, wandering around and taking pictures, but something else was going on as well. Clumps of people were gathering. Magic Folk, he noticed, by the occasional pointy ear or unhuman body shape.

Their faces were set and grim, like they were waiting for something. They reminded him of the bullies in his youth. Ready and looking for a fight. Any excuse for violence.

Kuroo frowned, sniffing at the air. There was a hint of cinders that he couldn't quite place.
Ten years ago, Manila outskirts, Philippines

Kuroo was sixteen when he walked into the abandoned church after school to share his leftover lunch with the small cat that lived there, as usual. Only this time, it was not just the cat. A group of six teenagers, older than Kuroo, had caught the animal and were busy stringing it up.

“Ow, you little shit,” one of the boys said, sucking at the scratch on the back of his hand. He pulled back his foot to kick and Kuroo didn't even think before storming into the room. His blood running like liquid flame through his veins, he yanked the kid backwards and head-butted him, startling the others.

Kuroo never remembered how it went, exactly. He kicked and punched them, he knew that much. He got nicked on the cheek with a knife at some point and the next day there would be bruises on his body that spoke of a losing battle. But he did remember the scream when one of the guys' clothes caught fire. And he remembered how the others looked at him as if he was the devil himself before running off.

At sixteen, Kuroo cut down the cat and slumped on the floor of the old church building, orange glow reflecting in his eyes.

“Thanks,” the cat said softly.

8 years ago, Manila outskirts, Philippines

It was two weeks before Kuroo's graduation and the garden shed was on fire.

His mother was crying. “Why? I just need to know why you would do this, Tetsurou?” she asked, voice shaky and desperate.

“I didn't. I didn't mean to...” he started, but she put her hands in front of her face and his father stared at him wordlessly.

They stayed like that while the police took him away for questioning and for the next four hours all he could say was that it was an accident.

It was.

When they found no evidence of foul play, the police let him go again.

At eighteen, Kuroo was officially an innocent man, but his mother looked at him with fear in her eyes and his father refused to speak.

Three weeks after Kuroo's graduation, he walked up to the old church building with a large backpack full of clothes, food and everything he held dear: a stocked mp3-player, a phone, a new can of deodorant and some old notebooks.
“Hey Kenma,” he said when the small cat peeked its head out of a doorway, “wanna go on a trip?”

Last year, Old Quarter, Vaeda

It was five years after he had settled in Vaeda when Kuroo showed the cute girl from the coffee shop what he could do. He held up his index finger.

“Look,” he said, “you just breathe calmly and focus.”

A small flame appeared at the tip as if it was a matchstick. The light danced and swayed in her eyes as she looked from the flame to him and back to the flame.

“And then with practice, you can control it,” he went on. The flame grew hotter and its colour changed to white, and then to blue.

She pouted and he couldn't suppress a smile because she was so utterly adorable when she pouted.

“Just find a safe place and practice,” he said, “I'm sure you'll get the hang of it.”

March 25th, 14:04 pm, Old Quarter in the City

It was six years after Kuroo had settled in Vaeda and the city smelled of fire.

He didn't like it one bit.

He drove up the hill towards the thoroughfare in the New Quarter and passed another group of Magic Folk. They were checking their phones and glaring at passers-by.

Maybe he should have gone to check up on Sawamura after all. None of this felt even remotely right. The sooner he got everyone to safety, the better.

Kuroo set his jaw and sped up, hoping to god that Kenma had found his way back into their apartment by now.
Big brother

Chapter Summary

Hinata huffed.
Right.
He had no idea what was going on today, but he had enough of thinking about it. He needed to do something.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March 25th, 10:52, Garden district

Hinata Shouyou sat in the back of a nurse's van as it hurtled through the wide, sloping streets of the Garden District. Every now and then they'd go through a particularly sharp turn and he'd reach out a hand to brace the stretcher that was holding Kageyama. On more than one occasion, the vehicle seemed to be in danger of tipping over completely. The wounded girl lay silent, dead to the world, not even waking up when she was shaken like a rag doll on one of the bumpier roads.

Hinata would be impressed, if his mind wasn't already occupied with a million thoughts and a growing frustration.

The last few hours had been an utter nightmare. He'd been attacked by sentient clouds and glowy things and even tentacles.

The worst of it was that this girl and Akaashi had acted like it wasn't that much of a shock. They'd looked angry or scared or... mildly inconvenienced in the case of Akaashi, but not shocked. Not grasping for their sanity, like Hinata was.

It was as if he had suddenly woken up in a different world, one in which he - and he alone - was completely lost. Everything he had always known was suddenly thrown out the window. He felt himself scrabbling to keep a grip and when he remembered the bag from the convenience store, he nearly burst into tears to find two packets of chewy sweets still in there.

One for him and one for his sister. Her favourite.

He opened one and sucked on a gummy, the familiar flavour giving him some sense of belonging.

He took a deep breath to calm himself and reached for his phone, wondering if maybe he should call his parents.

You know, just to check how they were doing. Not because he wanted nothing more right now than to hear the comforting voice of his mom.

He twirled the phone in his hand, biting his lip. It wouldn't be weird to just call them, right?
His parents had taken Natsu, his little sister, on a rare day just for herself. They were going shopping, and they had tickets for some play for little kids. Hinata kinda wished he was there with them now, even though he'd been so happy to have the whole house to himself.

It probably wouldn't hurt to see how they were doing, right?

Giving up, he scrolled through his contacts and chose his mom's number, one hand holding on to the swaying stretcher as he made the call.

It rang five times before clicking over to voice mail.

Hmmm. They should still be out shopping, Hinata thought, probably just didn't hear it.

“Hey mom,” he said to the answering machine, “just wanted to let you know that I have not destroyed the kitchen yet! Call me when you get this? Love you.”

As he closed the call, Hinata felt the van slowing down.

“Akaashi?” Hinata called to the front.

“Just a second, mister Hinata.”

The vehicle came to a complete halt and there was the click and bang of a door opening and closing. He could hear footsteps crunch on gravel, going around to the back of the van. Hinata perked up as the doors opened and Akaashi climbed in.

“How is she?” they asked.

“Still asleep, none of that shaking did anything,” Hinata pouted, “Where are we, anyway?”

“Southern part of the Garden District. It seems like we can’t drive to my residence at this moment but we should be relatively safe here for now.”

Hinata jumped out of the van and onto the gravel of what looked like a parking lot, with some pick nick tables and a small toilet building on one end. It was on the side of a hill, overlooking most of Vaeda. He walked to the edge to admire the view.

The air over the city was hazy in the noon sun and the smell of ash tickled his nose. From up here, he could occasionally hear the sounds of horns and car engines.

Vaeda traffic was at a standstill. It usually was.

But then he saw it: clouds of black smoke rising from some streets and squares. Parts of the city looked like they were on fire.

He could hear it, too. The wind carried the sound of sirens all the way up.

Hinata grabbed his phone and dialled his mom again.
Voice mail.

“Akaashi? What part of the city is that?” he yelled back at the nurse.

“We're in the hills overlooking Vaeda Central, mister Hinata,” came their monotone voice.

Oh.

Hinata tried calling his dad, this time.

Voice mail.

He looked at the high rises and the random chaos beneath his feet and swallowed hard.

His sister was down there. His parents were down there. No one was picking up their phones.

Akaashi walked up and stood next to him, frowning in the distance.

Hinata huffed.

Right.

He had no idea what was going on today, but he had enough of thinking about it. He needed to do something.

“Akaashi? Can you take care of Kageyama for me?”

The nurse gave him a curious look.

“I need to go.”

“Mister Hinata?” Akaashi blinked when they saw him run back to the van. “Please don't do that. That is a really dumb idea.”

Hinata was busy stuffing candy and a drink box in the pockets of his jacket.

“I need to go,” he repeated.

“Mister Hinata, it is very dangerous out there right now, you saw the wisps…”

“That's why I need to go,” the boy replied and when he looked back at Akaashi, his eyes had gone dark and fiery. “My sister is down there.”

“Mister Hinata....”

“Thanks for the help!” Hinata shouted, before jogging off without a second glance, leaving the nurse to sigh deeply.

March 25th, 11:15, Garden district
Hinata Shouyou ran full tilt through the wide streets leading down the hill. He made it all the way to the edge of Central before he really had to stop to take a breath.

But even he wouldn't be able to run to the shopping streets before breaking down.

This was a fool's errand, part of him knew, but he wasn't about to stop now.

He straightened his back and breathed deeply, wondering if maybe he should find a bus or a metro or something, when it caught his eye. It was leaning against a fence, seemingly discarded in this run-down part of town, as if it was there simply to solve his problems.

A bicycle.

It looked a bit rusty and old, and it had a big wooden box over the front wheel, but it seemed in working order.

Hinata looked around nervously. Was he really going to steal a bike? What if someone saw him? With sweaty hands he walked up to it, glancing left and right, and making a mental note of where he was. He'd bring it back, he promised himself. With a letter of apology and maybe a bag of chocolates.

Taking another deep breath, he kicked off and pedalled down the hill as if his life depended on it.

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March 25th, 11:44, Vaeda Central

“Natsuuuuu!” Hinata yelled out at the top of his lungs

He had arrived in the main shopping area and the place was pure chaos.

The streets were fully gridlocked and he was weaving in between cars and pedestrians, switching from the street to the pavement and back, trying very hard to move forward without hitting anyone.

On his way over he'd passed several groups of people getting into fights, harassing police and attacking buildings and cars. There weren't many, and the groups were always small, but they seemed to have quite an impact. He could swear he saw glowing hands or eyes on a bunch of them and he knew by now that that could not possibly be a good thing.

He wanted several times to stop and help out, but cold, damp fear urged him to keep pedalling.

In the shopping streets, most stores had now closed their doors, leaving several hundreds of people to pile into the few entrances to the subway. The queue was huge and didn't seem to move much. Cycling past, he heard shouts of the underground system being shut down.

When he stopped and reached for his phone again, he noticed that the mobile network was also down. Too many people trying to make calls at the same time.

Think, Hinata said to himself.
His parents would not be here. They were social scientists, they knew what to do in a crisis.

“People are smart,” his father had once told him, “but crowds are not. Try to avoid large groups of people, seek shelter, stay away and wait for it to pass.”

But then where were they?

He could hear sirens a block away.

There was a lot of yelling and a police helicopter was hovering overhead.

What the hell was going on?

Hinata could feel himself panic. His heart was pounding way too fast, there was a fuzzy feeling in the pit of his stomach and a deeply unpleasant buzzing in the back of his head.

Breathe, Hinata told himself.

1, 2, 3, breathe.

Think.

But he could not think.

He hopped back on his bike and started pedalling, desperate for something to occupy his mind.

“Natsuuuuuu!”

Hinata aimlessly cycled through the streets, eyes scanning left and right but not, in fact, straight ahead.

“Hey!”

He snapped out of his reverie and looked up just in time to see a man in a white t-shirt and jeans, right in front of him. Hinata swerved and managed to miss him by a mere centimetre, while the man nearly tripped into a wall.

“Oh gosh, sorry!” Hinata quickly stepped off his bike to help him.

“You are very imprudent, boy.” The guy straightened up and patted dust from his shoulder before looking down at Hinata through a pair of sunglasses. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Sorry! I’m looking for my sister,” Hinata said, biting his lip and scanning his surroundings again. “I need to find her. And my parents, too. Have you seen any of them, maybe?”

The man tilted his head at him.

“She's five,” Hinata rambled on, and he held his hand up to his chest, “about this high, and she has-”

“Bright orange hair?” the man asked.

Hinata looked up, eyes wide in awe.
“You saw her?”

The man seemed to ponder for a second before answering, lips curling slightly.

“I did,” he said, “But there were no grown people with her.”

Hinata gaped, mind exploding with a million possibilities and images, none of them good.

“Where is she? Where did you last spot her?”

The man looked down at Hinata and a strangely mirthless smile spread across his features.

“I can take you,” he said.

“Please do! Thank you! I've been so worried, I hope she's ok!”

“Indeed,” the guy in sunglasses said.

“I'm Hinata, by the way,” Hinata said, dragging his bike along and walking fast to keep up with the man.

“You can call me Makki,” he grinned, holding out a hand to steer the boy towards a side street, “right thissssss way.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late update!
Chapter Summary

Some people would always dream of ruling the world.

\textit{Seven years ago, Oregon, US}

Magic society takes care of its own.

It was one of the first things Sawamura Daichi learned when she spoke to people about witchcraft. The world she'd found herself in after her car accident had its own weird politics, its own traditions and its own law enforcement. You couldn't really go to your local sheriff with a story about how a drunk pixie had run off with your wallet, after all.

The tall, pale man at the community centre in her home town had told her stories of how magic society locked away its worst. The man eaters, the crazed beasts and the wizards that could – and would – flatten whole cities with a flick of the wrist. The really strong ones were almost impossible to kill, the man had said, milky white eyes boring into her skull, so they were sealed away long ago. Humanity still has myths about them. They're given names such as titans, ice giants or fallen angels.

And when she visited the ghostly coyote in the cemetery, she explained to her that for most, this was fine. Magic society kept to itself and the Veil had become so strong that normal people would rarely find out. The days of witch burnings were mostly over. The ones that were harder to hide, the gnomes, the dragons and leviathans were kept in farther reaches of the earth. They lived in the forests of Canada, in the Ural mountains and in the deserts, where no one bothered them.

But for some, this was not enough, the coyote had whispered. Some felt that they should not hide. They had forgotten why this fragile truce was created. They railed against the dictates of their society and rebelled against the Veil. They felt that humanity owed them something more.

Some, the coyote had said in a low growl, would always dream of ruling the world.

\textit{March 25\textsuperscript{th}, 13:42, Old Quarter, Vaeda}

Sawamura Daichi finished her practice session in the basement and walked back up the steps to her shop. The place was fairly calm, with only a few customers sitting at the tables, quietly chatting, reading or typing away at a laptop.

She straightened her apron and shoved a leftover donut in her mouth while she brewed herself a cup of coffee.

Asahi was playing around on her phone, frowning at the screen.

“What's up?” Daichi asked between bites.

“I've never seen them this excited before,” Asahi answered. When Daichi quirked an eyebrow, she showed her the device.
“What's this?” Daichi said, scrolling through a wall of text.

“It's sort of a forum? For magic folk?” Asahi explained, “One of the customers told me about it. People can just make posts and talk about what's on their mind. There's a subforum for Folk struggling to figure out their powers, for instance. And I've seen one with fashion tips for adapting high street clothes to tails and things. But some of it is also pretty scary, like people talking about how non-magic folk are inferior. They make fun of them and call them 'norms' which I'm pretty sure is a slur. There's also, uh, uh, this.” Asahi took the phone and clicked around before handing it over again.

It was a thread called 'It's STARTED', posted by someone with the nickname 'Kakuni'. It was full of people typing in all caps about gates and payback. As she scrolled down, Daichi found comments arguing back and forth about whether or not this was a good idea. There were some users trying to shush the whole conversation on grounds of not giving away secrets, while others shouted that that was the entire point. There was some very unfortunate Nazi imagery and at least one person kept posting completely irrelevant cat pictures.

Daichi blinked at the screen.

“How do you even make sense of this?” she finally asked.

“You get used to it,” Asahi smiled sheepishly, “Apparently, there's a guardian somewhere and they got rid of it. But a lot of other stuff is going on, too. Someone in the Garden district is reporting wisps and telling everyone to stay indoors. I don't actually know what a wisp is, but—”

“The spirits of the evil dead,” Daichi answered without looking up from the screen.

“Oh,” Asahi breathed, face going a little pale.

Daichi was getting that feeling again, an unpleasant heaviness in the pit of her stomach.

“Is this about the dragon?” she asked.

Asahi's eyes grew wide.

“What dragon?” she stammered, but Daichi was already back to scrolling through the thread, getting more disturbed by the second.

“Asahi, these people are talking about revolution,” she said, “They're talking about violence. Are they serious?”

If Asahi had an answer, she didn't give it. The brass bell to the coffee shop tinkled and she turned away to serve the group of customers that had just come in. There were five of them and they wore the kind of attitude you only ever saw in music videos.

“Uh, what can I get you,” Asahi said a little too quietly.

“I'm glad you asked,” the guy in the front said. He pulled back the hood on his sweater to reveal a blond undercut and a mischievous grin.

“This place is well known as a purveyor of ingredients for the general wizardry and I was hoping
you'd support us in the war effort. I promise it'll be fun,” he smirked, slight drawl in in his voice.

“W-war effort?” Asahi shrunk back from the counter. The boy leaned over conspiratorially.

“The time has come to take up our rightful place under the sun, don't you know? Me and my friends here,” he waved an arm at the men behind him, “have been So. Damn. Bored.” He punctuated each word with a sway of his head.

“All that power, and we're not allowed to do anything with it. We're just bursting for something fun to happen. Aren't you?” he asked and he raised his voice so everyone could hear. “Aren't you ready to kick some ass?”

Asahi said nothing. She swallowed thickly and awkwardly shuffled backwards until she hit the cabinet behind her. Her eyes never left the man who was making a scene in front of the counter. The entire coffee shop was looking at them and he, at least, seemed to bask in the attention.

He flipped himself over and leaned his elbows on the counter.

“Now, I know what you're thinking, little witch,” he continued and he spoke to the ceiling in a mockingly high voice: “But Teru, would I be joining the right side? It's such a Big. Bad. World out there and there's So. Many. Norms.”

He pushed himself upright again.

“And that would be a good question, because you're a pretty little lady who is also kinda smart.”

He winked at her.

“But why don't you let my friend here show you why we'll win?” he went on. “Bobata?”

The man he pointed out was taller than him, with brown hair and a bored expression on his face. He raised a glowing hand and brought it down on a stool near the counter, causing it to disintegrate into a pile of wood.

One of the customers in the back screamed and the blonde man named 'Teru' nodded appreciatively.

Asahi stepped forward.

“Uh, um-” she began, but her voice got stuck as he threw her another mocking glance.

“Do you have a question, little witch?” he asked in a sickly sweet voice.

“Get out of my shop.”

The voice came loud and clear and sharp as a shard of glass.

Five men and one trembling Asahi turned to look at Daichi, who had just about enough of this. She'd pulled herself up to her full height and was throwing her new customers a glare that could pierce granite.

“Oh boy,” Asahi squeaked under her breath.

Teru grinned.
“Sawamura, isn't it?” he said, turning around, “You know, it would be a pity if someone with such a nice face chose the wrong side. If it helps, I'm sure they'll let you keep your pet Norm.”

Daichi took a step forward and folded her arms, rage screeching through her veins.

“You think you can come in here and threaten me and my staff?” she said in a voice so cold it could plunge the entirety of Vaeda into an eternal winter.

“You think I will let you harass my customers with your stupid talk of a revolution? Get the hell out. Now.”

Several customers were crawling behind tables or sneaking towards the bathroom now, but the three regulars in the back rose slowly. One of them nodded at Daichi, ready to jump in if necessary.

Teru shrugged and threw up his hands.

“So rude, Sawamura. I'm not your enemy here,” he said with a wide smile, a glint of metal giving away a piercing in his tongue. “It really is a pity.”

He turned to his men. “Let's go. We're not getting free coffee today.”

With that, they walked out again, leaving only a stifling silence behind.

Daichi huffed and waited for her heart to stop racing.

“Take a break, Asahi,” she said, laying a soothing hand on her friend's shoulder before walking in front of the counter to sweep up the remains of the stool.

Asahi let out a shaky sigh and inhaled deeply, as if she'd been holding her breath all this time.

Several of the customers were packing up their things to leave while others merely sat back down to stare at their drinks.

It was dead quiet for several heartbeats, until the bell tinkled and something flew by in a flash of light. Daichi barely even registered it. She looked up from her broom to frown at the back of a guy running away and then someone screamed behind her.

“Molotov!” one of the customers shouted and at the same time, she could hear the unmistakable shriek of Asahi.

When Daichi turned around in a haze, it was already over.

On the floor in front of the counter lay a block of ice. Somewhere inside it she could discern a bottle and a blackened rag. Asahi stood over it, breathing heavily, a soft glow fainting from her fingers.

“Asahi?”

The girl looked up. She was shaking like a leaf, eyes starting to fill with tears.

“Nice save,” Daichi said.
Yachi meets the very last person she wants to see in the entire city of Vaeda, while Oikawa ponders murder for the sixth time this week.

Chapter Notes

Gore warning.

**March 25th, 11:37, Vaeda Central**

Oikawa strived for perfection in everything he did. He meticulously planned professional photo shoots for his hosts, he noticed stray pixels in logos and he expected the same kind of attention to detail from his staff. That is why Yachi Hitoka found herself walking out of a printer's office in Vaeda Central. She'd gone to personally check on the prints for a new hosts' card and had, very carefully, pointed out a slight change in colour. The second run was much better.

Feeling rather pleased with her work, she texted her boss.

A few minutes later, she stepped out of a side street and walked right into a huge crowd of people queueing for the metro.

**March 25th, 11:38, Light District, Vaeda**

Magic society takes care of its own.

It hunts and locks away the dangerous ones.

But some will always slip through the cracks.

Oikawa Tooru knew that better than anyone.

He looked at the piece of paper on his desk and pondered murder for the sixth time this week.

When did he become like this?

Lives were lost in this city every day. They shouldn't matter to him. It was nature, after all.

The old dance of predator and prey, repeated a billion times each day.
Oikawa had no business trying to stop a predator from hunting.

A small bleep interrupted his thoughts.

'Card run has been corrected, Oikawa-san. I'm on my way back.'

He smiled at the picture Yachi had provided with her text message. Run 1 next to Run 2, with the slightest of colour differences.

She was a twitchy little thing but she had a good eye, Oikawa had to admit.

He was rather fond of her.

It was becoming a weakness, really.

He poured a cup of green tea and returned to his desk to stare at the small piece of paper his contact had delivered.

Two lines.

An address three blocks away from the main shopping street in Central.

March 25th, 11:44, Vaeda Central

Yachi stood in a line for the metro and tried very hard to keep it together. People around her were getting impatient, there was some shoving and Yachi, perpetually aware of her small stature, feared that death by crushing was imminent.

A murmur spread through the crowd that the metro had shut down completely, there were rumours of sabotage and the sound of sirens wasn't helping Yachi to calm down at all.

She felt nauseous and out of breath. As if all these people were taking up what little air there was.

Much as she really, really wanted to go back, she also really, really didn't want to stay here.

With some difficulty she squeezed through the throng of people until she was clear of them.

“Natsuuuuuuuuuuuu!” a yell came from behind her and with a squeak she jumped out of the way as a reckless young man on a bicycle zoomed past. She held on to a lamp post until her breathing was back to normal. At least she could breathe here.

Feeling a little better, she walked toward the openness of the main shopping street and sat down on a bench to text her boss that she'd be late.

“Hey!”

A sound made her look up in the middle of typing a frantic apology. The boy on the bicycle was back and he'd nearly run over someone else. He got off to apologize and Yachi felt her stomach drop
when she saw who he was apologizing to.

It was him. It had to be him. The very air around him seemed to radiate with danger and just looking at his white t-shirt made Yachi's skin crawl.

The man dusted off his jeans and pushed his sunglasses up his nose, talking to the boy while Yachi sat frozen.

Oh no.

He... it was smiling at the kid. It was gesturing.

“Look at his eyes!” Yachi mentally shouted at the boy.

But he was just nodding at the monster, looking curious and excited.

Oh no oh no oh no.

In a fit of panic, she tried to call her boss, only to find that the network was down.

Ok, she thought, plan B. She needed a plan B.

She delicately lifted the leather bound book out of her backpack, closed her eyes and let it fall open.

“Corinthian,” she read at the top of the page, “The Corinthian is a walking nightmare, usually taking the form of a young male-”

She quickly scanned the page for ways to defeat it, only to find the one answer she didn’t want to read.

“The Corinthian is said to be immortal and cannot be defeated by regular means.”

Several metres away from her, the thing was pointing to a side street. The boy nodded.

Nooooo.

Yachi tried to concentrate.

“What do I do?” she thought to herself before letting the pages flutter open again.

“Running,” the book read, “Running is a quick method of transportation that is used by most species to flee danger-”

“You're not helping!” Yachi whined under her breath.

The boy was now walking with the monster, pushing his bicycle along.

“How do I SAVE him?” Yachi whispered desperately.

Fight or flight reflex,” the title at the top of the new page read, “A physiological reaction that occurs in response to a perceived threat to survival. Generally, when faced with a strong enemy, weaker creatures respond by fleeing, which gives them a higher chance to live-”

Yachi closed the book in frustration.
She had to do this alone.

She couldn't let that boy get hurt.

What else was she here for? She'd decided to come all this way to help people. What good was she if she didn't even have the courage to do this?

Yachi swallowed thickly and, as quiet as a mouse, she followed the pair.

March 25th, 11:53, Light District, Vaeda

Oikawa Tooru got up to refill his tea and checked his phone again.

Outside, smoke had dulled the already hazy sky above the city.

The radio talked about the metro system being down. People were requested to stay indoors, since small altercations were reported in the Garden District and they were spreading towards Central and the Old Quarter.

He could not reach Yachi.


He returned to his desk.

Two lines on a piece of paper.

An address three blocks away from the main shopping street in Central.

As far as predators go, this one was... special.

Too powerful for Oikawa, he knew that much.

With an annoyed huff he sat back in his chair.

Something unpleasant was nibbling at the back of his mind.

Something very close to worry.

She was not stupid, he told himself.

And he'd already gone above and beyond his duty as a Sanctuary holder.

She'd be fine.

Even if the slightly sour smell of fear seemed to cling to her very skin.

Even if Iwaizumi watched her like an overprotective brother.

He did that to a lot of people. None of it should matter to Oikawa.
When did he ever become like this?

Twenty years ago, Swat Valley, Pakistan

Oikawa Tooru found the boy in the middle of a clearing. He couldn't be more than six years old. The jar at his feet held a small swarm of beetles and he was busily trying to catch another. There was a scrape on his knee and dirt on his face. The child was obviously lost, venturing alone this far in the forest, but he didn't seem to mind.

Quietly, Oikawa sneaked up, preparing to pounce when the boy suddenly turned to him.

"Hello," he said, "my name is Iwaizumi. Who are you?"

Taken aback, Oikawa sat down and opened his mouth.

"Oikawa."

The boy smelled of lemon candy and mud and blood. His eyes were clear, open to the world, accepting of everything in their path.

He was unafraid. He was innocent.

He was easy prey.

"Oikawa, will you be my friend?" the boy said.

Sixteen years ago, Swat Valley, Pakistan

The pain in Oikawa's knee was sharp and hot, overriding any attempt to think. His vision had gone blurry. He had to get himself together, he thought, he had to find a way out, but his instincts were taking over.

A hand grabbed his back leg and he lashed out, drawing blood.

"Jeez, will you calm down, I'm trying to help," a gruff voice said.

Oikawa turned and tried to clear his view, to see the boy who was prying a stick into the trap that was holding him.

"Iwa-chan?"

"Hold still, you idiot," Iwaizumi grumbled.

Three years ago, Light District, Vaeda
Oikawa Tooru's heart beat in his throat when he caught a familiar scent, one he hadn't smelled in years. A flash of spiky hair made him stop dead in the middle of a busy street.

“That was almost our entire first pay-check, idiot Matsun,” the young man told his nearly unconscious friend as he hoisted him over his shoulder.

“When you're awake I'm beating you up for making me eat ramen for another month.”

His friend just grinned. “You had fun, didn’t you?” he said, swaying lightly while the both of them stumbled away from the dingy bar.

Before he even registered it, Oikawa had walked up to them.

“Iwaizumi,” he said.

“Wow,” the young man replied.

Three years ago, Light District, Vaeda

“Tooru?” Iwaizumi's voice on the other end of the line sounded like nothing Oikawa had ever heard. It was fragile, filled with fear and regret, trembling with rage and despair.

“Iwa-chan? Where are you?” he said.

“In my apartment,” came the answer, softly, almost a whisper and Oikawa was already running. There was no point in driving through morning rush hour. So he ran. He almost flew, faster than he should, fast enough to hurt his legs. All the way to the harbour.

He arrived at the small apartment and knocked softly, breathing hard when he noticed drops of blood on the floor.

“Iwa-chan?” he whispered, voice higher than he would like. The door opened a crack and Iwaizumi was there, eyes wide and red, body shivering, face swollen.

“Iwa-chan!” Oikawa pushed open the door and rushed through, only to freeze the moment he stepped inside.

Everything in this place was wrong.

Iwaizumi closed the door again and weakly leaned against it. His fists were bruised and he was bleeding from the side of his mouth. There were scratches on his arm, bits of glass still stuck in them.

And the room. Oh, the room.

Several pieces of furniture were broken. The tacky glass coffee table was shattered.

But mostly, there was blood. A lot of it.

Reddish brown hand prints and drips stained the walls, the inside of the door, the side of the couch, even parts of the ceiling. And Oikawa knew in an instant that it was not Iwaizumi’s.
“Where is he?” Oikawa gently touched his old friend's shoulder. The man seemed to shrink under his fingers. He shook his head and looked away, but Oikawa could see his eyes dart to the kitchen, just for a second.

Carefully, he pushed Iwaizumi onto the only unbroken chair in the apartment and stepped into the small galley kitchen.

The smell of copper hung heavy in the air. Saliva was already streaming into Oikawa's mouth. With eyes closed, he held onto the counter and put his sleeve over his nose, deeply inhaling the perfume on it until the redness cleared from his vision.

The body of Matsun lay on the floor, torn and shredded. The damage done to him was staggering.

The only reason Oikawa could recognize his friend's room mate was a necklace he used to wear. Oikawa bent down and took the pendant, broken like its previous owner, before carefully wrapping it in a kitchen towel and putting it in his pocket.

Sniffing his sleeve, he bowed goodbye to the late Matsun.

When he returned to the living room, Iwaizumi was sitting in the chair, head in his hands. He was crying and Oikawa felt his heart sink.

When did he start getting so invested?

He knelt down next to his friend.

“What happened?” he asked softly.

“He came home with a guy last night,” Iwaizumi managed, his voice so very quiet and frail, “they'd been texting for a while. So when he said he'd bring him over, I left.”

He sobbed. Iwaizumi, the strong, stoic Iwaizumi sobbed, leaving Oikawa speechless.

“I was giving him some privacy!” he wailed, “I never thought...”

Oikawa gently, ever so gently, wrapped his arms around his heaving form.

“When I came back this morning he was... it was...” Iwaizumi swallowed, wiping snot from his face with the back of his hand, “Oikawa, his eyes! They...” and he broke down again, hanging his head and letting his tears flow.

Oh, Oikawa thought. Of course it would be him. He made soft shushing noises while he patiently picked pieces of glass out of Iwaizumi's arm.

“Where is he now?” Oikawa asked.

There was a hint of fear in his voice but his friend did not notice, not in his state.

“I don't know,” Iwaizumi sniffled, “We fought and he ran off when I fell through the coffee table.”
Oikawa blinked.

“We need to go,” he said, suddenly, “Right now.”

He got up and rushed into Iwaizumi's bedroom to grab a coat.

When he returned, the young man was looking at him with a puzzled expression.

“Before he comes back,” Oikawa clarified. “And before the authorities show up.”

He hung the coat around Iwaizumi's shoulders and wrapped a scarf around his face, masking most of the damage. He half expected Iwaizumi to protest, but the fire in the poor man's eyes had burnt out. He allowed Oikawa to pull him up and waited passively while his friend scanned the room. Oikawa picked up a wallet and a phone, before opening some drawers to gather a few pictures and papers, the only things linking this recent immigrant to an identity abroad.

“Can you walk?”

Iwaizumi nodded quietly, allowing himself to be guided out of his apartment.

“Let me take care of you, just this once” Oikawa smiled.

March 25th, 11:56, Light District, Vaeda

Oikawa Tooru put down his teacup and sighed deeply.

It was a weakness, he told himself as he folded the piece of paper and put it in his pocket.

He was starting to treasure his weaknesses.

Oikawa shrugged on his jacket and made his way out the door.
Chapter Summary

Kageyama Tobio jumps off the face of another cliff.

March 25th, 12:22, Garden District, Vaeda

Kageyama Tobio jumped off the face of the cliff and screamed.

??, ??, ??, ??, ??

Kageyama Tobio was running through an endless forest, thorny branches leaving scratches on her arms.

“Keep up!” the boy in front of her yelled and he looked back briefly, black hair streaming in front of his smiling face.

“Nii-san!”

She tried desperately to catch up to him but the mist rose around her like a wall and her feet were quickly losing traction. The ground felt slippery and muddy. Every step she took seemed to bring her back to where she started.

There was music in the air around her, a wild chorus of notes clattering up and down like drops of rain. She briefly wondered how they'd managed to wheel a piano into a god damn forest when the mist started slithering around her.

Oh shit.

The musical notes in the background became faster and higher, as if a cat was running across the keyboard. But she couldn't concentrate on that when coils of mist started forming around her feet. She scrabbled for purchase but just felt herself slip.

Ohshitohshit-

“That was Elégie in E-flat minor,” a low, teacherly voice said by her ear, “one of the earliest of Rachmaninoff's compositions. We'll go straight to a contemporary beauty by the ever popular Einaudi after this short commercial break.”

What?

Something was tugging at her consciousness as the piano player in the distance switched to a jingle for throat candy. She frowned. The fog looked impenetrable, but at the same time very, very bright.

March 25th, 12:01, Garden District, Vaeda
Kageyama Tobio blinked up into the white wall of light to find that, upon closer inspection, it was more of a ceiling, really.

“Wuh?”

It was surprisingly close, this ceiling. As were the walls on either side.

Where the hell did she end up now?

Her fingers traced the fabric of a linen sheet and her back was resting on something soft. The place smelled weird, like a hospital, but also vaguely like vanilla and... jasmine?

She tried to wrap her mind around this cramped space while someone on the radio by her head praised a brand of tooth paste.

The last thing she remembered was getting into a fight with some tentacles and... ohfuck.

Kageyama gingerly patted herself. Everything was still there, though she was slightly worried about her clothes being gone.

She wriggled her toes.

Yup. Those still worked.

The tinkle of porcelain made her look up. Close by, someone was sitting in an overstuffed leather chair, reading a paperback novel.

“Good afternoon, miss Kageyama,” they said in a soft, droning voice.

“Man, this town is just full of fae, isn't it?” Kageyama mumbled.

The nurse put down a delicate teacup and lifted a single eyebrow at her.

“Sorry. What do I call you, miss...ter?” Kageyama said.

The nurse's large almond eyes looked at her unblinking. “Akaashi is fine.”

Kageyama lay back and stared at the ridges in the van's ceiling while she tried to piece together the shards of her memory.

“I have alerted the authorities about the rogue kappa that attacked you, miss Kageyama,” Akaashi said before taking another sip of tea.

Ah, yes. There was that.

“And I think it's safe to say everyone knows about the dragon by now,” they added.

Kageyama blinked.

Oh right. The events of the morning came crashing down in full force.

“This is bad,” she groaned.

The nurse nodded silently, flipping a page in their book.
Alright. Ok.

Kageyama took a deep breath.

"I need to go," she said, "How much do I owe you?"

"You have no money, warrior girl," came the monotone drone of nurse.

Right. Right.

"But it is true that you should go find your friend," Akaashi said.

"What friend?" Kageyama lifted herself up on her elbows to frown at them.

"The young man. Hinata."

Kageyama sputtered. He wasn't her friend, she thought, they only just met. He'd been infuriatingly pleasant and confusing, yes, but he was just a dumb boy. She had no time for this. There were dragons to find, wizards to fight, the fate of the world was probably at stake...

"Do you have better plans?" Akaashi's slate eyes rested on her, making Kageyama blush.

Of course she had better plans. She just had to figure out where to start, first.

"Then consider it your payment," the nurse said, when Kageyama did not answer.

"Why do you care so much about a dumb boy?"

"We are neighbours, of a sort," the nurse replied, gently putting down the teacup. "My... friend is very fond of him. They play soccer together."

"And you think he's in trouble," Kageyama huffed.

"He is new to this side of the veil, miss Kageyama. He is fragile in this state. More so than those blissfully unaware of today's events," Akaashi said, "It's not good for him to wander alone."

"Well, where the hell did he go then?"

The nurse closed their book and put it aside. "He is looking for his sister in Central," they said.

Kageyama grunted. That did sound like the little idiot. Jumping into situations he had no idea of and being all.. caring and stuff. The dumb kid was gonna get himself killed sooner rather than later, she thought.

"Alright, I'll go find the little moron." It would do no good to stay in debt to someone such as Akaashi and it gave her something to do while she came up with a plan. She swung her legs over the side of the stretcher and rolled her feet. They felt a bit stiff, but were otherwise ok.

Man, this nurse was good. Most of Kageyama's wounds were patched or healed. Her hip still hurt, but the pain was at least bearable now.

She carefully hopped off the stretcher.

"Is this a vehicle? Can you drop me off somewhere?"
“I would,” Akaashi said, rising from the leather seat to open the van’s doors, “but I have something I need to do.”

“So I'm running,” Kageyama sighed.

“That would take several hours, miss Kageyama,” Akaashi said, “I doubt mister Hinata can stay safe for that long.”

“Well, I don't see what else I can-”

She stopped when the nurse looked at her. A flash of something close to amusement flickered in those large eyes.

“Perhaps there is another solution,” they said.

Excerpt from the leather bound book.

Vila are a race of faeries with roots in the Slavic region. They have been described as fierce warriors, but are mostly known for having powerful healing skills and an aptitude at controlling the wind. Like most faeries, the Vila are of a romantic sort, easily preoccupied with finding worthy mates. In mythology, they are described as luring young men and women to dance with them, sometimes to their deaths. There are no reports of modern day Vila engaging in this behaviour in the region, though it must be noted that only a handful of their kind remain in the woods and mountain ranges of Eastern Europe. Most Vila choose instead to travel the world in search of true love.

March 25th, 12:19, Garden District, Vaeda

“You've got to be kidding me. What the fuck is this?”

“It's a hang glider, miss Kageyama.”

“I can see that!”

Kageyama glared at the contraption that Akaashi had unpacked from gods know where. It was fairly light, made out of aluminium pipes and parachute fabric. It looked a bit scuffed, like it had been used before.

“You put the harness on like this,” Akaashi explained, “and you hold on to this bar here.”

“And this will work?” Kageyama asked, hesitation coming off her voice in big, heavy waves, “It's not gonna drop me?”

“I've seen it hold heavier people than you, miss Kageyama.”

“Ok, but maybe they knew what they were doing,” Kageyama hissed under her breath, “I mean, I don't even know how to steer this thing. What if I roll over?”

“You are a Hunter, miss Kageyama, surely your balance is excellent?” Akaashi said, eyebrows raised.

She couldn’t argue with that, even if she wanted to.
“As is your ability to take damage, should you tumble.”

Kageyama just glared. She could swear there was a hint of a smirk in that emotionless face.

“And I can assure you that you will have the wind at your back,” Akaashi said.

“But I'm flying straight at the high rises of Central,” she mumbled.

“That is the plan, miss Kageyama.”

Inwardly cursing herself, Kageyama adjusted her weapon and tightened her backpack before allowing Akaashi to strap her into the glider.

Slowly, she walked up to the edge of the parking lot overlooking the city. There was nothing but grass and low bushes on this side of the hill. She had a clear path right up to the first houses on the lower slope and then she could land in one of the wide lanes or maybe in a park.

If she didn't crash first, of course.

The wind whipped around her.

Kageyama took a deep breath and, with her eyes shut tight, she kicked off.

March 25th, 12:22, Garden District, Vaeda

“AaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaah.”

Kageyama felt the wind rush through her hair and immediately regretted everything.

This was a stupid, stupid idea and ye gods she had to open her eyes now.

She squinted carefully, blinking away the tears immediately welling up from the assault of air on her face. Beneath her, the landscape slowly rolled by. She was already past the steepest part of the hill and the ground was flattening out, springing up trees and houses on the very edge of Central.

Those buildings were awfully small, Kageyama thought.

Soon enough, the homes with yards were replaced by big box stores and apartment buildings. Then the land rose upwards with offices and skyscrapers. From up here, she could see the traffic filling up the streets like standing water. The whole district seemed to be in chaos. She could hear sirens and there was definitely a helicopter around here somewhere, but she didn't want to turn her head to look for it.

Already she could see the high rises of the shopping streets. Remembering Hinata's rambling speech about his family, that's probably where he was. But this plan had worked too well. She was going way too fast, and flying too high.

Kageyama concentrated and surveyed the options before her.

She could circle until she had lost height enough to land on the ground. This would lead to a loss of
approximately 35 minutes, and the attraction of spectators.

*She could try to tip the glider to lose height faster, resulting in a crash.*

*She could attempt a roof landing.*

Oh dear gods how was she going to land on a damn roof?

*She could land on that high one, but would most likely overstretch, falling off the side.*

*She could land on the wide one, breaking both legs.*

*She could land on that smaller brown one, but would slam into the stairwell, opening a possibility for the rescue of Hinata Shouyou.*

*She could land on the flatter grey one without too much difficulty.*

Wait.

Back up.

*She could land on that smaller brown one, but would slam into the stairwell, opening a possibility for the rescue of Hinata Shouyou.*

Kageyama whined and braced for impact.
Chapter Summary

“I’m afraid I lied about your sisssster,” he said conversationally as Hinata backed away, “I hope you'll forgive me.”

In which Hinata flies around his cage like a deeply upset little bird.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

March 25th, 12:24, Central District, Vaeda

The alarms that had been building up in the back of Hinata Shouyou's head finally kicked in when he stepped into the apartment.

It looked like it had never been a home. The walls were unpainted and it contained only the bare minimum of furniture.

More importantly, there was no Natsu here.

The door fell shut behind him and with it came a cold, lingering feeling of dread. When he turned around, the man was calmly sliding several locks closed.

“I’m afraid I lied about your sisssster,” he said conversationally as Hinata backed away, “I hope you'll forgive me.”

“Wh- what do you want?” Hinata managed to squeak. His back was already bumping into the sofa.

The man said nothing, but turned to him and took off his sunglasses.

Hinata should probably scream at this point, he thought, but whatever noise he was trying to make fizzed out into a croak.

The man...thing had no eyes.

Where his eyes should be, there were two sets of very sharp teeth. They were grinning.

“Wh- what are you?” Hinata whispered, more to himself than anything.

“Hmmmm? I'm a... conoisssssseur of a ssssort.”

Oh god one of the eye mouths was talking now. The voice it produced sounded raspy and raw. It creaked and grated, like a heavy wooden box being dragged across dirt.

Hinata felt himself grabbing the sofa to stop from falling over, or fainting or... whatever his body was trying to do.

This wasn't happening. This couldn't possibly be real.

Whattheheckwhattheheck.

“Tell me ssssomething, boy. Do you know what the Veil isss?” Hanamaki asked.

All Hinata could say was 'Huh?' while his eyes desperately darted around the room. It really was practically empty, save for whatever came with furnished apartments in this part of town.

“It's a screen within reality, if you want,” the creature narrated, “It issss a mist, a blindnessss that makes it so most humans don't see the magic world. I hear it's a handy little thing,”

Hanamaki carefully folded the sunglasses and placed them on top of a cabinet by the door.

“There’s a custom in a city I once visited,” he said: "They torture a donkey to death, you see. Get it good and scared, before slaughtering it. It really brings out the tasssste. Something similar happens to people wading through that Veil. You, for instance, are at that point where your mind is trying to make ssssense of a new world. Everything is confusing. You may not wish to admit it, but you're
probably scared half to death just walking down the street, no? You're a puppy lost in someone else's house, a toddler venturing into a steel mill.”

Hanamaki turned to him and smiled: “People like you, people in the process of cutting through the mist? They're deliciousssssss.”

Hinata swallowed to wash away the taste of bile coming up in his mouth. Panic was now freely coursing through his body. He needed to leave.

Think. Think.

Behind Hanamaki was the door – locked- and to the right was a window – closed, six stories high. The monster was slowly, almost casually, advancing on him.

Three sets of teeth grinned at Hinata and it was like a switch flipped in his mind.

He became angry.

How dare this man thing make so light of him.

How dare he use his little sister.

How dare he.

“Ding!”

Hanamaki stopped in his tracks.

“Dingdingdingdingding!”

The man with no eyes tilted his head slightly, seemingly confused while the doorbell played its manic tune.

“Dingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingdingding!”

The monster frowned.

“I wasn't exsssssspecting company,” it said.

With a huff, it turned around and walked toward the speaker.

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March 25th, 12:29, Central District, Vaeda

Yachi Hitoka stood in the entrance of an apartment building she’d never visited before and tried to stop herself from fainting.

He was in there and he had the boy.

And she had to do something. If she didn't do something now, it would be all her fault when the boy got hurt. That poor boy would be dead and then she'd stand trial for murder and go to jail and she would have to get tattoos and would probably get some weird blood disease because jail tattoos aren't hygienic at ALL and she was going to die a horrible death from the resulting infections. So she’d better do something now.

She had followed the pair of them for what had seemed like forever, carefully staying behind corners and trying not to draw attention to herself.

She'd watched them walk into this building but that's where it ended. There was no way past this locked door.

Someone would have to buzz her in.

Looking around, she saw two rows of mailboxes: fourteen apartments, two on each floor.

Just past the locked entrance was the elevator. It had stopped on the sixth floor.

Ok, ok, she thought.

Sixth floor, that was two doorbells. One for a family of four.

The other had a single name next to it. 'John Smith'.

This whole thing was starting to feel like a movie.

The kind she’d peek at over the pillow clutched to her chest.

Before she could stop herself, she rang the bell.
Oh god what if it wasn't him? She'd be so rude, she thought.  
But oh GOD what if it was him? What was she going to say?  
Nothing happened, so she rang it again.  
And again.  
What was she DOING?  
Yachi mentally kicked herself and pondered fleeing in shame when the device sprang to life with a dull ‘click’.  
She froze.  
“Yessssssssssssss?”  
Through the static of the intercom, she could hear it, the voice that occasionally haunted her nightmares.  
It was the hoarse sound of someone who didn't look at the world as a place of wonder or adventure, but as a cheap buffet, full of things to snatch up, devour and discard without a second glance. It dripped with disdain, even in the face of an unknown guest.  
Yachi steeled herself to speak, but before she could come up with anything to say, there was the sound of breaking wood and a scuffle.  
“Help! I don't know who you are but-”, a voice screamed at her through the speaker, but it was quickly cut off by more sounds of a struggle.  
‘Click’.  
The line went dead again.  
Oh no.  
Trembling in this old entry hall, Yachi wistfully ran her fingers over the doorbell.  
Ringing it would do no good now. She had to find a way in there. She had to go help him but the door was locked and-  
“Fire escape!”  
As fast as her small legs could take her, Yachi ran out to find a way around the building.  

March 25th, 12:33, Central District, Vaeda  

“Yesssssss?”  
The monster calmly turned to pick up the intercom.  
Anger burned in the back of Hinata's throat.  
How dare he.  
Heart racing, he scanned the room again. Desk, chair, sofa...side table? It would just have to do.  
He grabbed the small wooden table and, with as much force as he could muster, sent it crashing down into the monster's head.  

“How dare he.” he yelled at the intercom, “I don't know who you are but-”  
A single hand flung him backwards across the room. He smacked into the sofa with enough force to knock the wind out of his lungs.  
The monster straightened up and shut off the intercom.  
“That wasn't very niceccccccccce.”  
Hanamaki cracked his neck. Its mouth was set into a thin line.  
“Are you going to cauzzz trouble, little bird? Even after you're already caged?”  
Hinata inhaled deeply, head slightly fuzzy.  
He looked up at the monster standing by the door.  
The grin was back. All three of it.  

On pure instinct, Hinata scrabbled to his feet and ducked behind the sofa.  
His chest hurt where the man had pushed him.
This thing was strong. Way too strong for Hinata, unless he could manage to punch him like he did with the tentacle thing.
Now if only he could remember how he’d done that.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are…” The raspy voice drew closer.
Hinata tried to recall what happened last time.
He’d been angry. He’d been really, really scared and frustrated, and he’d swung with all his might. Similar enough.
He tried to remember what it felt like. It was more of a ‘buoooooh’ than a ‘fwah!’, he mused, but he really didn't have the time to get into it now.
He concentrated on the sound of breathy chuckles moving to the side of the couch.
When they came closer, Hinata took a deep breath, grit his teeth and swung with every fibre in his body.
“Guaaaaaaaaah!”

His fist made a soft ‘doof’ sound as it collided with Hanamaki’s stomach.
He stared up at the monster, who blinked back at him.
That wasn't what it was like at all.
“What makesssss you think this could work, little bird?” Hanamaki asked, genuinely confused for a second while Hinata just stared at his fist with a desperate look on his face.
He rose to his full height and Hinata crawled backwards in horror.
The monster was shaking and hiccuping.
“Ehehehehehehe.”
It was the most disgusting sound Hinata had ever heard. It was raspy and hoarse and completely, utterly dismissive.
The creature was laughing at him.
How dare he.
In a fit of rage, Hinata sprung up and tried again, this time landing a punch square on the man’s smug jaw.
Hanamaki didn’t even stop giggling.
Hinata stumbled back, rubbing his stinging hand.
“Hi-na-taaa,” the man-thing singsonged, tasting each syllable before pushing it through rows of teeth, “You have the wrong idea, boy.”

In that moment, the monster lunged forward.
With a shriek, Hinata scrambled back and around the couch, so that it was between him and the thing.
This was not going well, he thought. If this kept up, he would die here.

But someone was out there and they may be trying to help him.
He needed to stall for time.
Whatever time he could muster.
The monster growled lowly. “Are we going to play gamessss, little bird?”
He feinted left and sprinted right but Hinata was ahead of him, running around the furniture to keep away.

“Tssssssssss,” Hanamaki said, “How long do you think you can-”
A loud bang made him look up for a second.
Instinctively, Hinata pushed all his weight into the couch, hitting the monster in the knees so that he stumbled backwards.
It was only an instant, but it may be enough. Hinata turned on his heel and fled for the bathroom door.
Hi and sorry to keep you waiting. I have somewhat settled into my new job, and while I'm still working out some kinks in my schedule, I'm hoping to get back to regular updates.
I have also discovered soft returns! Let me know if you prefer more white space :p
Nightmare

Chapter Summary

In which Hinata is no longer alone

Excerpt from the leather bound book

The Corinthian is a walking nightmare, usually taking the form of a young male. Please note that this is a Class A Dangerous Form: it is considered life threatening to all known creatures.

It received this classification in 1853 and it has not been under review since.

The most distinguishing feature of the Corinthian is a set of mouths placed high on its human-like face, where one would expect the eyes to be. The teeth in these mouths appear pointed and sharp, like a shark’s.

Eyewitness reports mention that the Corinthian can use these mouths to speak, as noted by adventurer and magic researcher Lord Whinton.

-“It was then that the man opened his left eye and spoke with it, in a grim voice resembling that of a growling wolf, and the townsfolk wept before him.” - (Sir Duncan Whinton, 1718-1782).

Whinton theorized that the Corinthian uses these mouths to eat the eyes of his prey. This theory has since been challenged by the famed researcher Silasi McHeard in a letter sent to a colleague in August of 1971.

- “I am utterly convinced, Hannah, that these sockets aren't just extra mouths. If you look at the way it behaves, it's certainly not blind. It moves as if its eyes are where they should be. The logical conclusion is that it derives vision from these 'mouths'. Who are we as researchers to say that it does not, simply because WE cannot see? The Corinthian has eyes. Perhaps hidden, but they are there. I'll prove it, too.” - (Professor Silasi McHeard, 1935-1971)

Records about the Corinthian are sparse, but go back to at least the 16th century. There appears to be a single creature of this kind in existence and it has been observed to have strength far surpassing its form. Filmed footage from security cameras in the late 1990's suggests that the creature also has high stamina and is difficult to outrun. The Corinthian is assumed to be immortal. Hunters have unsuccessfully pursued it since 1853.

Public advice for the Corinthian is to Avoid at All Costs.

When encountering the Corinthian, or being pursued by it, seek Sanctuary as soon as possible.

March 25th, 12:36, Central District, Vaeda

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!”

Kageyama Tobio swore loudly as she tried to steer her way onto the roof of a bland apartment building in Vaeda Central. She was aiming for the large, flat expanse of the roof but found herself going much too high. To stop from overshooting the building completely, she settled for bluntly crashing into the raised enclosure of the stairwell instead.
With a loud bang and a rather inelegant tumble, Kageyama fell onto the tarred surface, the glider crumpling into a mess of bent aluminium around her. She lay there for a second, waiting for the world to stop spinning. “Ability to take damage, my ass,” she grumbled. Her elbows were scraped from protecting her face and her hip seemed to have given up trying to alarm her to its pressing need. It now simply throbbed, pain largely overridden by the stinging in her butt. That was going to be a massive bruise tomorrow, she thought. If there was a tomorrow, she mentally added.

March 25th, 12:35, Central District, Vaeda

Yachi Hitoka huffed her way up several flights of narrow stairs, rabbit heart beating a steady racing rhythm. She was going completely insane. She must be. She’d slipped through a gate that very specifically said ‘Private property’ and then she’d crawled over a low fence and if anyone found her here she would definitely be deported, if not sent to work in a labour camp for the rest of her life. Somewhere halfway up, a loud bang coming from above made her squeak and freeze. It was followed by a lot of cursing sounds. This was all going to hell. But she was determined, she told herself. That boy needed help. She inhaled deeply and trudged on, making her way to the sixth floor. There were two windows next to the fire escape. Peeking in carefully, she could see what looked like a little kitchen in each. One was filled with dirty dishes and held a refrigerator full of badly drawn houses and stick figure families. The other was the cleanest, barest kitchen she’d ever seen. And then that voice drifted into her ear again, faint but very recognizable, even through the pane of glass. “Tssssss, ssso much trouble.” Yachi swallowed hard. In the dim light falling into the bare apartment, she could just make out the monster. “Hey you, you’re in my way.” Yachi jolted when a low voice barked at her. Something was coming down the stairs. It looked like some kind of demon: large flappy black wings, wild black hair and a scowl that could set villages on fire. Yachi stared, stock still, as the creature walked up to her and turned out to be a young woman in a large black coat. A rather scruffy young woman, but a very intimidating one nonetheless. “Hey?” the girl said, “Could you?” “Yes! Ma’am! I’m sorry, ma’am,” Yachi got up and somehow tried to stand to attention. She was shaking visibly now and the scary girl gave her a confused look. “I just need to get past,” she pointed to the wall. “Sorry, but I’m kinda busy here.” Yachi awkwardly pressed herself against the wall to let the girl by. “Open the door, little bird. Don’t make me dessssstroy it”, the creature was saying behind her. She couldn’t let this happen. The girl looked super angry but maybe, just maybe…
It took every inch of willpower she had, but Yachi steeled herself and opened her mouth.

“Um,” Yachi said.
“What?” The girl turned around and threw her another confused scowl.
“There’s a young boy in there and I’m fairly certain he’s going to die,” Yachi said, words falling over themselves as they tumbled past her lips, “You’re not going to believe me, but he’s being cornered by a monster and I don’t know what to do. He’s got red hair and-“
The girl’s face snapped up. “Well why didn’t you tell me that sooner?”

She turned on her heel and pulled something from a sheath on her back. It looked very pointy.
Oh god she’d done it now, Yachi thought, now everyone was definitely going to die.

“I’ve been looking for him,” the girl said.
Yachi just whimpered, backing away into the wall.
“To save him,” the girl added, frowning.
“Oh.”
Yachi took a deep gulp as the scary girl squeezed by again to peer through the window.
“Now tell me about this monster,” she said.

March 25th, 12:37, Central District, Vaeda

Hinata backed against the sink.
He’d made a mistake. Again.
He’d been hoping for a window. Any kind of exit, really.
At this point he’d just jump five stories down and take the broken bones. Heck, he’d take insta-death over whatever this man was going to do to him. But the only thing providing air and light in this room was a small grate with a fan and a cheap neon bulb.
There was a knock on the door.
“Sssstop hogging the bathroom.” There was a pause as the monster chuckled at his little joke.
Hinata looked around again.
The bathroom was small and bare. It didn’t even have a shower curtain. There would be nowhere to hide as soon as that monster broke through the door.
He’d backed himself into a corner.

“I’m giving you to the count of three to open this door, before I ssssmash it,” Hanamaki said.
Right. There really was only one thing he could do at this point.
He was small, and he may be weak, but Hinata knew that he was fast.
He braced himself, settling his feet against the back wall.
“Three.”
Hinata crouched, placing his fingers on the floor, like he’d see sprinters do.
“Two.”
With the sound of splintering wood, Hanamaki stumbled in, shoulder first.
He took only a second to compose himself, but in that time the boy was already zooming past him.

Too many things were happening at once as Hinata fled through the door.
There was the sound of breaking glass and from the corner of his eye, he could see the monster kick out.
He wasn't fast enough to avoid it.
With a stinging in his shin, Hinata tripped and dove into the living room. Behind him, Hanamaki was clutching the doorframe.
“Duck!” a high pitch voice squeaked and without even thinking, Hinata rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding the monster clawing at him.

March 25th, 12:37, Central District, Vaeda

Kageyama Tobio peered through the dusty glass pane to see a man talking to a closed door. Next to her, the twitchy blonde girl was yammering about eyes and sanctuaries and how this thing could walk forever, but none of it seemed particularly helpful at this point in time. Still, she had to respect her for being this scared and still trying to help the dumbass. Kageyama tried to concentrate so she could see her options, when movement inside the apartment caught her attention.

“Three…” The creature said, and it braced to break down the door.

“Shit,” Kageyama huffed under her breath.

The blonde girl had gone quiet.

“Two…”

No time for strategy now.

The creature was ramming the door and Kageyama wrapped both hands around the handle of her sword.

"Step back," she told the blonde girl, and with a muffled swear, she brought it down on the window, sending shards of glass everywhere.

“Oh my god!” squeaked the girl next to her, but Kageyama paid her no mind.

She crawled through the window just as Hinata, alive and well, flew out of the doorway and into the living room, where he promptly tripped and fell flat on the floor.

The girl was shouting something next to her ear and Hinata dodged, just out of the grip of the creature, who had quickly sprung after him.

The monster glanced up from its pursuit.

Oh.

That’s what the girl meant when she was babbling about eyes.

“Who invited you?” the creature said, tilting his head towards Kageyama.

Hinata, face pale as a shroud, was scrabbling toward the other wall and something was going off in the back of Kageyama’s head. Something loud and nagging and urgent.

“This looks a lot like assault on a civilian,” she said, pulling up her ‘professional’ voice to mask the shivers that were quickly spreading through her body.

“A hunter?” the creature said.

He seemed... familiar, somehow.

“That’sssssss cute,” he continued, and three sets of teeth grinned at her.

Ohhhhhhh.

In a flash, it came back to her. A list of names and pictures. A categorization of creatures and wizards, ranked from ‘Do not attempt to apprehend by yourself’ all the way up to ‘Run’.

This thing had been near the very top of the list.

“Oh shit,” Kageyama mumbled.

Hinata Shyouyou’s mind was reeling. He’d long since lost track of what was happening, but he was alive, and Kageyama was here and that meant he had a chance.

But Kageyama seemed to have gone stiff.

Her eyes were wide and fearful. She was frowning and mumbled something under her breath.

Most of all, Hanamaki was advancing on her and she wasn't moving.

Right.
One more time, Hinata told himself. 
While the monster was distracted, he gathered himself up and stood, shaky at first. 
His eyes were almost blank now, the only thing filling them pure, unfiltered determination.

Kageyama Tobio tried to survey the options before her, but they were going by too fast. 
Too many variables had turned any clear lines she could see into a jumble of words flashing by. 
She frowned, trying to make sense of it all. 
The word 'death' seemed to pass by an awful lot. 
Then the blonde girl screamed and Kageyama looked up to see the monster springing towards her. 
He was quickly closing the distance between them, snarl burning on his lower mouth. 
On reflex, she put up her sword and the next instant, Hinata had jumped in front of her. 
The boy pulled back his arm to swing but he was much, much too late. 
No matter what either of them did, he was going to be skewered. 
Over Hinata’s shoulder, she could see the monster grin. 
That idiot!
If only Hinata was a little faster. 
If only…

Time slowed to a trickle for Hinata Shouyou. 
For a few moments, he could see the world as if it was a scene in a wax museum. 
The monster before him, ready to jump forward, 
Kageyama at his back, sword drawn and held in front of her, 
the blonde girl at the window, face contorted mid-scream. 
Hinata did the only thing he could think of and moved aside. 
The next instant, everything sped up again. 
The monster leaped forward, straight onto an outstretched sword. 
Its expression was one of disbelief as Kageyama, wide-eyed, turned the weapon and pushed it through with a sickening wet crunch. 
Hinata, momentum still propelling him forward, crashed into the desk.

The monster twitched and frowned at the sword in his chest. 
Horrified, Kageyama Tobio let go, and the creature slumped onto the floor. 
She was shaking. 
She wasn’t supposed to shake like this. 
She definitely wasn’t supposed to feel like this, after having just made a monster kill. 
“Hinata, you dumbass,” she yelled, “Can’t you even stay out of the way! You IDIOT!” 
Hinata sat up and rubbed the back of his neck painfully. 
“Jeez, I was trying to help,” he mumbled, “You were about to get eaten, stupid Kageyama.” 
“You were THIS close to fucking dying, dumbass,” Kageyama heard herself say, “I came here to save your ass, not to get your help.” 
“You came to get me? Wow,” he said. “Thanks, Kageyama.” 
“Don’t get too full of yourself,” Kageyama grumbled, “The nurse made me.”

“Ah, thanks,” Hinata told the girl, who was now helping him up. 
And then: “Who are you, anyway?”
“Um. I’m Yachi,” the girl said, pulling out a damp towel from somewhere and dabbing it on the back of Hinata’s head.
“Hi!” Hinata said, and he beamed at her, “I’m Hinata! And I’m guessing you already met Kageyama. She’s that mean one.”
“I am NOT mean,” Kageyama screamed, wheeling around to face him.
“Yeah, why do you keep screaming at people, then?”
Yachi looked up.
“Because you’re insufferable!”, Kageyama said, fists clenching her jacket, “what the hell have you been doing all these years? You’re completely useless! You have a stupid strong power like that and you don’t even know what magic IS.”
“Guys?” Yachi said.
“Well if you’re so almighty and knowledgeable, why don’t you explain it, idiot Kageyama?” Hinata growled.
“GUYS!”
Yachi had gone very pale and was pointing behind Kageyama, where the monster had just sat up. It was busy pulling a sword out of its chest.
Fourteen years ago, Okinawa, Japan

Kageyama Tobio was four years old when the seer came to look at her. She sat on the hard, stone floor while the elderly woman peered into her blue eyes as if they were a well she was trying to pull water from. Kageyama fidgeted. She was not afraid, but she was uncomfortable. The formal clothes mother made her wear were hard to move in and they itched her skin. The gaze of the entire household was on her and it made her feel exposed and vulnerable, like a deer in an open clearing.

Then the old woman leaned back. She frowned.

“What do you see?” Kageyama’s father asked, worry clouding his usually stern face. “She has the gift,” the woman replied, and the whole room seemed to exhale. “But it's not like anything I've seen before.”

Ten years ago, Okinawa, Japan

Kageyama was eight years old when she joined her first hunt. The excitement was palpable in the air as her father and his troops closed in on the creature. She was stuck on a hillside further away, guarded by a stern nanny who forbade her to come too close.

“They’ve got him!” her brother shouted from his perch in a nearby tree. “Father did it!” He made a little punching motion into the night air.

A soft glow lighting up the mountain slopes was all Kageyama saw of the ogre's demise.

Six years ago, Okinawa, Japan

At twelve years old, Kageyama watched her brother make his first kill. Seeing him fight the creature was both beautiful and terrifying. The vampire moved in a blur, long claws and red eyes swirling faster than the eye could see, but not fast enough to beat her brother.

His whole body glowed as he sped up, became a whirlwind of motion and sharp edges. Two daggers cut the air in graceful arcs until they struck and cut through the creature. It fell to the ground, immediately bound with spells and rituals.

Two years ago, Okinawa, Japan

The wooden floor of her ancestor's shrine creaked under gentle footsteps. Kageyama, sixteen years old, hastily sat up and wiped her puffy red eyes.

“I thought I'd find you here,” her brother said. He crouched and placed a package before her. She recognized the flowered green cloth immediately, but opened it anyway. The scabbard was old but well maintained, adorned with images of crows and finished with gold thread.
The wakizashi was her grandmother's and Kageyama pulled it out, like she’d done many times before. The weapon was old, its edge curved from years of fighting. Its blade gleamed, a soft shine that glowed in the faint light of this room, a testament to the love put into taking care of it.

“Don't give up,” her brother said, voice soft with concern. “You've trained your whole life. You can still be a good hunter.”
“I'm not like her,” Kageyama hissed, feeling tears well up again. “I'm supposed to have the gift, the old lady said so!”
“She also said you were special.”
Her brother laid a hand on her slumped shoulders.
“Sometimes it takes a while to manifest,” he said.
“Until then, be like grandmother.”

March 25th, 12:39, Central District, Vaeda

Kageyama Tobio turned around to find the creature pulling her shortsword out of its chest.
“Take the girl and get out of here,” she said. She moved in front of the other two.
“Are you crazy? There’s no way you can fight that thing by yourself.”

Hinata was getting angry again. This kid really wasn’t very smart, she thought.
“You’re useless, dumbass. You’ll only get in the way.”
“And YOU are going to die, idiot Kageyama!”
The options currently flashing into her vision told her the little dumbass was right.
So be it.
If it came down to that, she would at least make her family proud.
“I am perfectly capable and trained to handle this, you noob,” Kageyama said, “Get out of here now.”

“Heeeheeeeee.” The creature threw the sword behind him, and it hit the back wall with a clang.
“Go on then,” it said, “Protect the innoccccccccccent.”
It was giggling now, little spurts of blood gulping out of the hole in its chest with every hiccup.
Kageyama looked on in horror, trying to figure out what to do next.
“You know, I met a Kageyama once,” Hanamaki said conversationally.
He looked up, three sets of grins staring her in the face. “He died.”
And the thing laughed again, a harsh rasping sound that reminded Kageyama of waves crashing into a pebble beach. Right before the tsunami.
“Well then,” he said, and he stood up slowly, like an old man breathing life into rusty old bones.
“Let’sssss do thisss.”

He lunged at Kageyama, who sidestepped him with the grace of a cat. She whirled around quickly and kicked him in the knee, her heavy boots hitting the soft bone with a crackling sound.
Behind her, Yachi winced.
“Why are you still here? Run!” Kageyama shouted, leaning back briefly while Hanamaki clawed at her.
But Yachi was rooted to the spot, and Hinata looked like he desperately wanted to fight.

This wasn’t working.

Kageyama rolled and aimed a kick at the creature’s other knee, but this time he was ready. He caught her foot in both hands and yanked up, sending her crashing to the floor. She quietly blessed her reflexes as she scrambled to the side, avoiding his fist.
It left a large dent in the wooden planks.
She hadn’t even slowed him down, Kageyama thought. There was a fucking hole in this thing’s chest, and it still fought her as if it didn’t matter. She flipped onto her feet, desperately looking for a way, any way, for the three of them to make it out of this. Her vision was a wall of words now, but she couldn’t find any that looked good.

“Kageyama!”
Hinata tugged at the girl’s coat. She was squinting into the middle distance like some crazy person and she didn’t react when he yelled in her ear.
She didn’t even move when the monster took another step towards her and swung.
With a shriek, Hinata grabbed the girl and pulled her sideways, out of its grasp.
She was mechanically crawling away from him now, eyes still blank and unseeing.
“What the heck are you DOING, Kageyama!”
There was a faint glow in her eyes, something similar to what his hand had done. Maybe she was doing magickey things, he thought, but if she was, they weren’t very effective.
“What will you snap out of it!” he shouted, shaking her shoulder.
And then Hanamaki was looming over them again.
“Little birdsssssss,” the creature said.
Hinata tried to think, but the only thing coming through was white hot panic.

Then there was a crash as a desk lamp hit the back of Hanamaki’s head.
Shocked, it looked around to find a tiny blond girl trembling with indignation.
Yachi was utterly furious. She looked fierce for a second, until realisation hit her and she just wanted to throw up instead.
The creature huffed at her and she shrunk back, holding on to the desk behind her like a life raft.
“We are far away from ssssssanctuary, little girl,” he grinned.
Yachi went pale. She really hadn’t thought this through. She just wanted him to leave those two alone. But now he was looking at her as if she was some kind of ant and her legs had quickly turned into jelly.
“Stay put for a sssecond,” the creature said, “the other two come firsssst.”

“I’ve got it!” Kageyama hissed.
“Hahhh?” Hinata gave her a confused look while she pulled his shirt to whisper in his ear.
“You’re going to punch it.”
She said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world.
“What do you think I’ve been trying to do, idiot Kageyama!” Hinata whispered angrily.
“Try again,” Kageyama said.
“I can’t just make that stuff happen,” he said urgently, “it’s not gonna work!”
“It will work,” she answered, “It has to.”
Hanamaki seemed to have lost interest in Yachi and was turning back.
“We’ll distract him. Me and.. Yachi.”
She kept talking as if it didn’t matter what Hinata said.
“You just focus on punching, and I’ll get that thing to you.”
“Wait, what?”
But she was already getting back on her feet. With surprising elegance, she jumped to her sword, narrowly avoiding another kick.
“Alright,” Kageyama said, standing up and holding her weapon in front of her. It was all in the timing, she had decided. The Yachi girl was an unknown variable, but if she got it just right, and delivered the creature at the exact time, it would work. It had to work, because all the other options before her resulted in death. The kid was a complete newbie, to magic and probably even to the Veil, but he had enough power to do something, at least. All she had to do was draw it out of him. With a flourish, she side-stepped around the creature and slashed its shoulder. Against the wall, Hinata had scrabbled upright and was putting on what she recognized as his ‘determined’ face. She danced around the creature again, trying to keep it away from the boy while he gathered his strength.

Hinata closed his eyes and tried to focus. He really needed to figure out what had happened last time. He had been angry, he had been really, really scared and the girl had been dying. He didn’t particularly want to think about that last part and he hoped it wasn’t a vital element. “Guaaaah,” he mumbled softly to himself. “It went guaaah.” He took a deep breath.

Kageyama landed another kick against the creature’s leg and it growled at her. It didn’t even flinch when she hit it this time. “I’m getting tired of thisssss, hunter,” Hanamaki snarled. As if to make a point, he stopped in the middle of the fight and, with a small smile, stepped towards Yachi. “Yeek!” The girl squealed and seemed to instantly regain movement in her legs. “Couch!” she heard Kageyama yell, so she ducked behind the furniture. “Not thisssss again,” the monster moaned. He walked right up to the back and tried to reach the frightened girl over it. Kageyama slashed him again, but he paid her no mind. She scowled. “You think you can ignore me?” The creature was busy reaching over the sofa. He did. He did think he could ignore her. Seething, Kageyama kicked him in the tailbone. “Oi!” she yelled. With a groan, Hanakaki turned around. “What will you do, hunter? Ssssstab me again?”

Kageyama tilted her head slightly, two glowing blue eyes boring into the monster before her. “No,” she said. The path was crystal clear. Kageyama lunged and grabbed Hanamaki’s shirt with both hands. The next moment she leaned back and pulled him down on top of her. The creature blinked, confused for just long enough to allow Kageyama to roll onto her back, place a foot firmly into his stomach and throw him over, straight into Hinata.

“Now!”
Hinata opened his eyes and the creatures back was suddenly in front of him, coming up fast. In an act of desperation, he put up both hands and pushed. “GuaaAAaaah!” he shouted. And he kept shouting, voice turning into a long wail as the room went red.

Yachi cautiously peeked over the back of the couch once the screaming had stopped. She immediately regretted that decision. One look at the room and she felt nauseous. Kageyama lay on the floor in a puddle of blood. Hinata sat slumped against the back wall, whimpering. The monster was, well, everywhere. “Are you guys alright?” she piped, trying to be heard without actually making any sound. With a groan, Kageyama sat up. Looking mildly shocked, she wiped some of the blood off her face. If she’d been intimidating before, she was utterly terrifying now, Yachi thought. Still, she’d come her to do something. “I think I have a towel,” she stammered.
Chapter Summary

In which Kuroo goes to find Bokuto in the city's strangest district.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March 25th, 14:20, The Village, Vaeda

Vaeda traffic was chaos.

It always was, but today it seemed to conspire to reach a complete and utter standstill. Gridlock didn't even begin to describe it. This was exactly why Kuroo Tetsurou loved the Bike so much, weaving in between cars, buses, trucks and the occasional tuk-tuk. He tipped his helmet to a driver swearing loudly at him as he slipped through an intersection where cars were just sort of standing in the middle of the road, nowhere else to go. The situation only got worse as Kuroo drove closer to his destination.

Akaashi and Bokuto technically lived in the Garden District, but they were on the very edge of the Village, a sprawling pile of unkempt buildings and cabins, tents and tree houses. The place had been an army base around World War 2. It became a hippie commune in the seventies and now it was... the Village and it proudly defied any other label. It attracted artists, anarchists and addicts alike. It featured piss stained mattresses and cardboard shanties but also artfully crafted sea shell statues and meticulously decorated cottages. There was even a single working beer fountain that kept going despite dozens of cases of food poisoning. The Village had chocolate fondue, hot yoga and a disco called The Pit that was known to mix heavy metal with underground trance. The Village had both the worst bars and the best vegan restaurants in the city. The Village revered graffiti and had its own community watch consisting of punks looking for a fight. The Village, above all, did not respect the laws of traffic.

A group of people dashed across the street and Kuroo nearly fell over his handlebars stopping for them. When he looked in the direction they'd come from, he saw that a fight had broken out in one of the larger squares. Frowning, he moved on, slowly heading up the winding streets to higher ground. He had to stop again when a truck was blocking an entire intersection trying to manoeuvre out of a garage. The air was hazy here, filled with smoke. Lively smoke, Kuroo noticed. Little puffs of it would swirl and dance around, and he could swear they were chasing people. He watched them circle a young man lighting a cigarette on a bench. The guy briefly swatted at them, panicked, before collapsing. Kuroo was about to get off the Bike to help him, when the man got back up and walked away.
Not walking. That wasn't the word, really. It was more like shambling, like someone who had drunk entirely too much whiskey.
Odd, Kuroo thought. Wondering briefly if these were the ‘things’ Bokuto had called him about, Kuroo set his jaw and tried to speed up as much as he could.

Higher up the slope, traffic finally cleared. There were less people here. A lot less.
Signs of a struggle littered the street. He had to veer away from overturned cans and broken glass. He carefully steered around a vending machine that had found its way into the middle of the main avenue.
So far, this was normal.
It wasn't uncommon to find a trashed street in the Village. It was the fact that it looked abandoned, that truly freaked Kuroo out.
There was always a crowd in the Village.

Feeling more uneasy by the second, he wound his way towards the Garden District through eerily quiet streets.
Soon enough there was nothing in his ears but the low, growling hum of the Bike and the occasional scream in the distance.
And then he heard it. A familiar voice.
“Oi! Get away from her!”
It was unmistakably Bokuto, yelling at the top of his lungs, unable to mask the slight crack in his voice that appeared whenever he was upset about something.
Kuroo stopped in his tracks and took off his helmet to listen.
“It’s ok, misses Newell, we’ll get you inside, alright?” Bokuto’s voice said.
It came from Kuroo's left.
He revved up and followed the sounds, making his way to a small courtyard.

There Bokuto stood.
He was holding a large piece of cardboard and waving it around, trying to fight off several of the little clouds while shielding an older lady behind his broad back.
He looked rather flashy, with spiky hair and a glittering gold and white tracksuit. Apparently he was interrupted on his way to or from his teaching job at a local dojo. The bag with his kick-boxing gear was still slung across his shoulders.
“Bo!” Kuroo shouted, relief quickly untying the knots in his chest as he glided into the enclosure.
“Good to see you, friend,” Bokuto yelled back, “Mind telling me what's going on?”
“Not a clue,” Kuroo said and got off the Bike to look around the courtyard.
There were quite a few of the little clouds, but they didn't seem particularly interested in him.
“You ok there?” Kuroo asked.
“I'm fantastic, thanks,” Bokuto said, swatting at a puff of smoke that tried to get too close, “But this lady here really needs to get indoors. They've been chasing her all over the place.”

The old woman was whimpering behind him. She looked like she was scared almost out of her mind, pale as a sheet and close to tears.
If this kept up it there wouldn't be much left to save, Kuroo thought.
He slowly stepped up, noting that the clouds would move out of the way for him and kneeled next to her.
“Hey there, ma'am,” he said calmly, producing his most charming smile, and grabbing her hand
“we're going to get you out of here, ok?”
Bokuto gave him a sideways glance while waving the cardboard around again.
The lady nodded timidly and he gave her hand a little reassuring squeeze.
“Okidoki.” Kuroo got up.
“They don't go inside?” he asked his friend.
“Not that I've seen,” Bokuto huffed.
“All doors locked?”
“Probably,” Bokuto said.

Kuroo looked up to form some sort of plan. He scanned the walls of the small courtyard for an opening and suddenly realized that the windows around him all had faces in them. He had an audience.

Several people were watching the fight below, their expressions a mixture of pity and fear. Kuroo searched for a sympathetic looking one and pointed at it.

“Hey you,” he said, voice loudly echoing across the small square, “Can you open that door for us?”

He indicated a small entryway a few metres away.

The face shrunk back, but Kuroo was unwavering, eyes locking on and a small smile on his lips. He was applying the grin he used with great effect on the tourists.

“Please?” he said.

There was a shuffle behind the window as the people inside apparently got into an argument.

“Right,” Kuroo said, “Let's see if we can move over there.”

He picked up some discarded cardboard and went to help his friend, pulling up the lady with one hand.

“Pst,” Bokuto said in a stage whisper, “Can't you, you know...pfoosh.”

He made a weird hissing sound and waggled his eyebrows.

“Bro, there's dozens of people watching,” Kuroo said, wielding an empty pizza box like a war fan.

“Right, right,” Bokuto said, “don't want to alarm people.”

“Yeah, they're already plenty alarmed,” Kuroo said.

Close by, a door was rattling and it sounded like someone was laboriously sliding the bolt.

“Nearly there, misses Newell,” Bokuto hummed, flapping his weapon about.

Kuroo turned to see the door had opened a crack. Two big, wide eyes were staring at him fearfully.

“Hiya,” he said, “this lady needs help, mind if we come in?”

The door opened wider to reveal a young boy, no older than fifteen. He beckoned them to hurry.

Kuroo practically had to drag the woman over. She seemed bewildered, staring at something behind him and getting distracted instead of just getting in the house quickly.

Then a shout came from inside and the boy froze.

“Look out!” he yelled.

The next instant, a large hand dragged him back and slammed the door.

Kuroo frowned. “What was that about?”

“Uh, bro?” Bokuto's voice sounded a lot smaller than usual.

Kuroo turned around to see what the fuss was about.

Oh.

A small crowd had gathered in the courtyard. They looked like regular people, but something was off about them. Little clouds spun and weaved around the group as they stopped a few metres away from them.

One of the people stepped forward. He was wearing a khaki apron with a logo of the local grocery store on it.

“Mister Fernandez?” Bokuto said.

The man ignored him. He just pointed at the lady.

“She's ours,” he said. His voice sounded hollow and dry, like wind blowing through ancient caverns.

“Mister Fernandez, what are you talking about?” Bokuto stepped in front of the woman protectively.
“Ours.”
The word was murmured by more and more people until it rose to a chorus.
“Ours.”
Bokuto's eyes grew wide, stretched open in shock.
“Ours. Ours.”
And then one of them lunged, aiming a butcher's knife straight at Bokuto's chest.
“Bo!”
Kuroo shoved his friends shoulder with enough force to send the both of them crashing to the ground. He scrambled to his feet quickly to see where the knife was coming from next, but the butcher was no longer moving. He was staring at the place they had been guarding and Kuroo felt his breath die in his throat when he looked back.

The old lady was sitting against the wall, whimpering and praying. She was surrounded by six wisps of smoke.
“Ours.” the mob chanted.
The butcher stepped back and joined the choir.
“Ours.”
Desperately, the woman tried to fight off the smoke, flailing her arms as it threatened to envelop her.
“Ours.”
Before Kuroo could get any closer, a shudder went through her frail body. Her eyes rolled back and she twitched.
A moment later, she blinked and looked straight at him, mild smile on her face.
“Ours,” she said.
“Well fuck,” Kuroo muttered.

He pulled Bokuto up while the lady slowly, almost mechanically, rose to her feet.
“We need to go, buddy. Come on,” Kuroo said urgently as he ran to the Bike.
Five wisps of smoke dispersed around the lady and joined their brethren in the crowd.
“Don't leave yet,” the lady whispered, a deep, breathy sound, “we need you too, my hero.”
The crowd was slowly turning toward Bokuto.
“Let's go!” Kuroo yelled at his gawking friend, who blinked twice before finally snapping out of it.
“Right,” Bokuto said, and he sprinted towards the bike, hopping on as Kuroo started the engine.
Without a second thought, they sped out of the courtyard, Bokuto holding Kuroo's chest in a vice grip from the back seat.
The crowd followed.

When Kuroo reached the street, it was no longer empty.
Whatever those people were behind them, they were far from alone.
A group of them stood in in the middle of the intersection, like they were waiting for something.
It took everything in Kuroo's power to avoid them.
Hopping onto the pavement between a parked truck and a newspaper stall, he drove on.
He checked back to see if they were chasing him, but they just stood, watching.
Odd.

He had no time to think however, because the next hurdle was already coming.
A bunch of them were blocking the road up ahead.
“Is that miss Jabari?” Bokuto was shouting behind him.
With a slide, he turned before the throng and entered a side street.
The people merely watched while he drove by.

This was all kinds of fishy, Kuroo thought.
At the end of the side street, a camper van was blocking the way down, so he swerved up and through a small bazaar.
Further on, a mass of people was waiting again.
“Fuck,” Kuroo mumbled, narrowly avoiding a young woman to enter an alleyway.

They were being herded.
He was sure of it.

And much as he tried, he didn't see a way out of this maze.
He really didn't want to injure these people.
Especially since Bokuto seemed to know half of them.
“William, get out of the way!” his friend yelled at a man standing in front of a parking garage, prompting Kuroo to turn and drive up some steps, back to the main road.

When he reached it, he could see the final goal was just up ahead.
The place he'd been guided to was a stretch of road going under a low, wide bridge.
Its construction was a testament to sheer stubbornness. Several houses were built on top of each other here, forming the bridge that still more houses were placed upon, all while the whole thing wilfully refused to fall down.
The small tunnel defying all rules of gravity led to a park that counted as the ‘gate' to the Garden District.
Before Kuroo could enter that, he would have to run a gauntlet through the crowd that had gathered. There were more people waiting. And there were little clouds. So, so many of them.

“Hold tight,” Kuroo said, but Bokuto didn't need much encouragement. He'd gone silent, rigidly holding on to his friend while his heart beat so loud that Kuroo could feel it through his leather jacket.

“Alright, baby,” Kuroo muttered, squeezing the steering wheel of the Bike affectionately as he gathered speed and shot forward.
The horde was standing, watching.
As he neared the bridge, Kuroo saw that there were more people on top of it
One figure stood out, perched in the middle of the overhang.
It was wearing a strange costume, like some kind of armour from a renaissance fair.
Closer up, it became obvious that he was wounded. Glistening in the soft glow coming off the man's fingers, Kuroo could swear he saw entrails hanging out of a gash in his abdomen.
Shocked, he looked up and stared for a second.

When he looked back down, the Bike was gone.
In its stead was the broad, black back of a horse.
“What the fuck!” Kuroo yelled, almost falling off his new ride.
“What's wrong?” Bokuto asked behind him.
“What do you mean, what's wrong?” Kuroo shrieked, “Can't you SEE?”
As if on queue, the mare turned its head and stared back at him with a wild red eye.
“Shit, shit, shit.” Kuroo felt himself panic.
As they passed under the bridge, he tried to keep it together.
“Nice horsey.” he muttered, “Niiiiice horsey.”
“Kuroo, calm down,” his friend was saying.
“I HATE horses, ok?”, Kuroo whispered through his teeth.
“Huh?” Bokuto said. And then “Aaaaah!” as he pointed straight ahead.

In front of them, coming up fast, was a small child.
It stood there at the end of the tunnel, facing a galloping horse like it had no self preservation whatsoever.
“Shit!” Kuroo gripped the mare's manes in an effort to steer away and in that moment, just as they
were clear of the bridge, the horse bucked. The thing veered right, missing the kid by a hair's breadth, and proceeded to spin out of control. Kuroo felt himself flung into the air to the sound of a metal clang. He came back down painfully onto the grass of the park's soccer field.

As he sat up, rubbing his head, he saw that Bokuto had mercifully dropped into a small pond. He was splashing around, shaking himself like an overgrown dog. A little further, almost wrapped around a park bench, was the Bike, front wheel still spinning. “Ah, nooooo,” Kuroo whined.

“What was that about?” Bokuto said, coming closer.

“I don't wanna talk about it, ok?” Kuroo said.

Tiredness washed over him as he looked sadly at the remains of his motorcycle. His friend was patting him on the shoulder.

“We'll get you another one, ok?”

“You know how much that thing cost?” Kuroo started, but his friend was now urgently gripping his upper arm and hoisting him up.

“Less than our lives, friend, let's go.” The horde had gathered again.

Wisps of smoke were floating in a large circle around Kuroo and Bokuto as the people of the Village came closer.

“Ours,” one of them started chanting.

“Bo, stay behind me,” Kuroo said.

He held an arm in front of his friend and his hand started to glow red. A flame sprouted from his palm and he aimed it at a newspaper lying on the ground, setting it on fire and stopping a few of the people in their tracks.

“That's close enough,” Kuroo yelled, “Everyone just back off, so we can all go home.”

The crowd stood silent for a moment.

Then the wounded figure on top of the bridge spoke. Its voice was shrill and loud like scraping metal, a train crumpling as it ran into a brick wall.

“Ours!” it screeched.

“Ours,” the crowd answered.

Kuroo nervously shot more flames, setting fire to debris and hedges in an effort to keep them at bay. But the mob was closing in, moving to surround them. Amidst all the confusion and the chants of 'ours', he could swear he heard a car horn.

Soon, Bokuto was excitedly yelling behind him.

“Hey hey!”

From the corner of his eye, Kuroo could see the crowd rushing to part. The next moment, a van screeched to a halt next to them.

Out stepped a person in a crisp black suit. They adjusted the leather gloves on their delicate hands with a bored look on their face.

“AkAAshi!” Bokuto shouted, “I've been so worried about you!”

“Mister Bokuto, that was not necessary,” Akaashi said, looking both men up and down. A small gust of wind whipped up Kuroo's flames, forming a circle around them.

“Thank you for keeping him safe, mister Kuroo.”

“It's all good,” Kuroo said, grin returning to his face as if it had never left, “You happen to know what's going on?”

“The possible end of our world, mister Kuroo.”
Hi and thanks for your patience.
This is the first chapter of the 'new' update schedule and you'll notice it's a pretty long one.
From now on, I'll be taking two weeks between updates.
I'm really sorry for the change. It's mostly there so I can keep physically keep up with writing. My new job has a very unstable schedule, so some weeks I just don't find the time. I'd rather stay punctual, and maybe get you more than one chapter per update, than get all chaotic on you.
Thanks for understanding.
A plan

Chapter Summary

In which Yachi is the only one thinking straight.

Eleven years ago, Okinawa, Japan

“The world is a beautiful place.”
Kageyama Tobio sat on the porch with her grandmother, staring at the stars stretching endlessly above her on a moonless night.
“It is full of such unimaginable wonder,” the old woman said.
There was a mild smile on her face, skin snagging slightly around the scar that ran from her right eye down her cheek.
“But it is also full of danger.”
She turned to Kageyama and her blue eyes held the young girl in a piercing gaze, sharp and clear as a mountain brook.
“My darling child, there are creatures in this world that prey on the weak, that hide in the shadows and hurt those that do not even recognize them as predators.”
She laid a hand on Kageyama's hair, ruffling it as the child stared wide eyed at her.
“It is those creatures you must fight. It's why we ask you to train so hard. You need to be ready to face them and live. Magic society takes care of its own, you see, and we are the ones who do the caring. We protect the innocent.”
“Why do we do that, nana?” Kageyama asked.
“Because it is in our blood,” the old woman replied, “We are hunters.”
“We hunt and kill,” Kageyama nodded, face serious and strict. This was a lesson she'd definitely picked up from her father.
The old woman breathed deeply and leaned back on her hands, taking in the full scope of sky above her.
“Not always, child. There are those that cannot be killed by mere mortals like us. There are souls that can never be put to rest. We lock those away and put guards at the gates.”
“What happens when they escape?” said Kageyama.
The old woman's face grew harder, for a second, eyes glazing over with the memories of untold experiences.
“Then we have to catch them again,” she said.

March 25th, 12:45, Central District, Vaeda

“Are you alright?” Two worried eyes were staring at Hinata Shouyou from the middle of a frowning round face.
“I, uh,” Hinata mumbled.
He probably wasn’t, to be honest, but at this point he didn’t even know any more. There was way too much static in his head for anything to make sense.
Yachi handed him a wet wipe.
“Thanks.” He started unconsciously rubbing his hand.
It was no longer glowing now. But it was red.
Blood red.
It made him feel like he had to hurl.
“Excuse me for a moment,” Hinata said, and he ran for the bathroom.

Kageyama had given up trying to clean herself. The towel she was given, pink at one point not too long ago, and the five wet wipes the blonde girl had thrust at her, were all saturated in a brownish red. She laid them in a pile on the floor and wrinkled her nose. She was getting annoyed. This was her first time ever removing a true monster. And the dude was a Type A, too, one of the really dangerous ones. She should be proud, of course, but something was nagging in the back of her head. A vague realization tried to rear its head but she stomped it down immediately.

“What do we do now?” Yachi said. She was out of wet wipes and had resorted to standing in the middle of the utterly disgusting room, looking lost.
“I don’t know about you”, Kageyama answered, “but I’m going to save the world.”
“From what?” Yachi asked.
“From everything.”
The blonde girl tilted her head and for a moment it seemed to Kageyama like beneath all the panic and the trembling, Yachi knew way more than her. It felt like she could see straight through Kageyama and pick up on the uncertainty, the chaos and that niggling feeling she was trying to drown out.
“Ok,” Yachi said kindly. And then: “Do you need help?”
“Maybe,” Kageyama conceded. She tried to focus on the options before her, but everything seemed to fizz out.

A flush came from the bathroom and Hinata appeared, looking slightly better. He’d cleaned the blood off his arms and lost his jacket. He seemed to have shoved his whole head under the tap and for better or for worse, he looked somewhat clean. He also appeared to have regained his senses. Walking into the living room, he flicked his eyes from the blood stained walls to the dripping couch and finally to the floor containing a messed up Kageyama.
“Wooow,” he muttered.
“Um,” Yachi said nervously, hands fidgeting, “I’ve been thinking, and this is probably a crime scene now.”
“Yeah, we should go,” Kageyama said, picking herself up off the floor and wiping her sword on the hem of her coat.
“Go? Shouldn’t we call the police?” Hinata said.
“And tell them what, exactly? That there was a monster with no eyes that was going to eat you and we exploded it with magic?” Kageyama glared at him and placed the sword back in its sheath.
Hinata opened and closed his mouth a few times, like a gaping fish.
“We could call the Folk Specialized Police Unit, but they’re no doubt busy with the whole …” she trailed off, making vague circular motions with her arms while she tried to put the situation to words.
“They’re busy”, she finally said. “So we get out of here, we save the world and we call them later.”
“We?” Hinata looked like he’d been slapped in the face.
“Whatever!”

Kageyama ineffectually tried to straighten her jacket. The whole thing was unpleasantly moist. This whole situation was unpleasantly... something. The niggling feeling tried to present itself again, but she shook her head quickly to dissipate it. She’d done what she came her to do. Things were supposed to fall into place now. All she needed was a plan.
“Well, it’s chaos out there,” Yachi tried, “it might be best if we find a nice safe spot, a... clean spot, to hide and wait for this to be over.”

“No,” Hinata drew himself up. “I’m going to find my sister. Thank you for rescuing me, but I need to get her to safety.”

Yachi almost immediately devolved into empathy.

“Oh no! Is she ok? Do you know where she is? She must be so scared with all the weird people out there,” she said.

“I dunno,” Hinata said, “but I need to find her to make sure.”

On the wall behind Hinata, blood was trickling down.

Little drops of it found their way into rivulets, converging into larger drops that slowly but surely made their way to the floor.

What Kageyama needed, was a plan.

The dragon was gone and the gate it was guarding, the door holding the creatures painstakingly locked away for centuries, was weakened and possibly opened. Judging by the general state of the streets she’d flown over, the city was in chaos. Bad things were happening everywhere.

Most importantly, someone, or something, had spooked a goddamn dragon enough to take flight from its hoard.

And they probably weren’t going to stop there.

She would have to find that dragon, wrangle it back to its position, ask it who was behind all this, defeat them and then wrestle all the insane and evil souls back into the underground where they belonged.

That seemed.... rather ridiculous, now that she thought about it.

With any luck at least these two dead weights would go back to finding the little sister, and she’d be free to go it alone.

Up popped the voice in the back of Kageyama’s head.

“I KNOW,” she growled, startling the other two into silence.

She knew. Even without checking her options, even without looking at all the different roads she had before here, she knew she’d need to take the stupid idiot.

Probably the blonde as well.

She could feel it in her bones even if she refused to acknowledge for the moment what the whiny little voice was trying to tell her. She’d deal with that later.

Kageyama groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Look kid,” she said.

“I’m twenty!” the boy interjected, “I’m probably older than you.”

She blinked at him. He was. She wasn’t going to admit that.

“Look... man,” she sighed. “You said your sister was with your parents, what good does it do that you risk your life trying to find her?”

“He needs to make sure if they’re doing a good job,” Hinata pouted.

“Well if two fully grown humans who are hopefully smarter than you can’t keep her safe, how the heck do you think you’re gonna manage?” Kageyama barked.

“Do you even have any kind of heart, idiot Kageyama?”

“Well do you have a brain? You’ve seen what it’s like out there, how are you going to find a single orange child?”

Kageyama was getting exasperated. Why, out of all the possible idiots, was she stuck with this
particularly stubborn one?

“I have to try!” Hinata yelled. “I’m her big brother! I have to check if she’s ok and my parents aren’t picking up the phone!”

“Oh yes, the phone networks are down,” Yachi piped up helpfully. “That's probably why.”

Hinata and Kageyama stared at her incredulously while she shrank back.

“I, uh, tried to call my boss earlier and it didn't work,” she pointed out.

“See?” Kageyama said, “she's probably fine.”

“You don’t know that!”

“And you don’t even know where to start to looking. You're going to run out there like a headless chicken and get yourself killed again.”

“Well miss smartypants what do you suggest we do instead, then? Sit here and play Uno?”

“What even is that?” Kageyama yelled, lunging for the boy, but missing him by a centimetre as he ducked.

“Card game.” Hinata said.

Kageyama tried again, and this time she managed to grab him by the shirt collar.

“The world is about to fucking end and you're going to play cards?!!”

“No, I'm going to find my sister!!”

“What your stupid ass is going to do, is come with me and punch things to death.”

Kageyama jabbed a finger at his chest.

“I don't even know how! Stupid Kageyama.”

Hinata managed to wrestle himself free.

“Believe me, I realize that, you fucking noob.” Kageyama growled.

“Then what's the point? If I'm such a noob, why are you so obsessed with me punching things?”

“BECAUSE IT'S ALL I HAVE!”

The words came out much, much louder than Kageyama would have liked.

Her voice was high, and cracked, and beaten into frustration.

She immediately shut her mouth and stood there, panting.

Hinata blinked at her, dumbstruck.

“Um.”

In the sudden dead silence of the bloody apartment, Yachi's tiny voice rang like a bell.

“I think I may have a way?” she squeaked.

In her hands lay an open book.

In a pile on the wooden floor, droplets of blood coming off Yachi's wet wipes were pooling.

It happened almost naturally, and it was certainly not noticed by its three human occupants, but the room seemed to become slightly more clean with each second.

The blood which used to be everywhere, was slowly moving down the walls and travelling across the floor, gathering in the centre.

“If it involves flying or falling of any sort, I’m not doing it,” said Kageyama.

“I was thinking more about finding help,” Yachi said, pointing at a page with a number of addresses on it. “I don't think we really know what's going on, and places like this-” she tapped the title 'Sanctuary' at the top of the page, “are run by powerful wizards, as far as I can tell. They should know what to do next, and where to find your sister.”

She smiled at Hinata encouragingly. The boy frowned and pouted.
“I kinda work at one, but it will take us some time to get there, especially if the subway is broken,” Yachi continued, “but I remember there being some closer by.”

Her finger ran across the page while Kageyama subtly tried to read the book upside down.

“Here,” Yachi said. “There's a few in the Old Quarter. They're probably our best bet.”

*Behind them, the remains of Hanamaki were lying in a growing pool of blood.*

*Inside what was once the creature’s chest, underneath a scrap of shirt, two eyes twitched.*

“Fine, let's just go,” Kageyama said, “this place is starting to stink.”

She walked toward the broken window and, hand wrapped in her sleeve, pulled out some more broken glass, making a safer exit.

Hinata still looked a little torn.

“I promise we'll find her,” Yachi said.

The boy nodded and seemed to come to some decision.

Without so much as a second glance, he climbed out of the window before leaning back in to give Yachi a hand.

“That's a really neat book, by the way,” Hinata chatted while he helped her through and waited for Kageyama.

Yachi nodded enthusiastically. “There's so much knowledge in it.”

“Do you also know what that thing was in there?” Hinata asked.

“A Corinthian, I think,” Yachi said.

Hinata looked from her to the blank, perplexed face of Kageyama, who had crawled onto the fire escape.

“It was,” she concurred.

“Wow, you’re like super smart,” Hinata smiled at the blonde girl, “Are you some kind of monster scholar? Because that would be an awesome job.”

“Oh, ehehehe,” Yachi found herself getting red in the face, “I'm not, really. I just happened to read up on that, uh, particular one.”

“That's so cool!” Hinata went on, leaping down the stairs two at a time and turning back to heap more praise on the girl. “I’d be really scared looking up stuff like that.”

“Well, it was pretty scary, but not as scary as actually facing him,” Yachi pointed out shyly.

Kageyama silently trailed them like a thunder cloud.

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**March 25th, 12:55, Central District, Vaeda**

A large white fox sat on the roof facing a bland building in the Central District. Its fur glittered and sparkled in the midday sun, pristine and flawless like untouched snow. Nine tails swayed softly in a rhythm all of their own. They formed patterns that you could easily lose yourself in, happily mesmerized till the end of time.

The beast’s green eyes were focused, watching intently while a red haired boy crawled through a window onto the fire escape. There were a few blood stains on his shirt and he looked like he’d just seen a ghost, but he radiated kindness. Even from across the street, he felt like the sun.

The foxes ears perked up briefly as the boy reached out his hand and helped a young blonde woman through the window. She was shivering and she smelled mildly of fear, as she always did, but she didn’t look hurt.

She was fine.

The two fussed over each other while a third human emerged from the building. This one was
practically dripping with blood and she wore a face that spoke of murder.
The fox stiffened and lowered its head slightly, hiding behind the edge of the roof. A deep growl escaped its throat.
This girl reeked of death and anger. It recognized that smell.
It sat there, unseen, while the three of them started down the stairs, chatting and squabbling. Only when they were fully out of view, did the creature move again.

March 25th, 13:17, Central District, Vaeda

Inside blood stained apartment, the man called Hanamaki rose slowly.
It patted itself and coughed, breath rattling like so many ancient bones in a cage.
That really hurt.
He'd grown careless, Hanamaki told himself. He had waited too long for the perfect meal and then...
He had made a mistake.
“Don't mind, don't mind,” Hanamaki mumbled. It was bound to happen eventually.
Painfully he crawled onto his feet and got up, cracking his neck.
He'd probably have to leave town, he thought.
Those kids had actually managed to weaken him, and if he had to fight proper hunters in this state-
A small sound behind him made Hanamaki turn around.

“Yohoo."
In the middle of the apartment, sitting in a lone clean patch on the floor, was the graceful silhouette of a large white fox.
It was immaculate, white fur bristling slightly in the gusts of air coming through the broken window. Hanamaki just stared for a few moments, single mouth slack as he tried to rake through centuries of memories.
“Why did YOU come here?” the eyes whispered eventually.
“Vengeance,” the fox said.
And suddenly, it was a whirlwind of sharp edges.
They walked on, Kageyama feeling more and more like she shouldn't have dragged these two civilians into this.

March 25th, 13:53, Central District, Vaeda

Kageyama Tobio silently tried to concentrate as they made their way down another back alley, trailing Yachi.
“So Kageyama, how does it work?” Hinata asked, walking in step next to her.
“Haaahh?” Kageyama said.
“Magic,” Hinata said.
Yachi, in front of them, paused for a second. She checked her surroundings and turned right. They followed.
“How the hell am I supposed to explain that to a noob like you?” Kageyama grumbled.
“Start at the beginning?”
Yachi stopped and motioned them to stay quiet and wait while she carefully peeked around a corner.
“It just does,” Kageyama whispered.
“So how do you make it... ’do’?”
It was like trying to explain to a toddler why the sky was blue, Kageyama thought.
“You just concentrate, and... boom,” she hissed.
Hinata frowned at her.
“You're not very good at explaining this,” he said lowly.
“I just TOLD you–” Kageyama started, but she fell silent as Yachi waved at them to come.

They'd tried to take a direct route to the first address on Yachi's list but had soon discovered that
a) the streets were full of people who couldn't get home and were starting to panic because
b) a number of magic users were roaming around in small groups, starting fires and playing pranks
on the unsuspecting populace
and finally
c) neither of these groups reacted well to Kageyama, who looked like she'd bathed in blood, which
wasn't even that far from the truth.

So they stuck to the side streets and alleys, trying their best to stay away from the crowds and not
draw attention to themselves.
It was taking them a while to reach their destination. Vaeda Central was a maze of towering
buildings and randomly blocked streets even on a good day. But now several intersections and
squares were off limits to them. Finding their way around had quickly become a tiring game of
snakes and ladders.
With the phone network down, Yachi had resorted to leeching off random people's wifi to get her
mapping app to work. She was surprisingly good at this, Kageyama thought.

They'd finally reached one of the quieter parts of the main street that they'd been trying to cross for
almost half an hour.
On Yachi's sign they ducked down, staying between parked cars as much as possible. This place was mostly deserted now. Any cars left were either parked or abandoned, some of them in the middle of the street. A few people were quickly walking by, but they didn't seem to pay the three of them any mind; Further up, a fight had broken out in a small square. There was a lot of shouting and what sounded like explosions. Then a roar bellowed between the buildings, making Yachi squeak and skitter faster. When she reached the next alley, she hid behind a dumpster, arms covering her head.

I wonder what that was,” Hinata said, trying to peek around the corner.
“Don't,” Kageyama answered, pulling him back by the collar of his jacket. “It sounds like either a giant or some kind of minotaur and we don't have time to fight either of those.”
“M-minotaur?” Yachi muttered from underneath her hands. 
Kageyama wracked her brain trying to figure out what was going on.
In general, minotaurs and giants were fairly docile. The only minotaur she knew of lived in a library. He spent his days cataloguing things and glaring angrily at guests whispering or putting things back in the wrong place.
All she had heard about giants was that they were dumb and liked to sleep. One of those showing up in a fight in a populated area was. Well it was troubling.
“We should go,” Kageyama said, holding out a hand to pull Yachi up.
They walked on, Kageyama feeling more and more like she shouldn't have dragged these two civilians into this. Especially since one of them wouldn't stop talking.
“So what is it you do?” Hinata asked.
“Hmm?”
“Besides the whooshwoosh.” He made some weird mockery of ninja movements.
“With the magic,” he added.
“That's kinda hard to describe,” Kageyama mumbled.
“Try me.”
“I... see things,” she said, vaguely waving her hands around.
“Huh?”

“Like, options. Things that could happen,” Kageyama attempted to explain.
“Do you see the future?”
“No.”
Hinata looked at her with a frown on his face.
“Maybe?” she said. 
Hinata knitted his eyebrows deeper together.
Kageyama sighed. She hated having to clarify this part, especially since she hadn't particularly figured it out herself. It's why she'd come to see the dragon in the first place. Kageyama's powers were so weird and useless that it took creatures hundreds of years old to be able to even identify them. 
But the stupid dragon up and left, and now she was walking along, trying to put the feeling of some sort of epiphany into words.

“I see the different paths that are possible, and then I.... pick one?” Kageyama attempted, 
“Sometimes? It's never been very clear and-”
“Oooooh. Like in a video game!” Hinata said enthusiastically.
“Huh?”
“You know how in games there's always lots of ways to do things and in boss fights it's like 'use special attack', 'drink healing potion', 'press f5 to reload'. That sort of thing,” Kageyama just stared at him blankly.
“Sure, let's go with that,” she finally said.
“And that's what magic is?”
“No.”
Kageyama groaned when Hinata started pouting again.
“Look. I'm not... a good example. Most people's magic is very straightforward. Like Kindaichi: he makes people do stuff. My brother can speed himself up. My father can multiply his own strength for short periods of time. There are people that can manipulate objects or fly or—”
“There are people that can fly!!?”
Hinata had stopped in the middle of the filthy street, staring at Kageyama with eyes stretched wide in wonderment.
“Well it was more of a float, on this one girl I met,” Kageyama said, “It's not like they sprout wings or anything.”
This seemed to disappoint Hinata slightly and he walked on in silence, deep in thought.
Deep enough to walk straight into Yachi, standing stock still at the entrance of the side-street they were in.

Kageyama pulled her back by her shoulder and looked down the intersection.
Sniffing around a department store fifty meters away was a dog.
It was about the size of a lion.
It had three heads.
Kageyama blinked. Those things were super rare. She had no idea where you'd even find one on this continent, let alone wandering around in the middle of a city.
“What the hell,” she whispered under her breath.
Hinata made a soft ‘woooow’ sound behind her.
“Oh, let's go this way,” Yachi suggested, pointing back down the side-street.
They turned around and took a few steps back, when a bark made them break into a sprint down the dirty, narrow street.

Yachi Hitoka doubled over, wheezing, when she felt she was in the clear.
She leaned one hand on the side of a dumpster and wondered briefly if she'd brought disinfectant with her while the other two stopped next to her, panting.
“We should have picked up some water somewhere,” Kageyama said, straightening up with a huff.
Yachi looked up. “Oh.”
Right, she thought.
In all the mess of looking up streets and running away from everything, she'd forgotten about that.
She took off her small backpack and opened it up, revealing a water bottle, two apples, an umbrella, a small first aid kit, a flash light, a battery pack, a box of matches, a stack of host cards and of course the leather bound book.
Hinata tilted his head at the selection. “Were you going camping?”
“I, uh, like to be prepared,” Yachi said, and she pulled out the water bottle, taking little sips from it before passing it to Hinata.
There was a low rumbling sound and without even looking up, Yachi pulled out one of the apples and handed it to Kageyama.
“Uh, thanks.”
Kageyama smugly took a bite while Hinata kept stealing hungry glances at it.
Looking around, Yachi opened up her phone again and let out a little squeal.
"We're right next to one!" she proclaimed. 
According to her map, the address of a Sanctuary should be just around the corner. 
Feeling slightly better about this ordeal, they packed up and quickly crossed to the next block.

"Number... 56" Yachi said, stopping underneath a white neon board. 
'Bethlehem - coin laundromat', the sign said. Looking through the large glass windows, Kageyama could see two rows of washing machines, with another row of dryers lining the back wall. The whole thing was illuminated in stark white light. 
About half a dozen people sat inside, two of them peering out suspiciously. 
Hinata walked up to the door, which had a very cheerful 'Sorry! We're closed' card on it. 
He knocked, startling the laundromat guests for a second, before they all turned their back and pretended not to hear. 
"Hello?" Hinata knocked again. 
Nothing. He frowned.

Kageyama peered at the people inside. They seemed nervous and jumpy. 
Squinting, she could see one pair of pointy ears and at least two tails. 
Something clicked and her heart sank. 
"I don't think they want to host us, Hinata," she said softly. 
"What do you mean, we're just here to ask some questions," Hinata said, rapping on the door again. 
"We're full!" a voice yelled at him from inside.

"Please," Yachi Hitoka piped up, "we just want to talk to someone." 
She'd been keeping a rising panic at bay for over an hour now, and it was threatening to bubble over. 
She would really like to sit down somewhere nice and safe, if only for a few minutes. 
Finally, movement came from the back of the room, and a man walked to the door. 
He was tall, with brown hair that had an almost greenish tint. His eyes seemed to have a perpetual squint and his pupils were strangely narrow. 
He opened the door a creak. 
"Go away," he said. 
"I'm- I'm sorry, sir. But we thought this was a sanctuary, and-" Yachi said. 
"It is," the guy answered. He had a slight lisp, she noticed. 
"Against people like her." He pointed at a blinking Kageyama. 
"Now bug off." And he slammed the door closed again, nervously licking his lips with a forked tongue before heading back. 
"Jeez, what's his problem," Hinata grumbled. 
Yachi stared at Kageyama, who simply sighed and frowned at the ground in front of her feet. 
"Maybe you guys should-" she muttered. 
"Well, whereto next?" Hinata said, interrupting Kageyama and turning to Yachi. 
"You said there was more, yeah?"

Kageyama looked at him, dumbstruck while Yachi leafed through her book again. 
"Ok," she said, taking a deep breath. "Three blocks from here is another one." 
Hinata shrugged when Kageyama kept staring at him. 
"I don't know what's going on but I trust you." 
"Dumbass," Kageyama muttered under her breath, but Yachi couldn't help but see a small smile on her lips. 
"Let's go," she said.

__March 25th, 14:41, Central District, Vaeda__
“Are you fucking kidding me?”
Kageyama Tobio swore under her breath as they reached the next address on Yachi’s list.
They’d sneaked through a creepy parking lot. They’d crawled over a chain link fence. Hinata had nearly fallen face first in a pile of stinking trash bags. They’d scaled another set of fire escapes and gone over the roof of several buildings to avoid a crowd below.
And now they had finally reached the address, and it wasn't there.
“This... should be the place,” Yachi said, voice trailing off and lip trembling.
“I don't know why this keeps happening. It should be here.”

The place couldn't be less there if it tried.
The street they were on was wide and lined with trees. Large marble and glass fronted buildings rose on either side, housing jewelers and designer boutiques on their lower levels.
It was the kind of neighbourhood where a square metre of land cost more than all three of them would ever make in a lifetime.
And here, in between the head office of an investment bank and an upscale apartment with a Michelin star restaurant at the top, was what could only be described as a blank space.
The patch was about thirty meters wide and maybe sixty meters deep and it was nothing but flattened dirt.
Two large potted plants and a menu board stood on the pavement and the copper rope stands for the entrance were still there.
An actual red carpet was rolled out, leading people straight into a patch of god damned dirt.
It must have been a hotel, Kageyama thought, or some fancy club or something.
Maybe it's invisible,” Hinata ventured, sneaking to the side of the pavement and putting out a tentative hand to where the front of the building should be.
He grabbed air.

Feeling very tired, Kageyama sunk down onto the red carpet and rolled her neck.
“This isn't working,” she said, to no one in particular.
“I'm sorry,” Yachi mumbled. She'd opened her book again and was flipping through it, frowning at the pages that popped up.
Hinata came to sit next to Kageyama, biting an apple he'd begged off of Yachi.
“Say, Kageyama,” he said, mouth full.
“What?”
“So you can see the future, yeah?”
“No.”
“Or 'pick a path' or whatever,” Hinata went on.
“Yes.”
“Can you, you know, look at where we're supposed to go? We're kinda making Yachi do all the work.”
Yachi looked up. “Oh, it's alright—”
“I can't,” Kageyama grunted. “I've used it too much already, it's not working anymore.”
“Oh,” Hinata said, taking another loud bite.
Feeling guilty, Kageyama concentrated. Immediately she a sharp pang in between her eyes. She hissed.
In the distance, there was the screech of tires rounding a corner.
“Either way, why aren't you helping Yachi?”
“I don't even know where we are, Kageyama.”
In a fit of annoyance, Kageyama lunged to grab him by the shirt, but he leaned back and she missed.
There was a sharp intake of breath from Yachi behind them.
“Look out!” she yelled.
**March 25th, 14:52, Central District, Vaeda**

A van was barrelling through High Street in Vaeda Central. It seemed to Yachi Hitoka like it was in a bit of a hurry. Though it was practically alone on the wide avenue, it had to make its way between parked and abandoned cars, and the occasional upturned trash can. It did this at speeds that couldn't possibly be safe. And it was coming straight at them.

Hinata and Kageyama scrabbled back onto their feet as the vehicle came closer. Yachi held her breath and braced for the inevitable impact as Kageyama stepped in front of her. Then, with a tortured squeal and a little hop, the van stopped. Yachi peeked over Kageyama's shoulder. A white van stood on the street, parked perfectly in front of the red carpet they stood on. It had a small grey-and-gold logo of an owl on the side. 'Akaashi Keiji', it said, 'Mobile Nurse'.

The door opened and out stepped one of the most beautiful creatures Yachi had ever seen. Dark blue almond-shaped eyes swept over the trio and homed in on Yachi. “Oh?” they said. “Akaashi?” Kageyama croaked. The nurse let their gaze rest on Kageyama, disapprovingly taking in the blood caked into the face and clothes of their recent patient. “It’s not mine,” Kageyama said apologetically. Akaashi raised a single eyebrow, but said nothing more. They walked around the side of the van and opened the back door, motioning the three of them closer. “Oho?” came the sound of a gruff voice from within. “Ohoho, what have we here?” said a second voice. The back of the van had two long, comfortable looking benches in it. One was occupied by a lanky black haired man in a leather jacket. On the other sat a bulky guy with weird, two-coloured hair. Two-toned hair man gave a little wave. “Hey, hey. You look like shit,” he told Kageyama as she squinted into the van. The girl's face shot up, glaring, when a happy yell came from behind her. “Bokuto!” Hinata said and he nearly jumped into the van. “You're never going to believe what happened to us!”

Hinata started babbling at his friend about monsters and blood and sprinting, only occasionally interrupted by an enthusiastic ‘whoaah’ from Bokuto. Meanwhile, Kuroo smiled a lopsided grin at the two girls. “Hey there,” he said. “I'm Kuroo. Lovely day, isn’t it?”
A small cat

Chapter Summary

Kenma just wants to go home.

March 25th, 14:29, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Kenma wanted to go home. There was warm fleece blanket with his name on it and some leftover kibble. Kuroo wouldn’t be back from work for a while, but he'd be able to lounge on the sofa, maybe bat a ball around for a bit. There was a spider in the corner of the bathroom ceiling that he'd had his eye on for a while. The thing had blatantly refused to come down, but he should probably check up on that, too. It would certainly be better than whatever this was.

Kenma sat crouched behind a potted plant, looking through a gap in the leaves at the outside world. A trash can and a low fence further hid the small cat from view. It wasn’t great, but it would have to do for now. A few metres further up, two groups of people were shouting at each other. On one side were about four teens, punks by the looks of them. The other group was larger and more diverse. It consisted of some older people, a young man in a delivery man outfit and several school children. One of the punk teens pointed angrily at the delivery man. He responded by exploding a nearby bench, causing the kids to shriek. Any bystanders still left in the street were scurrying off, now. Kenma would really, really like to be anywhere but here as well, but he saw no immediate way to leave without being seen. So he made himself smaller and squinted through the leaves again.

“Look man, what the fuck do you want?” the punk kid was saying. “How about you start by bowing to us,” the apparent leader of the gang replied. He was somewhere in his thirties, with a stern looking face and slicked back, black hair. He looked like a teacher or an accountant, wearing slacks and a dark green peacoat. He grabbed the kid by the front of his patched jeans jacket, causing a small whimper. The school children giggled.

Then the delivery man looked up and tapped the leader on the shoulder. A tall figure came down the street towards them. He was over two meters high, with a flash of white hair and no eyebrows. He wore the uniform of a bank guard. The figure stared silently ahead as he walked, face locked in a scowl, two sharp looking black horns peeking out from underneath his cap. On his shoulder sat a small weasel with light brown fur that shone gold in the sunlight. The people in the small crowd stopped in their tracks, throwing each other nervous glances as the oni approached. The gang leader just grinned at him. “Here to join the revolution, friend?”
The oni did not answer. He halted a few metres from the crowd and Kenma noticed, with increasing anxiety, that he was growling.
It wasn't really a sound the cat could hear, but he could feel it in the pit of his stomach, like the dread from a childhood nightmare.
The people must have felt it too, because they froze, not moving until the noise died out.
“Aw, they're supposed to be cowering in fear,” the creature on the oni's shoulder whined into the sudden silence.
The gang leader let go of the kid and he stumbled a few steps back, before turning around and blinking up at the bank guard. The oni nodded curtly and stepped aside.
“Uh, thanks man,” the kid said and he sprinted off, followed by his friends, one of whom had the bravery to throw out two middle fingers while running.

When they were gone, the oni turned his attention to his remaining audience.
“What you're doing is wrong,” he said in a low, stern voice.
The leader chuckled. “And what are you going to do about it?”
The sound was small, but as it rose and gained volume, the hair on Kenma's little body stood up, from his forehead all the way to the end of his tail.
It was a giggle.
And it sounded vicious.
High pitched, ice cold laughter came from the golden beast as it jumped off the oni's shoulder and crossed the distance to the gang in a second. Several of them backed away as the weasel came closer.
Its movements were fast and erratic. It almost seemed like the little creature had turned into a dust storm that floated through the crowd.
Wherever it went, it left gashes behind.
Panic broke out almost immediately.
The school children ran off crying, while several of the others were trying to fire whatever spells they had available.
Amid the confusion, at least one shoe exploded.
“Bloody hell, learn to aim, you idiot!” the leader cursed, turning towards his friend as he stepped back and tripped over another companion.
The dust cloud moved over him and instantly cleared up.
A small weasel sat motionless on the gang leader's chest, pinning him with two beady little brown eyes.
It bared its teeth in what was possibly a very creepy smile.
The gang leader went rigid, sweat dripping down his forehead

“Futakuchi, that's enough,” said the oni.
It felt more like an observation than an order, but the weasel squinted grumpily at his prey.
“Cowards,” the creature scoffed and in a blur he was back on the oni's shoulder.
The gang leader crawled to his feet and looked around to find that his associates had all left.
“Go home,” the oni told him.
With a face like a shroud, the gang leader turned on his heel and sprinted off.

“You too, little cat. You should find a safer place than this,” the oni rumbled before walking down the street, and Kenma sat trembling in his little corner until the figure had disappeared.
When all was clear, he slipped from his hiding spot and hugged the wall closely until he could enter a side street where he scrabbled up a parked truck and jumped onto a nearby balcony.

Excerpt from the leather bound book
The city of Vaeda is officially divided into twelve boroughs, with each borough containing a number of neighbourhoods. Some of these neighbourhoods, such as parts of Mariana and the Village, have historic roots in older municipalities or towns that have since been swallowed up by the expanding metropolis.

The historic centre of Vaeda is located in the Old Quarter, on the east side of the river. This is the oldest surviving part of the city, with much of the architecture dating back to colonial times. As such, it features many buildings in Spanish Plantation style, tall brick housing blocks typically adorned with wrought iron balconies. The narrow streets in these neighbourhoods are popular with tourists, and the lower levels of the buildings are known to contain boutique stores, speciality shops and restaurants.

The borough is home to a number of museums and popular tourist destinations, including Temple Square, the Old Churchyard, the venerable Eagle theatre and the Museum of Aerodynamics, a curious building filled with prototypes and mock-ups of flying devices, based on inventor designs from history. The oldest design currently housed in the museum is a small model floating device, based on a Sumatran prototype dated to 1500 BC.

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**March 25th, 15:11, Old Quarter District, Vaeda**

Kenma had learnt to walk quietly.

It came natural to him, but carrying two protective pendants around his neck didn't exactly make it easy. After some practice, he had found a way to move without jingling.

It was a handy skill when chasing birds, and it meant he could go about his business without being bothered by people, be they angry neighbours or overly interested children.

He was very glad of it now.

The city smelled weird. It reeked of smoke and fire, but not the good kind.

This was not the fire that Kuroo made when he was attempting to burn silhouettes into a plank of wood. It was not the fire that heated up the coals for the grill they kept on the roof of their apartment building, much without the knowledge of their landlord.

That fire was warm and cosy.

This was a dirty fire. Its flames were made of tires and plastic.

It pricked his nose and made his throat hurt.

This fire was angry and caustic.

The sound of the city was also wrong.

The regular hubbub in the Old Quarter consisted of tourists walking and chatting, of waiters yelling orders, of bicycle bells and car horns and hurried people talking on phones and drunk people singing off tune and the occasional yappy dog.

There was none of that now. As Kenma made his way over decaying brick walls, carefully squeezing through cast iron grates and hiding behind trash bags, cardboard boxes and discarded furniture, he heard only angry shouts.

Few people walked the street now, and the ones that did moved in small groups, scattered throughout the borough.

Kenma, from his perch among the red clay tiles on the roof of a villa, watched several of them converge onto a small square.

It was the kind of courtyard that was all too common in the Old Quarter. A cobbled expanse a few metres across, lined on all sides by high brick buildings and balconies overflowing with potted foliage.
Vines found their way up the walls and grass and moss settled between the stones. In the middle of the square stood a small statue. On one side there was a bistro, its windows shuttered and its chairs and tables stacked and chained together.

On the other side, there was a magic shop. Or more accurately: a magician's shop. It was one of the few specialty retailers of its kind and a plaque on the door proudly traced its lineage all the way to 1700's Saint Petersburg. It sold packs of trick cards, weighted dice, top hats and sequined boxes, anything an illusionist needed to put on a show. Most of its business was done online but here, in this small shop in a courtyard in the Old Quarter, you could visit their showroom, provided you made an appointment and signed a non-disclosure agreement.

On Thursday evenings, there were courses where you could learn sleight-of-hand tricks. But right now, the courtyard in front of the shop held a grim gathering of angry people. Their faces were set and determined. They weren't laughing, they weren't even talking. They felt like a pack of hyena's hunting down their prey.

A girl in office dress was writing something on the wall next to the shop door. The palm of her hand glowed with a sickly neon yellow light as she pointed it at the old bricks and spray painted 'BOW DOWN NORMS' in big, ugly letters.

Kenma watched, horrified, while some of the gathered crowd broke down the door. Soon, two of them came back out with the shop's owner, a very tall, lanky man with light grey hair. They dragged him into the middle of the crowd, where he collapsed in a heap of limbs, staring up with wide eyes. He already looked roughed up coming out of the building. His clothes were torn and there was dirt and scratches on his face, as if someone had thrown his head to the floor. “So you sell magic, little man?” one of the people in the crowd said. “You think magic is some kind of joke?” came another voice. The man just stared, narrow green eyes scanning the people surrounding him in innocent confusion. “Wh- what?” he managed. “I don't know wha-” He jumped when a loud crash came from behind him, a desk being thrown from the balcony. There was a cackle inside the building, and in a single blast, all the windows on the front cracked. The sounds of splintering wood and breaking glass hinted that the whole building was being thrashed. “What are you doing?” the man stuttered, pulling his arms over his head, “Why are you doing this?” “You think you know about magic?” one of his assailants said, and they held out both their hands. An arc of electricity crackled between their fingers and the man shrunk back, only to be pushed closer by the crowd around him. “Let me show you what magic can do,” said the electricity mage.

Kenma's tail went bushy while images of children coming to torture him came fleeting back. He felt nauseous, just watching the crowd from above. They were going to kill him. He needed to go and get Kuroo, he thought. But there were at least two dozen of them and then Kuroo would get killed. Kenma nervously pawed around in circles, wondering what to do, until the man below screamed in pain. He had to go get help.

Kenma trotted across the roof as fast as he could and ran over a television cable to the other side of the street. Home wasn't far now, but he needed more than one person to deal with this. As he ran through the gutter of a long, low house, he heard shouts behind him.
One ear rotating back, he could discern something like 'Oi, leave him alone'.
Kenma broke into a sprint.


March 25\textsuperscript{th}, 15:24, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

The pipe swung at her and she felt the world turn, almost as if in slow motion.

\textit{Breathe.}

She was starting to burn out. She could feel it in her bones. Her breath was heavy and halted.
She could feel \textit{everything}: the blood pulsing through her veins like a fast bass line, the aching skin on her fists, the raw heat of her face, the taste of copper in the back of her throat.
Her powers wouldn't last much longer, but she couldn't afford to fail now.

\textit{Don't fall.}

They were the only two left standing.
The small overgrown courtyard around her was cluttered with human shapes. More than a dozen bodies lay there, pummeled, burned, fainted or worse.
Most of the damage had not been done by her.
They'd electrocuted each other. Thrown darts at each other. One had accidentally punched a friend halfway across the square.
It was a thing that happened when you tried to fight her in a crowd.

\textit{Breathe.}

A soft humming sound made her look up.
The pipe came at her and her small body lurched, head narrowly ducking under the metal object.

\textit{Don't fall.}

The pipe moved again, arc slowly coming into view.
She was ready.

With every last inch of her concentration, she blinked.
When she opened her eyes, she was standing behind a woman in office dress, swinging a metal pipe.
The woman's hands were stained with neon yellow paint.
Her stomach protested, as it always did when she warped, but she ignored it.
Every drop of willpower focused on one movement, she kicked the woman in the back of the knees.

\textit{Breathe.}

She pushed off on both feet, limbs and muscles screaming at the sudden strain, and drove her entire body forward.
Her shoulder connected, hard, and the woman toppled forwards. She scrabbled on top and punched her in the head with whatever strength she had left.
The pipe clattered to the ground and the woman lay still.

\textit{Don't fall.}

She averted her face and vomited up her lunch.
With clenched fists, she woozily got up, heaving in the soft glow coming from her skin.

Warm liquid was oozing down the side of her face.

\textit{Breathe.}

A soft chuckle came from one side of the square.

"N-nice, Noya." One of the bodies moved as her friend made a failed attempt to prop himself up. He was barely recognizable now, covered in dirt and blood, with a nasty gash on the side of his face. He shouldn't have joined in, not with these people. But his grin was there, as it always was.

"We did it," he said, simply.

"Good", Nishinoya Yuu thought.

She allowed herself to sink to her knees while her head filled up with fog and the bass of her heart
grew so loud that it drowned out all other sound.  
The magician was long gone, fled at the first chance he got.  
“Good.”  
Noya’s eyes grew heavy and she felt her thoughts fluttering away, impossible to keep hold of.  
As she sagged further onto the ground, cheek cool against the concrete, she was dimly aware of footsteps coming closer.  
“Oh wow.” A loud voice, unsettlingly cheerful but vaguely familiar, walked into the courtyard.  
“They’re still here!” It was the magician.  
Something soft brushed her cheek and a small nose snuffled at her forehead.  
“I think this is one,” said a smaller, almost bored sounding voice by her ear.  
“Over here!” the magician yelled.  
More footsteps.  
“Let’s get them inside,” said a third voice, calm but urgent: “Asahi, help with that one, me and Suga will take the little guy.”
Good people

Chapter Summary

She couldn't protect them, she knew. But she was going to have to.

March 25th, 15:18, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Sawamura Daichi inspected the barricade with a critical eye.
“You think it’ll be enough?” she said.

March 25th, 14:12, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

The low, nervous buzzing that had been lingering in Daichi’s gut since she got up that morning kept droning on as the day unfolded.
The Molotov had only been the start.
Once the debris had been cleared and several of her more frightened customers had left, the rumours started to trickle in.
A regular came with stories of small gangs of magic users demanding tribute.
Someone finishing their lunch date received a company wide e-mail telling them not to go back to work, because large creatures were running loose in Finance and Central.
People reported something like a march going on in the Village and the Garden district, but it was impossible to reach anyone there to verify what was going on.
There was smoke above the city, which the more excited customers contributed to a dragon infestation and, finally, the phone network was down, which meant Daichi couldn’t call Kuroo to check on him.
She hadn’t been planning to, of course. She figured that if anyone was capable of handling himself, it would be him, but apparently the Nekomata museum was closed, which it really shouldn’t be at this time of day.
So, you know. It would have been nice to be able to... check. Just to make sure.

It kept niggling at her as she worked, pouring tea and coffee, listening to stories and trying to make a mental list of what the heck was going on.
The place was busy. Much busier than usual.
This concerned Daichi, but it took her a while to pinpoint why.
As more and more faces walked through the heavy door, looking frightened, looking familiar, in some cases appearing anything but human, it finally struck her why they were here.
They wanted someone to tell them it would be ok. They wanted someone to protect them.
They were here for companionship, to share the burden, yes, but mostly they were here because of the place.
The Crow’s Roost attracted people in need, even if its current owners didn’t have a clue what to do in a situation like this.
The people still came because part of them expected her to help them. It’s what she’d unwittingly signed up for.
Two years earlier, Vaeda

“Daichi, come see this.”
Sawamura had been in Vaeda for two weeks when Suga called her, sounding more excited than he
ever had.
She’d come to the city like so many others do, looking for a place where she felt more at home and
where she could learn. Part of her was curious about this magic thing, while another part wanted to
know just how high she could fly.
And Suga wasn’t about to let her do that alone.
So the both of them spent their nights in a run-down hotel, and their days looking for work or some
means of providing for themselves.

What Suga had found, was an old building.
From the picture, it looked like it had been magnificent in the past. Now: not so much.
“Are you sure this isn't going to collapse on us?” Daichi wrinkled her nose, checking the listing on
her phone as they walked through the Old Quarter.
“It’s gorgeous,” Suga said, pulling her along.
“It’s been on the market for over a year,” Daichi replied, “something is probably wrong with it.”
But Suga just smiled that wide, hopeful smile of his and led her into a side street next to what she
recognized as the Nekomata museum. “You have to see it to believe it,” he said.
Daichi believed it, alright. The place looked dilapidated.
On street level, it was a dark store front with wide, dusty windows and a black plaque above the
door: 'The Crows's Roost'.
The paint on the front was cracked and looking up, she could see one broken window on the second
floor, and a gutter that teetered dangerously.
Before Daichi could protest, Suga opened the large, heavy door and dragged her behind him.

A small bell tinkled brightly, clashing with the quiet interior.
It was oddly dark inside, despite the windows, probably because the whole place was painted a
heavy hue of 'old'. Everything was covered in the grey film of dust and inattentiveness that happened
when you left it untouched for long enough.
Daichi squinted into the store, waiting for her eyes to adjust, while Suga walked around looking
through the merchandise. It was the kind of store that seemed to sell any old junk.
By the window, there was a rack with a bunch of ugly scarves, capes and hats, each with a little label
attached to it. Looking closer, Daichi read things like 'rain proof' or 'ghost ward'. She found the same
labels on the assorted rings and pendants in a small cabinet by the wall.

“Dragon's wort?” Suga mumbled. He was standing in front of a large apothecary cabinet, each shelf
overstacked with little jars and tins. “Hair of the werewolf,” he read, “I wonder what kind of
hangover that's for.”
Daichi snorted and coughed to gain her composure.
“Bezoars (goat),” Suga continued, “bezoars (chupacabra). Ouch those are expensive... Nettles, toad
eye.... cocoa powder?”
“Ya wanna be careful with that,” came a gruff voice from the darkness in the back of the store.
The both of them looked up to see an old man walk toward them. He managed to look ancient and
spry at the same time. His skin had the colour and texture of old leather, his voice sounded like
gravel at the bottom of a lake, but judging by his build and the way he held himself, he could
probably outrun Daichi.

Suga bowed and smiled. “Hello, we're here about the property listing!” he said in the cheerfully
polite tone he used to charm the socks off people.
“Is that so?” the old man said, looking unimpressed.
“If possible, we'd like to see the place,” Daichi added, going into Business Mode, “and I don't see an
asking price in the listing, so we'd need to know that, too.”
The man folded his arms. “What are you going to turn it into?” he asked.
“A bakery!” Suga said.
“A bar,” Daichi said, almost at the same time.
They looked at each other and the man tilted his head.
“Something in between,” Suga and Daichi mumbled simultaneously.
“Hahhh!” The old man let out a short, raspy laugh. “Alright, what do you do.”
Daichi frowned. “I don't see how any of this has to do with-”
The man gruffly interrupted her. “You have all the markings of a hatchling witch, but you”, he pointed at Suga, “you don't smell like anything. So what do you do?”
“Oh, I’m not anyone special,” Suga started.
“Is that so?” the man said. “You look like you pierced the Veil not long ago and now you're here all the way in Vaeda with your friend the witch, trying to start a business. Nothing special, huh?”
There was a short huff and he turned to Daichi. “And you? Witch girl. What do you do?”
Daichi looked at her feet, vaguely wondering why she went along with this.
The man had the kind of commanding aura that left little room for rebellion. Lord knows she'd been looking for some kind of guidance, but this wasn't really where she expected to find it.
“I… don’t really know how to do things… yet,” she said weakly and, catching herself, she lifted up her head. “I'm working on it,” she added.
The old man leaned against the counter and grinned. “Explain your gift to me.”
“It’s like a… bubble?” Daichi started, “Like a shield. Something like that. It's not something I can just show you, if that's what you mean.”
The old man huffed.
“And again, none of this has anything to do with property values, so I would kindly ask you to-”
The next second, the old man threw a knife straight at Daichi’s face.
Suga screamed and Daichi's skin erupted in white patterns.
The blade bounced off the barrier surrounded her and clattered to the floor, where it was immediately grabbed by Suga.

“Heh,” the old man said, leaning on the counter again. “You need some practice, but you got good reflexes on ya.”
“What the hell,” Daichi muttered while Suga inspected the weapon.
“Oh,” he said, and he bent the rubber blade with a relieved little giggle.
Daichi wasn't entirely sure if she should feel glad or just really, really angry at this point.
The old man grinned at his guests. “Alright, you can have it.”
“What?” Daichi snapped, sounding more irritated than she'd hoped.
“I said you can have it,” the old man repeated, and she could already feel Suga shivering with joy next to her.
“Hold on, we haven't decided if we want it. We haven't even seen the place yet, let alone talked about price,” she said.
“Eh, don't worry about it,” the old man said, “the place won't fall apart as long as good people run it, and you two are alright. You'll need some practice though.” With that he pointed at her, stern look on his face.
“Hold on just a minute, mister” Daichi said, balling her fists.
The old man lifted his eyebrows and eyed Daichi with a kindly smile.
“And like I said, you can have it. You'll need whatever money you have to turn it into a... bakery bar,” he went on.
“Honestly, young people,” he muttered to himself, straightening up with an audible crack.
Daichi just stood there and frowned.
“Why would you...” Suga said, “I mean, thank you, sir, but how...”
“I've been meaning to get rid of this dump for ages. Now do you want it or not?”
“Of course!” Suga said, before Daichi could stop him.
“Good,” the old man said and he started ushering them out. “Come back tomorrow to sign the contract, we'll have the whole thing settled.”

The door slammed shut behind them and they walked back to the hotel in silence, Suga visibly, excitedly buzzing all the way. They'd never get a chance like this again, Daichi knew. Much as she thought the whole thing was a little (ok a lot) fishy, she could see the possibilities. Somewhere in the back of her head, she was also getting excited.

When they came back the next day, they found the place empty. Really, truly empty. The trinkets, the racks, the cabinets were all gone. Every piece of furniture, including most of the light fixtures, had vanished. All that was left was the heavy counter, with on it three pieces of paper. The first was the contract of ownership, pre-signed by one 'Ukai, I.'.
Next to it lay a small note with a key stuck to it and 'If you need anything, ask at the museum' scribbled in terrible handwriting.
Finally, there was the day's edition of the Vaeda Eagle, a local newspaper Daichi has never heard of. The bottom of the front page featured a small article with a picture of the building.

'Crow's Roost finds new owners'
The Crow's Roost, known as one of the oldest and most powerful purveyors of magical equipment in the city of Vaeda, has found new owners. The venerable wizard Ukai announced his plans to retire over a year ago. Since then, scores of people have enquired about the property, which has a long history as one of the first Sanctuaries in the city.
Joint ownership was finally won by one Sawamura D. and Sugawara S, ser Ukai tells our editor. It is unclear what they will do with the building. Ser Ukai has stated that he will use his new-found time to return to the country of his birth and visit his family.'

Daichi blinked and gave the paper to Suga, who scanned it with knitted eyebrows.
“What the hell just happened?” Daichi asked him when he looked up again.
Suga just shrugged and walked around the room.
When he came back, he took a pen from his pocket, pulling the contract towards him.
“A bakery or a bar?” he said, smiling, before putting his own scribble on the document.
“Something in the middle, I guess.”

March 25th, 14:16, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

As more and more people trickled in, Daichi decided that she should come up with some plan. Something other than 'sit around and wait' at least.
The radio had gone silent a long time ago. Her main source of information were the people coming in and Asahi, who had been glued to her phone all morning.
Neither had delivered any major updates in a while.
Grabbing a coffee pot, Daichi weaved through the tables, to the one in the back where three of her regulars sat.
“Kinoshita,” she said, eyeing a blond man who all but disappeared under her gaze, “can you do some recon for me?”
It was hard to focus on the boy. He seemed to fade from view, even as she was looking at him from a few centimetres away.
“Me?” he said, “What good would I do?”
“We need to know what's going on in the streets around us, that's all. Get a general feel for the place,” Daichi explained, squinting. If she didn't concentrate, she'd easily forget he was even there.
“Just stay out of view. I don’t want you to get in trouble.”
One of his companions smirked. He had black hair and Daichi had always considered him the leader of the trio. His name was Ennoshita. “That sounds like the perfect job for you,” he said.
Kinoshita sighed, fully solid again. “Right,” he said.

March 25th, 14:20, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

The bell tinkled and several guests got up to rush towards the door. Daichi, frowning, saw three people stumble in, heavily injured. One of them had boils and rashes all over his skin. The other two bore cuts and bruises, at least one was bleeding badly.
“Take them into the back room,” Daichi told the people by the door, before turning around and shouting “Is anyone here a doctor or a healer?”

March 25th, 14:26, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Daichi pinched the bridge of her nose and poured herself a cup of coffee, knowing full well that she’d reached overdosing levels ages ago. It gave her some comfort, even if her stomach protested vehemently.
She’d found an EMT to tend to the people in the back room, and someone claimed to be able to create ointments, so she let them have the kitchen and the stash of calendula and chamomile.
Asahi was running water and rags around, seemingly happy for something to do.
She’d given her phone to Ennoshita, who was sitting on a stool by the counter and frowning.
“I think we have a problem,” he said in a tone that made Daichi groan. “Look at this.”
He held out the phone to a thread on the forum they’d been watching.
It was called ‘Payback time’ and it started with the sentence ‘there’s a couple of bitches in a coffee shop that need to be shown their place’.
“Please tell me they’re kidding,” Daichi said, as the buzzing of the coffee and her general nerves went into crescendo. “Tell me it’s not us.”
“Uh,” Ennoshita said, “the address they’ve given is this one, I’m afraid. They’re meeting in Temple Square.”
The knot in the pit of her stomach exploded into a loud, angry cloud.
“When,” Daichi said.
“Around four,” Ennoshita said, gravely.
“Fuck!”
Daichi closed her eyes and tried to think through the white noise currently invading her veins. There were so many people here, and a lot of them were so scared she could almost taste it. She couldn’t protect them, she knew. She didn’t see any way, in her state, to protect them.

March 25th, 14:27, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Something hit the front window with a loud bang and splashed apart in a pool of fire in the street. There were shrieks, a few of the guest crawled under their tables and two kids started crying. Someone outside shouted something before running off, but she didn’t quite catch it over the din in the shop.
“Asahi!” Daichi snapped at her friend who stood frozen, halfway between the kitchen and the back room.
“Please put that out,” she asked and she pushed a low chair against the counter. Asahi blinked, nodded and made for the door. Daichi crawled onto the counter. “Alright people,” she said, to the growing chorus of slightly panicked voices. Ennoshita sat at the counter, looking up with raised eyebrows and a small smile. Most of the guests were staring at Asahi, whose ears had gone pink, while she carefully opened the door and looked around, before freezing the street. She came back in and stood still, visibly shrinking under the attention. Daichi steadied herself, buzzing noise coursing through her body. She took a deep breath. “OY!” she shouted at the top of her lungs. There was a shocked pause as several dozen people looked up at the young woman standing on the counter, feet slightly apart and fists angrily on her hips. There was no way she could protect them, she knew. But she was going to have to. If she didn't show grit now, when the hell was she going to? She took another deep breath. “Here's the situation,” she said.

March 25th, 15:18, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Sawamura Daichi inspected the barricade with a critical eye. “You think it’ll be enough?” she said. “It's a good start,” Ennoshita replied, studying the wooden construction, “We'll have to fireproof it, but I think we have the abilities to make it happen.” The barricade was mostly wood, made out of the scrapped furniture they found in the basement, and some debris they'd taken from the neighbouring abandoned stores. They'd built it halfway down the street, a few metres away from the coffee shop, and it would severely hinder, and hopefully stop, anyone coming from Main Street. That was where Kinoshita, coming back slightly paler than before, had told them people were roving around. Apparently groups were already gathering at the Temple, which didn't help with Daichi's general sense of nervousness.

Once Daichi had told her guests the shop was a target, several people had decided to try their luck elsewhere. But most had stayed. They had nowhere else to go. So this was the plan they'd formed.

The practice room in the basement had been turned into a makeshift hospital. The garage under the neighbouring gallery, the same one Kuroo used, was designated a safe space for children, to keep them away from the pointy stuff happening upstairs. The barricade blocked the street leading to Main Street. On the other side, they'd settled on some booby traps and two people with offensive abilities. Their little alley flowed into the campus of the Eagle Theatre, a veritable maze of tiny streets, hedges and columns. Kinoshita had told them no one was currently even in that area, but he'd picked a few places out that were easy to defend, if it came to that.

All this meant that The Crow’s Roost currently sat in the middle of a street that felt like a small fort. Next to her, Ennoshita was checking a list of names and abilities. The man seemed to have a knack for directing people into roles befitting them.

“We can spray it with water and maybe soap on the outside,” he was currently saying, “I think we also have someone with a glue-like ability to make it stronger.” “Sounds like a good idea,” Daichi said and she left him to it. She turned and walked back to go check on the wounded, when she found a very confused looking
Suga before her.
“Daichi?” he said, wiping the sleep from his eyes.
On his shoulders sat a small, frightened looking calico cat.
Overview

Chapter Summary

“Right, I guess I'll do this myself”, he mumbled to no one in particular.

March 25th, 15:25, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

The Plaza is the largest open space in the city, a flat expanse of concrete tiles skirted by tall glass buildings. Thousands of people cross it every day, workers making their way to offices and shops, kids hopping the bus to school.

A street musician can usually be found by the fountain, playing his cello for the tourists and school children gathering around the waffle cart a few metres further. He competes for attention with a beat boxer, setting up shop in front of a large Telecom store most mornings. He starts surprisingly early in the morning, gathering a crowd of people sipping coffee from large paper cups.

None of that is there now.

The square is empty, save for some trash and a bunch of newspapers being blown across the concrete.

A small group of people is making its way from one end to the other, heading towards the entrance to the Old Quarter. They're decked out in heavy boots and jeans, some of the older ones in workout clothes or the kind of overalls you'd wear to garden.

They're talking and laughing among themselves, though none give the impression of being particularly friendly.

Switch

Two women and a young man are hurrying through a side street in the Old Quarter.

They're silently following the lead of a calico cat when it suddenly stops, tail straight in the air.

“There he is”, it says in a soft, droning voice. Ahead of them, a tall man in a torn velvet suit leans against a wall. He's clutching his side, light grey hair streaked with red and blood dripping down the side of his face.

“Oh my god, are you alright?” one of the women says. She's tall, almost as tall as he is, and gently puts his arm around her shoulder.

“I came to get help”, the man in the suit groans.

Switch

A beautiful man strolls through a back alley of the Avenue of Light.

His hair is immaculate, his clothes of an up-scale brand, even though they appear to be slightly scuffed. He's humming a little tune to himself.

A small drawstring bag dangles from his long, graceful fingers. Inside are two round shapes, about the size of marbles. It's hard to tell through the thick black cloth, but they seem to be seeping liquid. They smell like blood and decay. It is clear from the way he's holding the bag, that the man considers them powerful, possibly dangerous.

The beautiful man walks up to the back door of a host club called 'The King's Court', according to a small plaque on the wall. He stops, carefully places the velvet bag in the inner pocket of his coat. Then he takes a deep breath and walks in.
A white van with an owl logo on the side hurtles through the wide streets of the Finance District, toward the Plaza. The driver has black hair, large almond shaped eyes and an indecipherable expression on their face. Next to them sits a blond woman, shrieking. She's pale and wide-eyed, almost foaming at the mouth as she holds on to the dashboard in front of her, whole body swaying left and right while the van inches between parked and abandoned cars, trash and random shards of building at high speed.

There is a small courtyard in the Old Quarter that is full of bodies. A bistro sits on one side, the smoking remains of a magician's shop on the other. On the cobbles in between, two women are fighting. The taller of the two carries a pipe and she swings it, just missing the other as she ducks. The woman with the pipe huffs, raises it and brings it down again. Her opponent, smaller, with short hair and in baggy, tattered jeans, blinks and disappears the moment the pipe comes down. The small woman appears again behind her assailant's back and immediately lunges, kicking the taller one in the knees before jumping on top as she falls, hitting her in the head until she lies still. Victorious, the small woman gets up, only to sag down to the ground again.

A few moments later two men, two women and a calico cat step into the courtyard. "Oh wow," the tall man in the suit says. "They're still here!" The cat carefully steps between the wounded, sniffing at them until she reaches the small woman. "I think this is one," it says. A tired looking woman with black hair and a barista apron checks her pulse, before pulling her up. "Over here!" the tall man in the suit yells, as he kneels over a young bleeding man with a shaved head. "Let's get them inside," the barista says. "Asahi, help with that one, me and Suga will take the little guy." She carries the wounded girl, looking back at the courtyard with a mixture of worry and pity while she waits for her friends to follow. "We should call an ambulance on the others", the man named Suga says and she nods. "As soon as we get back", she answers.

Golden afternoon light streams into a room in the Light District, barely blocked by the teal curtains in front of the windows. A muscular man with spiked hair is lying in a large, comfy looking bed, sleeping peacefully. He is observed by a small fly on the ceiling, as his chest rises and falls calmly, nothing punctuating the quiet of the room but the occasional soft snore. With a hushed click, the door to the bedroom opens, and the beautiful man with immaculate hair slips in on bare feet. He lost his jacket, wearing only a white buttoned up shirt and a pair of slacks. He stands by the door, unmoving as he looks at the sleeping man. His eyes go soft, for a moment, panning from the spiky hair down to the neck of the sleeping man, and following the curve of his back under the sheet. The immaculate man smiles, before slowly closing the door. He walks over and sits on the side of the bed, sudden movement waking the sleeper. "Oikawa?" With a grunt, the other sits up, blinking blearily at his visitor. He rubs his eyes and scans Oikawa’s face. "What’s up? Something wrong?" "It’s fine, Iwa-chan," Oikawa says, softly and seriously, "I got you a present." "Why the hell would you wake me up for a-" Oikawa places a finger on Iwa-chan's lips, shushing him, and fishes something out of his pants.
pocket.
He gently lays it in his friend’s hands.
It's a pair of sunglasses.

Switch

A white van with an owl logo on the side speeds onto the Plaza.
With screeching tires it stops, narrowly avoiding a group of people crossing the square. The group halts and starts shouting. A cloud of lemons materializes out of thin air above the van and falls onto the roof.
The blonde girl in the front seat screams.
The van audibly shifts gears, swerving as it sets off again.
It drives across the square, gaining speed and ducking into a wide street that functions as the gateway to the Old Quarter.
It heads down Main Street but slows again when it reaches Temple Square, where a crowd of people has gathered. The van's horn blares loudly as it tries to make its way through.
People step out of the way but do not go willingly. There's a lot of yelling, and a gust of wind knocks several of the protesters to the side.
The van starts moving again, clearing the square and heading further up, to turn into the street next to the Nekomata museum.
It halts there, blocked by a barricade.

Switch

An old man in a Dragon Guard uniform walks through the streets of the Village, slowly making his way towards the coast. There's a gash in his side and he hasn't bothered to push his bowels back in. He's followed by an army of men, women and children, surrounded by puffs of smoke.

Switch

A tall bank guard walks through a street in Central. He has white hair and no eyebrows, sharp looking horns peeking from beneath his cap.
“This is some mess, isn't it?” says the small golden weasel sitting on his shoulder.
The oni nods silently.

Switch

People are playing cards in a laundromat called Bethlehem. The stark white light overhead flickers and they peer outside fearfully.

Switch

A dragon sits on a rock in the middle of the ocean. It sighs deeply, heavy smoke coming out of its snout. Then it cranes its neck to lick at a gash on its side.
The dragon stops when it notices an insect flying towards him over the water. It squints, pulls back its neck and sucks in air, readying itself to attack.

Switch

Two men sit in the small kitchen of an apartment in the Garden District.
“Come on, Kindaichi, we've come this far”, one of them says, inspecting the bandages on his leg with a painful expression. His skin has a strange green tint to it. “I wasn't expecting her to get help, either, but we've survived so far.”
“We weren't supposed to just 'survive', Kunimi”, Kindaichi says, pouring some painkillers down his
throat and chasing them with a glass of water. “And I wasn't expecting *them* to set the whole damn
town on fire. Did you see those things? The wisps? They creep me the fuck out.”
“We've gone too far to back out now”, his friend says, eyes scanning the ceiling. “And will you keep
it down? He's probably tracking us.”

Switch

There is a small fly sitting on the wall of ‘The Crow’s Roost’ coffee shop.
It quietly observes the activity below. One corner of the store has been turned into a makeshift
workshop, where several people are building traps and reinforcements. Others come and go, carrying
finished products outside and hauling in more supplies.
At the table in the back, a man with short black hair is drawing up lists and pointing things out on a
map to his two companions, one of which keeps flickering in and out of view.
There is some commotion as the bell tinkles and new people enter. There are three of them, lead by
one cat, carrying or otherwise holding up three wounded people.
“Open the door, please, let us through”, says the tired woman with long black hair and a barista
apron. With some help, they carry a small, heavily bleeding woman into the back, followed by a
young man with a shaved head who can barely stand, and a tall man with light grey hair and a velvet
suit, who looks like he's about to faint.
As they disappear into the kitchen, people get back to work.
Then the bell tinkles again and someone comes running in.
“Ennoshita!”, he yells, huffing, “we have trouble.”
The man in the back looks up.
“A van just drove up to the barricade. They say they want in.”
Ennoshita frowns.
“Shall we attack?” the huffing man asks.
“Let's not”, comes the voice of the tired woman in the apron. She emerges from the kitchen, wiping
her hands and pulling her long black hair into a neat ponytail.
There are smears of red on her shirt and dark stains on her apron. Her face is set, hard and serious.
“I'll go and have a chat”, she says, walking out the door.
Ennoshita nods and goes back to peering over his papers, while the huffing man follows her outside.
One of the builders looks up and squints. She puts down her hammer and tilts her head.
Her skin is shiny, as if she's perpetually sweating, and her lips are wider than usual for a human
being. They part and out rolls a long, sticky tongue.
With a snap, she picks up the fly, its view blurring as it moves into the woman's mouth.
Everything goes black.

Switch

He blinked into the soft afternoon light falling through the dusty windows of his study and shook his
head.
He hated when that happened, that tiny moment of confusion where he wasn't sure if he was the one
dying.
Sighing, he got up and stretched, cracking his neck.
“Right, I guess I'll do this myself”, he mumbled to no one in particular.
He adjusted his clothes, pulling his shirt and cardigan down and tucking them into his pants. He shut down his laptop, open to a page on a forum for magic users. Then he walked across the room and stepped into his shoes.

A soft drone could be heard when he walked toward the door, and it only got louder as he stepped out of the study and across the hallway into the bathroom, where he splashed water on his face. He looked in the mirror, trying on a few faces until he remembered which one he liked best. Clicking his tongue, he walked down the hall to the living room, where the drone was the loudest. He opened the door and the buzzing sound took over his entire being. Clear tupperware boxes were stacked high against the walls of this room, each holding pieces of rotting meat and vegetables. There was a lidded tank of manure where the couch should be. Several tall buckets were lined up in rows in the middle of the floor, and this is where the drone came from. Flies were everywhere. The ceiling, the walls, the windows and every surface inside the room was covered in small black specks. And despite his care, the smell was rather unpleasant. Perhaps a change of scenery would be nice, he thought, making his way out the door with a small smile on his face.
If Sawamura was building a barricade, Kuroo decided that did not want to be on the other side of it.

March 25th, 15:42, Old Quarter District, Vaeda
Daichi stepped out into the cobbled street in front of her coffee shop to talk to whoever it was that had appeared in front of the barricade.
Afternoon light had turned everything golden, as if it had been run through a photo filter.
People were standing guard, others were hauling traps and supplies from one end of the street to the other. In front of the art gallery, a small group had gathered around a large box of clothes they'd found in the coffee shop's attic.
“This one's supposed to be fire proof”, one of them said, as he held up an orange and blue plaid shirt.
“And this”, he read the label on a flowery crocheted bonnet, “is anti-tank?”
This day felt unreal, Daichi thought. It was like she had been dropped in the middle of a weird action movie, the type that Suga loved and that she'd always just endured, eyes skimming the screen over a bucket of popcorn.
Daichi checked the clock on her phone. It was nearly time.
She had to keep telling herself that all of this was happening. That it was important and that what she did and decided mattered an awful lot.
The people in those movies always seemed to know what to do. They never had electricity running through their bones, like she did, interfering with their efforts to think clearly.
They did, of course, have the benefit of a script, she thought. All she had was static and a bunch of folks who were equally out of their depth.
Straightening her shoulders, she walked over to the barricade and climbed the ladder up to the top, to a ledge that allowed the people inside to look out.
From here she had a good view of the remaining part of Eagle Street, all the way to Main.
Daichi looked down and frowned.
A few metres from the barricade stood a white van with a strange group of people next to it. One of them waved at her.
“Kuroo?” she yelped.
“Yo,” Kuroo Tetsurou said.
The man she’d been worried about all afternoon smiled his lop sided grin up at her. “Did you know there's a giant barricade in your street?”
“Kuroo, for fuck's sake!”
Daichi sighed and slapped her forehead, hiding a smile. God, she hated that guy.
She turned to the guard next to her.
“They're friends,” she said, “hold off on the attack, please.”
The man nodded. “You sure though?” he said. “One of them looks pretty evil.”
He pointed to a girl in black who stared up with eyes that could freeze over the sun. She was covered in a reddish brown substance and looked positively psychotic.
“Uh. If they're friends of Kuroo they're probably ok.”
Daichi turned back to the street in front of the barricade, where Kuroo was leaning against the van,
arms crossed. “What's this thing doing here?” he shouted up. How he managed to sound conversational and relaxed in this situation, she would never know.

“Did you see any people in Temple Square?” Daichi asked loudly. He nodded, while his companions shuffled awkwardly. “Well, it's to keep them out!” The people near the van looked at each other, and at Kuroo. He shrugged. Then a short blond girl put up her hand. “Um!” she squeaked at Daichi, “What about us?” Her voice was oddly hoarse. “Uh.” Daichi faltered. She had no idea.

In the initial design of the barricade there had been a gate, but it was deemed impractical and posed a major weakness in the defence they were trying to build. So now there was only the inside and the outside.

And Kuroo was on the outside.

The crazy-looking girl in black seemed to notice her Daichi's hesitation. Without a word, she walked up to the barricade and kicked it, before trying to climb on. The soap Ennoshita had suggested proved surprisingly effective. The girl slid right off while Daichi physically restrained two of the men on guard up top. A short red haired guy walked over and pulled the girl up. “Idiot Kageyama, the whole point of that thing is that we can't just climb over.” “Well do you have any better ideas? We can't go back past that mob in the square, not after Akaashi nearly flattened them.” Behind the two, the others were talking amongst themselves.

Daichi checked the clock again. They really shouldn't be here, she thought. They'd get caught in the middle.

“Maybe you can go across the roof?” she suggested. “Or just lock yourselves inside somewhere? You don't have a lot of time...” Kuroo looked up. All her attempts at projecting steely-eyed confidence seemed to be failing, because the man at the bottom of the barricade frowned at her expression and then nodded briefly. “We'll go through the museum”, he shouted up, “just let us in when we get there, ok?” Daichi nodded and watched them drive off, back to the beginning of the street.

It gave her the same sinking feeling as seeing the beleaguered heroes scramble to safety in a movie, only much, much worse.

March 25th, 15:45, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Kuroo Tetsurou fished a key out of his pocket and opened the back door to the Nekomata museum. “Welcome, welcome”, he said, keeping the door open for his companions to enter. Once they were all inside, Kuroo locked the place.

Sawamura, he knew, was not someone who overreacted easily. She was usually calm, dismissive and therefore inappropriately cute when you actually got her flustered. Seeing her at the top of a barricade was... Well it was impressive but also terrifying.

And she really had looked scared. Like she was preparing not just for a riot, but for a war. She was serious about it.

If Sawamura was building a barricade, Kuroo decided that he did not want to be on the other side of it.

“Uhooooooh”, Hinata said, walking to a nearby exhibit. “That's so cool!”

He was pointing something out to Bokuto, who was equally excited. The two of them stepped into the museum, jostling each other to check something in a glass showcase. Someone next to him made a small chuckling sound, but when Kuroo looked up from bolting the
door, he only saw Akaashi. Their face was a marble slate without emotion, as always. “Softie,” Kuroo grinned and he walked away before he could get caught in the nurses' angry gaze.

He stepped into the front room and nearly bumped into Yachi who stood, frozen, in the middle of the floor. “Gh- ghost!” she whimpered.

“Oh hi, madam Nekomata,” Kuroo nodded as he saw the spectre. “We're just passing through.” He laid a soft hand on Yachi's shoulder. “That's my boss,” he said, before walking to a nearby window and opening it. He leaned out and pulled the shutters closed before locking them. “Can you believe Sawamura made a god damned barricade, madam?” he chattered, going to the next window and repeating the process. “That's probably a good idea”, the old woman nodded. She was hovering near the front window again, looking out over Main Street and, further ahead, Temple Square. The small crowd that Akaashi had nearly run over on their way here was growing. Some were arming themselves with stakes of wood from a broken bench. Kuroo tilted his head. A riot or a war, he thought. “Why don't we put the storm panels in front of the shop window while we're here”, he proposed. “Bokuto, help me out? Akaashi, could you finish the rest of the shutters?”

March 25th, 15:49, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Kageyama Tobio stood in the front room of the Nekomata museum and glared at what was very obviously a ghost. The old lady floated gently, amused smile on her face as she observed Kageyama in the gradually darkening room. Yachi had trotted off somewhere to help the nurse close shutters, while Hinata was investigating the exhibition in his own awkwardly excited way. Behind her, she could hear the banging sounds of Bokuto and Kuroo grabbing large panels to put in front of the windows. None of these people seemed to care that there was a dead woman in their midst. “How do you do?” the spectre said, mild smile never leaving her face. “Kuroo says you're the boss here?”

“It is my house, yes,” lady Nekomata answered. “Why are you still in it?” Kageyama demanded. “Rude!” Hinata mumbled from somewhere to her right. He was circling around, occasionally distracted by something 'cool'. “I still have things to do,” the old lady said softly. Kageyama frowned, mentally making a tally of all the things she knew about ghosts. It wasn't much, so instead she watched as the spectre bobbed softly up and down in front of the window, like she was flotsam in the middle of an ocean.

“Are you having a staring contest, Kageyama, because I don't know if ghosts even need to blink,” Hinata commented from behind one of the tables. “I'm doing no such thing!” Kageyama stuttered. The old woman's smile grew wider. “Oh, you are from the hunter family?” she noted. “That's why you feel familiar.” Kageyama's frown grew deeper. “What would you know about my family?” “I met your great grandfather once. He had the same eyes as you. Very... intense man, he was. I can see where you'd get that from.” She chuckled while Kageyama stood there, glaring. “So what brings you all the way to Vaeda?” the woman went on.
“I don't see how that's your busin-”
“Dragons!” Hinata interrupted. “Apparently there is one here and it's huge and she's fangirling over it.”
“I... what? Shut up!” Kageyama spun around and swung to barely miss Hinata, who had been inching closer during the conversation.
“She's writing stories about it,” Hinata said, undeterred as he dodged another fist.
“I see,” the old woman nodded, and the two of them devolved into a fight.

“Um.” From behind her, Yachi slinked into view. “How would we, uh, get to the roof, m- ma'am?”
The girl took a step back when the ghost turned toward her.
“It's just, um, we should get behind the barricade and the coffee lady said we needed to hurry, so...”
“That seems awfully conspicuous,” Nekomata pointed out. “A lot of those kids out there are magic users, they can just shoot you down.”
Yachi squeaked.

“Well, what would you suggest madam,” Akaashi said. The nurse had finished preparations and was now watching Kuroo and Bokuto bolt the door.
“That depends on where you're going. Back in the day, we dug a tunnel from here to what is now the coffee house and on to the back of the Eagle Theatre’, the old woman mused, “But that was two hundred years ago, you may have some work clearing it.”
Akaashi just looked at her, slack jawed.
“That's... convenient,” they said.
“This isn't the first time fighting has come to Vaeda, young fairy,” Nekomata answered. “This is a museum dedicated to a revolution. One that I had no small part in. We were well prepared, back then, as your friend is trying to be now.”
“You never fail to amaze me, ma'am,” Kuroo laughed, snapping shut the lock on the front door. He reached behind the counter and picked up a crowbar. “Would you mind if we took a look at this tunnel?”
The old lady motioned them to follow her into the back and down the stairs.
“Wait, are we going to trust a god damned ghost?” Kageyama protested.
“I always have,” Kuroo said, slapping her on the back.

**March 25th, 15:54, Old Quarter District, Vaeda**

The basement to the Nekomata museum was a place Kuroo Tetsurou rarely went. He had always considered it to be old lady Nekomata's 'house'. She hung out here during the day and it was her own little private territory.

But now he was walking down the steps, past the little store room and the archive with accounting statements going back to 1856. What lay beyond was a weird sort of maze. The building that now housed the museum had started out as a large colonial mansion and its basement was a dove cot of small cellars, larger stone rooms and dusty staff chambers. There was a water cistern that hadn't been used since the invention of plumbing and somewhere at the back was a trapdoor with a staircase underneath it.

Kuroo had never dared check what was down there, lest he find the body of the late madam Nekomata, which would make his relationship with his boss pretty awkward.
But it was exactly where they went now. Nekomata motioned Bokuto to open the trapdoor, while Kuroo grabbed some candles.
He lit them with his finger and handed them out.
The blond girl, Yachi, had somehow gotten her hands on a flash light. He was mildly impressed.

The second basement had a lower ceiling and felt very much like a series of catacombs.
The air in here was cold but stifling. As they walked through the narrow hallways, the dust of ages
rose up in anger for being disturbed after all these years. A thick cloud of it enveloped the group until a gust of wind cleared the air and allowed them to breathe again. Kuroo felt the blond girl involuntarily grab the back of his jacket while they filed through a series of corridors. He grinned out of habit but truth be told, he wasn't feeling too confident himself. Even Bokuto had picked up on the atmosphere.

“Don't worry, Yachi,” he was saying in that optimistic tone of his, “nothing's going to hurt you while I'm here.”

They walked on until Kuroo was certain they were no longer underneath the actual museum, when Nekomata floated into a side door and the group suddenly found itself in a large, round room. It was about ten metres across, with a domed roof and walls made of ancient brickwork and crumbling plaster. It looked exactly like Daichi's practice room.

“Huh,” Kuroo said, “I didn't know we had one of these.”

“What, um, is this place?” Yachi asked quietly.

“It's a stone dojo,” Nekomata explained. “There was a time when magic was forbidden in Vaeda. Only government agents were allowed to use it. So we created a network of little arenas to hone our skills without anyone outside knowing. Kuroo can tell you all about it later. It's one of the stories that this museum tells. For now, could you light those torches, please?”

The ghost motioned to brackets on the wall and waited for Kuroo to light up the room before floating to one end of it. The plaster here was shoddy, hastily slapped over bricks placed in a different pattern than the rest of the walls.

“Behind this wall is the tunnel network. The next room you reach should be the one underneath the coffee house.”

Akaashi stepped up to the wall and with a small tornado of wind, the plasterwork fell off. It revealed a bricked up doorway.

“Hmm, how do we get through this?” they said.

“Maybe Hinata can punch it?” Yachi piped up.

“He can't control his gift,” Kageyama grumbled.

“What do YOU know?” Hinata snapped back.

“Well go and punch it then,” Kageyama barked.

The boy just crossed his arms and pouted. “I don't want to anymore.”

“We'll dig! It'll be easy,” Bokuto said.

“I'm not sure if 'easy' is the word you're looking for, mister Bokuto,” Akaashi mumbled.

“Just watch me, Akaa-shi! I think I saw a shovel on the way over here.” Bokuto ran off back down the hall, while Kuroo tested his crowbar on the exposed bricks. The ancient mortar was easily scraped away.

“It looks doable, I suppose,” Akaashi said. “But we'd better hurry. I have a feeling your friend will need us soon, mister Kuroo.”

When Bokuto came back, he started to attack the wall. Hinata and Kageyama both grabbed the other shovel.

“Oi, leggo”, Hinata said.

“No YOU let go”, Kageyama hissed.

“I'm gonna help them dig, so give me the damn shovel. Let go,” Hinata said again.

“How's a tiny little guy like you gonna help? You'll only get in the way.”

“Oh, because you're so much better?”

“Well maybe I am”, Kageyama said.

“You nearly died today! Twice!” Hinata shouted.

“I was trying to save your sorry ass. And also the entire world.”

“Well who was the one who actually did the saving, huh?” Hinata asked, “If it weren't for me and
Akaashi you'd-“.
“I would have been fine, thankyouverymuch,” Kageyama growled.
“Ahem.”

It was a light cough, only barely heard beneath the shouting and the digging, but it held all the menace and weight of someone who shouldn't be trifled with.

Kageyama and Hinata fell quiet, looking up at the ghost. She smiled mildly.
“Can I talk to you two for a minute?” she said. She turned around and floated down the hall without waiting for an answer.
Reunion

Chapter Summary

In which everyone comes together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March 25th, 15:48, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Nishinoya Yuu opened her eyes to the most beautiful sight she’d ever seen. “Wow, you’re pretty,” she said to the face hovering above. The girl squeaked and turned a light pink under Noya’s staring eyes.

Correction: that was the most beautiful sight she’d ever seen.

“Hi,” Noya said, and she grinned widely.

This, she found out, hurt. In fact, rather a lot of her hurt, now that she got a good feel for it.

“T-try not to move too much,” the pretty face said, “I’ll get mister Shimada.” And she was gone.

Noya lay on her back and tried to let the pain drain away while she stared at the old brickwork above. She was in some kind of domed room.

What a weird place for a hospital, she thought.

Footsteps got closer and more faces came into vision.

A guy in glasses peered at her.

“Hello,” he said, “It’s good to see you up. I’m Shimada. Can you tell me your name?”

“How are you feeling, Nishinoya?” the man said, holding a finger to her wrist and checking his clock.

“Thank you, Nishinoya. You’re showing no immediate signs of a concussion, so that’s good.” Shimada pushed up his glasses and wrote something down on a piece of paper he placed next to her bed. “You got beat up pretty badly, so just lay down and rest until we can get you to a proper hospital, ok?”

“Uh, Shimada?” Noya asked.

“Hmm?” He looked up from his paperwork.

“Where the hell am I?”

Excerpt from the leather bound book

The Nekomata Museum in Vaeda’s Old Quarter is officially dedicated to the Workers Revolution. It
tells the story of a violent revolt that set fire to the streets of Vaeda for several days in the spring of 1756. It is presumed that the roots for the conflict lay in the living wages of sharecroppers tending to the fields surrounding the city.

The Museum resides in the partially restored building of an old inn, The Cat’s House. The inn is said to have served as a meeting place for many thinkers and artists of the time and it was run by ‘madam’ Nekomata, considered one of the leaders of the revolution. Before her death, she set up the Nekomata Fund, which manages the museum and gives out aid grants to certain immigrants and street workers.

March 25th, 15:59, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

“Hiiyah!”
Bokuto broke through the old brick wall with an excited shout.
“Nice, bro,” Kuroo grinned, wiping the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand.
“Woo! Didya see that? I ruined that wall,” Bokuto said, waving his shovel around.
“So you did, mister Bokuto,” Akaahshi said softly, “You also appear to have ruined that shovel.”
The nurse gave the cloud of dust around them a disapproving look, and a gust of wind blew it into the hole they just made.
“I wonder what’s behind it,” Kuroo said, peering at the darkness.
He put a hand to his mouth and shouted through the hole: “Hello? Any skeletons in there?”
No reply.
“Well that’s a relief, I guess,” he said.

“Um.”
With a small smirk, Kuroo stepped out of the way of Yachi, who he’d come to recognize as the nervous but helpful force behind any interjection starting with ‘um’.
The girl shakily aimed her flashlight into the darkness beyond the wall and averted her eyes, scared of what she might see.
“Wow,” said Kuroo next to her.
“What is it?” asked Akaashi.
“There is literally nothing exciting there,” Kuroo said.
“No worries, Yachi-san.” He gave her shoulder a little pat.
Carefully, Yachi peeked through the hole.
It was just a hallway. It was old and made of bricks, just like the domed room. There was a bit of rubble on the floor here and there, a few stray stones had fallen from the ceiling, but otherwise it was completely empty.
There weren’t even any spiders.
“Alright, let’s make this hole a bit bigger, so we can fit Bokuto’s big butt through here,” Kuroo said, heaving his crowbar again.
“Oi!”

Excerpt from the leather bound book

The Spring Uprising of 1756 is one of the largest magic conflicts in post-Enlightenment history. In March of 1756, magic users in the city of Vaeda organised a violent revolution against their ruler, ‘Papa Tatsu’. The leader, considered to be a benevolent if autocratic leader, is perhaps better known by his nicknames ‘Father’ or ‘Shepherd’.
Father Tatsu is notable as the leader of one of the very few magic based governments for a dual society, meaning wizards were in charge of a community of people both in and out of the Veil.
government had an unprecedented reported approval rating of 98%, with sources stating an all time low in crime. Notable ordinances to achieve this were a ban on magic use by non-government agents and full prohibition of any liquor and tobacco. These ordinances seem to have bred resentment with, specifically, the denizens of what is now known as the Old Quarter. At the time it housed several brothels, bars and gambling houses.

This conflict culminated in 'The Battle of Eagle Street', where the insurgents used guerrilla tactics to ultimately overthrow their government. Ripple effects of the violence were so strong that the conflict could not be fully contained by the Veil. It has been given a place in the official history records of Vaeda and a Veil-adapted name: The Workers Revolution of 1756.

March 25th, 16:07, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

“And then you guys swooped in and saved the day!”

Noya grinned at the magician, glad to see her rescue efforts were not in vain. The man was tall and pale, with white hair. He'd introduced himself as Lev and he was awfully enthusiastic for someone with a massive bandage around his head.

“So thank you,” he said with a wide smile.

“No prob, man,” Noya replied.

The pretty girl hovered around in the background, occasionally throwing a worried glance their way. She was taking care of Noya’s friend Tanaka, who was still out cold. It was a shame, Noya thought, he’d like being tended to by a pretty girl. Maybe she should take a picture.

“And now we’re here, and this place is like a fortress,” Lev went on, spreading his wide arms for emphasis.

“That’s pretty cool,” Noya nodded.

“Uh, mister Lev, sir?”

The beautiful girl came up behind him. “Maybe you should let her rest now. I think Suga can use your help upstairs.”

“Oh! Right!” Lev said, getting up a little unsteadily. “I’ll go help! Thanks again, Nishinoya.” He made a short bow before walking off, waving.

Noya laid back down and let her head roll to the side, watching the beautiful girl work. She was bringing water around, wiping Tanaka's forehead and growing more self conscious by the minute, until she turned to Noya and frowned.

“Is there something you need?” she said.

“Wanted me all to yourself, did ya?” Noya asked.

“I… what?” The girl blinked and looked around the room, which had several other wounded still in it.

“It’s quite alright, pretty lady. My radiant personality does that to people.”

The girl seemed utterly at a loss now. She was blushing, which was cute, and squinting at Noya in a way that was also pretty damn cute.

“Are... you?”


“That's awfully blunt of you,” the girl said.

Then she huffed and stood up straight. “And my name is not ‘pretty lady’.”

“Well what is it then?” Noya asked smugly.

The girl pouted. It was cute.

“I’m Asahi. Asahi Azumani,” she said.

“Hi Asahi, I’m Nishinoya!”

“I know.”
The girl sighed and looked away, while Noya let herself sink into the bed with a stupid grin on her face.

“Hey Asahi?” she asked after a while.
“Nishinoya?”
“Can you come here for a sec?” Noya waved.
“This better not be another pick-up line,” Asahi muttered.
“No, listen. Over here. Do you hear something?”

March 25th, 16:03, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

“Hahaaaa, take that!”
Bricks fell in a cloud of dust.
“Bokuto Cross Kick! Bet you didn't see that one coming!”

Bokuto had grown tired of hitting things with a shovel and had now resorted to pummeling the wall with his limbs, which was more of his forte. It was surprisingly efficient and Bokuto seemed to be having a blast.

“Jeez, bro, I'd hate to come up against you in a tournament match,” Kuroo Tetsurou said, “especially if I was a wall.”

He was standing a little out of the way with Akaashi, surveying the scene.

“I've observed that the way he speaks is quite effective in riling up an opponent, mister Kuroo,” Akaashi said.

When gust of wind blew away the dust, it revealed one pumped up Bokuto and a fairly large hole.

“That's probably enough,” Kuroo said. “Think you can fit through, Bo?”

His friend seemed to ponder the question for a moment, before shrugging and simply climbing through the hole with a candle in hand. A low whistle came from the other side.

“Whoo, this tunnel goes pretty far,” Bokuto's voice said. “I wonder what's down here.”

They could hear his footsteps retreating.

“Mister Bokuto!” Akaashi practically flew through the wall and Kuroo couldn't suppress a chuckle.

“I dare say it isn't wise to run off by yourself, mister Bokuto,” he heard Akaashi say.

“Just because it's dark doesn't mean it's dangerous,” Bokuto answered, “Besides, I can just punch them!”

“Not everything can be punched. You've already seen that there's ghosts in here,” came the exasperated voice of Akaashi.

“Nekomata? Ehhh she's alright.”

“And those whisps earlier...”

Kuroo listened to them arguing for a while, when he noticed Yachi come up to him. She was looking at something on her phone.

“What's up, Yachi-san?”

“According to this map, we are currently under Eagle Street,” she said, showing him their position.

“I think I've triangulated it properly with the few routers that are available in the neighbourhood. If we take the tunnel south west for about three hundred metres, we should hopefully find a way under the coffee shop. You said there was a room like this there?”

“Yeah,” Kuroo nodded. Yachi shone her flashlight into the darkness and peered at the tunnel ahead, checking the compass on her phone.

“Yachi-san? What is it you do, exactly?” Kuroo asked.

“Hmm?” She looked up questioningly.

“For a living, I mean.”

“Oh, I'm a designer. Well, sort of. I do lay-out and these days I mostly make posters and business cards for a club who was kind enough to hire me,” she said, “It's really nothing very special, um, I
“No army spy? Elite hacker? That sort of thing?” Kuroo pressed on. Her eyes went wide with horror. “That sounds dangerous!” she said. He hummed in agreement. “Yeah, it does, doesn't it?... Ah, there you are.”

Kageyama and Hinata stepped into the domed room, followed by madam Nekomata. “We're about ready to go here. One of you take that?” Kuroo said, pointing at the second shovel. Hinata picked it up and Kuroo couldn't help but notice that Kageyama wasn't fighting him for it. The both of them were, in fact, rather quiet and subdued. They also kept shooting each other weird glances.

Kuroo frowned and lifted an eyebrow at madam Nekomata, who just tilted her head and smiled. “Weren't you in a hurry a while back?” she asked.

“Righto, madam,” Kuroo said, making a short bow, “Thanks for the help. I'll be back to work when this little issue is fixed.”

Without another thought, he climbed through the hole to join his buddies.

Yachi shone a light for Kageyama and Hinata to silently crawl through, then she looked at Nekomata expectantly.

“Aren't you coming? Ma'am?” Yachi asked.

“I can't leave this place, miss Yachi,” the old woman replied.

“Oh! W-will you be ok?” Yachi said.

“I am dead, child.”

“Oh, uh, sorry. I can, um, see that.” Yachi looked at her feet.

The old woman smiled kindly. “I'll be fine. Go and join your friends, miss Yachi. They're waiting for you.”

Hinata was holding out his hand from the other side of the wall. “Give me the flashlight and I'll help you through,” he said.

With a small smile and a little shiver, Yachi nodded and climbed in.

March 25th, 16:16, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Asahi Azumane's heart was beating in her throat. It was a scraping sound. It was very real and it was coming from the wall above Nishinoya's bed. It sounded like something you'd hear in a horror film and Asahi had no clue how she'd know this, because she avoided horror films like the plague.

Oh god what if it was rats?

“Move,” she said.

“Huh?” The wounded girl looked up at her, confused at the sudden fierceness in her voice.

“We need to move you,” Asahi explained. “In case there's something behind that wall. Mister Shimada? Can you come help me, please?”

The two of them carefully lifted the makeshift cot, small patient and all, and placed it across the room.

“Doof.”

A dull thud shook the bricks, making some of the plasterwork float down. Asahi could hear voices, and then the scraping sound returned. Those were not rats.

“Mister Shimada...” she said. Her voice was soft and shallow, but the man peering at the wall next to her seemed to hear it just fine.

“Right, I'll go get some help,” Shimada replied. “Just freeze whatever comes through.”

“Wh-what?”

But Shimada had already fled out the door and into the basement proper.
“Doof.”
More plaster fell off the wall. More angry voices came from behind it.
With the bricks exposed, it became clear that they were different, more uneven than the ones around
them.
It looked like...
Oh god what if it was a demon door.
Asahi was not ready for this. She barely even knew which parts of the physical world were 'normal'
and which were magic. She was only starting to get a grasp of her own powers and absolutely no
one had told her what to do about demons.
Asahi stood in the middle of the domed room, several beds of wounded behind her.
She swallowed a lump in her throat.
“Doof.”
One of the bricks came loose and propelled itself from the wall.
With a shriek, Asahi shot a spray of ice at it, stopping it in its tracks and turning it into a cold,
slippery lump before it hit the ground.
“Whoah,” came the voice of Nishinoya behind her, “you're a witch too? You're amazing!”
“What's going on?” Suga said, hurrying through the door with a small cat at his heel and a huffing
Shimada behind him.
“I, uh, mmhf,” Asahi whimpered and she shakily pointed to the wall.
Angry voices drifted into the domed room. Suga stepped closer to listen.
“...people on the other side!” one of the voices said through the small hole.
“Well how else are we supposed to get through?” said a second voice.
“Uh, hello?” Suga shouted at the wall.
“Hey there!” came a cheerful voice from the other side, “Kuroo Tetsurou here, I promised I'd drop
by?”
Suga frowned and glanced at the cat, who seemed to heave a deep sigh.
“Yeah, it's him, alright,” Kenma mumbled.
“Hi Kuroo, this is Sugawara...”
“Yo!” Kuroo said.
“Look, we'll get some people to help you through, but could you stop doing that? Whatever is
making the bricks shoot across the room? You nearly hit someone.”
“Told you!” came a muffled voice from behind the wall and then, louder, “Alright, we'll just whittle
this down yeah?”
Suga put both hands on his head and scratched his hair.
“Right,” he said, “I'll go get some folks.” And he stormed off again.
“Uh, aren't you going to ask him how he got there?” Asahi shouted behind him.
“It's Kuroo,” the cat said from somewhere near Asahi's feet, “we probably don't want to know.”

March 25th, 16:22, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Sawamura Daichi watched from afar as a small party of people covered in dust came climbing
through a hole in the wall of the makeshift hospital.
Kuroo was the last one through, and he leaned down to let Kenma jump on his shoulder before
skratching the little cat's chin.
“Didya miss me, buddy?”
“Not really,” Kenma said, but his loud purrs told a slightly different story.
Daichi leaned against the wall and crossed her arms.
Kuroo had fire, she knew. And one of the others looked pretty buff. There was also the mean
looking girl in the boots.
Would it be enough? If it wasn't, she had just put six more people in harm's way.

“Yo Sawamura, you're frowning an awful lot for such a joyful reunion,” Kuroo said.
“Good of you to make it, Kuroo,” Daichi replied. “Fashionably late as always.”
“I do try,” Kuroo grinned. “To make up for it, I brought you a nurse, a kickboxer, some kind of magical hunter girl, a kid who apparently punches things really hard, and the little blonde one is a hacker but doesn't know it.”
Daichi shot him a disbelieving look. “How?”
“It's a gift,” Kuroo shrugged.
“Ok,” she said. “You guys can use the kitchen if you want to get cleaned up. There's a guy upstairs called Ennoshita who's keeping track of what everyone does. If you're good to fight, he'll assign you somewhere. We're expecting trouble soon... Good to have you with us, Kuroo.”
And with that, she strode out of the basement.

Eight months earlier, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Sawamura Daichi was not the kind of person that could wake up in an instant.
“Ngh.” She lifted her head and blinked into the mottled light streaming from the window.
“Gwuuh.” Daichi closed her eyes again and stretched languidly. She nuzzled the pillow, trying to force the lingering strands of hair out of her face.
“Mphf?” She frowned into the cloth.
Her left leg felt cold, while her entire right side was entirely too warm.
Her mind fought for clarity as a nagging feeling in the back of her head grew louder.
“Urgh.” She managed to slip her left leg back under the sheet but something seemed… off.
So she performed the little mental check that she had needed surprisingly often in the last few years.
Who am I?
Daichi Sawamura, 25 years old, witch.
Where am I?
...
She turned over to look at the unfamiliar room and rolled right into something warm.
It made a sniggering sound.
“Gah!” Daichi blinked up at the face of a grinning Kuroo, lying on his side, head propped up on one hand.
“Fuck,” she said.
“Good morning to you, too.”

With the sleepy fuzziness in her head vanishing at high speed, Daichi became extremely aware of the fact that she wasn’t wearing anything.
She clutched at the sheet, trying to wrap it tightly around her body, but stopped when it dawned on her that the same sheet was now rapidly falling off of Kuroo, who, it quickly became apparent, was also not wearing anything.
“How long have you been watching?” she scowled, choosing instead to hold her arms in front of her and trying her very best to avoid looking at the curve of Kuroo’s butt, just peeking out from the side of the sheet.
“I started around ‘gwuuh’,” Kuroo said with an amused grin on his face, “You put on quite a show.”
The bastard was not even trying to cover up. If this sheet moved even a few inches…
“You're adorable,” he added, grin growing wider.
“Fuck!” she said again.
“You're also incredibly foul in the morning, Daichi.”
Kuroo swung his legs off the side of the bed and rubbed his fingers through his hair.
“We’d better get up. Kenma will be grumpy as it is since he was out all night. He doesn’t like it
when I have company.”

Kuroo stood up and stretched, shuffling through the room while Daichi stared fixedly at the wall, fighting the urge to glance at this stupid man with his stupid muscled back and his stupid beautiful tattoos and his stupid sculpted butt.

“Coffee?” He put on some Batman boxers and strolled over to his little kitchen, opening a window on the way.

Daichi sighed and looked round the room for her clothes.

“Shit, Tetsu, I’m sorry. This wasn’t supposed to happen,” she mumbled as she fished her bra from the night stand and put it on. She found her panties and skirt at the foot of the bed, slipping into them while throwing quick glances across the room.

Images of last night came back to her, of warm hands squeezing her thighs, her fingers raking through his thick black hair.

“We shouldn’t have,” she continued, more to herself than anything else, “you know we can’t…”

His lips on her throat and a pressure deep inside of her that could quench a thousand years of longing.

“Relax,” Kuroo said, “No one got hurt.”

He leaned against the entrance of the kitchen, arms folded, and watched her dash across the room to pluck her shirt from one of the chairs.

Daichi didn’t answer him.

Anything could have happened. Neither of them had full control of their powers.

And they certainly didn’t know what would happen if they lost it.

Together.

This whole building could have caught fire or something.

She should never have allowed herself to get so close.

And now her skin remembered the electricity of his touch, the crackling heat of his fingers, the ache and the yearning as his lips brushed her shoulders.

And she was going to have to file all that away. Far away.

Fuck.

Kuroo silently watched his friend pace through his apartment, stepping into her shoes and hurriedly tying back her hair. The kettle behind him started to boil.

“I take it you don’t want any?”

Daichi stopped dead in her tracks and blinked at him.

He was searching her face, but his own expression was impossible to read now.

His eyes twinkling mischievously in the orange light of the street lamp outside the window.

Stop it.

His grin as he took her hand and kissed each individual knuckle.

Daichi, for fuck’s sake, get yourself together.

She swallowed hard.

“Sorry, no,” she said. “I… I should get to work.”

He nodded and let her rush past, her eyes fixed to the ground.

“I’ll, uh,” Daichi’s voice trailed off as she grabbed the doorknob.

“Yeah,” he said. And she was out the door.

When Kenma slipped through the window half an hour later, he found his friend curled up on the sofa, untouched cup of tea next to him, fingering the protection charm Sawamura had brought over last night. The little cat flopped down at his side and they sat there, wordlessly, while the sun came
Sawamura Daichi leaned on the sink in the small guest bedroom above her coffee shop and stared into the mirror.

“Ok,” she told her reflection, “you can do this.”

She felt frazzled, hot, restless. She was probably tired and should maybe sit down for five seconds, but a combination of white hot panic and too much coffee was making it impossible to even stand still. Her heart was beating too fast and a loud, throbbing pain was spreading from her temple to her forehead.

_They were going to have to fight. It wouldn't be long now._

Ennoshita's guess was five to ten minutes.

The sight of the barricade had confused the people in the forum they were following. But they'd quickly come up with a new plan. Instead of beating up the place to set an example, they would fight and beat up anyone trying to stop them. Take a stand. Make some kind of point that Daichi wasn't entirely sure she understood.

From what Ennoshita could gather, they were currently arming themselves and regrouping.

_It was going to be a fight. An unavoidable one._

Daichi bent down and splashed water on her face for the third time in two minutes.

There came a soft knock at the door.

“Yeah?” she blinked against the drops falling from her lashes.

“It's me, can I come in?”

With a small groan, Daichi reached over and opened the door.

“Kuroo Tetsurou reporting for duty, captain.”

He made a lame attempt at a salute and Daichi shook her head at him, fighting the urge to smile.

“God, you're such a dork,” she said. “Thank you. I appreciate it, but I'm kinda busy.”

“That's why I'm here,” he said, slipping in while Daichi went to grab a towel. “It seems to me like you've been running ragged all day, taking care of everyone and their cat, for which, thanks, by the way, and somewhere along the line you forgot to take care of yourself. And now I know what you're gonna say-”

“I'm FINE,” Daichi grumbled, “I don't need you to flipping worry about me.”

“Exactly. So. Now that we've established that you're _fine_, are you ok?”

Daichi closed her eyes and sighed.

“Because I'm offering hugs as part of this package deal and maybe you could use one.”

He held out his arms slightly, stupid smirk on his face.

Daichi pinched the bridge of her nose to stop her eyes from stinging.

“I don't know,” she said. “There's a group of people coming this way that want to hurt us and I don't know if I'm prepared enough, or strong enough... to be ok.”

She took a shaky breath and Kuroo calmly stepped forward.

“Fuck, Tetsu,” she said, letting her head fall against his chest. “I have no idea how we're going to make it through this.”

Kuroo lay a light arm around her shoulders. “Well, that guy downstairs has an awful lot of paperwork. I take it we have a plan?” he said in a low voice.

“The plan is that we use whatever we have. This includes my ability, even if I haven't particularly mastered it.”

“Well, Daichi,” he took her shoulders and gently pushed her upright, giving her a sly grin, “no time like the present to practice, yeah?”

“Aren't you nervous?” Daichi asked, pouting up at him.
“Not at all, my dear captain,” he grinned, “I'm fucking terrified.”

Chapter End Notes

Heya!
Thanks for reading so far. This chapter was very full and kinda scattered, but I wanted to get all the fluff out of the way before the big action stuff happens.
Next time: The Battle for Eagle Street!
The Battle for Eagle Street

Chapter Summary

In which a whole bunch of stuff happens

March 25th, 16:38, Old Quarter District, Væda

Kuroo Tetsurou climbed the ladder to the top of the barricade and looked out at the street below. It was eerily quiet up here. The air was still hazy with smoke, but the sounds of sirens and traffic seemed very far away now. Like all the police and firemen had sort of packed up and buggered off to watch this particular scene from afar.

He didn't like it one bit.

“Any news, bro?” Bokuto was leaning against what appeared to be a fortified wardrobe door, one of the taller parts making up the parapet.

“They’re ready,” Kuroo answered.

“So are they,” Bokuto said, nodding his head to the end of the street, where a throng of people had lined up. There were too many of them to squeeze into this street in one go. They’d have to come up in small groups at a time, which was a mercy.

Ennoshita knew his stuff, Kuroo thought. He’d placed several people with projectile abilities up top. Someone who shot glue, a girl that could make it hail somehow, that sort of thing.

To their right, Lev the magician had hauled up a crate of green grenade-like things.

“Stink bombs,” he explained, handing them out to the others on the barricade. “They erupt in a thick smoke that is irritating for the eyes and airways, so throw them far out. I have Suga making more, but that could take a while. Don’t use them all at once.”

“And the brown stuff?” Kuroo asked, pointing to the baubles stuffed into Lev's many pockets.

“Ah, for that I’ll need your help. They’re cocoa grenades.”

“What?”

“I use something similar for illusions. There’s a little mechanism that causes them to break apart into a cloud of, in this case, cocoa.”

“Festive,” Kuroo said, raising an eyebrow.

“Cocoa powder is highly flammable, mister Kuroo,” Lev noted with a smile that was not entirely sane, “so if I could get your help with that, we can cause a dust explosion that has quite the impact.”

Bokuto elbowed him in the side while Lev went back to handing out grenades.

“Aren’t you mister all rounder,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Well I don’t exactly look forward to setting people on fire,” Kuroo sighed.

“Isn’t that plan b, though?” Bokuto replied. “We just have to keep them off the barricade. You scare them, and if they get close, I'll punch them.”

“I guess.”

Kuroo paused for a moment, looking up at the hazy, quiet sky. “Sorry to pull you into this mess, buddy,” he said.

“You pulled me out of another mess, didn't you?” Bokuto said. “I have to return the favour! Besides, I'm a fighter! And these guys are not ghosts! This is way more like it. I can punch them, see? That's what I'll do. No worries, bro.”

He patted his friend on the back with a very familiar type of bravado.

Kuroo, still not feeling particularly optimistic, folded his arms over the top of the parapet. At the very
beginning of the street, in front of the mob of people, stood one person. They were gesticulating wildly and it looked like they were making a speech. Maybe going over battle plans. From this far, they appeared to be the sole cork holding back the sea. The stopper in a shaken soda bottle. Once they stopped talking, the whole thing would come spilling over.
“Looks like it's show time,” Kuroo mumbled.
The hail girl next to him was visibly shivering and while Lev seemed wholly unaffected by the prospect of guerilla warfare, several other people on the barricade looked a bit pale. Kuroo swallowed down a lump in his throat.
“Alright people,” he said, raising his voice, “I get that we’re all scared shitless here and that’s fine. Most of us have never done something like this before. So listen up. There's no need to panic. We have the higher ground. We have a plan, a solid defence and a clear goal. Keep them,” he pointed at the street below, “from getting behind us. Long range casters, don’t let them reach the barricade. Melee fighters, throw them off if they manage to get close. We’re like the blood in our veins. We must flow without stopping. Work together, help each other up, bring the wounded to safety. Keep the oxygen moving and your mind working. We can do this."
Several of the people on the barricade nodded, faces set and serious.

“What kind of weird speech was that?” Bokuto asked, sliding up to his friend.
“I'm just trying to inspire them. Motivate them a little, you know?” Kuroo pouted.
Bokuto smiled a knowing smile. “Watch me,” he said.
“Hey hey hey! Ok, listen up, uh, again. I see that some of you are a bit nervous, so let me tell you something I tell my students before their first big fighting match. I like to call it: The Wisdom of the Fighter. Firstly, the figure of the fighter is one that inspires. You gotta look cool! Those people behind us, the kiddies and all, they're counting on us, so we can't stand here wilting like a leaf, ok? We're gonna give them the coolest show they've ever seen. Secondly, the fighter should shatter any wall. You see something come up that is seemingly impossible to get over? Go through it. Go under it. Do whatever you can to win. Thirdly, the fighter should use any opening to his utmost ability. It's not because we're on the defence that we can't fight back. If they're focusing on casting, hit them. If they come too close, make them regret it. A fighter who's ready for battle, can take on anything. Now, can I get a 'Yeah'?
Several people, including Lev, shouted out.
“I can't hear you!” Bokuto yelled, “Are you true fighters?”
“Yeah!”
“Are you ready for battle?”
“Yeah!”
“That's what I thought,” Bokuto nodded, pleased with himself.
Kuroo grinned at him. “Where'd ya get that?”
“What? It's inspiring.”
“You did not come up with that yourself, Bo,” Kuroo said, throwing him a lopsided smile.
“I may have a shirt that says something like it,” Bokuto admitted, “but I turned it into a speech myself!”
“There ya go,” Kuroo patted him on the back. “Good speech though.”
“Isn't it?” Bokuto grinned.

March 25th, 16:41, Old Quarter District, Veda

It started with a sound.
A low rumble, not unlike a hungry stomach, that grew into a muddled roar until Kuroo could recognize it as dozens of feet slapping on the cobbles that made up Eagle Street. The people on top of the barricade watched in stunned silence while their assailants below sprinted down the narrow
street. They washed between the buildings like a liquid, filling cracks and gliding along as if they weren't individuals, but a single mass, an angry ocean coming his way.

"Well shit," Kuroo muttered under his breath.

“They’re here!” Bokuto yelled to the people behind them. “Everyone get ready!” He ducked down behind his fortified wardrobe and pulled Kuroo with him. Then he took out one of Lev’s smoke bombs. “See you on the other side buddy.” He winked at his friend.

“What the fuck, don’t say stuff like that,” Kuroo shot back.

“It sounds cool in movies," Bokuto smiled.

“Whenever people say that in movies, they die, ya dumb owl,” Kuroo rambled, nerves now actually getting to him. “Say something else, like ‘hasta la vista’ or ‘for freedom’ or something. ‘For Rohan’, if you must.”

“What?” Bokuto frowned, but Kuroo did not get a chance to explain.

“Incoming!” Lev shouted next to them, lobbing the first smoke grenade right before the wave of people crashed into the barricade.

The noise was ridiculous.
If he was in a band, Kuroo would want to use it as the opening note to every single one of his songs. It was so loud that it reverberated through his entire body: a wooden, splintery sound, a deep bass of running feet and an overpowering chord of screaming, angry voices.

It would be glorious in any context but the one he was currently in.

The collision shook the barricade and Kuroo shot up to lob a smoke bomb before ducking down again.

From the brief glimpse he got, there was a lot of kicking and coughing going on down there. Some of the people that got hit with the smoke were already being pulled back, to be replaced with fresh fighters.

They were throwing all the strength of a raging sea at it, but the barricade, mercifully, held.

“Mister Kuroo,” Lev tapped him on the shoulder. “Can I have your assistance please?” Lev smiled widely as he held up one of his cocoa bombs.

“If I throw it a few meters, can you still set fire to the dust?”

Kuroo nodded briefly and a few seconds later there was a very loud, very sudden explosion. It was followed instantly by screams. People were trying to run the other way, into the massive mob behind them. From up here, the chaos looked terrifying.

“That scared them,” Lev said happily. Then a moment later: “Ow.”

A lemon bounced off the top of Lev’s head, and he ran long fingers through his hair, looking up in confusion.

Above them, a whole cloud of lemons formed, before dropping down and covering every surface in fragrant if slippery fruit.

Kuroo peeked over the barricade. A few meters ahead, behind the mob attacking the barricade, stood a small man with blond hair and a fearful expression on his face. Behind him, a line of very determined looking magic users had formed. Their hands and in some cases their eyes started to glow.

“Lev! Cocoa bomb!” Kuroo yelled.

“Yay!” Lev lobbed one of the brown baubles over the parapet and Kuroo zapped it.

The ensuing detonation stopped most of the casters in their tracks, but not all of them. A rain of pebbles, ice and some kind of slimy goo rattled the wood that protected them. It was followed immediately by another load of lemons.

Beside him, Bokuto threw a smoke grenade, causing a few more coughing fits below.

“What’s the deal with the lemons?” he asked.

“That little guy’s power,” Kuroo replied.

“Bit of a silly power, no?” Bokuto said. He frowned when one of them bonked off his head.
“It’s bloody annoying, is what it is,” Kuroo grumbled, before peeking over the barricade and throwing another stink bomb, this time hitting the ground right before lemon dude’s feet. He crumpled and vomited.
“Gotcha,” Kuroo grinned.

March 25th, 16:44, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

“Is the crowd thinning, you think?” Bokuto asked, pulling up a basket of freshly made smoke bombs.
Kuroo shot fire over the barricade, lighting up another cocoa grenade.
“Not really,” he said, “but a bunch of them did run away by now. We may be able to hold out until it's over.”
“Mm, it's a good thing they don't have any siege ladders,” Lev added, looking over the wall. He didn't even flinch when a glob of goo flew right by his ear.

He should not have said that, Kuroo thought. Because that's the moment that a maniacal scream could be heard overhead, and someone dropped right in the middle of the wooden balcony at the top of the barricade.
The new arrival took only a second to compose himself, before he stood up straight, pushed up his glasses and lunged at a baffled Kuroo.
Instinctively he shot backwards, only to find that the guy's hands were glowing, his fingers extending into long, straight claws. He only barely managed to duck under them before Bokuto kicked the guy in the back, distracting him enough for Kuroo to regain his footing.
Arms wide, claw man whirled around and took a swipe at the boxer, who ducked under his arm and quickly planted a fist in his stomach. Sharp claws raked over Bokuto's back, causing him to yelp and spring back.
Kuroo stopped a worried shout from leaving his throat. Instead, he pulled himself up and furiously conjured a large, white-hot flame. Cold sweat running down his back, he took aim and swung, hitting his opponent's claw hand before he could hurt Bokuto again.
The guy in glasses growled and clutched at his arm, which had now turned an angry ashen black.
Too late, Kuroo realized that the guy's other hand was glowing.
Before he fully realized what was going on, two spear-like fingers were racing toward his eyes.
Startled, he took a step back, and he felt something round and squishy under his foot.
The world went sideways.
The spears missed, passing over him, but then so did the wooden balcony.
“Bro!”
He only registered that he was falling when he saw Bokuto duck to grab his hand.
He, too, missed, and while Kuroo flailed his way down, the guy in glasses shot forward, claws at the ready.
Kuroo heard the pained scream from his best friend, and the next moment he crashed into Eagle Street with a hard thud.

March 25th, 16:45, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

“So, uh, do we know what we’re doing?” Hinata Shouyou said nervously, “Shouldn’t we practice?” Kageyama, next to him, strode to the middle of the cobbled street and critically assessed the situation, or whatever it was people did at a time like this. She looked like she owned the place. Hinata didn't, and he was quite aware of the fact that he most likely resembled a lost puppy following the hunter
But then this was all very new to him. The noise out here was overwhelming. There was a lot of shouting, people were running and from the direction of the barricade came a constant, deep roar, as if the wooden structure was holding back a raging ocean.

Hinata really, really hoped it wouldn't break.

“We don’t have time to practice, you dumbass,” Kageyama was saying. “I told you I was fizzling out earlier and I haven’t fully recovered. We need to conserve power.”

She said it with a confidence that suggested she knew what she was doing.

Hinata looked at the people scurrying around them, at the ones fighting on top of the wall and the ones hauling ammunition to them. And for a moment he was completely, utterly lost.

“Kagayama,” he said carefully, “Do we have a plan?”

Kageyama didn’t immediately answer him. She was frowning at the barricade, cocking her head as if listening for something. Then she pointed up suddenly.

“Dodge!” she yelled, shoving Hinata to the side.

A figure was coming their way, and they were screaming. They made a perfect arc, shooting past the wall and coming down in the middle of the enclosure. Hinata saw a brief flash of a blond guy with an undercut poking his tongue out at him, before he was gone again, bouncing away with a high-pitched yell that vaguely resembled a ‘wheeee’. Hinata blinked, following the perfect arc back. “Hey dumbass!” Kagayama barked behind him.

She’d already drawn her sword and that’s when Hinata noticed that blond guy had left something behind.

In the middle of the cobbled street stood a girl with shoulder-length brown hair and glowing feet. She spun a broomstick around and after taking a brief look at the square, she grabbed it in both hands and rushed at Kageyama.

The young hunter hunched and prepared to roll, but instead of leaping away like she’d done before, she just stood there. There was a brief moment of sheer bafflement on her face, before the broomstick hit her in the shoulder and she staggered, cursing under her breath.

“Hinata, she roots you. Be careful,” she said through gritted teeth, managing to duck under another swing, limbo dance style.

That was his cue.

“Oi!” Hinata yelled, and the broom handle came his way.

He jumped over it and did what he figured he was good at.

He started running.

Hinata ran circles around the girl,ducking under, sometimes even stepping onto her weapon. If he slowed down or stood still for even a second, he could feel the pull of the ground, like he was walking in wet cement.

Kageyama, he noticed while shooting past her, was doing The Thing. She was staring at them, eyes slightly glazed over.

And then suddenly, while the girl with the broomstick swerved, frustrated at Hinata flying around her like an hungry mosquito, Kageyama freed one leg and kicked her in the knee. “‘Now. Hinata, knock her out!”

Kageyama’s eyes were glowing.

Right, Hinata thought and he stopped, changed direction and hurtled straight at the brown haired girl, catching her by surprise.

With almost comical determination, he skidded to a halt in front of her and slapped her across the face. His hand was glowing.
It felt exactly like it had done before.
It felt really, really good.
The girl in front of him blinked once, twice, and then crumpled into a heap on the cobbles.
“Holy shit,” Kageyama mumbled from somewhere to his side.
“Whoooooh that was so cool!” Hinata bursted out, staring at his hand, “I can’t believe that worked.
Kageyama! Did you see that?”
Kageyama prodded the crumpled girl with her foot, eliciting a loud snore.
“We did it!” she said, making a small fist.
When she turned to Hinata, she was smiling. It was one of the strangest views he’d seen that day.
“Yes!” Hinata shouted. “We did it!”
A few moments later his eyes went wide and dreamy.
“Hey,” he said, tugging at Kageyama's sleeve, “does this mean you can make me fly?”

March 25th, 15:58, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

The ghost of the late madam Nekomata floated down the hall, leading Kageyama and Hinata away from the demolition in the domed room. She moved silently, bobbing gently ahead until she turned and floated into a small side room.
Kageyama followed without a word.
Hinata Shouyou suppressed several flashbacks of being sent to the principal's office while in high school before he, too, crossed the doorway.
“Did you, uh, want to talk to us, ma'am?” he said as he stepped into the room.
“Yes I did,” the old woman said. “Please take a seat.”
Hinata shot Kageyama a questioning glance, but she just shrugged.
She carefully sat down on an ancient bench and Hinata shuffled next to her.
“Miss Kageyama, Hinata says you came here to visit the dragon, yes?” Nekomata started.
“Mmmm,” Kageyama nodded.
“And did you get your answer from him before he fled?”
“Uhhh, not fully. No.” Kageyama answered, before her eyes grew narrow and suspicious. “I don't see how this has anything to do with—”
“Would you mind if I ventured a guess as to what your question was?” Nekomata interrupted, unwavering Mona Lisa smile on her translucent face.
Kageyama swallowed. “I don't think I can stop you, madam.”
The old woman nodded. “This is about your power, is it not?”
Kageyama blinked. Then, very slowly, she nodded.
“What did he tell you?”
Kageyama remained silent.
“Because I fear that you will need to master your ability long before Moniwa comes back,” Nekomata supplied.
“You, uh, know the dragon?” Kageyama asked quietly.
“He's an old friend,” Nekomata said. “He's more knowledgeable than I am, of course, but I feel that what he was trying to explain to you was important, and rather urgent. Now will you let me help you?”

With a small shrug, Kageyama opened her backpack and pulled out her oracle notes.
“The dragon, uh, mister Moniwa, said that my gift is complicated and powerful,” she read, with a small hint of pride in her voice, “and that's why it doesn't just work like my brother's.”
The old woman nodded, urging her to continue.
“It's kinda hard to figure out, because, uh, mister Moniwa speaks in riddles, but I think he said I need a catalyst. We never got much farther...” She pouted.
“You know, young hunter, that gifts are not unique, right?” Nekomata said gently.
“Mmmm.” Kagayama nodded, while Hinata watched the back and forth like the world's most confusing game of ping pong.
“Though some are rarer than others. Yours is... quite rare. You're lucky that both me and Moniwa have seen it in action, if I'm honest.”
“You what?” Kageyama sat up, suddenly full of rapt attention.
“One of my... comrades back in the day had a very similar gift. It took him decades to figure out how to make use of it but once mastered... Well he was invaluable to us.”
Kageyama's shoulders sagged at the mention of 'decades'.
“He made a breakthrough once he figured out the same thing that Moniwa, in his own meandering way, was trying to tell you. Your gift, young hunter, should not be contained to a single person. You can use it when alone, and you probably have, but it's much more powerful when it is focused through something, or someone, else.”
The woman tilted her head at the two young people in front of her. Kageyama looked mildly shocked, while Hinata just stared at her in confusion.
“I think, miss Kageyama, that part of you has already figured out who this catalyst is, no?”
The girl groaned.
Both of them looked at Hinata, who was taken aback by the sudden attention and blinked a lot.
“What? Whatwhat?”
“He’s an excellent catalyst, because he’s an idiot.” Nekomata said mildly.
This made Kageyama smirk.
“Like you,” Nekomata continued, “Birds of a feather and all that. Full of drive and with little care for consequences.”
The girl pouted again.

“Uhhh, what are we talking about?” Hinata tried.
He was pretty sure that they were insulting him at this point, but it also seemed that he was important enough to be part of the conversation.
“Mister Hinata, can you tell me what kind of magic you've used so far?” Nekomata asked calmly.
“Uhh, I hit a tentacle really hard,” Hinata said, making a punching motion with his arm.
Nekomata frowned. “Hmmm, some kind of strength enhancer?”
Kageyama made a small choking sound as realization dawned on her. Hinata could almost see the physical light bulb going up in her head.
“Strength multiplication for a short time, like my father,” she said, staring at the ground in front of her. There was something like a weird grin battling its way onto her face.
Nekomata chuckled. “Did you do anything else out of the ordinary, mister Hinata?” she asked.
“Uh, there was that bit where time stood still?”
Nekomata tilted her head at his friend, as if waiting for some answer.
“Speed enhancement...” she said, blushing now, “Like my brother.”
“Wonderful,” the old woman laughed. “More, mister Hinata?”
Hinata thought back, wading through a whole bunch of memories he would really rather forget.
“Well when we were fighting the eye monster, I sort of pushed him and he exploded?”
Nekomata looked at Kageyama again.
“Uhh... that one I once saw in a kung fu movie. It looked cool,” she said, averting her eyes.
“Do you see what’s going on now, miss Kageyama?”
Kageyama nodded again. She seemed awfully happy all of a sudden.

Hinata frowned. “So what does this mean?” he asked.
“That all that magic wasn't you, dumbass,” Kageyama said.
“I'm not magic?” Hinata said. He wasn't sure how he felt about this. It had been really cool, doing some of that stuff, while it had also been super scary. The thought of it all just... disappearing left him feeling rather empty.
“On the contrary,” Nekomata said, “You are rather uniquely magic. You are merely an invaluable part of a duo.”
“You don’t have to be a jerk about it,” Kageyama mumbled.
“Who’s being the jerk here, Kageyama?”
“A witch like you, miss Kageyama, and a catalyst like you, mister Hinata, could be quite the powerful team,” Nekomata stated.
“So how does this work? The duo thing?” Hinata said.
“We just told you,” Kagayama shot back.
“What you said, stupid Kageyama, was that it was very complex and that there are catalysts and strength enhancers and kung fu and riddles.”
“Think of it as a game of chess,” Nekomata spoke, patiently ignoring the brewing fight, “If Kageyama here has the chess pieces, then you are the board upon which she places them.”
“Uhhh....” Hinata stared at her.
“You know how we talked about games earlier?” Kageyama tried, “If I'm the controller, you're the character in the game,”
Hinata made a face. “Like you make me run around?”
“More like I make you pick options. What was it? Fight, drink potion, press f5 to reload.”
“That's not a very good comparison....” Nekomata said patiently. “Consider reality as a tapestry, with each thread a possibility. Every event is a knot with different threads going to different futures. You, Kageyama, can see these threads of fate, yes? You can pick them and follow their path to know where it leads.”
“Like see the possible outcomes? Yeah.”
“Well, when cooperating with Hinata, you can create new threads. You become a weaver, rather than a reader.”
The both of them were now staring at her dumbfounded.
Nekomata sighed. “If you play the videogame by yourself, you pick options,” she said, “but if you play with Hinata, you can make new... buttons?”
“Oh!” Hinata said, “So if she's alone, she can choose punch, kick, drink potion, but with me in the party she can, like... create a cool new fireball!”
“Uhh, let's go with that, yes.” Nekomata nodded.
“Wow! That's... that's really weird.” Hinata said, “Magic is weird, Kageyama.”
“Just because you don't understand it, doesn't mean it's weird, dumbass Hinata.”
“Ahem.”
The both of them fell silent under the stern gaze of the dead woman.
“What it mostly means, young ones, is that you two are meant to work together,” Nekomata said grimly. “My comrade found a catalyst in a man we only ever got to know as the Little Giant, a smallish boy with a rather large presence. After those two parted, the wizard's power was never the same. You have several trials ahead of you, miss Kageyama, mister Hinata, so I suggest you keep your... aggression aimed squarely at the goal. We may not have much of a world left, if you fall here.”
Nekomata floated towards the door while the other two glanced at each other wide-eyed.
“Let's head back, shall we?” the woman said, smiling her mild smile again.

March 25th, 16:48, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Ennoshita Chikara watched from a distance as the young hunter and the boy called Hinata fought with a brown haired girl.
“I feared they might have abilities that let them in,” he said, “Narita, please tell the people in the hospital that we need reinforcements.”
Narita, a dark haired man of indeterminate age that seemed to always exist in close proximity to Ennoshita, nodded briefly and trotted off.

Ennoshita made a few notes on the papers strewn before him. He had installed a small, sturdy table in a corner away from the barricade, facing the exit to the Eagle Theatre. It gave him a decent overview, and doubled as a guard post for the back entrance.

So far everything was going according to plan, he thought. The bouncy guy was an unknown element, but could be dealt with.

He’d seen worse.
This was the kind of battle that would probably not last very long.
He reckoned they only needed to hold out for a few hours. He might actually stick around till the end, for once. If he played it well, this should be a walk in the park.

“Chikaraaa!” A frightened looking Kinnoshita shifted into view.
He was pointing at the entrance to the theatre, behind him. “We’ve got incomi-,”
His shout was cut off when his hand shot out, grabbing Ennoshita by the front of his shirt.
“Kinnoshita? What the hell?”
The boy's eyes grew wide.
“Oh, oh nonononono,” he said, as his hands wrapped themselves around his friend’s throat and squeezed.

He was strong. Way stronger than Ennoshita had ever known him to be. He desperately tried to pry the hands off of his throat, but he couldn't get a grip on them.

“Kinnosh-” Ennoshita grunted, clawing at his hands while his friend bodily lifted him off the ground.
“I’m sorry! I'm sorry, I can’t…” Kinnoshita sobbed, and Ennoshita felt his throat constrict even more.

He limply kicked the man holding him, but it didn't get him far.
He's lost a lot of his strength already. Lack of oxygen was making his head start to feel light. His throat was burning with a sharp, searing pain and it was hard to find the energy to keep struggling. He could barely swing his leg to try and push Kinnoshita off him.
Stars grew in his vision, only to pop out of existence again, and it was getting hard to stay awake.
Through blurry eyes, he saw something dark materialize behind his assailant.
The next second, he dropped to the ground and gulped air.
There was a scuffle as Narita swiftly took Kinnoshita into a neck hold.
“It's not me doing it! I'm sorry! It's not me!” Kinnoshita wailed.
“I don't know, they looked like your hands,” came a soft drawl from behind them.

Two young men walked into the enclosure. One of them had glowing hands and pointy hair. The other, who had just spoken, was pretty obviously a kappa, all wet green skin and greasy flat hair.
Now that could be a problem, Ennoshita thought as he tried to force his lungs to take in ever more air, throat screaming at him in protest.
Narita was still struggling to get a hold of his friend, who kept shouting about how he didn’t want this, all the while punching and scratching like a wild beast.
Ennoshita sat back and leaned against the wall, taking deep, wheezing breaths.
It always did take some time without, to remember how good actual clean air felt.
He shook his head to clear his mind and patted his coat. Carefully, he pulled out a gun, an old flintlock he’d always been fond of. He placed the barrel on his folded knee and closed one eye to aim.

“Narita. Move,” he said hoarsely.

Narita nodded and in a remarkably smooth motion, he pulled Kinnoshita back and onto the ground.
With a loud crack and a plume of smoke, the gun went off. A few meters away, the boy with the glowing hands and pointy hair yelled out, clutching his upper leg.
“You son of a bitch!” his friend shouted. His face, which had looked bored and uncaring just a few
seconds ago, turned hard and furious.
Ennoshita could almost see it happen in slow motion. The kappa erupting into tentacles, the slithering tendrils reaching out, looking for a way to retaliate. He watched in wheezing wonderment as one curled around a loose cobblestone.
He should really react now, Ennoshita thought as the stone came flying at his head, but his body was way too slow to move. It was like wading through syrup.
He would never make it. So instead he closed his eyes and waited for a hit that never came.
When he opened them again, Narita stood in front of him.
He swayed a little, before folding over and crashing to the ground with a sigh.
Kinnoshita, in a moment of regained lucidity, tipped over the table and pulled it in front of the three of them as a makeshift shield.
He crawled over to Narita, who was clutching his stomach.
“Jeez, are you ok?”
He rolled over to check on Ennoshita, who was rubbing his neck carefully. “You ok boss?”
He nodded and smiled. “Thanks for that”, he whispered through a burning throat.
Kageyama and Hinata were coming their way now. Things were going according to plan, more or less.
He’d been through worse, Ennoshita thought, rolling his head.
The battle of Verdun came to mind. Maybe Stalingrad.
This was pretty much a walk in the park.
The other battle

Chapter Summary

In which bad things happen.

March 25th, 16:50, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

A loud bang rang throughout the enclosure. Kageyama Tobio spun around to see their tactician, whatsisname, folded up against a wall in a cloud of powder. His buddies were involved in some scuffle, fighting each other, which seemed weird until…

Kagayama’s her hair stood on end. With all the fury of a hungry lion she strode across the street. “YOU!” she growled at the wounded man on the ground. Kindaichi, who was desperately trying to stop the bleeding in his leg, looked up and immediately froze.

“Oh shit,” he said, eyes wide, “Nonono, not you. You stay away.”

“What’s the matter,” Kageyama growled through gritted teeth, “Not feeling up to it now that you’re the one who’s outnumbered?”

“They didn’t tell me you were gonna be here,” Kindaichi whined, shuffling backwards until he hit a wall, “we just came to cause a ruckus, that's all.”

Kageyama folded her arms, trying to calm herself down. She was a professional, after all. From the corner of her eye, she could see Kunimi was coming her way. At least she’d distracted the douche duo long enough for whatsisface and friends to get behind cover.

“Look,” Kunimi said, face as impassive as ever, even while he was trying to be diplomatic, “let’s all calm down here. This was obviously a… mistake. There’s no need for us all to be so hostile.”

This made something snap inside Kageyama’s brain. “You pushed me off a CLIFF,” she screamed.

“Also the part where you tried to strangle her,” Hinata provided from somewhere behind her.

“Well, none of that would have happened if you weren't such a stuck-up bitch,” Kindaichi shouted, “We knew your high-and-mighty ass would never just give us th-”

A tentacle slapped him in the mouth.

March 25th, 16:46, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Kuroo Tetsurou fell off the barricade and hit the cobbles of Eagle Street with a hard thud. He groaned and rolled onto his side. A cold pain was spreading from his right hand and his butt, blooming upwards across his arm and his back.

Then he remembered the scream.

On top of the barricade, his best friend slumped forward, his broad chest impaled on two-spear like fingers. With a disgusted look on his face, the guy in glasses pushed him off and Bokuto made a small gurgling sound before dropping to the wood like a sack of potatoes.

“Bo!” Kuroo howled.

No reply. Bokuto's arm hung limply over the balcony, blood dripping down next to Kuroo's feet.

“Shit! Shitshishitshit fuck.”

This was his fault. All of this was Kuroo's fault. If he hadn't brought Bokuto here. If he hadn't
slipped, none of it would have happened.

“Oh fuck oh fuck.”

He had to go get Akaashi. Akaashi would fucking kill him but-
Spears guy jumped down and landed in front of Kuroo, derailing his panicked train of thought.
With an angry grunt, he threw fire at him.
The guy dodged while Kuroo painfully got back to his feet.

He felt hot. He liked to consider himself a pretty chill guy, but whatever it was that kept him calm under normal circumstances was very quickly being replaced with white hot anger.
Kuroo wobbled.

His opponent, noticing an opening, immediately attacked. Kuroo swayed to the side. His feet were having trouble keeping him stable, but his hands were burning. He hit the guy in the shoulder, causing him to cry out.

“Fuck you,” Kuroo snarled, “you fucking piece of shit.”

He swung again, but glasses guy was waiting this time, ducking under it and shooting out a spear finger that nicked Kuroo in the side of his ribcage.
The fire mage hissed and stepped back.

Kuroo’s eyes were starting to water. His heart couldn’t beat any harder if it tried. He hurt.
He also wanted to make sure spears guy knew exactly how much it hurt.

All those years of trying to keep control and parts of him were catching fire that had never burned before. Flames licked at his hands. His forearms were ablaze. Small sparks and glowing embers lit up his hair. Even his feet were starting to smoke.

With a menacing grin, Kuroo lunged forward. Glasses guy shot sideways and the two fought, trading swings and only barely managing to hit each other until Kuroo’s leg gave out.

It was just a moment, a misplaced foot, and he tipped back into the barricade.

Glasses guy immediately pounced.

A blackened, sharp claw shot straight at Kuroo’s throat.

He didn’t even have time to register it, but instead of ending his life, the dude winced and pulled back. He rubbed his claw, hissing while Kuroo carefully fingered his neck.

Shards of Daichi’s protection charm dropped down his shirt and he couldn’t help but smirk. He should really thank her, he thought, scrabbling back up and leaning against the wood.

In front of him, glasses guy was nursing what seemed to be a pretty sore claw. And Kuroo, for the first time in this fight, felt like his mind was clear.

Cotton burns at a temperature of 200 degrees Celsius, he knew. Light fabric, even when mixed with polyester, should cause a quick burst fire and while not necessarily deadly, it should be really fucking painful. Kuroo conjured up a large green flame and carefully aimed it at spear guy’s back.

The result was almost instantaneous. Glasses guy screamed as his tattered shirt lit up around him, a high pitched, piercing wail that instantly buried Kuroo’s anger under a mountain of regret.
The guy jumped, panicked, and ran in flailing circles before Kuroo had the presence of mind to trip him, making him roll on the cobbles.

“Komaki!” a booming voice shouted from above “I’m coming!”

With a groan, Kuroo noticed that bouncy man was back, and he’d brought more cargo.

This time he was carrying a large, dark haired man. He was apparently heavier than the last two, because the blond guy was visually struggling to keep him in the air.

And that was before his cargo started expanding.

“Hey, whoah, whooooooah!” At the top of his arc, blond guy lost control, dropping a rapidly growing human cannonball to the ground.

March 25th, 16:51, Old Quarter District, Vaeda
“Did you just call me a stuck-up bitch?” Kageyama Tobio muttered under her breath.
“Wait, what did you want her to give you?” Hinata said from behind her back.
Kindaichi slapped away the tentacle, while Kunimi shot him an Look.
“It doesn’t matter,” Kindaichi sighed, struggling to get on his feet. He leaned heavily on a small wall made of chairs, that was meant to guard the back entrance to Eagle Street. “We’ll just-”

He was cut off by a shout from above.
“Aaah!” Hinata yelled and she was yanked sideways by the scruff of her coat. A large and rapidly expanding man was coming straight at them.
She fell over, very nearly squashing Hinata, before scrabbling away.
Kindaichi, meanwhile, stood transfixed, staring at the incoming man in bafflement.
“You idiot! Look out!” Kunimi shouted and he pushed Kindaichi out of the way, hurling him with surprising force onto the cobbles.
The next moment the now giant man crashed into the enclosure, and the kappa gave a strangled cry.

Kageyama sprang onto her feet.
The giant was a pile of limbs currently unfolding with a tortured grunt.
By the wall, Kindaichi rubbed his shoulder, too hurt to pose a threat now.
She couldn’t see Kunimi but she’d deal with that attack when she got to it.
“Hinata, let’s do this,” Kagayama said. But the boy did not respond to her.
She glanced back to where he stood, and found him frowning a little, staring blankly into space, like his brain had just short-circuited.
“Hinata?”
No reaction.
When she looked back, the giant had unpacked himself to his full height, which was an impressive feat. He was at least three meters tall.
Grumbling under her breath, she grabbed her sword firmly and charged.

March 25th, 16:53, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Surely she wasn’t a bitch, Kageyama Tobio thought as she rolled under a sweeping hand. She knew what she was capable of and maintained a professional distance from people, yes, but that did not mean she was arrogant.
It could merely be interpreted that way.
She raced up a long arm and swung her sword, only to be thrown off when the giant shrugged and bellowed.
Just because she’d yelled at Kindaichi a bunch of times, did not mean he had any right to try to fucking murder her. He’d gotten in her way. He’d interrupted her talks with the dragon with his offers of tea, and then derailed her thoughts while she was trying to make sense of Moniwa’s stupid riddles. She did not want to talk about the weather, ok? That did not make her a stuck-up bitch. That just made her someone with Better Things to Do.
The giant kicked at her and she jumped out of the way as the small barricade behind her dissolved into wood chips.
It mildly worried her how much that comment had stung. A hunter wasn’t supposed to care about what people think. Hunters are leaders. They tell people what to do. They were meant to be feared, not liked. Even if that meant being turned away from some sanctuaries.
She leapt up and struck, leaving a gash in the giant’s side.
Ok, that has also been… unpleasant. Mostly because the Bethlehem people had hated her enough to endanger the other two. And then those two idiots hadn’t even reacted. Yachi and Hinata didn’t yell at her. They just packed up and moved to the next address.
Kageyama noticed she was running straight into a massive fist and she dropped to the ground.
It felt weird because she’d considered herself a lone hunter. She hated being sociable. It would have been fine if that orange boy hadn’t wriggled himself into her life. Lying flat on her back, she brought her short-sword up, stabbing the giant in the arm.

An angry roar thundered over the enclosure. She was meant to be a solo, respectable hunter. She would have been totally fine with that. And she would never have found her true powers.

God damnit.

She rolled past the giant and landed back on her feet, ready to charge. Even the old lady had told her to be cooperative. But that was like the one thing she’d never practised for. How did you even do teamwork with dumbasses like these?

Frustrated, she paused to view the options before her.

*She could duck right but would roll into the wall, causing injury.*

*She could duck left but would get squished by a falling giant, causing severe injury.*

*She could stand still and compliment Azumane Asahi.*

What?

The giant lurched, and a spell shot out before him. With the next step, he slipped on a patch of ice and came down hard. Blinking, Kageyama looked around. A few feet away stood the nervous looking girl that worked in the coffee shop. Her hands were glowing and she was whimpering under her breath. “N-naff…knife, nice!” Kageyama stuttered.

Asahi nodded, trembling a little.

March 25th, 16:54, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Haiba Lev sat at the top of a barricade, protected by an old desk, and pondered wound management. He wasn’t sure if he should move the Bokuto man, but he did know there was entirely too much blood. It was all over Lev’s hands and his suit, it was soaking through the fabric at his knees. It was certainly much more than he could bandage or mop up.

And he didn’t even want to know what would happen if he turned the guy over. He’d called down for a medic several times, but the noise coming from the barricade and the screams within the enclosure seemed to drown out everything. Everything but this.

“Mister Bokuto?”

The voice was soft, almost monotone and certainly not loud, but Lev heard it clearly. From the entrance of the coffee shop, the nurse came his way. They flew up the ladder, their porcelain face contorted in worry.

“I… don’t know what to do,” Lev admitted as they approached.

“Mister Bokuto,” the nurse whispered, kneeling down.

Lev looked up to see Akaashi’s hair was standing on end, steel grey eyes burning with a deep blue fire. The nurse was muttering something under their breath, a strangely melodic chorus in a language Lev didn’t fully understand. It had the same cadence and feel as his native Russian, but the words felt much, much older. They invoked snow covered mountains and deep, ancient woods. They sang of heroes and desire and vengeance.

The wind around him swept up and Lev blinked, vividly remembering the stories his grandmother used to tell him. They were silly fairy tales then, something to scare the children into going to bed on time, but this particular one felt very real.
“Hunker down!” Lev shouted to his comrades on the barricade, “Hold on to something!”
While the wind around him gathered force, Lev locked his arms behind the legs of his reinforced
desk and prayed to whatever deities he could think of that the wood would hold.
Around him, a storm was gathering. It tugged at cocoa dust, gathering hail and debris from the fight.
It swirled in front of the barricade, turning the smoke into a spinning dervish lashing out at anything
around it.
The wind gathered speed and power, never stopping until a small tornado formed in front of the
barricade. Then, Akaashi’s lips curled into a small vindictive smile, and the tornado started moving.
The angry gale charged down Eagle Street, knocking people into walls and pulling others off the
roofs. In a fit of panic, several mages tried to shoot it, inadvertently making it more powerful. It
lumbered on, flinging lemons, stones and ice at anyone caught in its clutches. It made it all the way to
the square at the end of the street, before it died down and dispersed.
“Wow!” Lev muttered, peeking over the barricade. Where before there had been a chaotic throng of
people, the street was now a mess of groaning bodies.

“Mister Haiba?” came a voice from behind him. He blinked back owlishly.
“Help me carry him down,” Akaashi said. The burning in the nurse’s eyes had dimmed, but they had
lost none of their intensity. Haiba quickly complied.

???, ???:??, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

“Aaah!”
Hinata Shouyou yanked Kageyama away from a large object crashing into the street. She fell into
him and suddenly the world went woozy.
He tried to focus but it was difficult because everything was happening on top of everything else. For
a moment it felt like he was watching the tv in his grandparents’ attic, the one that would sometimes
play two channels at once.
In one channel, Kageyama was fighting a giant. Kindaichi was crumpled in a heap by the wall and
he could see Kuroo by the barricade.
In the other channel, which became clearer by the second, there was no barricade. But the place felt
much the same.
The lay-out of the street was there, but where the coffee shop should be, there was an ‘ale house’,
whatever that was. The front had stained glass windows, most of them broken.
Something else felt the same too: the cobbled street was full of people fighting.
And this fight made the one he’d been experiencing up to now look like a playground.
There were a lot of wounded people on the ground, and a lot of people that Hinata hoped very much
were not as dead as they looked. Several of the surrounding buildings were on fire and because
everything was made of wood, that fire was spreading.
Most of the street was filled with uniformed men, members of some army or police force. They were
fighting a group of mages backed into the end of the street, in front of the ale house.
One of them was a tall man with long black hair, wearing a hakama, who shot lightning at anyone
coming close to him. He looked like some weird samurai, but he also vaguely looked like
Kageyama. He certainly had her glare when he turned around and pulled out a katana.
Close to him, wearing a bright red dress with a depth of cleavage that made the tips of Hinata’s ears
burn, was a woman that looked like a younger version of the ghost lady Nekomata. Only she wasn’t
a ghost here. She was very much flesh and, uh, blood.
Hinata shook his head to focus, and watched as she fought a guy in a fancy uniform.
“Release Nobuteru,” the lady shouted, dodging a sabre, “It’s over, Washijo. We know what you’re
trying to do and it’ll never work. The magic world will not stand for this.”
“Is that so?” the man answered, “I don’t see anyone else fighting me. People love us. Do you not see
the parades? The adoring crowds? We’re creating a paradise and you’re the old class getting in the
way. Besides, all we need is him.” He indicated Sorta-Looks-Like-Kageyama, who was starting to
get swarmed, “And we don’t even need him in one piece.”

Maybe-Young-Nekomata took a breath and screamed, sending shock waves across the street.
The man called Washijo quickly pulled a guard in front of him, dropping him to crumble into a heap
on the ground when the waves died down. Then he pulled out a small whistle and blew on it.
More uniformed men came pouring into the street. They were carrying muskets adorned with
bayonets and formed a nice orderly line across the street.
“Ready when you are, Shepherd general,” one of them said.

This wasn’t how it went, Hinata thought.
He’d seen this in the museum.
Elite government agents fighting the rebels in the Battle for Eagle street, 1756 edition. He knew the
rebels won that time. At least that’s what he assumed. Nekomata would grow older, the shepherd
dude would be defeated.
He knew how this would end, and it wasn’t with a firing squad.

Maybe that’s why Hinata felt oddly calm, watching the chaos around him.
It wasn’t real, not really. Or maybe it was, and in that case he should find cover.
But part of him was too caught up in what would happen. It was the same part that hated cliff
hangers in movies and would eagerly click through to the next episode on Netflix.
He wanted to know what happened next.
His gaze was drawn to the side of the street. From inside the not-coffeehouse-yet, came two people.
One of them was small in stature but he had a presence unlike anything Hinata had ever seen. There
was a hunger there, a confidence, the unshakeable belief that he was going to save the day.
“Little Giant,” Hinata muttered.
Probably-Little-Giant was arguing with his companion. “I’m telling you, I can do this,” he said.
“Well I don’t trust you to,” the other guy answered.
“Look, are we going to win this or not?”
They continued squabbling as they walked into the fray, ignoring the line of guards poised to shoot
while dodging attacks from other skirmishers until the Little Giant stood still in the middle of the
battlefield and briefly shot his companion a glance.
The other guy just sighed and nodded.
His small friend jumped up and it was like he’d sprouted wings.
“Whoooooo,” Hinata whispered as he watched the little guy soar into the air, before charging
something large and white.
The next moment, everything exploded and Hinata was blown to the ground, shielding his face.

When he opened his eyes again, the barricade was back. The giant was on the ground and some guy
was making wood go boom. But more pressingly, Kageyama was coming his way, and she looked
angrier than usual.
“Finally done napping, dumbass?” she barked.
“Kage-yama?” Her eyes were definitely the same as that samurai.
“Who the fuck else would I be?” she snapped as she pulled him up, “Are you good to fight, because
that giant is getting back up and he’s unhappy.”
“Kageyama.” Hinata tugged at her sleeve, making her bend down so he could talk in her ear. “I want
to try something.”
Wave

Chapter Summary

In which there is water, and a whole lot of smoke.
This chapter comes with a mild gore warning.

March 25th, 16:59, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Asahi Azumane was feeling a strange mixture of elation and mortal fear.
On the one hand, she’d managed to slip up a giant dude and that had never worked before. All day
she’d actually used her spells in some constructive way and it was going more smooth and natural
than it did when she was practising. It was like she was getting better at it.
On the other hand, she’d needed her spells throughout the day and that had also never happened
before. She tried not to think too much about that.
The giant was lying on the cobbles after what must have been a painful fall and Asahi wondered
briefly how that guy even got here. Was he tall enough to just step over the barricade?
It was then that she heard a scream from above.

“Pretty laaaaady!”
It was the guy that had asked her for free coffee earlier. It seemed forever ago, now. What was his
name again? Teru.
Teru the Highly Inappropriate Customer.
“Just call him an asshole,” Suga had said when she explained the story to him.
Teru the Asshole, then.
He came bouncing in in a perfect arc and touched down right in front of her feet.
“Yo,” he grinned. “Still not up to changing sides I take it?”
Asahi shook her head, baffled at the amount of confidence oozing from this dude.
“Pity,” he said, and he punched her. Asahi had just enough time to put her arm in front of her face,
stepping back with a startled shriek.
“Wow, nice one, pretty lady!” Teru laughed, putting his hands up in a mockery of a traditional
boxer's stance. “Someone teach you self defence?”
And he kicked, making Asahi jerk her knee up to block the blow.
Someone had, in fact, taught her the basics. Years of being scared of everything and everyone had
caused Asahi's school friends to drag her to one of those 'how to deal with muggers' type classes
when she was younger.
It had been utterly mortifying, but it had apparently left enough of an instinct within her to step out of
the way and shift her weight, leaning to the side to avoid another jab. It was a movement that
surprised even Asahi with its fluidity and, feeling pretty good about herself, she put down another
patch of ice.
Teru turned around and prepared to swing at her again, but slipped and fell on his backside instead.
“Ouch, was that really necessary, pretty lady? After all the compliments I gave you today?”
“Sh-shut up!”

March 25th, 16:58, Old Quarter District, Vaeda
Hinata tugged on Kageyama Tobio's sleeve to make her lean closer. “I wanna try something,” he said in Kageyama's ear. “Can you make me fly?”

“What?”

“Make me fly, like him,” he pointed to bouncy guy.

“What's the point of that?”, Kageyama frowned. “What are you going to do once you're in the air?”

“Punch him?” Hinata indicated the giant, who was getting up slowly.

“What makes you think we can do two spells in quick succession like that?”

“I'm certain it's possible,” Hinata replied, and his eyes were big and focused, full of concentration. “Well, I'm not certain at all,” Kageyama grumbled under her breath.

“Just trust me,” Hinata said and without hesitation, he walked up to the giant.

“Are you fucking serious?” Kagaya stuttered, “Wait!”

But Hinata had already broken into a run, pulling his arms back as if they were wings.

“Bring it on!” he yelled.

There was a sharp sting in her forehead that was only getting worse, but Kageyama, left with no other choice, surveyed her options.

The next second, Hinata jumped, and flew. He bounced high up in the air until he was level with the giant's very confused looking face. The tall man stared at the redhead, and Hinata, with complete and utter seriousness, slapped him across the cheek.

The giant blinked, frowned and then yawned as Hinata came back down again, flailing now that he was suddenly prey to the powers of gravity.

“Whoaah!”

He hit the cobbles with his feet, luckily, and then rolled backwards in a jumbled ball.

Before him, the giant toppled like a crumbling tower. At the same time, he was shrinking, growing smaller while he fell. By the time he was out cold on the street, he was normal sized. Or at least normal for someone who plays basketball for a living.

The Ex-Giant was also snoring loudly.

“I told you we could do it,” Hinata said triumphantly, hopping back onto his feet and walking up to Kageyama with a smile that could rival the sun.

“Dumbass! What the fuck were you thinking!” Kageyama shouted. “Don't just come up with new stuff like that in the middle of a fight! We barely even know what we're doing! This needs practice, and preparation, and-”

“We did it though,” Hinata giggled and she couldn't exactly argue with that smile.

Rubbing her temples, she checked her surroundings.

Kindaichi was being carried to the downstairs hospital, weak from blood loss and possibly also from being hit on the head by Kinnoshita in the very recent past.

The giant was snoring, as was the broom girl.

Kageyama kept feeling like she'd forgotten something, and looking around, she suddenly saw him.

Kunimi lay on the ground, heavily bruised. By shoving his friend out of the way, he'd taken the brunt of the giant's fall and the resulting injuries weren't pretty.

Walking closer, Kageyama tried to see what she could do for him.

It felt like she was fizzling out again. Nothing was coming up.

She closed her eyes and tried again.

“Oh, that looks painful,” Hinata said behind her. “We should get him to the EMT.”

Kageyama stared at Kunimi with glowing eyes and still got nothing.

She looked at Hinata, a worried frown on her face.

“What?” the red haired boy said.

Line upon line came scrolling down her vision.

She looked back at the battered kappa.

“I... don't think that's necessary any more,” Kageyama muttered.
There were no more options for Kunimi.  
“He’s dead,” she said softly.

March 25th, 17:00, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Next to the man called Teru, his cargo was unfolding.  
Sawamura Daichi, from her position in front of the garage, recognized him as the guy that had turned her bar stool into splinters. That couldn’t possibly be a good thing for this particular fight.  
As Teru and Asahi got into a fight, the new guy calmly walked over to the low makeshift wall in front of the garage and put his palm on it. A loud boom rang through the enclosure before it was abruptly cut off.  
With a frown, he looked up.  
The explosion had reduced the fence to wood chips, but instead of flying everywhere, they hung in the air, bobbing lightly against a bubble of about a meter across.  
“I’ve had just about enough of you,” Daichi growled, moving closer.  
“Coffee bitch!” the guy said cheerily and he kicked Daichi, who was still concentrating on the small bubble of wood, in the side.  
Splinters rained down on the cobbles and Daichi rubbed her hip, eyeing the guy him with a dark glare while he lunged again. Hoping with all her might that this would work, she pulled another shield around her as the guy punched.  
There was a weird little ‘wubwub’ sound and his fist slowed, caught in an elastic looking, transparent web.  
He blinked, while behind him Teru clambered upright and patted him on the back.  
“Bobata! Let’s switch!” the blonde guy said and Daichi, currently trying to remember how to breathe the ‘magic way’ while keeping a shield up, found herself face to face with Teru.  
“Hi!” he said, smiling widely, “Nice fight you got here.”  
He winked.  
“What the hell do you guys even want?” Daichi said exasperatedly, completely forgetting to breathe. It made her bubble pop and Teru immediately grabbed her arm in a vice grip.  
“Oh, money, power, the chance to cause a ton of mayhem.”  
“Are you serious?” Daichi exclaimed.  
“There’s people on the other side of that wall that truly believe, you know,” Teru said conversationally, while behind him Bobata was pelted with a large ball of ice. “That the Veil should be lifted. That we should be rulers of the norms, all that.”  
“Not you?”  
“Honestly? I don’t care either way. Bobata over there blows stuff up. He's a strong one, but me, I bounce. Tsuchiyu makes lemons. Lemons! What kind of dumb power is that?”  
He chuckled. “I'm not stupid enough to believe that the guy we're putting in charge with this little revolt is going to be any good. I just wanna do shit, you know? Have a little fun.”  
“By killing people?” Daichi asked incredulously and then, as an afterthought: “Who are you putting in charge?”  
But Teru was no longer listening, busy as he was laughing at his friend, currently on the ground in a pool of ice cubes. When he looked back at her, there was a glint in his eye.  
“Tell me something,” Teru asked, looking up while his feet started glowing. “Does your shield work from super high?”  
“What? Wait... waitwaitwait!” Daichi stammered.  
“Because we're about to find out.” Teru added with a maniacal grin.  
“Feet! Freeze his feet Asahi!” she shouted in a panic.  

And Asahi did.
In a moment that made Daichi wince and look away, she froze Teru's legs in a large block of ice at the exact time that the boy lifted off. Or tried to. There was a snapping, tearing sound, like a large branch breaking, and it was the most horrifying thing Daichi had ever heard, right up to the part where Teru started screaming.

“Oh god,” Asahi whimpered while Teru fell down, howling about his legs.

“Shiiiiit,” muttered Bobata, who was crawling toward his friend.

Daichi wondered how she was going to handle this carnage, when she noticed that the magician was shouting something. Lev, still blood-soaked and looking slightly panicked for the very first time since she met him, was yelling something from atop the barricade. She strained to understand him, walking a little closer, when behind her, the garage door opened and smoke spilled out in a large cloud.

She caught on to what Lev was saying just as a line of kids came stumbling out of the garage, coughing and crying.

Everything had gone to shit again, she thought, and took a deep breath.

They were never going to survive this one, she said to herself as she walked to the middle of the enclosure.

They were never going to survive this if they didn't believe they would.

March 25th, 16:58, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Carefully, tip of her tongue peeking from between her lips, Yachi Hitoka fastened the small cork on what was once a christmas decoration, and now a weapon of mild chemical warfare.

With a small smile, she looked at her handiwork.

One perfectly crafted cocoa bauble, lovingly made and probably dispatched in like ten seconds. She'd be upset about that, but she was helping. Next to her at the table, Suga-san counted the assembled grenades with a very serious look on his face.

“Maybe two more and we can bring these to the barricade,” he said. “That should last them about ten more minutes?”

“Two more!” someone down the line said.

“Ok! Nearly there!”

The underground garage had been turned into a workshop of sorts. In the empty space in the middle stood two long tables, partly put together with pieces from Kuroo's small art studio. The table Yachi was working on, for instance, had a tableau of black cats walking down the length of it. Several of the coffee shop's less magically inclined guests were working here in quiet concentration, putting together smoke bombs and other necessities.

In the back, behind a heavy door, the sound of children playing could be heard. They were kept as far away from the fighting as possible.

From the end of the line, a short man with black hair and round glasses came up, carefully placing a stink bomb into the box.

“Takeda, was it?” Suga said off-handedly as he weighed powder packets on a small spice scale. The man pushed his glasses nervously and nodded.

“Nicely done, thank you,” Suga said, and he flashed him a smile that made Takeda blink.

“Happy to help,” he muttered after a moment.

And then he yelped when something fell behind him with a loud bang.

Yachi looked up to see a hole in the ceiling. A man was climbing out of it, somehow clinging upside down on the ceiling by the pads of this fingers and his bare feet. He had dark blond hair and Yachi wasn't sure if it was meant to stick up, or if that was just gravity doing its thing.

Behind him, a second guy poked his head through the hole before dropping into the centre of the floor. He was tall, Yachi noticed, with slicked back black hair and an expression that wouldn't look amiss on a juvenile delinquent.
Yachi squeaked and hid behind the table.
“The hell you looking at,” the newcomer grinned at the small crowd of staring people. Dark shadows grew from his feet and raced across the floor and the walls.
“Intruders!” someone in the back of the room shouted, and a smoke bomb came flying through the air.

Several things happened at once.
One: people started screaming. Two: smoke filled the already stifling room, giving everyone a coughing fit. Three: it suddenly became very dark, which was not something a smoke bomb should be able to do.

Yachi, blinded and wheezing, reached down and patted the ground until she'd found her backpack under the table. Pulling it open, she searched until she found a handkerchief, which she put over her mouth to make breathing easier. She also pulled out her flashlight.

She emerged from under the table, flicking it on in the hopes of seeing something in the pitch dark. The beam of light mainly showed a wall of dust in the air.

To her left came a muffled sound.
“Suga-san?” Yachi whispered. She tried to wave away the smoke and shone her light on Suga who was at that very moment covered in what could only be called shadow goo. It looked like a thick black slime and it clung like paint to every inch of the silver haired man, who was flailing wildly.

When the light hit it, however, the darkness hissed, pulling back in places and giving Suga the opportunity to move his face out of the mess.

He looked like he was in pain.
This scared Yachi, whose grip on the flashlight started trembling.

The beam of light shook and fluttered through the air, hitting the shadow monster in several places. The thing shrieked.

“This is Towada?! Are you ok?” The sticky guy dropped onto the floor with a light ‘plop’ and Yachi could hear him running through the fog towards them.

For the shadow monster, the beam of light seemed to have the effect of pepper spray. It wailed, shrinking back from Suga with an angry roar while the man fought to get the black goo off of him.

“Get that away from him!” the blond guy shouted from somewhere in front of them, and his form came barrelling through the smoke towards Yachi.

“Yeek!”

Before the sticky man could reach her, however, a figure loomed out of the thick dust cloud, pushed up its glasses and tripped him. He fell, crashing into a table and sending several smoke grenades into the air.

“Oh! Oh dear” said the voice of Takeda, and he scrambled to catch them all, while Suga managed to grab one out of the air as well. He gingerly placed the grenade back in the box and leaned heavily on the table, breathing into his sleeve.

“Thanks,” he said in a small raspy voice, giving Yachi a sideways glance.

“Wh- where is the shadow man?” she stuttered, shining her light around as the smoke sunk to the ground.

She found him sitting two meters away, on a table. Towada was human again, and he was rubbing his eyes painfully.

“Whelp, that didn't work,” he said, looking defeated. “I guess we'll go. Karamatsu?”

He searched around for his friend as the smoke levels lowered further, frowning when he didn't get an immediate answer.

There was a small whimper and everyone looked toward Takeda, standing in front of the table with his arms full of smoke grenades.

He looked down at his feet, where the fog had faded just enough to show Karamatsu, lying on the
floor with what looked like a metal pipe straight through his throat.
“Oh my,” Takeda muttered.
Yachi started trembling uncontrollably.
“What the hell?” Towada said under his breath. And then his face contorted into anger. “You sick bastard!”
“W-wait! I didn't.” Takeda said, while Towada jumped from the table towards him. Scrambling to get away, the startled man in glasses dropped several of the grenades.
They immediately went off.

In the chaos that followed, Yachi could hear the loud grating of the garage door being opened.
“We have to get out of here!” Takeda's voice said, “Someone get the children!”
The noise and the smoke was too much. Around her, she could hear feet pounding and furniture scraping but Yachi could barely breathe, handkerchief or no.
She was panicking, she knew she was. It was hard to stop trembling as her flashlight flickered through the thick miasma of smoke.
And then she felt the reassuring hand of Suga.
"Let's go," he rasped, and he grabbed her shoulder.
Coughing and heaving, the both of them felt their way out of the room and joined the people streaming out of the garage.

March 25th, 17:03, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Lev, still covered in a lot more blood than he ever thought possible, climbed the ladder back up the barricade and looked out across the street below. He immediately regretted that decision.
There was a wall.
At the end of the street.
And it was coming his way.
Squinting, he tried to figure out what it was, when one of his companions muttered something. “Is that a fucking tsunami?”
Oh, Lev thought. That's what that was.
Damn.
“Wave! There's a wave coming!” he shouted at the enclosure below.
“Everyone get inside!” Lev screamed, climbing back down the ladder. “You guys, get off here, it’s never going to hold.”
It was about this time that the garage door opened and a cloud of smoke came pouring out, followed by a stream of coughing people.
“Oh,” Lev said.

He touched down on the cobbles and blinked at a line of six kids coming into the enclosure, bawling their eyes out.
Behind him sat Kuroo, looking all kinds of bruised. To his right, Yachi helped a coughing, heaving Suga onto the street.
Several wounded or snoring people were scattered across the cobbles in front of him while in the corner the two weird kids – Kageyama, he thought one of them was called- were pulling up the tactician. They were having trouble, because they kept squabbling. They'd never make it in time.
Behind him, the roaring became louder.
That wave was coming closer by the second.
“Oh no.”
Pick one, Lev told himself. Pick any of these and go.

In the middle of the street, the lady that owned the coffee shop stood.
“Miss Sawamura!” he shouted, “there's a wave!”
He wasn't entirely sure why he felt the need to tell her that. They'd never get everyone to safety.
But she just nodded. She was oddly calm. For the first time since he'd met her, she looked in control, like she knew what she was doing.

Sawamura walked to the very middle of the enclosure, radiating seriousness. Her eyes were glowing, her hands too, and something soothing spread out in circles around her.

Then, before Lev's anxious eyes, her skin erupted in white light. Patterns danced in strange movements, coming together to form new motifs, before moving on to arrange themselves in ever more elaborate designs. They whirled across her skin, and Lev could swear he saw them move off of it, forming a bubble around her that grew as she stood there.

She was muttering something and Lev stood transfixed, holding still while the bubble grew, engulfing him and everyone else in the enclosure.

The roar grew closer still, but he somehow felt safe. Warm and calm, protected even.

Behind him, Kuroo chuckled.

“She's actually doing it,” he said, pride in his voice as Lev leaned down to help him up.

While the wave came closer, the bubble grew enough to envelop the whole enclosure, from the end of Eagle Street up to the barricade, and probably a little bit further, to the people lying wounded in front of it.

The wave crashed into the shield and for a moment, all Lev could hear was white noise.

Very, very loud white noise.

Looking up, he could see the water washing over the bubble, frothing up the side of the shield until it was halfway over the enclosure, before retreating back down and disappearing.

The water pulled away and just like that, the bubble popped.

In the middle of the enclosure, Sawamura Daichi sagged onto the cobbles.
Betrayal

Chapter Summary

In which a whole bunch of exposition happens.

Chapter Notes

My thanks to @bittersweetoranges and @haruhi02 for feedback on the draft.

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March 25th, 17:26, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Haiba Lev looked over the barricade at the washed out street below. The only movement down there were a few people coming to pick up the wounded, or the dead, still lying around on the cobbles. They'd broken the siege. They had, at least. With an attack so powerful it could have killed everyone. It was a move that, briefly, baffled Lev. He nodded to the girl standing guard.

“One tall cinnamon latte,” he said and handed her a paper cup. The name ’Yui’ was scribbled on the sleeve. “And a bagel.”

The girl nodded happily and accepted the offered food before taking a seat. Lev sat down next to her, legs of his stained suit dangling over the balcony while he sipped mint tea. In the enclosure below, the last of their own wounded were being carried away, seen to by Shimada the EMT, who was looking like he was about to keel over himself. The garage was aired out, so the kids were back in there, the workshop being used as a secondary hospital now.

“They’re starting their meeting soon.” Lev said to his companion, “If you wanna go.”

“I’m good here,” Yui answered. “I like to stay vigilant. We have to fight till the very end, you know.”

March 25th, 17:28, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Daichi Sawamura sat on a stool and took a gulp from her umpteenth coffee of the day, letting the warmth and the sugar flow through her veins. The enormousness of what just happened still hadn’t fully trickled in. The only thing she did know for certain was that the shield had left her feeling weak and hungry. She’d absolutely gorged herself on donuts before she managed to stop under the surprised, mildly amused look of one Sugawara Koushi.

But she felt better now. Sugar and coffee may not fix everything, but they fixed A Lot of Things.

“So,” she said, taking another glorious sip, “tell us what’s going on.”

On the floor of the coffee shop, surrounded by glares, sat Bobata.

There was a bandage on his head, from where he was hit with a chunk of ice the size of a volleyball. He looked pretty miserable.

“I don’t know, man,” he pouted.
Out of all the adversaries they'd captured, Bobata was one of the very few in any shape to be questioned. Several of them were heavily wounded and two were in a sleep so deep it baffled Shimada. When asked about it, Kageyama had just shrugged. She seemed to assume they'd wake up eventually, and there was very little else they could do about it.

Even more curious was Towada the shadow mage, who was mostly unharmed but refused to speak. They had found him in the garage after the smoke had cleared. He had been pinned to a wooden table with images of cats burned into it, a screwdriver sticking from where his throat would be if his shadow form hadn't saved him.

Since his release from that precarious position, Towada had been very meek, shivering like a leaf and making no sound but the occasional whimper. It was so bad Suga had insisted on giving him hot cocoa and a blanket.

The same Suga now stood up from his seat and walked over to Bobata.

“Look,” he said, radiating reason and sympathy like he always did when he was trying to get something done, “you lost the fight. It's over. Your own people tried to drown you. Surely you can tell us why you attacked us.”

Bobata shrugged. “We were on a roll, and you got in the way.”

“On a roll?” Daichi raised an eyebrow. “You mean how you're starting riots all over Vaeda?”

The mage on the floor nodded.

“Why, uh, are you starting riots all over the city?” Ennoshita asked. “I mean, what do you hope to accomplish by doing that?”

“Two words,” Bobata grinned holding out two fingers in a highly unlikely peace sign, “Magic. Rulers. You know all the oni, all the furries, the little people, how they all have to hide behind human suits? That's not right. The Veil is a lie, man. If we lift it, we're free. We have the power, we have the means, we could rule this shit. They opened the gates, man.”

“The, uh, dragon gate thing?” Daichi said.

“Yeah! They're letting em all out! And once they're all out, we'll be unstoppable.”

“Letting what out?” Suga asked carefully.

“Ohh!” an excited voice came from somewhere in the crowd and people jostled aside. “Excuse me, are you, by any chance, talking about the dragon gates?”

“Do you know what they do?” Suga asked as Takeda came squeezing through.

“Ah, uh, yes,” Takeda said, pushing up his glasses, “I'm quite a fan of mythological archaeology, so I, uh, may be of some help here, if I may?”

“Go ahead,” Suga said with a friendly smile.

“Thank you. Ahem.” Takeda coughed into his hand and looked around, visibly nervous at the sudden attention. “So. Apparently there are, ahh, several gates to the underworld. The smaller ones, like the one on the Vaeda mountain, are used as, let's say, prison gates. Spirits that are considered too powerful to kill, or too difficult to deal with, those that are, um, incorrigible, are banished to the Underworld and they go through there.”

Next to him, Yachi was nodding enthusiastically. “That's what it says in the book also,” she added, a little breathlessly, “The dragon guards the gate, because it's never fully closed. The hunters and magic government people need a little crack so that they can put bad people in. And the dragon's presence is powerful enough to keep them there.”

“Indeed,” Takeda went on, “Now, according to legend, these are merely the, uh, back doors to the underworld. There is at least one much bigger gate, and it appears this is the one these people are currently working on opening. In that case we may need to, uh, hurry up and stop them before the place is overrun.”

“Well who is protecting the big gate?” said Nishinoya who, while small and covered in bandages, was loud enough to make Takeda take a step back.

“Uhh, nobody I can find,” Yachi said, flipping through her book.
“Well why the hell not?” Noya asked angrily.
“I’m not sure,” Takeda answered, pulling down his shirt and cardigan in an effort to straighten himself. “I mean I'm assuming it’s fairly hidden and probably not easy to get to.”
“Well these guys have apparently found it,” sighed Daichi. She closed her eyes and rolled her neck, tiredness radiating off her.
“Who's trying to do this?” she asked Bobata, “who are you putting in charge with this little revolt?”
“Not a clue,” Bobata said.
“I'm serious!” he exclaimed when Daichi shot him a glare that could wilt a cactus, “all we got is a nickname. On the forum he goes by Father.”

March 25th, 17:31, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

People kept talking about gates and dragons while Hinata Shouyou sat on a stool, legs dangling, and sipped orange juice. This was just like the museum, he thought. This Father or whatever was gonna start a magic kingdom and to do that he was letting all the magic monsters out that had been locked up for ages.
Bobata talked about the guy like he was some kind of benevolent person, someone who wanted to make the world a better place, but if he was anything like the Papa Tatsu that Hinata had seen in his vision, he really didn't want him in charge of anything.

What had happened, according to Takeda the Amateur Scholar, and Yachi with her Book, was that he’d opened the gates to the Underworld in an effort to expand his government far beyond the island of Vaeda.
Hinata frowned, losing track of the conversation while his own mind was skittering wildly, trying to remember.
Papa Tatsu, Takeda was saying, was eventually stopped by a group of guerilla wizards, who closed the gate again after locking him up in the Underworld with his minions.
“And apparently history is repeating itself,” Takeda went on, “with these people searching allies beyond the grand gate.” The people around him all nodded seriously at this.
“So what's our plan to stop this?” Daichi piped up.
Several people started talking at once and Hinata, kicking his legs, frowned into his juice.
“I don't think that's what the museum said happened,” he pouted.

Excerpt from the leather bound book

The Underworld is referenced in several mythologies and religions. It is featured as 'Hell' in Christianity, for instance, as 'Tartarus' in ancient Greek religion or 'Diyu' in Chinese texts. Little is known about the nature of the realm, since studying it is fraught with danger. Most scholars agree that one has to be dead, or very close to it, to even be able to enter the Underworld.
Gates to the Underworld lie in several places across the Earth and they are invariably protected by powerful magic forces. It is unclear how many there are, but general consensus places portals underneath a lake in Greece, in a small town in Pennsylvania in the United States, on a mountain on the island of Vaeda and in a field in Turkmenistan. There is supposedly also one in the printer section of an office supply store in Nairobi, but this is as yet unverified.
At least one additional 'greater' gate is said to exist, though ancient texts only reference it indirectly. In her seminal work 'The Road to the Afterlife', the Inuit scholar Aguta Umiaktorvik writes that no one knows how to open these gates. She does describe a method to close them.
“The old stories speak of a ritual that consists of a Lock, a Key and a Sacrifice. The Lock to place
over the doors, the Key to close it. The spilled Sacrifice to seal it. Popular interpretation is that the Lock represents a protective spell of some sort, symbolizing the protection of the world against the denizens of the Underworld. The Key is most likely a hunter's powers, since hunters are the traditional guards of the magic world. This scholar hesitates to name what the sacrifice could stand for." (Aguta Umiaktorvik, 1964)

March 25th, 17:36, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Kageyama came through the door into the domed room under the coffee shop and nodded to the guy standing guard.

“Just gonna pop out for a piss,” Kinnoshita said, nodding in reply, “I'll be right back.”

Kindaichi Yuutarou sat on a makeshift cot and wearily watched the hunter walk across the room. His leg had been bandaged and he was slowly downing some tea concoction the Sugawara person had given him. Around his neck was a pendant, a magic blocker Kageyama had provided. Not that it was necessary. He didn't have the energy, or the will, to fight.

“Kindaichi.”

Kageyama sat down on a stool in front of him and Kindaichi felt the heat rising to his head.

“I-” she started.

“Don't sympathize,” Kindaichi barked before she could say another word, “I'm not about to apologize myself. So don't pay me your condolences or feel bad for me. I knew what we were getting ourselves into. Kunimi did as well.”

“Mmm,” Kageyama nodded, face impassive.

“We lost, and bad things happened, but I still think you're a stuck-up bitch. You always were, you always will be.”

“Mmm,” Kageyama said.

“I hate hunters. Kunimi hated hunters. They're everything that's wrong with magic society and you are no different. You only care about yourself and your prestige. So don't come in here and sympathize with me and my dead friend”, Kindaichi gritted.

“Mmm,” Kageyama said again.

“This fight isn't over,” he went on. “You've won this battle, but next time it'll be mine.”

“Kindaichi,” Kageyama said while she got up slowly, “we will win the next fight as well. And the one after that. However many we need.”

He blinked up at her.

“I'm going to protect these people and I won't be doing it alone,” she muttered.

He had to strain to hear her next few words. “And I'm sorry about your friend.”

With that, she walked back to the door.

“There you are!” Hinata poked his head through just as she came up. “They're waiting for you upstairs. Something about strategies.”

March 25th, 17:44, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

So far, it had been surprisingly easy, Ennoshita Chikara had to admit.

It was certainly no Stalingrad. There was food, for one, though Daichi was going through the donut stash rather fast. Still, they were safe and comfortable, which is exactly why the new strategy being proposed to him was so baffling.

In all of his many, many years, he'd seen a fair amount of badly thought-out battle plans, and this one seemed entirely too... insane. Even by his standards.
“So what you're saying,” he reiterated, trying to sound as calm and level headed as possible, “is that we send Daichi, our main defensive force, and the freak duo, our main offensive force, to go find, and then close, an ancient secret gate to the Underworld in a quest that is probably going to kill them?”

“Hmmmmm, you're right,” Lev said, “who's going to protect them?”

“Oh! I'll go!” said Noya, who was entirely too enthusiastic for someone bleeding through several layers of bandages.

“You're not going anywhere,” Ennoshita said, exasperated, before returning to the matter at hand.

“More importantly; who's going to protect us?”

The people around him blinked owlishly.

“Our attackers have backed off for now, but we're not certain if they won't regroup,” Ennoshita explained, “And we have a lot of wounded. Splitting up leaves both groups vulnerable. If these three leave, most of our heavier hitters will be either gone or incapacitated.”

“Ohhhhh,” Lev said, putting voice to the thought of the general populace around Ennoshita.

“We have Asahi!” Noya piped up, “She's amazing! Did you see the thing she did with the ice? Pow!”

Next to her, Asahi gained a nice shade of pink.

Ennoshita coughed. “True,” he said, “but she's a single mage who's already used a fair amount of power. And as you, of all people, should be aware, there's no such thing as endless spells. The people that were on the barricade are most likely also running low.”

“We'll deal with it,” Noya said stubbornly.

“I'd just like a contingency plan, is all,” Ennoshita sighed.

“Well offence is the best defence,” the tiny girl said, folding her arms, “Easiest way to defend this place is to not have the world overrun by zombies.”

Ennoshita slapped a palm over his face and dragged it down.

“Ok,” he said, “shouldn't we at least ask them if they want to go and risk their lives in a hair brained scheme like this? There's bound to be adversaries. We have no idea who they're up against-”

“I was already going to go,” Kageyama grumbled from the other side of the table. “I've been trying to go and save the world since this morning but everyone kept getting in my way.”

Next to her, Hinata nodded. “I need to make sure no zombies get my sister,” he said. “Or anyone else for that matter.”

Ennoshita glanced at Daichi, who sat in a chair sipping coffee with her eyes closed. She seemed torn, but he figured he knew her well enough by now. When she opened her eyes again, she gave him a single nod.

“Well, do we even know where you're going?” Ennoshita tried.

“Um.”

With a heavy heart, he looked down and to his right, where the small blond girl was flicking through an old book. “I think I may have found a way,” she said.

March 25th, 17:56, Old Quarter District, Veda

Kuroo Tetsurou lay in bed in a small room above the coffee shop, with a wet cloth on his forehead. Next to him, Kenma was curled up into a tight ball, purring softly. The cat had spent the entire fight underneath a dresser, and was seemingly happy to just be on something soft and warm for a while. Kuroo stretched out his fingers and sunk them into thick fur, earning him a small 'mrooww'. He grinned and laid back again, watching the gentle sway of the lace curtain by the window above him.

Fuuuuck, he hurt. It was like he'd found entirely new ways to hurt.

Not just his muscles, or his wounds caused him pain, but there was something deep inside his very
soul that felt depleted. And that wasn't even counting his mind, which kept running the same grotesque scenes over and over in his head, of blood dripping down the barricade balcony, reminding him of a very different sort of hurt.

Kenma lifted his head and a second later, there was a short knock on the door.

“Yeah?” Kuroo said, happy to be distracted.

Daichi walked in, carrying a plate that she set down on the bedside table.

“Donuts?” Kuroo said, propping himself up slowly, “Did I end up in some kind of weird fantasy where Sawamura Daichi brings me breakfast in bed?”

“Shut up,” Daichi said, “they help with the magic.”

“Magic donuts?” Kuroo grinned and prodded one gingerly, as if it was going to transform into a frog and jump off.

“Just maple glaze, I'm afraid,” she replied and went to the small sink to wash her face and hands.

Kuroo carefully munched on the fatty pastry, feeding a piece to a whining Kenma.

“You burned through a ton of energy and this is an easy way to restore some of it,” Daichi went on, undoing her ponytail and combing her hair while looking critically at herself in the mirror.

“So how are things downstairs?” Kuroo asked, pulling another piece off his donut and holding it out for his cat.

“Pretty crazy,” she said, pulling her hair into a tight knot.

“Bo?”

“Akaashi's with him,” Daichi said with a sigh, “They're not letting anyone near. I'm not sure what's going on.”

At those words, Kenma sat up and stretched. He jumped off the bed and stopped by the door, looking up at Daichi expectantly.

She let him out and shot Kuroo a careful glance. He nodded.

It gave him some peace of mind, at least. Akaashi wouldn't just let Bokuto die without trying everything in their power and Kuroo suspected they had a lot of fucking power.

Something very close to hope was welling up in his chest and it made him feel a little bit better, even if he was entirely too emotional.

Luckily, something to occupy his mind had graciously presented itself.

“So what's up with you,” he said, tilting his head at the girl currently pulling a few loose hairs off her shirt and pretending to be casual about it.

“I'm fine,” she said.

“Mmmhmmm,” Kuroo nodded, “now that we established, again, that you're fine, can you just admit you're here because you want something off your chest and go ahead and tell me? It saves time, you see.”

She pouted and with a huff, she sat down on a chair by his bed.

“It's been decided,” she said, “that I'm going on a quest.”

Her brows were knotted together and she was pursing her lips in a way Kuroo thought was cute, despite the fact that it was obvious she was worried.

“A quest? Like... go slay the dragon?”

“Close, but it turns out the dragon is one of the good guys,” Daichi said.

“Oh,” Kuroo took another bite and munched thoughtfully, letting his crush get on with the slow process that he recognized as ‘Daichi getting over herself so she can voice her thoughts’.

“There’s a gate that's letting in all these... monsters? And we have to go close it.”

“You?”

“Me,” Daichi said, “and the hunter girl and the redhead. Oh and probably the scared blond girl. She offered.”

“Yachi?” Kuroo asked.

“Yachi,” she nodded.
“Helpful one, her. Possibly some kind of Mossad spy without knowing it.”
“Tetsuuu,” Daichi whined.
“Do you not want to go?” Kuroo asked.
“I don't think I have a choice at this point.”
“Sure you do. You always have a choice,” Kuroo shrugged, “You could run away, take on a fake identity, become a nightclub singer in Lima. You’d look good in sequins.”
“I've already decided,” Daichi groaned, “It's not a matter of if I'm going, it's a question of... if I'm coming back.”

Kuroo swallowed, blinking at Daichi for a moment.
“This... quest is going to be pretty dangerous. Like... even more dangerous than that stuff,” she waved a vague hand towards the street outside. “So I may very well die. And I've been thinking about a lot of stuff lately. Like how much better I've gotten at magic, and how much more... natural it comes to all of us, really. Including you. Like you haven't even set the barricade on fire and you certainly were under enough stress to...”
Realization dawned in Kuroo's mind and a grin was slowly crawling onto his lips.
“I've been thinking about, you know, how magic spells don't necessarily clash because there were a lot of them flying around and nothing got blown up, at least not without intent and that made me think about,” she took a deep breath, “some past decisions and really we could all just die at any moment so...”
She looked up into a now painfully wide smirk.
“Feel free to end my suffering at any time, mister,” she said.
“No, no, this is good stuff,” Kuroo chuckled. “You were saying?”
Closing her eyes, Daichi took another slow, deep breath.
“When I come back... If I come back, I'd like us to try again, maybe?”
She was looking at him with that worried little frown of hers and Kuroo moved to take her hand in his, trying very hard to keep his smile from splitting his entire face in half.
“Tell you what,” he said, rubbing a thumb over the back of Daichi's fingers, “when you come back, because I have no doubt you will, we are going on a date, and we're cooking chicken tinola and lying on the couch watching really, really shitty horror movies while eating ice cream and that,” he kissed her hand, “is a promise.”
Daichi bit her lip and shook her head, suppressing a smile.
“Ok, it's a promise,” she said.

March 25th, 18:04, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Kindaichi Yuutarou's head was spinning. The room was at the same time too hot and too cold. His leg was hurting like hell, despite the painkillers the EMT had found for him. He was tired, he was drained and worst of all, he was being fucking cared for by the worst of people.
“I'm sorry about your friend,” Sugawara said, pulling a blanket over him and pouring him another cup of tea.
“He would have killed you if given the chance,” Kindaichi mumbled, failing to put much bite to it. If his encounter with a disturbingly sympathetic Kageyama hadn't been enough to make him miserable, there was this completely magicless creature currently occupying his space. He was being nice to him. Despite being a filthy norm, this Sugawara person was like the nicest human being in history and Kindaichi had serious trouble dealing with that revelation. Even worse, Sugawara reminded Kindaichi a little of his former boss.
That one had been impossible to understand as well. But like Sugawara, he sure did seem to look right through Kindaichi most of the time.
Part of him wanted to go back there, to go home. It was the part that regretted leaving the club and
the makeshift family he'd found there to embark on this stupid endeavour. The part that was content
to sit and chat and be pleasant for a living. The part that secretly wondered how the boss's pet norm
could be strong enough to rival the best of mages.
Kindaichi had buried that part when he decided to join the Cause, but he couldn’t really deny that,
embarrassing existence or no, Kunimi would still be alive if they'd just stayed there.

"Deep in thought?" Suga said gently.
"Why are you like this?" Kindaichi asked irritatedly.
"Like what?"
"Like this!" He waved his hand at the tea glass and the blanket. "We came here to ruin you. I tried to
kill your friends."
"Mmm," Sugawara said, straightening the blanket, "Looks like that worked out well."
Kindaichi bit his tongue to stop a curse. Sharp as his former boss too, it seemed.
"You are beneath me," he hissed instead.
Sugawara looked up with eyes deep as oceans. "Do you think I don't know how weak I am?" he
said softly.
Kindaichi blinked, face rigid.

"I'm very much aware of being a small cog," Sugawara said, locking Kindaichi in a ferocious gaze
that burned with the heat of a thousand suns, ‘I'm the 'other one', next to Daichi, next to Asahi. But
I've decided to help them succeed. Even if people think 'poor guy, he's stuck in a sanctuary being the
only staff member with no superpowers', it doesn't matter. I will do everything needed to help my
friends reach their goals. I may not have magic, but I am part of this team. And I will protect them,
however I can, even if that means bringing tea around and lending an ear to frustrated supremacist
mages."

Kindaichi swallowed and remained silent, slightly taken aback by the sheer force of this cursed
norm's willpower. He carefully sipped his tea, never once breaking eye contact, until Sugawara’s
face broke into a disarming smile and he got up to see to his other patient.

On the other side of the domed room sat Towada the shadow mage. He was shuddering, mumbling
something incoherent to himself while his eyes, wide and panicked, searched the room. He seemed
to have gotten worse in the last few minutes.

Towada’s eyes kept flicking back to a spot on the ceiling in the middle of the room, before fleeing
and travelling left and right in erratic movements. It was like he was trying to avoid it, but at the same
time felt drawn to it. Like an arachnophobe needing to make sure the spider is still in the same place
it was ten seconds ago. Towada whimpered when Sugawara crossed the floor, making shushing
noises.

Kindaichi squinted, focussing on the place Towada was so desperately trying to avoid.

There was a small black fly sitting there.

“Hey Sugawara,” Kindaichi said in a struggling voice. “Maybe you should, uh, go.”
"Hmmm?" Sugawara said, taking the cup by Towada's bed and refilling it.
"Like, go and get a coffee upstairs or something," Kindaichi repeated.
The fly tottered across the ceiling and the sight of it was making his heart beat faster. Kindaichi was
definitely sweating now, but it had a worse effect on Towada, who was trying to hide underneath his
blanket as if he was a kid scared of ghosts.

“Suga.” Kindaichi tried again. He wasn't entirely sure why he was doing this, but it was almost
stronger than himself. “Uh, yeah. G- get me a coffee, bitch.”
This caused a small chuckle.
“Yeah, yeah, just give me a moment,” Sugawara said.
“Alright. Power bars, check. Juice boxes, check. Thermos of espresso strong enough to kill a griffin
and just about enough to keep Sawamura upright, check-. Ow!”
Ennoshita rubbed the back of his head, where Daichi had just thwacked him with the end of a dish
towel.
“Melee weaponry, check...” he mumbled.
“I would suggest something slightly more sturdy as an additional weapon,” Narita proposed dryly.
“Like what?” Daichi asked. She was stuffing her face with donuts again, in a self-proclaimed effort
to load up before leaving.
“I don’t know, like a gun? I can probably get you a gun,” he said, patting his coat.
“What? No! No guns. What the hell Narita, why would you even have a gun?”
Narita froze, but Ennoshita spoke up in his stead.
“I am highly uncomfortable with weapons, Ennoshita,” Daichi groaned.
“Besides, that one,” she pointed accusingly at Kageyama, who was eating a banana at the other side
of the table, “has a full fledged sword!”
“That’s just one sword though...” Ennoshita tried.
“No.”
“At least take some smoke bombs!” Lev came waltzing in with his arms full of baubles, dropping
them on the supply table. It caused Yachi to jump away.
“Oi! Be careful with those!” Daichi shouted.

There were four backpacks on the table, one for each member of the expedition.
Ennoshita had been trying to fill them with a variety of food, medical supplies and whatever else they
might need on their trip. Yachi’s was already rather full with her battery pack and the random
survival supplies she apparently carried around on a daily basis. He dropped some smoke bombs into
Hinata and Kageyama’s pack and while Daichi started arguing with Lev, he gave his friend a
sideways glance.
Narita, raising one eyebrow conspiratorially, opened his coat and pulled out a cestus, shoving it into
the bottom of Daichi’s backpack.

March 25th, 18:19, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

A group of people came marching through the domed room, past Kindaichi Yuutarou’s bed. Four of
them were carrying backpacks and looking nervous. Even Kageyama, though she was very
obviously trying to hide it. Now there was a sight, Kindaichi thought.
They walked up to the hole in the wall and then there was a shuffle of hugs and ‘be careful’s, before
a bunch of them climbed through.
There was something about the atmosphere that Kindaichi couldn’t really read. The whole thing felt
very… final. Things only got worse once part of the group had gone.
A pregnant silence fell over the remaining people as they stood there, carefully listening to the
retreating steps.

“Do you think they'll be ok?” one of them finally asked. She was a tall pretty girl who couldn’t stop
fidgeting with her hands.
“Of course!” The enthusiastic reply came from a small woman, or that was what Kindaichi assumed.
It was hard to tell with all the bandages. “You saw the little guy fight, didn't you?” she went on,
“They’re amazing! Hinata can punch someone and Pow: asleep.”
“Alright, alright,” the third voice came from a black haired man Kindaichi recognized as the guy
who had shot him. He winced at the memory.
“There's not much we can do now except wait and prepare our defences,” the guy was saying, “I'd like to talk to you guys upstairs, so we don't bother the sick people.” He ushered the group back out. “You too Kinnoshita, I want you to check some things,” he said as he passed the doorway. The mage that had been guarding the door materialized in front of him. Kindaichi had already forgotten he was there.

“Do you think you could hold down the fort for a minute, Suga?” Kinnoshita asked.

“Mmm, no problem.”

Sugawara sat down and poured himself some tea. He inhaled the steam with a peaceful expression on his face.

After the rush of people, the room suddenly felt stifling in its silence. All Kindaichi could hear was the soft whimpers of Towada and the taps of the fly buzzing against a light bulb.

He hated it. It made him feel nervous and guilty, so he cleared his throat.

“Sugawara?” he said, and the guy looked up.

“More coffee?” he asked with a smirk, “You should probably get some rest instead.”

“No, that’s, uh, not it.”

Sugawara frowned and crossed the room to his cot. On the opposite wall, Towada stirred, finally peeking out from beneath his blanket.

“What was that all about?” Kindaichi asked, indicating the hole in the wall.

“They're off to close the gate,” Sugawara said, casually checking the bandage on Kindaichi’s leg. Behind him the light bulb shuddered to a tick-tick-tick beat of the fly hitting it.

“Huh? They shouldn’t have to do that,” Kindaichi muttered, momentarily distracted.

“It’s ok, we figured it out. There’s a spell to shut the gate and-”

“No, listen. That’s not… They really shouldn’t go there.”

Sugawara just smiled at him. “Well, sorry to throw a wrench into your plans,” he said. Behind him, Towada was muttering to himself again, making jerky rocking motions.

“Listen to me!,” Kindaichi begged, reaching for Sugawara’s shoulders, “They’ll make it worse! Please just-”

There was a very soft, surprised intake of breath and Sugawara’s face shot up.

A hand wrenched his head back by the hair.

A blade shot across his throat so fast Kindaichi could barely register it.

What he did see, was blood. Everywhere.

There was no scream, no fight.

Sugawara sagged forward with a small wet sound and eyes wide in confusion.

Behind him stood someone that Kindaichi, in the panicked blur of the moment, could only see as a silhouette with two blinking squares for eyes.

“Looks like you were just a meaningless cog after all, right mister Sugawara?” the figure said.

“Who the hell are you!” Kindaichi scrambled closer to the wall, eyes wide and skin white as a sheet.

Blinking hard, he could see that the silhouette was, in fact a man. He looked human.

He grabbed the bed sheet, using it to wipe off an elaborately carved dagger.

“My name is Takeda,” he said, checking the blade as it glinted in the dim light, “But I don’t think I’ve ever used that with you.”

“You… you’re… are you.”

“Yes yes,” he said, and he leaned forward to cut the magic blocking talisman off Kindaichi’s neck.

“What are you doing here?”

Takeda put the dagger into a small sleeve on his side and rolled his cardigan over it, pulling down on it to straighten his clothes again.

“Making sure everything goes according to plan,” he answered, and with a slightly darker look, “Making sure everyone stays on track.”

Kindaichi swallowed hard and the man gave him a small smile.

“Now then, off we go,” he said, tugging Kindaichi upright. “We’re following those four so don’t
dawdle, now. I have use of you yet.”

Takeda climbed through the hole and after a moment of hesitation, Kindaichi followed, hand briefly glowing before he made it through the wall. Behind them, Suga lay in a growing pool of blood.
Hanami

Chapter Summary

In which Ukai remembers.

March 25th, 15:05, Sendai, Japan (Vaeda time: 16:05)

Ukai Keishin kneeled before the grave and lowered his head in respect, saying a little prayer as he did. *Ukai Ikkei*, the stone read. Died at age 73, two years ago.

Same time that Ukai himself had disappeared, incidentally.

It was a pretty sad story, if you thought about it. The guy had owned a shop in Vaeda for more than thirty years. Finally retired, he came back home to his kids and died only weeks later.

Weak heart, according to the doctors. Bullshit, according to Ukai Keishin.

So he sat on his haunches in front of the plain white stone and tried to jog his memory, like he’d done every day for the last month.

The cemetery was small and calm. A good place to think.

Maybe that's why he felt drawn to it.

Or maybe he was hoping his grandfather would drop him some kind of clue as to what happened on that day.

“This still no luck?” the old priest said, drifting by slowly.

He rippled a little in the breeze, the outline of his being thin and transparent like gauze.

“Nope. Brain just doesn't wanna,” Ukai muttered. “You?”

The ghost shook his head sadly. He was missing one eye. Had been for 160 years.

Ukai didn't have the heart to tell him that he may want to look for a glass replacement instead.

So he just let him be.

He tried to leave all the ghosts alone mostly, even if some of them knew his name by now. Harmless as they may be, they creeped him the hell out.

There were several of them in this cemetery, some with more tragic stories than others.

A woman who had lost her baby and was desperately searching for it.

A man who had attempted a double suicide with a lover, which had turned out to be more of a murder, really.

A grandmother waiting for her adult son to visit her grave just once.

Restless dead, all of them, and none were his grandfather.

He supposed that was a good thing.

Sighing, he straightened up again. There was a sweet smell in the air, like the first whiff of spring.

Next to his grandfather's grave stood a sakura tree, its first buds only just starting to open.

Ukai shoved his hands in his pockets and walked to the exit.

Pretty soon, people would gather to view the cherry blossoms and have picnics in the fields. It was a thing that families and couples did, gathering to watch the flowers and celebrate the beauty of nature and all that. But it was mostly something he vaguely remembered from his crow days.

Picnics, it turned out, were great to steal food from.

He couldn't recall when his last 'human' hanami party had been.
Maybe he should ask his mom if she wanted to go and have one, just to see the incredulous look on her face.
It wasn't even a bad idea, to be honest. A blossom viewing party.
The type with blankets and large boxed lunches. Where it's just chilly enough for rosey cheeks and sweaters, but not so cold that you get uncomfortable.
With hot tea from a thermos and his lover lying on a blanket, lumpy from the grass underneath. He's giggling in between reciting poetry, the fresh new sun lighting up the dimples in his cheeks.

Ukai stopped in his tracks and blinked.
There had been someone.
Why the hell had he not know something as important as that?
Where did this guy suddenly come from?
Reaching out, he took a single bloom off a nearby tree and stared at it.
The memories didn't come back. The images in his head were fixed on that one picture of a man on a checkered blanket, gazing at the sky with not a care in the world.
Ukai couldn't remember anything more.
But there had been someone.
He twirled the flower between his fingers and let his mind wander as he marched home.

March 25th, 15:32 Sendai, Japan

“I think I'd know, dear,” Ukai's mother said, raising an eyebrow.
“And you're absolutely sure I wasn't seeing anyone?” Ukai asked again.
“Of course I'm sure! I can tell you, it would have certainly eased my worried heart a little,” she began. “I was hoping you'd settle down and just find someone nice, even before all that business—”
“Mom...” Ukai dragged the palm of his hand over his face just as a bell chimed in the next room.
“Suit yourself,” she said, raising her hands before trotting off to check on her oven.

There had been someone. He was certain.
The thought was weirdly alien to him and the whole thing felt annoyingly sappy, but that image wasn't some random friend he'd forgotten about.
The feelings attached to the memory made that much clear.
It just made little sense that he would hide this.
Maybe he'd kept it to himself because it was a guy. Or more likely, he was trying to stop his mother from suffocating the poor dude.
But there had been someone.
It was a start, at least. Something new to cling to while he looked for clues in the thick fog that was his brain.
Because he did want to know what had happened to him. Since Yachi left, and as his life went back to some semblance of normal, something like a deep curiosity had taken hold of him. He still didn't want anything to do with magic, but if that's what it took, so be it.
He had to know. And this was the closest he'd gotten since.
“I need to go out for a minute,” he yelled at his mother, “could you mind the store?”

March 25th, 15:51 Sendai, Japan

Deep in thought, Ukai walked around the neighbourhood, checking with old friends.
None of them had seen him with anyone, either.
It was like there was this person-shaped hole in everyone's memory except his, and he was the one
battling magic induced amnesia.

His final stop was the local eatery. He definitely remembered the waitress here, all blonde hair and cleavage.

She, also, had not seen him with anyone else. But she gave him a beer – “the usual” – and a wink. He sipped it grumpily, staring out the window, when something dawned on him.

_The bitter taste of beer, coupled with something sweeter. Sake perhaps._

The man had tasted of alcohol and it was very obvious that he was a lightweight. He'd definitely needed someone to safely guide him back home and Ukai hadn't minded one bit.

Straining his head, Ukai walked out again, following traces of a memory down the street, past several blocks until he entered a quiet lane on the outskirts of town. There were a few houses here, small ones with neat little gardens. They all looked alike.

Ukai’s mind went blank and he cursed under his breath.

“Oh! Hello, I haven't seen you in ages.”

To his left, an older woman was sitting in her front garden. She was wearing a hat and gloves, and was in the middle of planting seedlings.

“Uh... ma'am?”

“Have you come to clear out the house?” she asked, face in a concerned pout, “You two were close, weren't you?”

“Uhhhh...”

“It's a sad state of affairs”, she went on, nodding to a small house across the street. “Have they still not found him? Is he... do you think he’s... dead?”

She gave him a pitying look while Ukai's mind raced to come up with some suitable answer.

“Oh, no,” he said. “We don't know, so there's still, uh, hope, I guess.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I'm just here to pay my respects. Maybe look around to find clues.”

That seemed to do the trick.

“The police haven't even been once, can you imagine?” she said. “A well respected man, a high school teacher, just up and disappears and they don't even go looking.”

“Yes, terrible...” Ukai mumbled as the woman shook her head.

He bowed to her and crossed the street to the house she’d pointed out. It looked fairly modern, but wasn't well taken care of. Someone had taped the mailbox shut and the tiny garden was overgrown with weeds. Dirt had accumulated on the windows. The place looked like it hadn't been lived in for months, perhaps years.

_Two years_, a voice in the back of his head helpfully provided.

That would just be his luck, wouldn't it?

Out of a strange sense of politeness, Ukai rang the doorbell.

If he was going to break into someone's house, he would at least make sure they really, really weren't home. But now that it became clear that no one was just going open the door for him, Ukai was faced with a new problem. He was not a burglar.

Surveying the scene, he wondered if any ex-lover of his would be so clichéd as to leave a key under the doormat. Lifting the moldy thing with his foot, he noticed with some minor pride that no, his lover had not been quite that lame.

And then he looked to his left and saw a small flower pot on the window sill.

_Aww man._

The pot was just dirt, whatever plant once lived in it long since gone, but there was indeed a key there, stashed in the space between the pot and the little dish it rested on.

Rolling his eyes, Ukai took it and carefully opened the door;

Inside, the house was remarkably clean.

It felt as if someone had packed up everything before leaving.

Like they were going on vacation and wanted to keep the place in order for when they got back.
He wouldn't be surprised if they'd turned off the gas. But it was dusty, though. Several months – two years, the voice in his head said – of stale air hung in the little front hall. Ukai pondered for a second if he should be a polite guest and take his shoes off when entering the place, but part of him already assumed he'd find something that would have him running. This was the part that also mentioned that, really, he should just leave. Instead, he compromised by keeping his sneakers on. He coughed awkwardly as he stepped into the hallway. “Hello?” he tried. Nothing. Alright then.

Walking through the house, pieces of memory trickled in. There was a couch in the living room where they'd sat together, watching some historical drama that Ukai wasn't interested in, but that the man seemed very passionate about. In the small kitchen right next to it, Ukai remembered cooking his mother's pork curry recipe and how red his lover's cheeks had become upon trying it. A shelf in the hallway held a large array of theatre texts and poetry, as well as some very worn books about the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. He remembered the way the man's eyes lit up whenever he found an opportunity to talk about things like an iambic pentameter or kanshi poetry. “What a dork,” Ukai hummed, smiling to himself.

Making his way from room to room, he grew increasingly anxious about where this mysterious lover had gone to. Parts of the house felt off. Random pieces of furniture were missing. Places where he'd expect something like a coffee table just had a blank space. It wouldn't even be noticeable, if Ukai wasn't already feeling a certain sense of dread. Mentally kicking himself for being such a coward, he slowly, carefully, headed up the stairs.

There was a bedroom here, and the mere sight of it flooded Ukai with the kind of thoughts that made him blush. Yup, definitely more than just friends. Next to it was a small bathroom and then another door, which was locked. Frowning, he tried the door again, then went back into the bedroom to check for a key. When he couldn't find one in any of the super obvious places, he shrugged. He'd come this far, he may as well go all the way. In a move he'd seen in a film ages ago, he braced his back against the wall and kicked the door's lock out. The room beyond was dark. In the light falling in from the doorway, it looked like an office. Shuffling toward the window, Ukai managed to hit his knee against a small table, a desk and at least one chair. Cursing, he pulled open the curtains and turned around.

It hit him like a runaway train. The pictures on the wall, the scraps of text littering the floor, the books, the plans, the computers. Images rushed at him with the speed of a fire storm, scraps of memories bearing down on him so fast he threatened to drown in them. The memories of curry and evenings on the couch had been good, but they weren't the only ones. What played out in the whirlwind coursing through his head now was the story of a relationship steadily degrading over what must have been months. It was one man changing a little, day by day, so that you didn't see the transformation until it was much too late. It was two people clinging to each other while mercilessly drifting apart. There were fights and make-out sessions, there were shouting matches, too, and Ukai wasn't proud
of the fact that he seemed to do most of the shouting.
“What are you hiding? What are you so scared about?”
“Are you in trouble? I’m worried sick!”
“Why are we scurrying around like this is some secret affair? We’re not doing anything wrong, for fuck’s sake!”
“Will you fucking talk to me!”
There was erratic behaviour, with his lover cold and distant one day, shyly affectionate the next. There were nights lying awake, fretting over something that had been so good, and now seemed lost forever. And the more time went on, the more the fights outweighed the peaceful moments, all of it culminating in this one room that looked like the sanctuary of a conspiracy theorist.
It was so much that Ukai wanted to vomit. What he needed, was air.
He sprinted down the stairs, stopping just when he entered the hallway, where something compelled him to glance into the small dining area near the front of the house.
That was a mistake.
The place that had seemed so cosy before, looked alien now, darker. The image that came back to him was a damned nightmare.
The body of his grandfather on the floor, the coffee table cracked, wet with spilled tea. There are flies everywhere and his lover is holding an elaborately carved knife.
When he looks up, there is sadness in his eyes. A deep purple mist forms at his feet.
Not wanting to see more than this, Ukai yanked open the door and ran outside. The image followed after him.
“I’m sorry” he says, and his voice is strangely flat. “Humans are silly like this, always letting their emotions run them too close to the fire.”
He pushes his glasses further up his nose and Ukai is transfixed, unable to move as the mist climbs his way, creeping over his toes and slowly crawling up his legs.
“I didn’t want you to get hurt,” the man says as the mist climbs up. “I really did try to stay away but I’m afraid that I, too, am human after all. Forgive me, Keishin.”
There’s a sharp sting behind Ukai’s eyes and it feels like his body is contorting into a hundred different directions at once. The pain is almost unbearable. Just when he thinks he cannot possibly handle any more of this, his brain shuts off and everything goes black.

Ukai sprinted full tilt out of the garden and down the street, weaving like a drunkard while his mind just kept serving up horrible images.
It took two blocks before he felt calm enough to slow his step. He sat down on a staircase and pulled out a cigarette, lighting it while he waited for the cloud of thoughts in his head to settle.
“Fuck,” he said to no one in particular. He took a deep drag and blew out a cloud of smoke, letting the puzzle pieces fall into place.
Slowly, very slowly, one idea rose to the top. It was a niggling little feeling that grew and bloomed while Ukai inhaled, exhaled, inhaled, until it was right in front of him.
“Fuck,” he mumbled again, and he pulled out his phone. He dialled a number in his contacts, and swore when it clicked to a pre-recorded message.
“Um. Hello. This is the voice mail of Yachi Hitoka. I’m very sorry! I can’t pick up right now but, uhhh, please leave a message if you don’t mind!”
The marble maze

Chapter Summary

In which four people try to make their way to a demon gate.

Chapter Notes

This is 4k of exposition and misplaced slapstick and I'm sorry.

March 25th, 18:23, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Kageyama Tobio allowed herself to drift along with the others. Even if she wasn't much of a 'follower', it was nice to let someone else do the thinking for a bit. At the very least it gave her brain some time to cool down. It was overworked and woozy, making it hard for her to focus on anything. They were carefully making their way through an underground tunnel in what turned out to be quite an extensive network. The ghost of old lady Nekomata had failed to mention that, next to the domed rooms under the museum and the coffee shop, there were other roads. One seemed to branch off towards the Eagle Theater and after that they passed many more, as if half of the buildings in the Old Quarter had their very own forgotten magic gym.

The only reason that they weren’t completely lost, was because they were following the gps in Yachi’s smartphone. She was leading them West in the hopes of finding an exit there, closer to their actual goal and farther away from any lingering mobs of angry magic users.

“I don’t think we’re deep enough to go under the river like this,” Daichi said, checking the little paper tourist map she’d brought along.

Yachi nodded. “We should try to find a door before then. It seems unlikely that this network would extend across the river, since that was where Papa Tatsu had his headquarters.”

The region that now spanned the Light District and Central had been the basis of Papa Tatsu’s government. That’s what Yachi had deduced from an old map in her book and a painting she’d seen in the museum. She had somehow remembered all of this despite the explosions and general chaos that happened after. This mildly impressed Kageyama, who had already forgotten the name of the government leader they were chasing until Yachi said it just now.

“And we’re going to, uh, this Tatsu’s old palace or… something,” she said.

“Kageyama did you even pay attention?” Hinata shot at her.

“Of course I did! I just like to go over our plans, so we all know what we’re doing. Briefings are standard military practice,” she huffed, adding a ‘dumbass’ for good measure.

She had been paying attention, she really had. Mostly to the food she was consuming all through the part where everyone talked over each other.

Yachi nodded eagerly, quite happy to explain her ideas again.

“Since we know that Papa Tatsu was trying to open the big demon gate,” she said, “It would make sense for him to at least have an easy way to get there. So I looked up where his most important buildings were when he was in charge. The ones with all the, um, guards and the high walls. And then I recalculated those to this map of current day Vaeda.”
She showed Kageyama a colourful map on her phone. “Now this,” she indicated a red dot at the very north of the map, “is where his summer palace was. It has since been razed to the ground, but it's on the slopes of Vaeda mountain, so it should be next to the dragon’s cave, yes?”
Kageyama nodded slowly.
“And this,” she swiped around and zoomed in on a blue dot at the edge of the Light District, “is where he had is headquarters built.”
“So we're searching his old palace,” Kageyama said slowly.
“The palace is no longer there,” Daichi said, waving her tourist map.
“Right,” Yachi said, “but we have fairly close approximation of where its most guarded quarters were. There’s something the revolutionaries of the time called ‘the Vault’. You can see it right here on the map.”
She held the book out.

Daichi took the leather bound book and frowned at it. “I don’t see anything,” she mumbled. Hinata sidled up and looked over her shoulder. “Whoah,” he said, “it’s nothing but scribbles.” Scowling, Kageyama shoved him out of the way to peek at the book herself. Letters were dancing across the page. They didn't stand still long enough to read and trying to focus on even a single word made her eyes hurt and her head feel light.
“How do you make any sense of this?” Kageyama asked while Daichi leafed through the book, looking sceptical.
“It’s not a map?” Yachi said, doubt quickly clouding her expression.
“Maybe you’re the only one who can read the book,” Hinata said with wide eyes. “Is that a thing, Kageyama? Like security or something.”
She just shrugged. “I guess.”
Daichi closed the book and handed it back, squeezing her eyes shut. “We’re just gonna have to rely on you,” she said.
“Oh! Um,” Yachi hesitated, “do you, um, not want to do it? We can go back and find an alternative maybe, I-”
“It's our best lead,” Daichi said, “besides, you haven’t been wrong yet, or so I hear.” Slowly, Yachi nodded.
“Right, let’s go then.”

Excerpt from the leather bound book

The river Vaeda has its source in the mountains in the middle of the island and meanders south to the sea, effectively cutting the city of Vaeda in half. Twenty five bridges connect the two banks to each other, the most famous of these being the Old Carmelite Bridge. Finished in 1806, the elaborate cast iron bridge was built to connect the Old Quarter's Carmelite Boulevard on the east bank to the newly built governmental palace on the west side of the river. The massive classicist building still known as the Governor's House currently functions as the seat of the Vaeda Parliament.
Of the twelve official Vaeda boroughs, five are located on the eastern side of the river. These include the historic Old Quarter, as well as business hubs Central and Finance, and the residential areas of the Village and the View.
On the western bank of the Vaeda river one can find the Light District, best known now for it's night life. To the south lies the governmental centre of New Quarter and, by the sea, the residential district known as Mariana. Further west are the Harbour district and Commerce. On the slopes of the mountains to the north is the suburban North District.
The only borough that spans both banks of the Vaeda river is the Garden District, in the mountains to the north of the town.
When the underground path they had been following finally ended, it wasn’t on another bricked up doorway or even a domed room, but on a very simple, flimsy looking, wooden door. Frowning, Kageyama removed the bar before it and tried the handle. It opened without much fuss, save for a small tortured whine. Behind it was an old basement. There were tools here, old pots and wooden chests that had been untouched for decades. The faded poster on the wall advertised tapeworms as a means to lose weight.

Hinata wrinkled his nose.

“Um!”, Yachi piped up, “are we, uh, officially breaking and entering now?”

“Probably,” Daichi grumbled, walking across the room and trying the handle on the next door. This one was made of iron and led to a hallway that had a lot less dust in it. A little sign was glued to the outside of the door: ‘Stockroom 14-b, Authorized personnel only’.

“That’s one way to keep people out, I guess,” Daichi remarked, flicking her flash light down the hall.

“Where to now?”

“Are we, um, sure about this?” Yachi tried again.

“Too late to back down now,” Kageyama shrugged, heading down the hall towards what she assumed was the river. Hinata gave Yachi a reassuring smile.

The place they’d ended up in was some kind of maintenance network, and the four of them wandered around for a good half hour, occasionally retracing their steps and entering more and more modern hallways until they finally opened a door that led them outside. They were standing on the banks of the Vaeda river, on a stonework footpath just below street level.

Kageyama breathed in the night air. The city smelled of smoke and there were sirens in the distance, but otherwise it was eerily quiet.

Like everyone had buggered off and gone home.

With any luck that included the rioters and the random minotaurs, she thought.

March 25th, 19:16, ???, ???

The room was a big box, about four metres square across, and four metres high, and made entirely out of white carrera marble. There were no windows in the walls, just a thin gold trim running the length of the room, on which golden candle lamps were hung. There also wasn't really any furniture, except a blackboard leaning against one wall.

In the middle of the floor, on the bare marble tiles, sat a small round imp. It had greenish blue skin and teeny tiny wings. It could be considered cute, if it weren't for the whip-like horn coming out of the middle of his head.

Opposite him sat a tall, thin demon. He seemed to mostly consist of limbs, with a flash of golden hair and spikes all over his skin. From the middle of his forehead, three large black horns grew. This one would look rather fearsome if he wasn’t currently staring in utter confusion at a makeshift game of checkers in front of him.

“Ha! I win again!” the imp cheered as he made a round stone skip across the board, taking out the last of his opponent's pieces.

“Damnit! I thought I was getting better,” his opponent moaned. He crossed his arms and huffed.

“You are getting better, Koganegawa,” the imp said happily. “It’s taking me more turns to beat you now, so that's something.”

He got up and chalked an extra line on the blackboard.

'Score', the top of the board read, with underneath it 'Koganegawa – Sakunami'. The right column
had 1446 points, the left had 1, from when Sakunami had accidentally knocked over the game and
given up the win as a matter of consequence.
“You really are getting better,” the imp repeated, “please don’t give up.”
“I’ll definitely beat you some day,” Koganegawa grumbled.
His friend nodded encouragingly.
“But I’ve had just about enough for now. Let’s do rounds?”

Sakunami nodded and picked up an enormous spear, about five times his length, and hoisted it on his
shoulder as he opened the door. His companion grabbed a club leaning against the wall and followed
him, into the marble hallway beyond.

March 25th, 20:21, Light District, Vaeda

“This should be it,” Yachi said, pointing across the street.
“That?” Daichi Sawamura raised an eyebrow.
“The coordinates for the Vault on the map correspond with a spot about ten metres behind the
façade, so this is the closest we can get.”
The building in front of them was a single story concrete rectangle with a small car park. The whole
thing was painted in soft pink and brightly lit with white neon. A sign in the front said 'Sharon
Bowling' in big, excited letters.
“So, uh, how do we get there?” Hinata asked.
“Hmm, we could find a way under it maybe,” Kageyama suggested.
“Oooh, like in heist movies!” Hinata piped up, “They always go in via the sewer or the ventilation
shaft, maybe we can open a cover around here and-”
“Ok, no. Absolutely not.” Daichi stopped the boy in his tracks, holding up two hands in what she
considered her most firm 'not happening' gesture.
“But...” the boy protested.
“No. Let me make it very clear that traipsing through the shit of several million people is my personal
very last resort,” Daichi added. “So any alternative we find, we try first.”
Hinata deflated a little.
“Um, it looks like it’s open?” Yachi said.
“What? You think we can just walk in?” Kageyama turned and stared at the building across the
street.
“That seems to be the case, yes,” Yachi said.
“Oh.” Both Kageyama and Hinata seemed mildly disappointed.
Daichi wasn't. “Let’s go bowling,” she grinned.

The sound of bland rockabilly greeted them when they pushed through the glass and aluminium
doors.
The place looked old and pretty run down. It reminded Daichi of the bowling alley in her home
town. That one, too, had existed since the sixties and hadn't really considered such fancy terms as
'remodelling' in all that time. It was all wooden floors and bright soda ads on the walls. The whole
room smelled vaguely of dust and mildew, with only the briefest hint of wax.
Unlike the one in her home town, however, this one was completely empty. It made sense,
considering the, uh, riots.
The only person here was a young man sitting behind a glass divider near the entrance, probably the
cashier. He was in the far corner of the office, in front of a computer screen, and he was talking into
a headset.
“Just a sec,” he shouted when he noticed them come in.
Daichi motioned her companions to check the place out while she waited for the kid to pay them
some form of attention.
After what felt like minutes, the kid pushed back his chair and took off the headset. The word ‘victory’ was splashed across his screen.

“Welcome to Sharon Bowling, ma'am, how can I help you?” he said in a flat drone.

“Entry for four,” Daichi said.

“Sure, any pref for a lane?” the kid behind the glass asked.

Daichi eyed Yachi, who’d been walking around, staring at her phone.

“Anything specific?” she called out to her.

“The one at the end, please,” the blonde said after some consideration, “Number 9.”

“No can do, ma'am. Any other lane?” the kid drawled, taking a pen to a big ledger next to his cash register.

“What do you mean ‘no can do’?” Daichi grumbled. “The place is empty!”

“That one’s out of commission,” the kid said, without looking up, “How about 8?”

“I don’t see a sign,” Kageyama interjected, already moving toward that point where she would start shouting.

The kid just sighed. “I can’t give you 9, because it hasn’t worked since forever. They can’t fix it and it would look bad to have a sign put up for decades at a time. So we just don’t hire it out. Now, do you want 8 or not?”

“What’s wrong with it?” Hinata asked.

“If they knew that, don’t you think they’d fix it?” the kid grumbled. When four pairs of eyes, one of them glaring daggers, kept staring at him, he added “It eats bowling balls, ok?”

Now he was just getting blinked at.

“Don’t look at me, that’s what the boss says. About half of the balls thrown at it just disappear. Some of the pins too. It's a bit of an urban legend around here. That's why they disabled the mechanism on that lane and you can't play,” he leaned back and crossed his arms. “So. Are you going to take lane 8 or what?”

“Fine,” Daichi said, putting money down. “Do we need to rent shoes?”

“Do I look like I want to clean those up?” the kid said. “Just play already. There’s a vending machine in the corner if you want a drink.”

And with that, he turned around and went back to his computer.

“Alright, I'm back,” Daichi heard him say, “Let’s go.”

“So. There’s probably something up with that pin gate,” Daichi mused when they'd walked into the alley proper, out of earshot of the cashier.

“I dunno, it doesn’t look like a demon gate to me,” Hinata said doubtfully, “There’s no demons coming out of it, for one.”

“If it ‘eats’ bowling balls it might be a doorway to the place where the real gate is?” Daichi suggested, “I mean I was kinda hoping there wasn't a mouth into hell right in the middle of a city, you know.”

“Oh, like a warp gate?” Yachi was already busily rifling through her book.

“Is that a thing that exists?” Hinata asked.

“I don’t know, we would have to get closer to look,” Kageyama mumbled, “We should have a lookout in case the cashier wants to stop us.”

“I honestly don’t think he cares what we do as long as we don’t set fire to the place,” Daichi answered. The kid was busily shouting into his headset and clicking away at his screen. She couldn’t really make out what he was saying but it involved wards, apparently.

She took a ball and threw it down the lane, hitting six pins in a move she was more than a little proud of.

“Oh dear,” she said in a dramatic tone, “I lost my ball! I guess I’ll have to retrieve it.”

“That’s not how bowling works, Daichi,” Hinata hissed.

“I know,” Daichi said, making her way to the end of the lane. She was quickly followed by her companions.
They crouched near the pin deck of lane number 9 and peered inside. It looked pretty normal.
“I wonder if there's a spell to open it,” Kageyama said.
“Like a keyword?” Yachi asked.
She nodded.
“What like 'strike'?” Hinata said.
“Or maybe we can just slide through if we go fast enough or something. Like in Harry Potter?”
Daichi suggested.
“What's Harry Potter?” Kageyama asked.
Yachi and Daichi turned to stare at her, horrified, while Hinata crawled into the opening on all fours.
“Man, this is really dusty,” he said, voice muffled, “there’s nothing down here but the mechanism for the- whooaah.”
And with that, he sunk into the floor.
“Hinata!” Kageyama lunged and grabbed his foot, only to be dragged along.

March 25th, 20:28, ???, ???

“Ow,” Hinata Shouyou whined, rubbing his head. “Hey, get your leg out of my face.”
“What the fuck,” came the groaned reply.
Hinata fought off a random limb and turned around to find Kageyama looking anything but graceful.
“You totally face planted,” he giggled.
“Shut up, I was trying to save you,” Kageyama grumbled, “where the hell are we?”
She pushed up on her arms and squinted at her surroundings.
The both of them were in a marble hallway, on top a huge pile of bowling balls.
“Good thing these are here,” Hinata noted, “it looks like a long way down.”
Next to him, Kageyama was scrabbling to sit up.
“Did we come from up there?” she asked when she’d pulled herself together. She pointed at the ceiling. If you looked at it from just the right angle, you could see a shimmering circle.
“Yeah,” Hinata said
“Uh, then we should probably get out of the way in case-”
“Yeeeeeeek!”
Down came a frightened Yachi, followed not long after by Daichi dropping onto a confused pile of human.
“Ouch!”
“Sorry, sorry.”
“That's my kidney you're poking.”
“Ow!”
“Excuse me.”
Hinata squeezed out of the mess and slowly slid down the pile, helping Yachi and the others to get to solid ground.
“Well that went, uh, smooth,” Daichi said, dusting herself; “where are we?”
Yachi instinctively looked at her phone.
“It’s not finding a location,” she pouted.
“This is most likely some alternate world,” Kageyama said. “Like a secret palace that the Tetsu man built.”
“Cooool” Hinata said. Next to him, Yachi made a little worried noise.
“What's up?” Daichi asked her.
“If he built it, there may be some traps or security measures left.”
Kageyama nodded. “We’d best be careful. Let's look around.”
March 25th, 21:51, Secret Palace, ???

While they weren’t entirely sure where they were, they did figure out quickly that the place was fancy, seeing as how it was made entirely out of marble and gilded wood.
It was also, Kageyama Tobio noticed, a fucking maze.
The hallways seemed to go on forever and looked utterly alike. Most of the doors were locked or led to empty rooms. There was nothing in the way of windows or decorations or anything that could give them any indication as to where the hell they were supposed to go.
Finally, after walking around for what seemed like forever, they came upon a set of double doors, larger and more elaborately carved than the others.
Frustrated, Kageyama jiggled the handle and with a small click, they swung open, revealing a large hall with a podium at the front.
Next to her, Daichi let out a low whistle. This place was enormous.
The floor was a flat expanse of black and white marble tiles and the ceiling was high enough for it to be some kind of concert hall. A large chandelier hung in the centre of the room, all candles burning.
Near the podium, Kageyama could see balconies with what looked like box seats.

“Who’s that?” Hinata pointed to a large portrait hanging on the other side of the room. It spanned most of the wall.
He ran up to it, feet slapping on the floor and echoing across the empty room.
“Be quiet, dumbass!” Kageyama shouted after him, her voice bouncing loudly between the walls.
The portrait showed two men, side by side, in the kind of pose you’d see war heroes in. One of them was small, with wild, wispy white hair and a grumpy expression on his face. He was saluting.
The other was much taller. He looked more like a scholar, but also kind of like a horse. His hair was dark and slicked back, and he had a long face with thin eyebrows and squinting eyes. The man had crossed arms and was puffing out his chest. He looked stern, like some sort of bureaucrat, the kind that wouldn’t give you the paper you needed unless you’d filled in fifty different forms just for the hell of it.
A banner hung above the frame: 'To Our Fathers of Hope'.
“That’s the Shepherd dude,” Hinata said in a stage whisper, pointing to the short man.
Yachi nodded. “I don’t recognize the other one though,” she said. “Was he at the museum?”
Hinata scratched his head and shrugged. “Maybe he’s like an advisor or something?”
“I don't know, he seems important,” she said.
“The shadow behind the throne?” Daichi mused.
“Unless the shadow behind the fucking throne tells us how to get to the demon gate, he’s useless,” Kageyama grumbled.
What she needed, was a map. At this rate they'd never even make it out of here.
“Kageyama, do you just hate everything?” Hinata groaned, “we are in a super cool weird magic palace and-
The four of them froze, straining their ears.
There was a definite ‘something’, a soft, slapping rhythm, like a slow clap coming their way.
“Footsteps,” Kageyama whispered.

March 25th, 21:56, Secret Palace, ???

Koganegawa Tanji walked down a large marble hallway he'd paced thousands of times before, feeling excited.
For several hundred years, nothing had happened at all. He'd get up, do rounds, talk with Sakunami, play some checkers, and then do rounds again before bed. The first three years after everyone left, he'd take the time to cook, also. He'd gotten really good at a salted beef noodle dish before the
ingredients ran out. Not that he needed food, or even sleep. It just posed a nice distraction. There had been precious little of that since.

And now, 246 years, 6 months, 2 weeks and 4 days after the last person from the garrison left, someone was shouting.

Following the sound, Koganegawa came upon the doors to the Great Hall, which were swung wide open.

How odd!

He could barely contain himself.

Koganegawa strengthened his grip on the club and put on his most menacing face before he entered the room.

A single orange haired boy stood in the middle of the floor.

“Hi?” he said.

By all the demons in hell, this was exciting. He'd been waiting and practising for this for centuries.

Koganegawa drew himself up to his full height, which was a rather impressive feat, and growled.

“WHO DARES WALK THE HALLS OF THE GREAT LEADERS?” he bellowed, noting with some satisfaction that the kid grew pale.

“Uh, I’m Hinata and I got lost?” he squeaked.

“ARE YOU PREPARED TO FACE THE TRIALS OF THE INTRUDER?”

“Excuse me?” Hinata said.

This was even better than anticipated. Koganegawa was about to get into the speech of the 'Seven Trials Testing Those Who Would Invade the Palace of the Fathers of the Revolution', when a shiver ran down his spiky spine. The unmistakable cold edge of a sword rested on his bare back.

“Move a muscle and this gets shoved straight through you, demon,” a voice said behind him. It sounded high, young even, but the menace in it was hard to ignore.

“Whoa whoa, hold on a second,” Koganegawa said.

“Who the fuck are you?” the voice at his back barked.

“Hey! That’s my line- ow owowowow.” The sword was now poking him. This was not going as planned.

“Alright, alright! I’m the guard here,” he said, dropping the club and putting up his hands. “Ow, will you quit it?”

“How many guards?” the voice insisted.

“Like I’ll tell you that, intruder! Oow!”

Koganegawa winced and rolled his back, trying to get away from the mean person poking him. His ears perked up when he heard a second voice and the eyes of the redhead before him went wide.

“Drop the sword,” the voice said, clear and bright like a sulphur spring.

“Sakunami?”

“I got your back, buddy,” the imp replied, “now drop the sword, witch.”

There was shuffle and the sound of metal hitting the marble floor.

“Turn around. Slowly.”

Koganegawa turned around, hands above his head. Behind him stood a young woman, also with her hands above her head. She glared from Koganegawa to Sakunami, who held a spear at her throat, all the way from the doorway.

“Who are you two?” he said.

He was trembling a little, looking either mortified or furious, Koganegawa wasn’t entirely sure.

“We’re just, uh, travellers passing through?” the orange haired boy tried.

“Koganegawa, get over here,” Sakunami motioned. “And you, stop that or I’ll attack.”

The girl’s eyes were glowing. It didn’t seem like she was listening.

“Right. Now,” Sakunami shouted, and he raised his spear.

Before he could do anything more, however, a bubble shield plopped down around the two intruders.
“Alright, everyone calm the hell down.”
A third voice came from behind the door and a woman stepped up, skin glowing with white patterns. Behind her, the head of a small blonde peeked out.
“Who the hell are YOU?” Sakunami said exasperatedly, pointing his spear at her.
“I’m someone who doesn’t have time for this shit. You, put that spear down or our witch over there will turn you into mush.”
“No, you put her down,” Koganegawa pointed at the girl with the glowing eyes. “The spell, I mean. Not the… WHATEVER.” He growled in frustration.
“Ok, um, how about we all just step, uh, down,” the small blonde said in a cracking voice. “Please? We promise not to hurt you and you promise not to hurt us. Does that sound like a good idea? On three, ok?”
Sakunami nodded slowly, as did the red haired boy.
“Alright. One, two… three.”
The bubble popped and Hinata slapped the girl on the back of the head, breaking whatever ability she was using and making her whirl around to shout at him.
Sakunami carefully placed his spear on the floor.
“Alright, everyone be cool. Are we all cool?” the bubble woman asked.
“It’s not particularly cold here...” Koganegawa mumbled in confusion.
She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Fine.”
In the middle of the room, Hinata and the young witch were fighting.
“And cut that out!” the tired woman shouted at them.
She sighed and stood up straight. “Ok, now that we’re all not actively trying to murder each other,” she threw a sideways glare at the other two intruders, “Hello, we are travellers just passing through. My name is Daichi, that one is Kageyama and this one,” she stepped aside to show the frightened blonde, “is Yachi. You are palace guards or something, right?”
Koganegawa, mildly stunned by the pure tired frustration dripping from this woman, nodded meekly.
“Alright, then take me to your leader, I guess.”
Transit

Chapter Summary

In which our heroes try to make it to the Gate.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March 25th, 22:04, Secret Palace, ???

“Alright, then take me to your leader, I guess,” Sawamura Daichi groaned.
The demon and the imp looked at each other.
“Uh, can’t do that,” the tall one said, while the other shook his head.
“Isn’t that what you do?” Daichi asked, “you capture us and then take us to Tatsu or the other one.
You know the ‘fathers’ or whatever.” She waved in the direction of the large painting.
“They’re not here,” Koganegawa pouted.
“Everyone left,” Sakunami said.
“Then who’s in charge?” Kageyama huffed.
“We are.”
“You are?” she said doubtfully.
Sakunami nodded.
“The two of you?”
To Daichi, they didn’t look like they should be put in charge of anything.
Especially the tall one.
“Yes,” Koganegawa said. “The fathers of the revolution gave us the very important task of guarding
the palace and the route to the-"
“Shhhhhhhhh!” the imp interrupted him.
“The gate?” Hinata asked. He was beaming, which seemed to frighten the imp. “You were going to
say ‘gate’, yes? You guys know how to get to there?”
“I… we don’t… uh… we won’t tell you anything, intruders!” Koganegawa sputtered, standing to
attention.
“So they do know,” Kageyama said and she dropped down to pick up her sword, “Let’s beat it out
of them.”
“We are not beating ANYONE,” Daichi said through gritted teeth and Kageyama took a small,
cautious step back.

“Excuse me,” Yachi piped up, emerging from somewhere behind Daichi’s back, “When was this,
when, order given?”

“On the 170th day of the Glorious Revolution. We have steadfastly guarded these halls, never
wavering, until your arrival this very moment,” Koganegawa said proudly.
“Wow,” Hinata said. “But that was ages ago! Have you guys been alone here all this time?”
Koganegawa nodded and the boy knitted his brows.
“Isn’t that lonely? Don’t you get bored?” he asked.
“Of course not. We play checkers! And we do rounds and…” Koganegawa deflated a little.
“Either way, we are here to stop people like you,” Sakunami said. He elbowed his friend in the knee,
making him straighten up and nod.
“Oh, the food ran out ages ago- Ow.”
The imp prodded Koganegawa again. “Focus,” he muttered.

“That sounds awful,” Hinata said.

“Stop sympathizing with the demons, dumbass,” Kageyama grunted at him.
But she was entirely too late to change that sentiment. Yachi stepped up, lip trembling a little.
“You were waiting here all this time?” she said, voice cracking. “With no food? With no visitors? It’s been two hundred years!”
“More like 246,” Koganegawa said, “and 6 months, 2 weeks, 4 days…”
A single tear ran down the blonde’s cheek.
“Oh, oh dear, please don’t cry,” Sakunami said. He was blushing now, and obviously flustered.
“It’s fine, really. It’s what we’re here for.”
He looked helplessly at his friend, while Daichi patted Yachi on the shoulder.
“Man, that’s a lot of back pay,” she sighed. “I’d have walked out ages ago.”
She took off her backpack and was absent-mindedly rifled through it.
“Back… pay?” Koganegawa asked.

“That’s not how demons work, Daichi,” Kageyama said. She sheathed her sword and sat on the floor, arms crossed. “They don’t get paid. They form a contract and then they’re bound to it.”
“That’s awful,” Hinata interjected.
“Yeah, well, they’re demons,” the hunter shrugged.
“When does the contract end?” he asked.
“When the contractor dies, usually.”

“So what are your orders?” Daichi said, pulling a sandwich out of her backpack.
“To guard and secure the route to the Grand Gate,” Koganegawa recited. “For the Honour and further Glory of the Magical Revolution.”
Daichi was pretty sure she could hear the capitals. “Mmm,” she mumbled, munching some smoked cheese on rye. “honour and glory, hm?”
“Wait,” the blonde said, “but that’s where we’re going.”
“Nu uh,” Koganegawa shook his head. “We’re making sure you won’t get there.”
“Um. But doesn’t your order say you should guard the route?” Yachi said, “No one told you to stop us, right? You just have to make sure it stays nice and safe while we travel to the gate, yes?”
Daichi frowned for a moment, before it dawned on her what her friend was trying to do.
She swallowed down a bite.
“Yes!” she said, coughing a little, “to make sure we, uh, don’t break anything. Right? That’s the order, isn’t it? For the Honour and Glory of the Revolution and all that.”
Hinata and Kageyama were now looking at her as if she’d gone mad, but Yachi nodded enthusiastically.
The demon and the imp blinked at each other.
“Hold on for just a moment,” Sakunami said, and he pulled his friend out into the hallway.

Daichi leaned against the wall and tried to listen in on the demon’s hushed conversation. She could only make out little snippets, most of which came from the larger demon.
“What do you mean ‘technically’?” he was saying, before his friend whispered at him in a softer voice.
“Well it certainly felt like a hunter blade, Sakunami. It really hurt, you know!”

“But there’s four of them.”

“What, like a back-up?”
“Shame, they’re both the nice ones.”
…
“Well why can’t we just ask them?”
…
“Ok? Ok. This is so exciting, I can’t believe it’s finally happening.”

When the two of them came back in, the imp was sitting on the demon’s shoulder.
“Alright, so we have-” he started saying, when he was interrupted by his friend.
“REJOICE. FOR WE HAVE DECIDED TO TAKE YOU TO THE GATE.” He bellowed.
“You… have?” Hinata said. “Cool!”
“FOR THE FURTHER HONOUR AND GLORY OF THE MAGICAL REVOLUTION.”
He slammed a fist against his chest and saluted.
Kageyama squinted at him, while Hinata happily saluted back.
“That’s very nice of you,” Yachi smiled.
“Please follow us,” Sakunami motioned at them.

Excerpt from the leather bound book

Liminal spaces, according to modern day mythology by non-magic folk, are those places where the fabric of reality is weak.
This is of course nonsense.
Magical scholars have deduced that these spaces do tend to have thinner Veils, because they usually correspond with ‘folds’ in reality, where one part of reality touches, or is otherwise close to, another part of reality that is not near it in a conventional spacial sense. In this way, they form a short-cut between geographical regions, allowing creatures with the right powers to use them as ‘wormholes’ to quickly move from one spot to the next.
Specialised magic users could use these ‘thresholds’ as a mode of travel.

March 25th, 22:15, Secret Palace, ???

Sawamura Daichi chewed on a sandwich while their small group walked through endless marble halls.
“So where are we going? How far is it?” Hinata asked, keeping step with the large demon at the front.
“THE ROUTE TO THE GATE IS FRAUGHT WITH DANGER,” Koganegawa bellowed.
“I think it’s ok to use your indoor voice now,” the imp on his shoulder said encouragingly.
“Oh. Right,” Koganegawa replied. “Oh, here we are.”
He was distracted for a moment as they came upon a pair of double doors. With a mall flourish, he opened them up and showed the group into a giant cavern.
Wind howled through the large open space and in the distance Daichi could see long, thin beasts flying around on leathery wings. Before them, the ground fell away into a massive chasm. Sharp peaks shot up, some going up high into the mists above them, hopefully holding up whatever counted as a ceiling around here.
A very thin and extremely unsafe looking rope bridge led off into the distance.
Kageyama tapped one of the ropes with her foot and it creaked painfully.
Yachi gripped Daichi’s arm. She looked like she was about ready to faint.
Behind them, Koganegawa coughed. “As I said, the route to the gate is fraught with danger. That’s
why we’re taking a short-cut.”

He took a left and walked a narrow stone path by the side of the canyon. The others followed, Yachi holding Daichi’s hand so hard she was sure the blood flow was cut off. Finally, they came up to a wooden door and Koganegawa waved them through. Behind it was something Daichi could only describe as a waiting room, possibly to some old-timey dentist. The walls were bare, save for a large, loudly ticking cuckoo clock that was at least ten minutes off. There were wooden benches and a table with typeset printed newspapers, some of them illustrated with obvious woodcut engravings. All of them were dated to before 1760. They would have been old news long before any magical revolution.

In an act of unprecedented creativity, someone had also decided to decorate one of the side tables with a tableau made from bowling pins. If she squinted, it looked like two of the pins were playing checkers.

“Take a seat,” Koganegawa said cheerfully. “We’ll have to wait just a bit while Sakunami crafts us a path.”

The imp jumped off his shoulder and stood on a small table in the waiting room.

“Now we may need to make a few jumps,” he said, rubbing his hands together until they glowed with a faint blue light, “because the thresholds near the Gate are all kinds of wonky. But it’s better than a spike pit.”

He gave them a toothy grin and rubbed his hands together, faster and faster until sparks came flying off. As the seconds loudly ticked by, the sparks became brighter, and Daichi had to close her eyes to not be blinded.

When she opened them again, they were sitting in a very different waiting area.

March 25th, 22:23 (Vaeda Time), ???, ???

It looked like a waiting room for some kind of public transport.

It was warm in here, a very humid sort of warmth, and instead of marble, the walls were made of plasterwork painted in yellow and orange. The benches the group sat on were covered in graffiti. The clock on the wall read 09:23 and a female voice came on speaker.

“Plataforma 2. Tren a Neuquen llega a la plataforma 2.”

Yachi Hitoka blinked.

“Just give me a moment to find the next one,” the little imp said. He jumped off the bench and wandered to the corner where the train tables hung.

Peeking through the window, Yachi could see the road outside. There was a parking lot with some trees, and a high rise building in the distance. It looked… well it looked pretty normal, if she was honest

A small bleep made her fish out her phone.

It was a text message, welcoming her to the mobile network and listing the roaming prices.

“Movistar?” she muttered, looking at the provider.

“Argentina,” Sakunami said, walking back and carefully crawling onto a bench again.

Yachi watched him as he sniffed the air, slightly too shocked to really register what he just said. She nearly jumped out of her seat when the phone bleeped again.

New text message. This one was from Oikawa and it had been sent hours ago.

“Those cards look adorable, Yachi-san. You even made Kyouzani look like a handsome host! Good work, I’ll see you when you get back - Oikawa.”

It was followed by an emoji of a v-sign.

“Oikawa?” Kageyama said, peeking over her shoulder.

“Kageyama don’t be rude,” Hinata prodded her.
“No, wait.” Kageyama shoved him so he fell off the bench and turned around to frown at Yachi.
“You have people named ‘Oikawa-san’ in your contacts?”
“Um, he’s just my boss?” Yachi replied, holding the phone to her chest.
“Is this Oikawa magic?” Kageyama insisted. There was something very close to hunger in her eyes.
“Well… Yes, he has a sanctuary and.”
“You need to stay away from that beast,” Kageyama interrupted her.
“Wh-what?”
“You heard me,” Kageyama said. She looked upset. Somewhere between worry and outrage. “I can’t believe you work for that guy. He’s a monster.”
“He saved my life…” Yachi stammered.
“Don’t be ridiculous. He can and will hurt you.”
“B-but he’s always been very nice to me,” Yachi whispered, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt.
“You can’t trust him,” Kageyama snapped, “He doesn’t deserve to live. He’s a killer.”
On the bench across from them, the two demons were watching the fight with mild confusion.

“Isn’t that what you do, too?”
Hinata sounded small and faraway. He was staring at an orange wall in front of him while the whole room went silent and looked at him.
“What did you just say?” Kageyama’s voice came out strangled.
“I mean, Akaashi called you a hunter, but you’re not exactly hunting foxes, are you,” Hinata said, still looking at the opposite wall.
“You kill people. You were going to kill them.” He pointed at the demons, who shot back a hurt look.
“Oh really? I’m the bad guy now, huh? I’m a killer, am I?” Kageyama rose to her feet to grab his collar. “I am NOTHING like that beast.”
“Uh, guys?” Daichi got up.
“And if you EVER compare me to him again-”
“Enough!” Daichi roughly pulled them apart. She plopped Hinata down next to the Koganegawa, and dragged Kageyama to the other side of the bench.
“Does it really seem like the right time and place for this?” she said, sitting heavily next to a trembling Yachi.
Kageyama crossed her arms and huffed, staring silently out the window while Hinata pouted at his hands.

It was quiet for exactly twenty-three seconds.
Yachi counted them.
“What did he do, anyway?” Hinata mumbled.
“Haaaahhh?” Kageyama said.
“This Oikawa-san, what did he do for you to hate him that much?”
“He’s a monster. My family has been chasing him since the 1500’s. Like I said. He killed someone.”
“But Yachi said he saved her life,” Hinata tried, fidgeting under Daichi’s burning gaze. “And that was ages ago. Can you even prove he did it?”
“He’s a powerful kitsune,” Kageyama said, “A vengeful nine-tailed fox. It’s in their very nature to eat people.”
“Does your boss eat people, Yachi?” Hinata asked.
“He likes green tea and parfaits…” Yachi whispered.
This made Daichi laugh.
“I don’t expect someone like you to understand.” Kageyama sulked.
“Hey, what’s that supposed to-” Hinata said, but he was interrupted by the imp.
“Alright! I found it! Next stop!” he said, and he rubbed his hands together.
March 25th, 22:29 (Vaeda Time), ???, ???

Sparks flew and a second later, Sawamura Daichi was no longer sitting on a bench, but on a wooden fence. It surrounded the parking lot of what looked like an abandoned gas station. A single street light cast a white glow over the scene. How anyone ever thought they’d get customers here, was baffling to her. As far as she could see, which, admittedly, wasn’t very far in the dark, there was nothing around the building but flat plains and dirt and rock.

“No reception,” Yachi pouted next to her. “It does look like we’re smack in the middle of nowhere,” Daichi conceded. The middle of nowhere was hot and dry and scratchy. She didn’t like it much. The only movement around here was the occasional bug and if she squinted, she could see some animals pottering around in the distance. “Are those…emu’s?” she mumbled. “Whooooh!” Hinata mouthed, any semblance of his bad mood gone in an instant. “Those are super cute!” “They’re also very dangerous,” Yachi nodded. “They once won a war against the Australian military.” “Huh,” Hinata replied.

Sakunami clapped his hands together like a mild-mannered tour guide trying to keep the attention of a group of middle school children. “Ok, we’ll need to walk for a bit. It’s just down the road here,” he said, and he waddled ahead of them.

They hoisted their backpacks up and followed the asphalt while Hinata recounted his last zoo visit to a fascinated Koganegawa. Trailing a few metres behind, Kageyama doggedly marched on, sporting a pout. Daichi slowed her step to walk next to her. The hunter was quiet and seemed busy tracking a small fly that was buzzing around her head. With a sharp pinch, she picked it out of the air, crushing it between her fingers.

“What?” Kageyama snapped. “They’re nasty.” “They symbolize death, don’t they?” Daichi said conversationally, “at least they did in some book I read. What was it called again?” Kageyama said nothing, so they walked in silence, until Daichi remembered. “The lord of the flies!” she said triumphantly. “You know about him?” Kageyama asked. “It’s just a book,” Daichi shrugged. “In the story, it was the head of a dead pig.”

Kageyama stared off into the distance. “The lord of the flies exist,” she said after a while. “He comes to those who seek power. My grandma told me. She said to never get caught by a fly unarmed.” “That sounds… difficult,” Daichi said. “She said they’re agents for some entity. Or they could be. Apparently this thing can take over their brains to see what’s going on in the world.” “Yuck,” Daichi said. “Sounds like an... interesting person.” “It’s not a person. It’s an entity. It was already in that world when we started using it for incarceration, my gran said. It was some lord there and it got out. According to the hunter textbooks, its main goal is to open the underworld and either unleash hell or go back home.” “One of those?” Daichi asked. “Possibly both.”
“Huh,” Daichi pondered. “I wonder if that's what we're dealing with.”
Kageyama just shrugged. “We’ll see. I was never really sure if it’s a real thing or just a bedtime story, like your book. But I am certain that Ill recognize a fucking hell lord if I ever stand before one.”

They walked on in silence until they finally reached a crossroads. With an excited grin, Sakunami announced that this was where their next jump would be.
It certainly felt alien enough to Daichi. She'd always been a little weirded out whenever she saw an intersection in a large stretch of nothing, two perfectly straight asphalt roads crossing each other in the middle of nowhere. This one even had a working red light, swinging softly in the breeze.
“Everyone ready?” Sakunami asked, rubbing his hands together.

March 25th, 22:37 (Vaeda Tûne), ???, ???

Yachi Hitoka felt herself shrink the moment the temperature hit her.
“Brrrrrrrrrr!” Hinata said, next to her. “Chilly here.”
That was an understatement. Where the last place had been reasonably hot, this one was ice cold. Possibly freezing. The sky overhead was grey and a very pale sort of light fell on the playground around her. It was pretty normal, as far as playgrounds went. It had bouncy ducks and climbing racks, but because of the cold, it was completely empty.
It felt a bit sad and lonely.

Next to her, Hinata had shoved his hands in his pockets. He was looking around curiously, but something seemed a bit off about him. To the side, Kageyama was stomping her feet to keep warm.
She’d been grumpy and quiet since the fight in Argentina. Grumpier than usual, even.
It was all Yachi's fault. If she hadn’t been so preoccupied with her messages, those two would still be friends. She had gone and stuck her nose into this whole affair. She’d volunteered for this mission out of some selfish need to be important and help out.
Now look where it got her.
She’d ruined everything.
Walking to a nearby swing set, she took out her phone and sat down.
A text message announced that she was now on the ‘Farice ehf’ network.
The device bleeped again, announcing one missed call.
She quickly put it away when someone came her way.
Koganegawa gave the swing next to Yachi an investigative prod, before carefully sitting down on it. It let out a strangled squeak.
Gently, the demon swung back and forth, giggling a little.
His eyes were wide in amused wonderment.
“You know, it’s pretty amazing of you guys to do this,” he said after a while.
“Hmmm?” Yachi blinked at him. She’d taken a scarf out of her backpack and was busily wrapping it around her head.
“Sakunami won’t let me talk about it, but we know what you’re up to,” he said, giving her a knowing look. “So that's ‘cool’. Especially since you’re not demons and all. I never expected this to happen, you know, voluntarily. And I appreciate it.”
“Well, thanks?” Yachi said.
“It’s just a shame that it’s gonna be either you or the redhead huh. I mean, you’re the nice ones.”
He shot a sideways glare at Kageyama, who was hopping up and down, breath forming little puffs of steam.
“Have you decided who it’s going to be?” Koganegawa softly asked.
“What are you talking abou-”
In the distance, Sakunami was causing sparks.
“Get over here!” he yelled.

March 25th, 22:43 (Vaeda Time), ???, ???

When she regained her senses, Daichi Sawamura found herself on the world’s most depressing beach.
It was tiny, hugged on three sides by massive concrete walls. Piles upon piles of smelly seaweed and assorted trash had gathered in the corners. A few metres away, an inky black sea lapped at the rocks and dirty sand. Behind her, a slippery looking staircase covered in black moss led up to the sea wall while out in the water, she could make out several big ships in the distance. The little beach was unlit, save for the light coming from the street above.
“Here we are,” Sakunami said with a wide smile. “The gate is just up there.”
Daichi sniffed. The smell, the air, the whole place felt awfully familiar.
“I can’t find a network,” was all Yachi said.
They followed the two demons up the treacherous steps and when they reached the top, it suddenly hit Daichi why this felt like a place she’d been to before.
The shipping company to their right, the light tower in the distance, the unmistakable silhouette of the mountains to the east…
“We’re back in Vaeda?” she demanded.
“Perceptive,” Sakunami nodded happily.
“You’re telling me we went through all that just to end back… where are we?” Kageyama said, turning to Daichi.
“The very northern part of the harbour,” she groaned.
“You mean to say we went through all that just to end back in the harbour?” the hunter shouted. “We could have driven here!”
“But then you wouldn’t have passed the Trials,” Koganegawa pointed out.
“We didn’t DO the trials!” Kageyama barked.
“It’s the, uh, journey that counts?” Sakunami tried.
“To be fair, we probably got here faster than if we’d crossed the entire city without a metro system,” Daichi admitted, calmly tugging Kageyama’s shoulder so she would stop furiously looming over the little guy.
“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Kageyama said, “Where’s the damn gate, imp?”
Silently, Sakunami pointed to a warehouse further up. It lay on the very edge of the harbour, in the middle of an empty parking lot, surrounded by a high, rusty fence.
“It’s in there, just down some steps,” he said.
“Thank you,” Hinata bowed.
Kageyama huffed and strode off.
“This is also as far as we can take you,” Sakunami told them, “so be careful from here on out.”
Hinata nodded, and they waved goodbye.
“Good luck!” Koganegawa said cheerfully, “We’re counting on ya!”

They walked towards the fence, where Kageyama had stopped. She was observing a weird looking cloud hovering near the entrance.
It looked like it was made up of a bunch of little clouds.
“Uhh, what are those?” Daichi asked.
“They’re wisps,” Hinata answered. “If they get you, they take over your body.”
“Wh-what?” Yachi looked at Kageyama, who nodded.
“You met these things before?” Daichi asked.
Hinata nodded grimly.
“Oh wow,” Yachi muttered, watching the boy with renewed respect.
“It’s ok,” Hinata told her, “they can’t go through doors… I think. So if we run fast enough and get in, we should be fine.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey there,
thanks for reading this far. Hopefully you're still enjoying it.
I've had a lot of fun writing the next few chapters, and as such, I have worked up quite a buffer.
That's why from now on till (I hope) the end of the book, I'll switch back to a weekly schedule.
See you next week!
March 25th, 19:01, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Kenma sat outside the door to Suga's bedroom above the coffee shop and licked his back leg. The door was locked and protected by some kind of force field. It had been like that ever since Akaashi had dragged Bokuto in there. Whatever barrier they’d put up closed off all light and noise, it seemed, because nothing came through, except when it suddenly did. Kenma's ears perked up when he heard voices, as if someone had turned on the sound in the middle of a conversation.

“Wow, really?”
The voice was unmistakably Bokuto’s and Kenma got up, pacing in a tight, excited circle before sitting back down again.

“It’s fine,” answered the soft drone of Akaashi.

“But you do so many other cool things.”

“This is what they wanted, mister Bokuto.”

“You’re a nurse, though.”

“Most of what I do involves washing and needles, mister Bokuto.”

“I'm just saying, that's a steep price and-”

“The decision has already been made. It's... it was worth it,”

Akaashi’s voice sounded a little cracked and Bokuto started coughing awkwardly.

Then suddenly, the nurse spoke up.

“Hello, cat. Are you coming in?”

With an apologetic chirp, Kenma pushed against the door and poked his head through. Bokuto was sitting up in bed, looking positively chipper. He'd had a change of clothes and there were no signs of visible wounds. He seemed... well he seemed totally fine. The only one that looked a bit roughed up was Akaashi, on the chair next to him. They gave the impression that they'd had a worse time than their friend in these last few hours. The nurse looked very tired, slightly paler than usual and they had scratches on their arms and face. There was a small victorious smile on their lips.

Padding in, Kenma placed his front paws on the mattress and sniffed. Akaashi smelled of forests and sulphur and smoked meat. The little cat wrinkled his nose. Bokuto, meanwhile, smelled fresh and clean, and very much like Bokuto. Kenma jumped up and rubbed his head on the guy's arm.

“Hey there Kitty-Ken,” he said brightly, scratching the cat underneath his chin. “Got you worried there for a second, did I?”

“Not really,” Kenma drawled, purring loudly as he paraded around the man and rubbed up to him.

March 25th, 19:10, Old Quarter District, Vaeda
Kindaichi Yuutarou was not having a good day. In less than twelve hours, he'd managed to get beat up by an arrogant hunter and her unexpectedly strong redhead friend, he’d gotten shot and he had lost his best friend. And now he was trying to keep up with what was possibly the scariest person he’d ever met.

He limped out of the maintenance door and onto the stone path by the river, and leaned heavily on the wall.

“I... I don’t think I can go much further, sir,” he said.

Takeda turned around slowly, glasses glinting in the light of a street lamp.

“Sure you can,” he said pleasantly.

The hair on the back of Kindaichi’s neck stood up. He would love to be able to run right about now.

“There’s no need to look at me like that,” Takeda said with a polite smile. “It’s almost like you’re afraid that I would hurt you. But you failed me before, did you not? And you’re still here. Now come.”

Taking a shaky breath, Kindaichi stood up, trying very hard to ignore the throbbing pain in his leg.

If those were supposed to be words of comfort, they weren’t exactly working.

But he shouldn't expect a pat on the back. From what Kindaichi had seen so far, the man in front of him was completely insane. He had single-handedly started a movement that would save wizardkind from oppression but he wasn’t even a wizard. At least not a normal one. Up close, it became clear that he was something else entirely.

Kindaichi only wished he’d figured that out sooner.

Like twelve hours sooner.

“I will protect my friends any way that I can,” Suga had told him.

Whenever he closed his eyes, that shocked face, framed by light hair came into view.

It haunted him like nothing else had done before.

The fucking norm was a better person and certainly a better friend than he had ever been and, try as he might, Kindaichi had not been able to do anything for him.

In the end, he thought, he turned out to be a pretty shitty wizard.

He shook his head and swallowed down whatever burning lump lingered in his throat.

They walked across the bridge over the river and made their way to the edge of the Light District, Takeda occasionally throwing a mildly irritated glance behind him.

In the silence between them, Kindaichi’s mind feverishly threw up questions.

Would jumping in the river help? Could he try to call a cab? An ambulance?

And also: why the hell were they following these four people heading to the gate?

Takeda had spies literally everywhere. He, of all people, should know where they were going.

But still they walked.

Following the little band of 'heroes' wasn't exactly hard. There was hardly anyone out in the city right now. It sounded like the police and some of Takeda's band of online cronies were clashing in several places, but they were nowhere near their route. Takeda had made damn sure everyone stayed out of the way.

So Kindaichi and his scary leader were undisturbed as they followed the four squabbling people at a distance, hanging back and staying behind corners in case they were to look back.

They never did.

Eventually they walked into a bowling alley and Takeda smiled softly.

“Sit,” he said, indicating some steps next to the sidewalk.

Kindaichi plopped down, rolling his neck. He wondered if he could find painkillers anywhere around here. Or some sugar, maybe.

Hell, a cookie would do at this point. Anything to give him a little bit of energy.

Next to him, Takeda leaned against the hand rail and checked his watch.
March 25th, 19:17, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

It was the smell that hit Akaashi first.
Earth and iron.
The scent of human blood hung heavily in the air and Akaashi hated every part of it.
It crept up the stairs and as they followed the small cat through the basement of the coffee shop, it mingled with the smells of roast beans and herbs, somehow tainting and distorting everything that was familiar and comforting about of them. Once they stepped into the domed room, the smell quickly became overwhelming and Akaashi had to steel themselves to keep their face flat and professional.

The body of the young man lay on the floor, with a crying Asahi knelt down next to him.
Some effort had been made to dress his wounds and a sheet covered most of him, tucking him in like a sleeping child.
A little further, a small woman in bandages was arguing with Shimada the EMT.
“Don’t tell me you’re giving up!” the woman was shouting, “You’re not doing anything!”
“Nishinoya…” Shimada started, but then the woman saw Akaashi and sprinted over, eyes wide and commanding.
“You! You’re really good at this, right? Like… magic good. You can save him, right?”

There was no wind here. Not even a draft coming from the tunnel network.
The air was stifling and heavy and Akaashi felt their heart sink ever deeper.
Swallowing hard, they shook their head. “I cannot,” they said.
“Why the hell not?” Nishinoya burst out.
“Young witch,” Akaashi murmured, as gentle as they could muster. “Even if I could, it is unwise to bring back the dead.”

Akaashi had seen lives snuffed out before. It was part of the job, really.
The old ones, found in the morning, their spirits restless and still hanging around their bedrooms, screaming for someone to mourn them.
The young ones were arguably worse, but usually more peaceful. Dying of some long disease, exhausted from fighting and stretched thin, frayed at the edges. Their spirits never held on long, just enough to say goodbye, fading quickly into the tears of their parents.
Every one of them unique, and each of them painful in their own way.

They knelt down next to the young man and hovered their fingers over his hair.
A soft breeze rustled through silver locks.
The essence of Sugawara was already gone.
He’d moved on with an ease rarely seen for a death so brutal, so violent.
It made Akaashi feel a tinge of pride. No regrets, they thought.
What they said was: “I’m sorry for your loss.”
Asahi just sobbed harder.

March 25th, 20:32, Light District, Vaeda

Kindaichi Yuutarou had lost track of how much time was going by.
His head felt light. Surprisingly airy. He had the distinct impression that he was gaining some deeper understanding, as if his time dealing with a wounded leg had made him infinitely familiar with pain. It had flavours, you see.

While it was more of a cold, white tingling near the edges, it grew bendier, more wibbly as it got closer to the centre, where the actual bullet was. And that centre was hot like the sun, it smelled like asphalt after summer rain and it tasted of olive oil, a little bitter and sticky, but at the same time very fragrant. He could sense that flavour on his tongue and it made him very tired and fuzzy.

If he could just close his eyes, he was sure he’d fall off the edge of the world.

“That should do it,” Takeda spoke up suddenly, rousing him from his thoughts. “Let's go.”

Without looking back, he crossed the road and walked up to the bowling alley.

With a whine, Kindaichi hoisted himself up and step-hopped behind him.

Takeda pushed through the glass and aluminium doors and sharply rapped on the booth window, startling the kid behind it.

“Konoha?” he asked, pulling out one of his polite smiles as if it was a poker card.

The young man took off his headset and stepped up to the window.

“You the boss man?” he asked.

“I... prefer the term 'Father', but yes. That would be me,” Takeda said as he pushed his glasses up. “I take it everything went smoothly?”

Konoha nodded. “They sank right through the floor. It was... weird.”

“Good. Good.”

“Will they, uh, be ok? Wherever they're going?” Konoha asked, opening the door and stepping out of the little office.

“They’ll be fine,” Takeda said, surveying the bowling alley with mild interest.

At this point, Konoha noticed Kindaichi, who was trying to lean against the wall in the hallway but mostly ended up slipping down it.

“Dude, what the hell happened to you?” he said.

Kindaichi just grunted.

“He’ll be fine as well,” Takeda chatted, as he studied a soda ad near the cash register.

“He, uh, looks like he's bleeding a lot.” Konoha pointed out.

“Never mind that,” Takeda said pointedly. He smiled and grabbed Konoha by the arm, leading him back outside.

“We'll be taking your car and I'll need your ability for a moment.”

“Uh, sure,” Konoha muttered, giving Kindaichi an odd look as he passed him.

March 25th, 19:21, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

In Kuroo Tetsurou’s dreams, blood came dripping from a wooden balcony.

“Wow, you look like shit.”

He shot awake, confused for a moment when he heard a familiar voice.

Kuroo blinked and sat up, a friendly warmth flooding through him.

“Bo! Holy shit am I glad to see you,” he grinned. “Are you ok? All limbs still attached and all that?”

“I’m better than you, buddy,” Bokuto gave him a wry smile.

Kuroo sniggered. “Fuck, I was actually worried, man.”

“Heyheyhey, you don’t think I’d go ‘poof’ just like that, did ya?” Bokuto said, plopping down on the chair next to the bed. “I’m way too cool for that.”

“I guess you are. I keep forgetting how good Akaashi is at this shit,” Kuroo said. “Maybe I should
request a visit. Think you could refer me? Maybe get me a friend discount?”
Next to him, Bokuto’s demeanor shifted.
“I’m sorry,” he mumbled and he slumped in the chair, pouting.

That was fast, Kuroo thought.
He’d assumed Bokuto’s miraculous survival in the face of near-certain death would at least keep his mood up for, oh, more than half an hour, surely.
“What’s with the slump, buddy?” he asked.
“I’m sorry,” Bokuto repeated. “I don’t think they can help you now.”
He lifted his hands into his hair and shook them, two-toned peaks swaying madly.
“It’s all my fault,” he wailed.
“What the hell, bro?” Kuroo said.
“They can’t heal anymore,” his friend muttered, “not without, you know, medicine and stuff.” He made a vague gesture towards Kuroo’s bandages.
“What do you mean?”
“It’s gone! They can’t do the healy magic. And now they can’t help you or the others,” Bokuto went on. “And it’s all because I got hurt. I made a dumb mistake and they must have been really scared to go that far.”
“Oh,” Kuroo said.

“I have always been aware of the price of these things, mister Bokuto.”
Akaashi stood in the doorway and spoke softly, as if not to disturb the cat sitting on their shoulders.
“I’m sure mister Kuroo understands this, even if you do not.”
Kuroo sat quietly pondering for a moment, and then he nodded.
“Respect,” he said.
“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Akaashi droned. They walked in and stopped by the dresser to let Kenma jump off.
“I wanted to speak with you, mister Kuroo,” they went on. “We have an issue.”
“Is this about Suga,” Kuroo said, cringing, “Because Lev told me and I’m not sure if I can process that right now.”
“I am truly sorry about the passing of your friend,” Akaashi said, “But this is about everyone else.”

March 25th, 20:38, Light District, Vaeda

“Think of your recipient and then tell me your message,” Konoha explained.
His ears were glowing with a soft yellow light.
Takeda nodded, closed his eyes in concentration and said: “Get rid of the remaining allies.”
Konoha blinked. “That it?”
“That will be all,” Takeda replied, smiling that weird smile of his.
The boy shrugged and held out his hands. The yellow glow travelled from his ears and danced like growing vines across his arms. It swirled to the tips of his fingers, where it flowed out into a streams of light coloured dust. The dust hung in the air for a second, and then it took on the form of a small bird.
When Konoha nodded at it, it flew away.

“Good,” Takeda said and he clapped his hands. “Now then, is this your car?”
He patted the little hatchback parked in front of the bowling alley.
Konoha nodded slowly.
“Good, good. You’ll want to drive us to the harbour.” He opened the passenger door and motioned
Kindaichi into the back seat. 
“Uh... sure, but aren't there riots everywhere?”
“I'll tell you how to drive,” Takeda said, strapping himself in and giving Konoha a reassuring smile.
“We won't have any trouble.”
Behind him, Kindaichi sank into the cushions and closed his eyes.

March 25th, 19:35, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

It wasn’t the first time that Ennoshita Chikara had attempted to solve a murder, but it was definitely the first time that the answer felt so… slippery.
“Let’s go over it again,” he sighed, drawing a sketch.
Kinnoshita had beat the living shit out of the Towada person, but the only thing that seemed to do was make Kinnoshita feel a little bit better. The shadow mage was still a ball of simpering nerves and he was not budging.
Every investigative instinct in Ennoshita’s mind was telling him that Towada probably didn’t do it, but he really couldn’t force himself to see it in any other light.
“It makes no sense,” he murmured to himself.
“What doesn’t?” Kuroo asked. He shuffled past and painfully lowered himself into an overstuffed leather armchair across the table.
“Shouldn’t you be in bed?” Ennoshita shot at him.
“Too calm up there,” Kuroo mumbled, “Too quiet. Too boring.”
He slowly moved his arm to let Kenma jump onto the armrest and hissed, swearing under his breath as he rolled his shoulder.
“Now, anything I can do to help, that doesn’t involve physical activity?” he said brightly, beaming a lop-sided grin at Ennoshita.

“It just doesn’t add up,” he pouted.
“Is this about poor Suga?”
“Yes! We can’t figure out how that happened! I keep feeling like the answer should be obvious. Like we’re just missing something and I can’t….,” Ennoshita slumped forward with his head in his hands.
With great effort, Kuroo picked up one of the papers with Ennoshita’s notes on it. “Mk, so Kindaichi is the dude we captured, and he’s missing, making him an obvious suspect,” he said.
Ennoshita nodded. “Sadly, he’s not a very good suspect,” he said. “Kindaichi is badly wounded and he was unarmed. Both him and the shadow mage were. They even wore magic blockers. We found one on the floor. It seems likely that someone cut it off Kindaichi before his escape and you need specialised equipment for that.”
“Ok, so who else is missing? Don’t you have like a buddy list?”
Ennoshita handed him another paper and slapped his forehead.
“Think!” he told himself.

“You’ve done a roll call, yeah?” Kuroo said, peering at the paper.
“Narita checked everyone on the list,” Ennoshita sighed.
“Mk, so that’s everyone but Daichi and friends, and they left already. And then there’s this… Takeda person who doesn’t have a tick mark. Where’s he?” Kuroo asked.
“Oh, he should be around here somewhere,” Ennoshita said offhandedly. “He’ll show up. He’s very trustworthy.”
“Is he?” Kuroo said, raising his brows, “He’s the only other one missing, doesn’t that make him a suspect?”
“Oh no, he’s very trustworthy. Good guy, him,” Ennoshita said, staring at his sketch.
“Do you know him?” Kuroo insisted, frowning. The fire mage was giving Ennoshita a weird look and he didn’t like it one bit.
“I feel like I’ve known him for ages,” he said, getting a bit ruffled. “He’s very trustworthy. Do you have some point to make or are you just going to distract me with your silliness? I’m trying to solve a murder here!”
“Why do you keep saying that?” Kuroo was now full on staring at him. It irked him to no end.
“Saying what?” Ennoshita stood up, irritated. He shook his head and closed his eyes, trying to clear his thoughts. “Look, if you’re only going to bother me-
“Oi Lev,” Kuroo shouted at the magician standing by the bar, “can you check if they have a drink that gets rid of charms?”
“What charms?” Lev asked. He was sitting by the counter with a mug of mint tea he’d made himself. “I dunno, brainwashing? Seduction? Some kind of image curse. That sort of thing.”
“Why would you look for that?” Ennoshita snapped, trying to wilt the dumb cat man with his stern gaze. But Kuroo just grinned at him. It was enough to make a blinding rage bubble up. Who the hell did this asshole think he was?
“Hey Lev” Kuroo said loudly, grating on Ennoshita's final nerve, “How would you describe Takeda?”
“Oh, he’s very trustworthy.” Lev said over his shoulder, as he messed around in the cabinets.
Ennoshita blinked. It was like his brain was actively fighting itself. Kuroo raised an eyebrow at him.
“White sage and fennel tea,” Ennoshita finally said, sagging back into his seat. “It’s the easiest way to get rid of negative influences.”
He rubbed his forehead and felt a blush come on.
“Better shove a handful of cloves in there too.”

March 25th, 20:45, Light District, Vaeda

Konoha’s car swerved through the streets of the Light district. Following Takeda’s directions, they had managed to avoid any scuffles and street fights so far, even if it meant they took a lot of sharp turns.
In the back seat, Kindaichi Yuurarou sat and hurt. He wondered about the future. About how exactly he’d gotten to this point and how, if there was a way, he’d get out of it.
Another sharp turn, and his leg bent at an unpleasant angle, shooting a sharp pang all the way up to his neck.
He didn't mean squat to Takeda, he knew that much by now.
He had a pretty good idea about what the man still needed him for, but the more he thought about it, the less he felt like he actually wanted to do that.
Kindaichi had always believed that your abilities make you who you are. And let’s face it, his most unique ability forced people to do things they didn’t necessarily want to do.
That was his skill. His gift.
He was good at it, too, but most people had always kinda thought he was a creep for it.
Even the ones that were ostensibly pro-magic and all that.
Not all magic users are created equally. Something like that.
You had the really cool ones that throw fire or ice and then you had the creepy ones whose gift would never make them anything but a criminal, or maybe a useful flunky to a terrible government.
He pulled himself up and stared out the window.
He recognised this place. They were just heading up the Avenue of Light and Kindaichi felt a pang of nostalgia for the bright neon lights and garish flashing signs of the city's nightlife.
The club should be just up ahead.

In the front seat, Takeda was saying something about a left turn, and Konoha hit the brakes. In a split second, Kindaichi made a decision. It was almost an unconscious thing, like his body had decided not to wait for any more input from his brain, seeing as that was quite busy with the whole ‘wallowing in self-pity’ thing.
Kindaichi was now moving on pure adrenaline. The car slowed down and mechanically, he opened the door. And as Konoha took the turn, he allowed himself to roll out, smacking hard into the street.
He cursed loudly and took a moment to gather his breath. A few metres away, the car stopped with screeching tires, but Kindaichi scrabbled upright and with his last bit of energy, he sprinted up the steps of the King’s Court Host Club before banging heavily on the door.

Behind him, Konoha stepped out. “Oi!” he shouted. “What the fuck, man?”
Kindaichi banged louder, faster. “Pleasepleaseplease,” he begged, mostly to himself.
The door opened a sliver and a gruff voice called out. “We’re closed.”

Unable to hold himself up any more, Kindaichi fell to his knees. “Help me!” he cried.
The door opened wider and a buff, spiky-haired man stepped out. “Kindaichi? What the hell are you doing here?”
Iwaizumi knelt down next to him, face suddenly soft and worried. “Holy shit you’re hurt. What happened to you? Yahaba, Watari!” he yelled behind him, “Get over here!”
Out on the street, a car door slammed and the engine revved. The car drove off and Kindaichi closed his eyes, letting unconsciousness take him.

March 25th, 19:51, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Kenma weaved through half a dozen legs, dodging at least two hands trying to pet him, before he made it to the domed hospital room underneath the coffee shop. He carefully walked around the edge of the room and slipped through the hole in the back. When he reached the museum, he shook his fur, taking the time to clean the top of his head. Once he considered himself presentable, he jumped through the Bokuto-shaped hole and sat down in the middle of the stone dojo.
There was nothing in here but some broken brickwork and a discarded shovel. But cats can see a lot better than humans can. Sniffing the air, he turned and addressed the ghost before him. “Ma'am?” the cat said in a soft melodic voice, “can I ask you a question?”
Chapter Summary

In which there is a boss fight.

Chapter Notes

Author’s note: Hey there, this chapter is on the heavy side, particularly for people who are sensitive to talk of suicide. So if you feel at all uncomfortable with any of the below subjects, do please feel free to skip it. Trigger warnings: suicide, graphic gore, blood.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

March 25th, 22:48, Harbour District, Vaeda

“Alright, we run on three,” Daichi Sawamura heard herself say. “If the door gives us any trouble, I’ll use my shield.”
The others nodded.
“One… two… three.”
They sprinted across the open concrete space, straight towards a cloud of wisps. The little spirits spread out as they got closer, hovering in the air with surprising menace until the sheer force of an angry Kageyama cut through them and they dispersed on the wind.
“Quickly!” Hinata said, and he pulled on the door, grunting from the strain.
Daichi and Yachi added their weight to the effort and the gate rolled open with a high pitched moan while Kageyama stood guard, pointing her sword at any wisps drifting their way.
“Go, go,” Hinata said, waving the others through. “You too, Kageyama.”
She slipped into the dark doorway and the four of them leaned heavily on the other side until the gate shut with a satisfying ‘thunk’.

“That should do it,” Hinata said happily. “That was easier than I expected, too. From the way Akaashi looked at them they should be like super scary.”
Daichi shrugged and looked around the hall. She wasn’t about to complain about things being too easy.
They’d sprinted into an abandoned shipyard. At least it vaguely looked like it. The hall was about three stories high, with square panelled windows, most of them sporting broken glass. In the middle of the room lay a large basin of brackish water that led to two enormous gates on the far wall, and from there further out to sea. Chains and hooks hung from thick beams supporting the ceiling, and various oil-stained tools and large metal drums stood in the corners. The floor was heavily stained with bird droppings, though she couldn’t hear any of them in here right now. Overall, the place looked gloomy, and it smelled bad. It was also massive.
“Wow,” Hinata said.
“Wow…wow…wow…,” the room echoed.
Eyes wide, the boy slapped his hand in front of his mouth.
Daichi raised an eyebrow at him.
“I guess we’re looking for a staircase,” she murmured.

Next to her, Yachi was shivering slightly. She’d been awfully quiet for a while now. Nerves, Daichi suspected. Nothing like the end of the world to put your fears into perspective. “You know,” she said in a low voice while they walked through the echoing hall, “now that we know where the gate is, you can probably stay here, if you want. I mean, you got us this far, you’ve done plenty and…”

The blonde blinked at her. Then she quickly shook her head. “I’m coming with you,” she said, face set and determined. “I’m seeing this through to the end.”

 Ahead of them, Hinata had reached the other side of the room. “Oh!” he shouted. “Oh…oh…oh…” the hall reverberated. Face blushing, he waved them over to an iron trapdoor. It was big enough to send a jeep through. “I think this is it,” he whispered.

It took four people and the leverage of a well-placed crowbar to get the thing open, but underneath was indeed a staircase. Hinata swallowed thickly. “Ready?” he said, and Kageyama shoved him out of the way to walk down the steps.

The journey started out with a wide staircase in reinforced concrete. They had little trouble going down it, even if the air became cold and clammy as they walked. The walls around them were sweating, and green moss became more plentiful as they descended the seemingly endless steps. At one point there was a small landing and the staircase continued as a series of steps hewn straight out of the rock. “How deep do you think we’re going?” Hinata asked Yachi. She shook her head. “I really don’t want to think about the amount of seawater above us,” she said, quivering. “We’re under the sea?” he said, eyes wide. “Wow, I hadn’t thought about that. We’re walking under the entire ocean, huh?”

Next to him Yachi made a face like she was about to faint. “That’s pretty cool,” Hinata concluded.

March 25th, 23:10, Harbour District, Vaeda

After several hundred more steps, the path finally levelled and opened up into a roughly hewn hall. Through an archway on one end, Kageyama Tobio could see a large round room ahead. “Wow,” Hinata said in awe. “If this were a video game, this is exactly where I’d save.” As if on instinct, he stopped and took off his backpack to get a sip of water. “What the hell does that mean?” Kageyama asked.

“I think he means it looks ominous,” Yachi piped up, looking fearful. “Like something bad might happen here.” Hinata nodded. “It’s a boss fight room. And this little hallway is the prep. Like in a game! We prepare here, get all our gear and spells set, and we save. And then if the boss fight goes wrong, you can press F5, reload and start from this spot.” Kageyama rolled her eyes. “That’s stupid,” she said and she walked ahead. “Hurry up, we’re nearly there.” Sighing, Hinata closed his bottle and put the backpack back on. “You’re no fun,” he pouted.

Kageyama stepped into the massive room beyond and felt, for one of the first times in her life,
completely terrified. Even more than that time she’d gone up against a spider youkai, by herself, without any kind of power other than the ability to see in how many different ways the thing could murder her.

But the worst that could have happened then, was that she’d die horribly.

This was different. If she messed up here, *everyone* would die horribly.

The room was a stepped dome, illuminated by a skylight at the very top. Thick stone ridges formed an almost perfect half sphere several dozen metres across. Where the floor should be, there was a massive hole that looked like it might go down straight into the centre of the earth. A narrow pathway circled the edge of the dome and four stone bridges spanned across the pit, meeting each other on a round platform in the middle. Kageyama could not see what the platform was resting on. It seemed to be suspended in the air by pure willpower. Possibly by magic.

She didn’t really want to, but if she looked down into it abyss at her feet, she could see a swirling mass of darkness.

If she looked for too long, it felt like whatever resided there would pull her down and consume her. ‘Things’ were caught in this vortex, little flecks moving and whirling around between the mists and the blackness. Some of them were wisps, perhaps, but there were larger things too, big shapeless entities made up of entirely too many eyes and teeth and claws. Some of them looked like they were made up of nothing else. Occasionally, one would shoot off, rising up above the bridges before disappearing into the porthole in the ceiling.

And then there was the noise.

The gate sounded like a cement mixer. It churned loudly before her in an endless grind, pulverizing anything that had the misfortune to fall into it.

“Well sh*t,” she murmured to herself.

Cold sweat was already running down her back but she wasn’t going about to back down now. Taking a deep breath, she stepped onto the stone bridge and carefully, step by step, she headed towards the middle.

“Don’t look down, don’t look down,” Kageyama whispered to herself.

She glanced behind her and saw that the others were following. They were all holding each other’s hands as if their lives depended on it.

The walk itself seemed to take forever. As she got closer, more and more spirits would flit past her on their way up. One grazed right by her shoulder, startling her enough that she nearly fell.

She stumbled, swayed, and felt a firm hand on her shoulder.

“Nearly there,” Daichi smiled reassuringly.

She nodded and walked on, until they’d all reached the platform in the middle.

“If they looked up from here, they could see right into the hole in the roof.

“Don’t look down, don’t look down,” Daichi whispered to herself.

She glanced behind her and saw that the others were following. They were all holding each other’s hands as if their lives depended on it.

The walk itself seemed to take forever. As she got closer, more and more spirits would flit past her on their way up. One grazed right by her shoulder, startling her enough that she nearly fell.

She stumbled, swayed, and felt a firm hand on her shoulder.

“Nearby there,” Daichi smiled reassuringly.

She nodded and walked on, until they’d all reached the platform in the middle.

If they looked up from here, they could see right into the hole in the roof.

“A beam of light fell down from it, straight onto the platform.

“How is it doing that?” Daichi asked. “We’re at the bottom of the sea.”

Hinata shrugged. “Magic?”

“Oh, so how do we close that thing?” Daichi went on.

Kageyama pointed at her feet. They were standing on a stone medallion. Symbols were meticulously carved into the rock, forming a sort of magic circle.

“I’m going to guess you need to place a shield over us,” she said, “and then, uh…”

It had been niggling in the back of her mind, making her nervous since they’d set out.

She’d pushed the thought away for as long as she could, but there was no way around it now.

“Uh hh.”

“It’s ok,” Yachi said.

Her voice sounded weirdly flat as she went to sit in the middle of the circle, book open in front of
her. “You know what you have to do.”
“What? Whatwhatwhat?” Hinata said.
Kageyama just stood there, frozen. A big part of her knew exactly what she was supposed to do, but
that didn’t mean she wanted to.
“It’s why I’m here,” Yachi spoke calmly. “There has to be a sacrifice. She has to sacrifice me.”
“Ok, no. Absolutely not. No,” Daichi said firmly. “We did not come here to die.”
“But I did,” Yachi spoke again. “I’ve known from the beginning. I have a purpose. This is it. It makes sense, if you think about it.”
“That’s insane!” Hinata shouted. “Kageyama, do something!”
“If we close this, we save millions of people,” Kageyama croaked, as her brain slowed down trying
to come to grips with it.
“No! I refuse to be part of this,” Daichi said stubbornly.
“There has to be another way. Maybe we spill a bit of blood, maybe that will help?” Hinata
suggested desperately, before kicking his foot at the ground. “Why would anyone make a gate this stupid?”

*Excerpt from the leather bound book*

*The sacrifice is a key component of the spell to close the gates of Hell. It is unfortunate that this component will lose their lives, but they can rest peacefully, knowing that they provided a great service for humanity and the magic populace as a whole.*

*March 25th, 23:15, Harbour District, Vaeda*

“I’m ready,” Yachi said, eyes staring off into the distance.
“No you’re not!” Hinata shouted and he kneeled in front of the blonde.
Around them, the black vortex was getting restless. A spirit shot right past Kageyama, nicking her
ear.
“Ow! Daichi, use your shield!” she yelled.
“No. I will not be part of this spell!” Daichi shouted.
A large shadowy entity detached itself from the mass and drifted up. It loomed over the platform, all
teeth and spikey claws, in no way resembling anything other than a complete nightmare, cooked up
by an insane mind.
“Daichi!”
“I said no! I don’t know what you’ll do once it’s in place. For all we know you’ll actually go through and kill her!” Daichi shouted.
“If you don’t use it, we’ll just die here and it will have all been for nothing!”
Above them, the dark thing hung for a moment, and then it tore itself into pieces. Instead of one shadow, there were now dozens of thin tendrils, each with razor sharp teeth at the end.
They moved erratically, jittering around like the world’s worst stop motion movie, until they
suddenly found a purpose and shot in the direction of the barista.
Kageyama swung her sword, cutting three of them off, while a fourth sunk it teeth into Daichi’s
shoulder, leaving cuts like stabs of a knife.
“Daichi, for fuck’s sake!” Kageyama screamed.
Wincing, the young witch looked up.
“Promise me,” she said. “Promise me we’ll find another way.”
“Alright! Fucking hell, do I look like I wanna do this?”
More teeth were coming their way. Daichi shot Kageyama a pleading look, before she closed her
eyes and concentrated. Her skin erupted in white light.

Several dark tendrils crashed soundlessly into the bubble. Kageyama took a breath. The loud grinding sound was quieter now and she almost instantly felt calmer. In here, nothing would shoot out and bite them. It almost felt peaceful.

Excerpt from the leather bound book

Some people have no purpose in life, other than to die. For them, to die gracefully, to serve the greater good, is the highest achievement.

March 25th, 23:16, Harbour District, Vaeda

“Listen to me,” Hinata Shouyou said, crouching in front of the tiny blonde. “You don’t have to do this.” Yachi just shook her head and folded her fingers into fists on her knees. “We’ll find another way,” he soothed. “It’s ok,” Yachi said, “It’s nice of you to worry, but I knew what I was doing when I came here.” “That doesn’t make it right,” Hinata said. He knit his brows together, trying to think of ways to make her feel better. He found it hard to concentrate like this, when everything around him was loud and whirling and shoutey. “What made you feel like you should do this?” he finally asked. “Hinata, please!” Yachi begged, “We’re losing time. I’m just a nobody. So many people will die if we don’t hurry up!” “Nobodies have their own kind of awesomeness,” Hinata said firmly. “And they can do really awesome, important things, but you need to be alive to do them. Yachi-san I don’t know what to tell you. What do you need me to do right now, to convince you?” “I don’t want you to convince me,” Yachi cried. “I just want to get it over with. I alone can do this. Let me do this.”

Excerpt from the leather bound book.

To die is not necessarily the end. For a person who has lived a full life, or who has sacrificed themselves for the greater good, it could be more of a beginning. They will die truly happy, knowing that the world is a better place for their efforts.

March 25th, 23:17, Harbour District, Vaeda

“You’re not alone though?” Hinata said, tilting his head. “You’ve got me, and you’ve got Daichi, and you’ve even got Kageyama, though she’s super grumpy like all the time. I mean, we all care about you. We would never have made it this far without you.” “You don’t understand,” Yachi said. She was crying now, and Hinata was at a loss. “You’re right,” he muttered quietly, “I don’t really know what you’re going through, and it’s probably super hard to carry that and go through all this thinking you’re going to die at the end. But
it doesn’t have to end here. We’ll figure out a way.”
“I’ll just be a burden,” Yachi sniffled.

Excerpt from the leather bound book

It is a sign of a weakling to take a long journey, only to step back right when they are near the end goal. It is a sign of a hero to take a leap off the edge, into the unknown. People are like cogs in a machine. Every piece has a singular purpose, a goal to achieve to make the world turn. What’s a cog that doesn’t turn when it should? That slows down the machine by not functioning correctly? Worthless. A burden.

March 25th, 23:18, Harbour District, Vaeda

Hinata shook his head and gingerly reached out to pat her shoulder. “Come on. You’ll never be a burden. I wouldn’t even know where in Vaeda I am if it wasn’t for you and your smartphone skills”, he smiled. “With your smarts and Kageyama’s… knowledge we can think of a better plan than this, right?” Swallowing heavily, Yachi nodded. “Is it ok if I hug you?” “Mk,” Yachi whimpered.

Excerpt from the leather bound book

Just end it. Nobody cares. Nobody did. It’s over. What good are you if you can’t even do this one thing right.

March 25th, 23:19, Harbour District, Vaeda

“Allright, what do we do?” Kageyama said, crouching next to a sobbing Yachi. The girl looked up startled, before she pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the moisture from Hinata’s shoulder. “We should have brought a bunny,” Daichi deadpanned. “Maybe a goat.” She was sitting on her knees with her eyes closed, focused fully on keeping the shield around them. “What would we-” Hinata started. “Animal sacrifice,” Daichi clarified. “We could also like… pool our blood together.” “Hmm, or maybe just Yachi’s, if she’s the sacrifice,” Kageyama pondered. “Just a little bit, mind,” she added when Hinata shot her a glare. “What is it with you and hurting her?” he started. Kageyama frowned. “That’s not what I’m trying to do here, dumbass. In case you forgot, we’re attempting to stop the apocalypse.” “And sacrifices have to be made, right?” Hinata got on his feet, leaving a baffled Yachi to blink up up at him.
“Yes. Sometimes sacrifices have to be made. The world is a shitty place, ok? People get hurt. People die. A lot of the time, they’re innocent people and there’s very little you can do to save them.”

Kageyama swallowed, trying to reel herself in. She had to be professional about this. At least one of them should be.

“That doesn’t mean you don’t have to try,” Hinata shouted at her.

And Kageyama could almost hear something pop in the back of her head.

“I DO TRY!” she cried as she got to her feet. “I try all the fucking time! You want to talk about sacrifice, mister ‘I grew up without a care in the world’? You want to talk about trying to live up to your name and your family and not being able to? You want to talk about fighting and working and fucking trying to do right without anyone ever appreciating it?”

“Wow, hold on,” Hinata stammered. She grabbed the front of his shirt.

“I saved your sorry ass twice today, but I’m apparently still some kind of horrible heartless ‘no fun’ killer that should not be trusted.”

“Guys,” Daichi said. Around them, the bubble shimmered.

“Alright, alright, I just don’t like seeing people hurt, ok?” Hinata muttered.

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**Excerpt from the leather bound book.**

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March 25th, 23:21, Harbour District, Vaeda

Kageyama took a deep, shaky breath and let go of Hinata’s shirt.

“Ok, so we pool our blood. Is that the new plan?” she asked.

“I think we could just go ahead with the old plan.”

Behind her, Yachi had risen. Her eyes were big and empty and downright frightening.

In them, Kageyama saw something very much like the maelstrom underneath their feet.

Something deep and painful and dark enough to pull her under if she’d let it in.

And with a speed Kageyama had not seen from the tiny blonde, she grabbed the end of her sword.

“Wait, what are you doing? No!” Kageyama yelled.

She tightened her grip on the sword, but Yachi was surprisingly tough. She was holding the sharp end of the blade in her hand, not even budging as blood started dripping rapidly off her palm.

“Kageyama!” Hinata screamed.

“Pull her off!” Kageyama shouted.

The red headed boy shot forward to help, when he was suddenly pulled back, as if a hook had snagged him. He looked utterly baffled for a moment, but Kageyama had no time to wonder what his problem was this time.
He did not come to her rescue, so she struggled with Yachi alone.

“Stop it!” she shouted, trying to keep a hold of her weapon while the girl did her level best to wrestle it from her.

“Yachi, please,” she begged, “Please. Don’t make me fucking kill you.”

“Don’t worry,” the blonde girl said, “I won’t.”

And she smiled the saddest smile the hunter had ever seen.

Then she kicked out, hitting Kageyama’s bruised hip with the heel of her shoe.

Kageyama lost her balance and with it, her grip on the sword.

Her grandmother’s wakizashi, the blade that had saved so many, now lay helplessly in the hands of Yachi.

She did not hesitate a second when she pushed it through her own chest.

“Shit!” Kageyama scrambled upright and caught the falling girl, who smiled up at her.

“You idiot! What the fuck is wrong with you?” she rambled as she held her, not sure if she should pull out the sword or not, lest she make it worse.

There was so much blood, all over Kageyama’s hands, and as Yachi went limp, it became harder and harder to hold her up, soaked fabric and skin slipping through her fingers.

“Yachi, please,” Kageyama prayed. She clawed at the girl, fingers trying hard to hold on to something, when Yachi inevitably fell and Kageyama stood with nothing in her red hands but a cellphone.

Through the smears she could see a small blinking light. One missed call.

The blonde girl fell to the floor and bled.

Red liquid stained the seal underneath her body, flowing in rivulets as it found its way down tiny canals carved into the stone. The blood coursed through paths that were hewn centuries ago, forming a dark red drawing, a text in a long dead language that started glowing once it was completed.

With a loud, grinding ‘click’ the platform moved underneath them.

To her right, Daichi opened her eyes.

Her mouth fell open and around them, the bubble popped.

Behind her, Kageyama could hear someone clapping. It was a slow, dry and painfully deliberate clap.

It was a mockery.

“The End,” a voice was saying. “That was beautiful, just beautiful. A play for the ages.”

Kageyama whirled around. She saw nothing. There was nothing there.

For a moment she was sure she was going insane. The atmosphere around her was different. She was certain that the ground was moving, but she couldn’t fucking see anything different.

“Do lift the curtain, Tanji,” the voice said, “I wouldn’t want to deny our honorable hunter a front row view of the big show.”

The next second, everything fell away.

Kageyama felt the bile come up in her throat.

The room around her was not how she’d first seen it.

The hole in the ceiling they had tried to close was not a hole anymore. In its place hung a giant chandelier.

Where the pit had been, was a stone floor, and this was where the grinding sound came from.

Rings of stone tiles were spinning like the world’s largest stone lock. There were dozens of them.

Small rings going around the platform, but bigger and bigger ones near the edge of the dome, all
turning and grinding and clicking to a halt. Before Kageyama’s eyes, the final rings slotted into place. The next moment, one by one, the tiles started falling away. The smallest stone ring around the platform dropped into the depths and then the next, and the next, faster and faster until there was no more ground to stand on. This was the true pit, Kageyama saw, the real one, and what came out of it was much more horrible than any of the nightmares she’d seen before.

“What?” she stammered. It took every inch of effort to stop her brain from shutting down. Something big and slimy and utterly horrific was oozing out of the pit and heading for the exit, while all around her wisps, ghosts and flying reptiles rose up from the depths, swarming away, out towards the city. People were standing on the edge, just watching her. This was not how it should have gone. This was not how it was meant to be. No longer able to form words, Kageyama silently turned around. Before her stood a short man in glasses, whom she vaguely remembered from the battle. He carried a blood soaked dagger, and with one foot, he was holding down a wounded Hinata. “Bit much to take in, I suppose,” the man said conversationally. “It’s not every day you inadvertently open the gates to hell.” Kageyama said nothing. She couldn’t think of anything to say. She couldn’t think at all. It felt like every thought in her brain was drowning. Behind her, things slithered and screeched, abominations too horrible for horror stories crawling out of the pit and making their way into the world. Before her, next to the body of Yachi, sat a man in a dragon guard uniform. He was grinning widely. He had a gaping wound in his abdomen, that he’d clumsily tied closed with a piece of cloth. Almost in slow motion, Kageyama looked down to see what he was sitting on, only to find the broken remains of Daichi. Her eyes were wide and her neck was bruised. Daichi had died and Kageyama hadn’t even seen that happen. She hadn’t registered it. She hadn’t even tried to save her. She was alone. There was blood on her hands and she was alone with only nightmares. It was too much. Kageyama, breath rattling, took a step back, towards the edge of the platform.

“Kageyama…” It was a hoarse moan and she could barely hear it but instinctively she looked down. Hinata’s face was pale. There was blood on his lips and stab wounds on his back and Kageyama didn’t even want to see if there was a way for him to survive this, because she didn’t have the strength to face her options. “Kageyama, press f5,” he whispered. There was ice in her veins and her brain was working in slow motion. “What the hell are you talking about?” Kageyama murmured through a throat that seemed painfully constricted. With a force that made her wince, Takeda brought his foot down on the open wound in Hinata’s back and stepped over the boy, dagger at the ready. “Press…f5…”

March 25th, 23:10, Harbour District, Vaeda
“Wow,” Hinata said in awe. “If this were a video game, this is exactly where I’d save.”
He walked into the small hall and, as if on instinct, he stopped to take off his backpack.
Through an opening in the wall, Kageyama could see a massive domed room.
“Wh- what?” she asked. “What the hell does that mean?”
“I think he means it looks ominous,” Yachi piped up, looking terrified. “Like something bad might happen here.”
Hinata nodded, sipping from his water. “It’s a boss fight room. And this little hallway is the prep. Like in a game! We prepare here, set up all our gear and we save. And then if the boss fight goes wrong, you can reload and start from this spot.”

Kageyama stood frozen. “Wait, what?”
She felt weird. Like she’d been here before.
Next to her, Hinata closed his bottle and put the backpack back on. “All done! Let’s go,” he said.
“Wait,” Kageyama said.
“Oh come on, Kageyama, are you suddenly getting scaaaaared?”
Something burned in the pit of her stomach and she felt drained, much more tired than she should be.
As if every last shred of energy had just left her.
“Will you fucking wait!” she yelled.

Chapter End Notes

First up: if that felt a little close to home, and you would like to talk to someone about any suicidal thoughts, please do so. Here's a list of various crisis hotlines and chat platforms for different countries. These people are there for you.

Secondly: I actually really want your opinion on this one, because I struggled with it quite a lot. Do you like the chapter? Hate it? Hate me now that I made you go through this? Do you think I used the cheapest trick in the book and wasted your time. Tell me all of it, so I can get better at this.
Intermission

Chapter Summary

In which certain things are explained.

March 25th, 20:03, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

“There were two of them,” the ghost of madam Nekomata told the small cat. “Washio Tatsuki and Washijo Tanji. It was a coincidence that their names were so similar, I guess, but essentially, they acted as a single person. That was Papa Tatsu’s big secret.”

“Nothing about that made it into the museum,” Kenma said, flicking his ear.

The old woman sighed, drifting a little aimlessly in the middle of the stone dojo. “The retelling is muddled, I know. Most of the pictures in the museum show Tanji. Washio’s relatives caused some trouble, you see. They heavily opposed the museum. We also had a whole bunch of varying eyewitness accounts and really, too little tangible evidence to show the body double story. It proved difficult to tell the truth as we ourselves knew it to be,” she said sadly. “I decided that I’d rather have a watered down version of history to learn from than none at all.”

She motioned the cat to follow while she gently floated out of the stone dojo, into the maze of basements underneath the museum.

“I knew Washio… Tatsu if you will, as a child. He was a bright one. Very ambitious. He really wanted to make the world a better place.” She bobbed into a side room, where she motioned the cat to jump onto a desk. “But at some point he started changing. According to one of his friends he became cold, scary at times. He’d know things he had no reason to know. Things said in closed rooms.”

“Like some listening ability?” Kenma asked.

“Oh, his gift was to bend marble,” Nekomata said. “It’s pretty harmless, as far as talents go. So it was disturbing... do you read, little cat?”

Kenma nodded and the ghost pointed out an old ledger. In a long list of generals and royalty stood the name Washio Tatsuki, written in flowing calligraphy. It was one of the only names in the ledger without a fancy title attached to it.

“He started work for the governor as a lowly builder, but he soon became an architect. His zeal and his ideas quickly got him promoted.”

“And the other one?” Kenma asked.

“Tanji? A very strong illusionist, him. He was a mercenary, I believe. We’re still not sure how they found each other, but as Tatsu rose through the ranks, the other one would start appearing as him more often.”

The cat stared at her.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said, “These were different times. The government was even more chaotic than it is now and it’s not like photography had been invented yet. You assumed someone was in charge based on the outfit and the soldiers surrounding them. Those who knew them probably considered it a safety measure. Either way, everyone called the first one Papa or Father Tatsu, while Tanji seemed to prefer the term Shepherd. I dare say most people didn’t know they were not the same person.”

“That sounds needlessly complicated,” Kenma said, wrinkling his nose.

The ghost shrugged. “It meant he could be in several places at once. They also complemented each other rather nicely, I suppose. Tatsu had charisma, while the other had a very powerful gift and the
disposition to beat down anyone willing to protest.”

Kenma sat and flicked his tail.
“But you asked me about the gate,” Nekomata said, smiling softly. “At some point, Tatsu became truly frightening. He had spies everywhere, as if they were flies on the walls. He’d incarcerate people for saying something in their own home. We couldn’t trust anyone. People would just disappear.”
“What do you mean?” Kenma asked.
“Just like that. Poof. Gone. People with certain abilities. My good friend Nobunaga had a shield gift and he was simply lifted from his bed one night. I never saw him again.”
“A lock, a key and a sacrifice,” Kenma nodded.
“Mmm. Of course, we didn’t know about that. We didn’t even connect the dots until they went after that Kageyama girl’s ancestor. One of our scholars found a passage about the Gate in an old codex and it accelerated our attempts at overthrowing them. Keeping Kageyama safe was a priority.”
“Tatsu wanted the hunter dead so he wouldn’t be able to close the gate?” Kenma asked.
The old woman frowned, shaking her head.
“What? No! That’s not it at all. Tatsu needed a hunter sword to open it.”

March 25th, 21:24, Light District, Vaeda

“That’s idiotic,” Oikawa said, sipping green tea. “The whole point of those gates is to stay closed. That’s what they’re designed to do. There’s no complex rite to shut them. You can do that with a simple hex.”

Kindaichi Yuutarou was sitting on a chair at the bar of the host club, staining the white counter top a dirty reddish brown. It felt weird coming back here after he and Kunimi had left to join the Revolution. But it also felt comfortable, somehow. It felt safe, even if the eyes of the entire gathered staff were on him.

He silently swallowed down a mouthful of a foul smelling concoction his former boss had given him. It tasted terrible, but it filled him with a warm glow that seemed to numb most of his pain.

“The only stupidly complex rite would be the one to open it, I guess,” Oikawa went on, “though I don’t know how you’d—”

He suddenly fell quiet as the realization dawned on him.

“A lock, a key and a sacrifice...” Kindaichi muttered, staring at his dirty hands. “A shield, a hunter and an innocent. That’s what Takeda says.”

“Are you telling me three of those are currently walking down there to ‘close’ the gate?” Iwaizumi barked. He leaned forward until his nose was millimetres from the boy’s bruised face.

Kindaichi just sat there and blushed. “Takeda is very good at, uh ... convincing people.”

“I’ve seen the hunter,” Oikawa whispered, gently pulling Iwaizumi back. “Who’s the shield?”

“The girl running Ukai’s old sanctuary with Sugawara. What's her name, uh, Sawa-something.”

Oikawa nodded. “Sawamura.”

“And the sacrifice?” Iwaizumi pressed on.

“I'm not sure,” Kindaichi said, trying to wriggle away from the burning gaze of the bouncer, “they have a short guy with red hair and a twitchy blonde girl with a boo- Ahh!”

Iwaizumi slammed both hands on the bar hard enough to rattle glasses at the other end. Without another word he walked off to his room in the back of the club.

Oikawa sighed into his tea and took a delicate sip while the room grew silent, all eyes on him and Kindaichi.

When Iwaizumi came back not a minute later, he was wearing a jacket.

“Iwa-chan!” Oikawa yelled, “You can’t be serious!”

“Watch me.”
The bouncer turned and headed out.

“Wait! Come on, be calm about this for five seconds.”

Oikawa ran after him and grabbed his elbow: “You have no idea what you're up against. These are powerful mages and you don't even have the magic to shut the damn gate. You have no real power to stop them. You'll just be running off to your death!”

“Yes, it’s much better to sit here and have a little cosy tea party while outside the world goes to hell,” Iwaizumi barked, pulling himself free. “You made a promise to that girl.”

“She’s not under my protection when she's outside, Iwa-chan. I can't take care of the whole world—”

“Neither can I, but I'm gonna fucking try and get Yachi-san to safety,” Iwaizumi said, pulling his sleeve away from his boss. “Whether you want me to or not.”

The large front doors closed behind him with a thud.

A heavy silence fell on the club, several of the hosts eyeing each other while Oikawa stood near the doorway like a statue.

A few moments went by and he turned around, eyes burning with a deep fire while he stormed towards a cowering Kindaichi.

“Where?” he said. His voice was dripping with anger, sounding closer to a growl now than to his regular affected pitch.

“They went towards the harbour. Please, I..” Kindaichi said, but the host had already retreated.

“Yahaba!” he ordered.

“Sir!”

“Keep him here. Tie him up if you have to,” Oikawa said as he swept through the room.

“If he moves a muscle, beat him. If he still makes things difficult, have Kyoutani beat him.”

“Yes, sir!” Yahaba said, very nearly saluting.

“I'm not planning to...” Kindaichi started.

“Shut up!” both Oikawa and Yahaba snapped at him.

The hosts were muttering to each other now, and Oikawa sprinted up the stairs.

Kindaichi closed his eyes, draining the rest of his potion in one final disgusting gulp. He hoped it would knock him out. He'd love to be unconscious right about now.

Some awkward, whisper filled minutes later, Oikawa came back wearing a long coat and a pensive expression on his face.

“Yahaba?”

“Sir?”

He stood still for a moment, halfway to the door.

“Arrange for Kunimi's funeral, will you? Once the dust settles. He was one of my employees, after all, and I don't think anyone else will foot the bill.”

Yahaba blinked and opened his mouth, but his boss was not finished.

“The wages for this month are already set to be paid, but we still have the matter of the new staff hires to deal with. Some interviews have been arranged. You can find them in my calendar.”

“Sir, what are you implying?” Yahaba asked, brows knit together.

“This is merely in case I don't return in time, of course,” Oikawa threw back a radiant smile.

“Consider yourself my replacement. There's a document in the safe that has your name on it, so the authorities shouldn't make this hard if it becomes a long term position.”

“Why would you even have a thing like that,” the man called Kyoutani grunted.

He was one of the gruffer looking hosts, with punk hair and the kind of muscle that made him look slightly out of place in a crisp suit.

Obviously he was a client favourite.

“I had it drafted in case I needed a break,” Oikawa shrugged. “Don’t worry yourself so. You’ll get wrinkles. And what customer would want a ‘bad boy’ with wrinkles, hmm?”

“Sir, you... are coming back, aren't you?” Yahaba stammered.
“Of course I am! Have a little faith in me, will you?”
“You don’t even have faith in yourself,” Kyoutani grumbled.
“Well what do I pay you lot for?” Oikawa said, looking over his shoulder, “Now be good, my dear hosts. I believe in all of you.”
And with that, he was out of the door.

March 25th, 20:36, Old Quarter District, Vaeda

Ennoshita Chikara looked at the small cat on the table and scratched his head.
“Well, that’s… that’s not good,” he said.
“Opening a hell gate would be the opposite of good,” Bokuto provided helpfully.
“Can we go and stop them?” Kuroo asked.
“We would need to know where they are, first,” Akaashi shook their head. “It would be fairly hard to track them in a city this size…”
At the table, Narita had already pulled out a large map of Vaeda, and he opened his jacket to pick out a shimmering golden crystal.
“Wait, you’re going to scry for them?” Kuroo frowned. “That’s… that’s pretty old school.”
“If they’re in the city, I should be able to find them,” Narita replied without looking up, “Daichi is carrying a piece of me.”
“Wait, what?” Kuroo’s head shot up.
“Ewww?” Bokuto added.
“It’s the cestus,” Ennoshita sighed. “We dropped a weapon in her backpack. It’s… it’s complicated, ok?”
“Where did you get a something like that?” Bokuto said, “Did you rob a museum? Kuroo, did he steal from your museum?”
Next to him, Kuroo snorted.
It was pretty short-lived.
“Aww, ow OW, oh fuck I should really, really not laugh.”
“Considering our predicament, that does seem inappropriate, yes.” Akaashi deadpanned.
Kuroo and Bokuto coughed awkwardly.

At the table, Narita shook his head. “They’re nowhere on the island.”
“Where’d they get a boat that fast,” Bokuto asked.
“We are dealing with magical properties here, mister Bokuto,” Akaashi droned. “They could be cloaked, or in some otherwise protected environment. They could even be in Daichi’s bubble.”
“Wouldn’t that mean they’re in danger?” Bokuto pouted and he frowned down at his now worried looking friend.
“Keep trying,” Ennoshita told Narita. “For now, we need to come up with a plan.

March 25th, 21:56, Light District, Vaeda

By the time Oikawa Tooru had caught up to Iwaizumi, he was already out of the Avenue. He found his friend marching fast, hands deep in his pockets and looking for all the world like he just wanted to punch something.
“Iwa-chan, do you even know where you’re going?” Oikawa said, walking up to him and matching his step.
“I’ll find it,” his bouncer grunted.
“Well, I actually thought this through before running off in a huff, so I asked Kindaichi,” Oikawa said, putting a hand on his chest.
“Yeah?”
“Aren’t you at least a little bit impressed? Go ahead and tell me how awesome I am.”
Iwaizumi stopped and turned to his friend. “Where the fuck is she, you idiot?”
“How rude, Iwa-chan!”
The bouncer just sighed and walked on. “That’s what I thought,” he mumbled angrily.
“If you must know, they’re in the harbour.”
Without a word, Iwaizumi took a sharp turn into a side street that led west.
“How do I know you’re not lying to me?” he said to the man speeding up to walk next to him again.
“You don’t want me to go there, do you?”
“True,” Oikawa shrugged. “You’re probably walking straight into your doom and depending on the enemies we face, even I won’t be able to save you.”
“But?”
“But you’d never forgive me if I stopped you now,” Oikawa muttered.
“Damn right,” Iwaizumi said, grinning. “Let’s go find a car or something.”

March 25th, 22:44, Old Quarter, Vaeda

“Ennoshita. I have a hit.”

Narita called his friend over, finger on the map of Vaeda.
“The harbour,” he said. “It’s hard to pinpoint it exactly, but they’re on the northern side. If I were to venture a guess, probably in one the warehouses in the lesser used part.”
“Oh,” Kuroo said. “I used to live there. There’s all kinds of fishy stuff going on in those buildings.”

Next to him Bokuto had a giggle fit.

“Not a pun, bro.”

“Sorry, bro.”

“It is true that there would be less oversight from law enforcement there. It would make a good base for something like an underground smuggling ring,” Narita nodded thoughtfully. “Or a… doorway to hell, if you will,” he added when Ennoshita shot him a Look.

“That’s halfway across the city,” Kuroo pouted, “Will they hold out until we get there?”

“Let’s have some faith in them,” Ennoshita said, “We should go there to help, but I’d like to think they wouldn’t just walk into an obvious trap. I would honestly be slightly more worried for you guys staying here. We don’t know what else Takeda has in stall for us.”

He hadn’t even finished the sentence, when they heard a loud bang outside.
“Oh, you really just had to go and say that, didn’t you?” Kuroo grumbled.
“Guys!” Lev ran into the door of the coffee shop. “There’s a giant cow man outside and it’s trying to break down the barrier?”
Several pairs of eyes stared at him.
“I’m… I’m really not kidding, please come help.”

Kuroo sighed. “Someone wheel me out there,” he said.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

In the doorway to the kitchen stood Asahi.
Her eyes were bloodshot and she had trouble breathing through her nose, but it would take a creature with more bravery than all those assembled to oppose the furious determination radiating off her.
“I’m not letting anyone else get hurt,” she added as she swept into the coffee shop, rolling up her sleeves.

Behind her, Nishinoya poked her head through the door. “She’s so cool,” she was saying, “Isn’t she cool?”

Asahi stopped before the front door.
“Go, Ennoshita. Get them back safely,” she said, voice only cracking a little.

Ennoshita quietly nodded, putting on his coat.
And mister Bokuto? I may need your help if you don't mind."
“Right you are, ma’am!” Bokuto said cheerfully, jumping off the back of Kuroo’s chair. “Let’s go beat up a cow.”

March 25th, 23:03, Harbour District, Vaeda

“Oh, I’m so super smart I asked Kindaichi where to go. I just forgot to get an actual address cause I’m too full of myself,” Iwaizumi mocked in a high pitched sing-song voice.
He was sitting behind the wheel of a dark grey sedan he had ‘borrowed’, looking grumpier than usual.
“So mean, Iwa-chan,” Oikawa Tooru pouted next to him. “Without me, you’d still be searching the Light District.”
“Yeah well we’ve been searching the Harbour District for damn near an hour now. I swear, if this is just your way of getting me to give up and go home-”
“It’s not,” Oikawa said, calmer and more serious. “They have to be here somewhere. Maybe we can ask for directions or something.”
“Oh, hello,” Iwaizumi mocked in his 'Oikawa' voice, “could you be a dear and point us to the nearest hell gate? Shittykawa.”
Oikawa rolled his eyes.
“There’s not even anyone here,” Iwaizumi added, sighing.

Oikawa crossed his arms and looked out the window at building after listless building.
He was right, of course. There was nobody around.
They were in a rundown part of town, and this time of night no one was offloading ships.
It was empty and quiet. Even the seagulls were asleep.
The only sounds to disturb this peace were the lapping waves and the quiet purr of the car engine.
They were nearing the edge of the harbour district and the road cleared the last few buildings, opening up to a stretch that ran next to the ocean.
It was dark out, nothing to illuminate the empty asphalt but a few twinkling stars and the occasional street light, with the steadily turning beam of a lighthouse out in the distance.

Oikawa looked to his left, where Iwaizumi was silently driving with a small, adorable pout on his face.
He’d rolled up his sleeves and with every light they passed, the glow washing over him would light up the little hairs on his forearms.
Despite the unsettling situation he found himself in, Oikawa felt incredibly calm. He felt happy.
Iwaizumi threw him a sideways glance, a silent ‘what are you looking at’, before concentrating on the road again.
“It’s beautiful here, in a way.” Oikawa said softly.
His friend hummed next to him.
Oikawa smiled.
They were such weird creatures, humans.
Always scurrying around, spending their whole lives working and running in all directions, always in a hurry, always driven by something.
They were fascinating. They built the world in their own image and didn't care about the consequences.
And still he loved them.
Quite a lot, in fact.
It was a weakness of his, really.

Oikawa looked up when Iwaizumi slowed the car to a halt.
“Let’s ask him,” he said, nodding to a figure sitting on a big dock bollard, overlooking the ocean.
“Stay in the car, I’ll do it,” Oikawa said, opening the passenger door before his friend could protest.
Even sitting down, the guy looked a bit too big to be a normal human.
It didn’t help that three horns were growing from the top of his head, either.
In which things get complicated

March 25th, 23:11, Harbour District, Vaeda

“Will you fucking wait?” Kageyama Tobio stood in the anteroom to the Hinata’s ‘boss fight’ and tried to make her head stop spinning. It felt like she’d just woken up and whatever she’d been dreaming was so horrifying she’d already forgotten.

Blinking, she stood and watched the other three walk toward the domed room.

It was not a good feeling.

“Wait,” she said again.

Images were flickering across her vision. This whole place felt familiar. She kept looking at her hands and she didn’t know why because there was nothing wrong with her hands.

“Wait. Waitwaitwait. Stop!”

“Kageyama,” Daichi said gently, turning around, “We’re so close. We’re right here. I understand that you’re nervous. We’re all nervous, but we have to make just one more push and it’s over.”

“Don’t we need a plan?” Kageyama said, grasping at some kind of hidden hook she could feel in the back of her mind. “What if… what if it’s not real?”

“No. Listen. Don’t you think it’s weird?” Kageyama blurted out, babbling about anything that could stall her for time while her brain tried to catch up to some idea she was sure stood just over the horizon. “There’s no one here. No one’s trying to stop us. Isn’t that… weird?”

Daichi hummed. “You think they’ll pop out at us the moment we step into that room?”

“I… don’t know. Just… give me a fucking second.”

Feeling frantic, Kageyama tried to focus again, but her mind simply refused. Instead it kept giving her little flashes, like after images of something she didn't remember staring at.

The same one kept cropping up, of stained hands and a smartphone.

“Ok, wait. You, Yachi, check your phone,” she said.

“You had reception in… Austria or whatever. Didn't you? Just check.”

Slowly, Yachi pulled out her phone and clicked it on. She had one pending voice mail.

Giving Kageyama a frightened look, she turned the phone on speaker and clicked open the message.

“Hey Yachi, it's Ukai,” a gruff voice said. “Shit, fuck why don't you pick up? Look, I don't have much time but I figured out who turned me into a crow and why and… Fuck. Ok, ok.” The Ukai on the other side of the line took a deep breath. “This dude was a teacher at your school. He’s bad news and I’m pretty sure he’s the reason you have that stupid book. I need you to call me back as soon as
you can and in the meantime, this is very important, don't trust a guy in glasses who calls himself Takeda or whatever. You know what, just don't trust anyone in glasses, ok? And stay away from the book! It's-” There was a tone indicating he was nearly out of time for the call. “Shit! It’s lying to you. Yachi, don’t let it get into your head. Whatever you do, don’t-” The call clicked off.

Yachi blinked at the device in her hand while Daichi and Hinata just stared at the hunter. “What was that all about?” Daichi finally asked, breaking the silence. “H- how did you know…” Yachi muttered. “Who’s Ukai?” Hinata frowned. “He’s a friend,” Yachi said slowly. “Do you trust him?” Hinata asked. Yachi nodded. “Ok, let’s get rid of the book then,” Kageyama shrugged. The blonde stared at her with big, hurt eyes. “No! It’s never been wrong before. I’m nothing without this book. I don’t understand why-” “Just leave it!” Kageyama snapped. Hinata stepped between them while Yachi cowered, holding the leather bound book to her chest. “You’re not our boss, Kageyama,” he said, eyes full of fire. “You’re not some kind of queen, so stop shouting at everyone!” Kageyama sagged. “Ok, ok. Fine. I just…You know how I see the future and everything?” “You said you don’t,” Hinata grumbled. “Ok, so I don’t, but I do have a really, really bad feeling about this.” Hinata crossed his arms and pouted at her. “P-please,” Kageyama sighed, “let’s listen to the phone man and drop the book.”

There was a tense moment where Kageyama quietly pleaded while Hinata visibly fumed. It was broken by a small, diplomatic cough. “How about this,” Daichi suggested, stepping forward. “We put the book down here. Just as a precaution. Right there by the wall, nice and safe.” Yachi blinked at her, still clutching the leather bound book to her chest. “Maybe what Kageyama and this Ukai are seeing is that it’ll like… explode when it comes into contact with the gate or something. And since we’re already here, we don’t need it right this second, right? We’ll pick it up when we go back. Sound good?” Yachi stood there trembling under the gaze of her three companions. “Ok,” she finally said. Slowly, reluctantly, she placed the book on the floor of the anteroom, before stepping away from it nervously. “Alright,” Daichi said. “Are we ready to go? Everyone just stay alert, ok? In case someone jumps us.” The others nodded and they stepped into the massive dome beyond.

March 25th, 23:23, Harbour District, Vaeda

The pit in the middle of the floor was a churning vortex of black, dotted with slivers of souls and, occasionally, beings made entirely out of teeth, or eyes, or claws. The noise was overpowering, but oddly enough, the gate sounded familiar, like a cement mixer, or like stones grinding against each other. Still, everything about this place felt wrong to Kageyama. It was to be expected, she supposed, with the whole ‘gate to hell’ thing. Truth be told, she was terrified. She’d never been so scared in her life, but she wasn’t going to back down now. Taking a deep breath, she stepped onto the stone bridge and headed, carefully, towards the platform in the middle.
“Don’t look down, don’t look down,” she whispered to herself. In front of her, her companions were holding each other’s hands as they made their way across the pit. The walk itself seemed to take forever. As she got closer, more and more spirits would flit past her on their way up. She watched them carefully and dodged one that dived for her.

A beam of light fell on the platform in the middle of the room, casting shadows over the intricately carved circle at their feet.

“How is it doing that?” Daichi asked. “We’re at the bottom of the sea.”

Hinata shrugged. “Magic?”

“That makes no sense,” Kageyama said. “The amount of power to keep up a spell like that would be enormous.”

She had the uncomfortable feeling that she was missing something. Like she was searching for a word just sitting at the tip of her tongue but she couldn’t even voice the very concept of what she was looking for. It seemed like some big revelation was right in front of her and if her brain could just run a little bit faster, she’d understand it.

“Ok, so how do we close it?” Hinata said. “I guess Daichi uses the shield? And then what?”

“It’s ok,” Yachi said.

Her voice sounded weirdly flat as she went to sit in the middle of the circle and looked up at Kageyama. “You know what you have to do.”

“What? Whatwhatwhat?” Hinata said.

Something clicked in Kageyama’s mind and she froze.

“It’s why I’m here,” Yachi spoke calmly. “There has to be a sacrifice. She has to sacrifice me.”

“Ok. No. Absolutely not. No,” Daichi said firmly. “We did not come here to die.”

“But I did,” Yachi spoke again. “I’ve known from the beginning. I have a purpose. This is it. It makes sense, if you think about it.”

“That’s insane!” Hinata shouted. “Kageyama, do something!”

Kageyama stood there and frowned. She felt detached, like she wasn’t here, like she had no part in the events unfolding. It felt more like a movie she was watching on tv than a scene she was actually in.

“I refuse to be part of this,” Daichi said stubbornly and it sounded so, so familiar.

“There has to be another way. Maybe we spill a bit of blood, maybe that will help?” Hinata suggested desperately, before kicking his foot at the ground. “Why would anyone make a gate this stupid?”

“This can’t be real,” Kageyama whispered, “none of this makes sense.”

Daichi cocked her head at her, but Yachi interrupted before she could say anything more.

“I’m ready,” she said, eyes staring off into the distance.

“No, you’re not!” Hinata shouted, and he crouched in front of her.

Around them, the vortex of souls was getting restless. A spirit shot right by Kageyama’s ear, nicking it. She concentrated, wincing at the pain shooting behind her eyes.

She didn’t see a large black entity detach itself from the mass. She didn’t see it drift up while Hinata and Yachi argued with each other.

It loomed over the platform, all teeth and spiky claws, in no way resembling anything other than a complete nightmare.

Instead Kageyama, eyes glowing, checked her options. There were entirely too many and most of them were insane.

She could stab Takeda, one of them said. But Takeda wasn’t here.

She could defend Daichi from the spirit of Tanji Washijo. She didn’t even know who the hell that was supposed to be.

None of it made any sense.

Unless.
The sound around them fell away and Kageyama blinked. They were inside of Daichi’s bubble, long tendrils and sharp teeth crashing soundlessly into the shield.

“This isn’t real,” Kageyama said firmly. “Daichi, turn it off, it isn’t real!”

“Are you crazy?” Daichi shouted. “Have you seen that thing? It’s gonna kill us before we have a chance to do anything.”

“I’ll fight it,” Kageyama said. “You have to trust me.”

She’d trained for this. See what is there, not what you expect to see. If she could fight Kindaichi trying to take over her body, for even a second, she could resist some asshole trying to get into her brain.

Daichi gave her a curious look and Kageyama’s vision flickered.

The curtain lifted and what she saw instead was… it was exactly as insane as the options had been. They were in a domed room, but underneath their feet was no abyss. Instead, the entire floor consisted of stone tile rings, grinding against each other in an endless intersecting wheel, like the world’s largest combination lock.

There were no large teeth monsters outside the bubble either, but there were people standing near the entrance. A small group of them, some wearing aprons, some armed with pitch forks or rolling pins, all watching the little tableau on the platform as if it was a stage play.

In a flash, she could swear she also saw the kid from the bowling alley, sitting against a wall looking utterly mortified. He was eyeing a giant three-headed dog next to him.

Turning around, she noticed that there were even people on the platform with them.

Next to Daichi sat a man in a dragon guard uniform, and right in front of her stood a short man in glasses.

Takeda smiled at her shocked face and lunged. With a startled shriek, Kageyama swayed to the side, but the dagger he was holding managed to cut her shoulder.

A few drops of blood sprayed on the stone carvings beneath her feet.

“You’re not very good at this, are you?” Takeda said casually. “You’re much too weak to fight me. You’ve always known this to be true.”

Kageyama frowned at the statement, but she had other things to occupy her mind.

“Daichi, to your right!” she shouted, jumping out of the way of another attack.

The girl opened her eyes and blinked at her.

“Feel to your right!” Kageyama yelled again.

Carefully, with one eyebrow raised, Daichi waved her hand.

Her eyes went big with shock when it connected.

Around them, the bubble popped.

March 25th, 23:29, Harbour District, Vaeda

Yachi Hitoka sat on the stone platform and felt like she was definitely going insane this time.

“Listen to me,” Hinata said, crouching in front of her. “You don’t have to do this.”

He looked super worried and she felt bad for making him sad, but she did. She really did have to do this. She shook her head and folded her fingers into fists on her knees.

“We’ll find another way,” Hinata said in a calm, soothing voice.

“It’s ok,” Yachi replied, “It’s nice of you to worry, but I knew what I was doing when I came here.”

She’d been prepared for this since she’d found out what was needed for the gate to close. She’d always known, somewhere in the back of her mind, that the sacrifice was going to be her. It felt like
her brain was bathing in mud but that much had been clear.
“That doesn’t make it right. What made you feel like you should do this?” Hinata asked, knitting his eyebrows together, as if he was trying to understand what a stupid little blonde like her was thinking.
“Hinata, please! We’re losing time. I’m just a nobody. So many people will die if we don’t do this!” she tried.
“Nobodies have their own kind of awesomeness,” Hinata said firmly. “And they can do really awesome, important things, but you need to be alive to do them. Yachi-san I don’t know what to tell you. What do you need me to do right now, to convince you?”
“I don’t know,” she cried. “I just don’t know.”
Hot tears were gathering in her eyes and she’d never felt so insignificant in her life.
“Hey, I don’t really know what you’re going through, and it’s probably super hard to carry that and go through all this thinking you’re going to die at the end. But it doesn’t have to end here,” Hinata said slowly. “We’ll figure out a way. You’re not alone in this, remember. You’ve got me, and you’ve got Daichi, and you’ve even got Kageyama, though she’s grumpy sometimes. None of us would have made it this far without you.”
Yachi sniffled and swallowed away a lump. There was something happening around her, Kageyama was shouting things, but Hinata gingerly reached out to pat her shoulder.
“Is it ok if I hug you?”
Yachi nodded.
“Come on,” he said, “With your smarts and Kageyama’s… knowledge we can think of a better plan than this, right?”
“Mk,” Yachi whimpered.
When he let go, there was no more Hinata.
She sat in the center of an empty room, and in front of her was Kiyoko Shimizu.
“What are you doing here?” Yachi asked, slightly breathless.
Her ex was beautiful, as she always was. Too gorgeous for the world and definitely too good for the likes of Yachi Hitoka.
She looked down at her with disdain.
“Did you really think, for just a second, that you mattered?” she said in a tone Yachi had never heard her use before.
“Wh-what are you talking about?” Yachi said.
“No one loves you. I certainly never did. I came to see if you’d actually do something useful for once in your life, but it looks like you’re nothing but a disappointment. Like all those other times.”
“You… did though. Love me, I mean. You told me so often. You said it wasn’t my fault…” Yachi stammered.
She had not been prepared to see Kiyoko again. Her heart physically hurt and her lungs were about to explode. If she could, she’d faint in this very spot.
“I lied,” the girl before her said. “You were a distraction. A water bottle to keep my bed warm while I looked for someone halfway decent.”
Yachi thought for a minute. That made sense, she supposed.
It was easy to believe, at least, that everything the two of them had had together was one big farce. It wasn’t exactly hard to see that Kiyoko had always been entirely out of her league.
She was always just a tad too pretty, the way she smiled as the two of them sat on the couch together and watched k-dramas. Or how her eyes would sparkle when they cooked together in their small little kitchen in their small little apartment.
Yachi tried to push the memory down, back under the floorboards where she’d stashed them.
It didn’t work.
Kiyoko had even been gorgeous when she was sad.
How she looked so hurt when things weren’t going well anymore, when they would fight and argue. That little tremble in her lip when she finally told Yachi of her decision to leave.

They were memories Yachi had buried months ago, because she had never thought she was strong enough to face them.

Looking at them now, they didn’t seem so bad. They hurt, physically hurt like being punched in the gut, but they weren’t enough to break her. Not after everything that had happened the last few weeks. They also showed a very simple truth.

“You did love me,” Yachi said. “You weren’t lying.”

And then she looked up at the woman before her with a keen gaze. “You’re not her.”

Kiyoko made an irritated tutting noise and Yachi became aware of someone shaking her shoulder.

“Yachi-san! Who are you talking to?”

Blinking, she opened her eyes and stared straight into a face round and warm like the sun itself. “Hinata?”

“You’re back!” he said urgently. “I have no idea what’s going on, but Kageyama and Daichi are fighting thin air and we need to do something!”

He helped her up and Yachi squinted at the scene around her. Her vision was muddled, as if several different realities were fighting for dominance. To the side, Kageyama was fighting something she couldn’t see, but judging by the bloody streaks on her thighs and arms, the something was winning. In front of them, Daichi was also wrestling with an invisible force. She pulled back her arm and punched, and suddenly her opponent came into view. He staggered back and ran off across the bridge with a speed that was surprising for someone who looked pretty hurt.

Daichi whirled around and then froze.

“Ok. What the hell is going on,” she said.

The whole room around them had changed.

Yachi followed Daichi’s eyes, across the dizzying tiled floor, to the edge.

“Oh! Oh god,” she stammered. There were people here. People were looking at them, and most importantly, they had a giant three-headed dog.

She couldn’t even register anything else. It was a dog and it had too many heads and it was huge. It was black, or perhaps a very, very dark red, and it had glowing red eyes. Its fur was shaggy, unkempt, moulting in places and spiky and hard in others. It didn’t look like a very well-cared for dog.

It looked, most of all, like a very hungry dog.

And it was staring at the platform with fire in its eyes.

“Uh, Kageyama?” Hinata tried.

“Bit busy here, dumbass!” Kageyama shouted back.

Even with the illusion gone, it was hard to figure out exactly who or what Kageyama was fighting. There was a man in glasses that Yachi recognized as mister Takeda, who kept insulting her, but at the same time she seemed to be fighting a formless cloud of… were those flies?

Yachi shivered. Next to her, Hinata was bending down and rifling through his backpack. He pulled out a smoke bomb.

March 25th, 23:35, Harbour District, Vaeda

Sawamura Daichi was trying her best to get some grip on the scene around her.
An awful lot of things were happening and she wasn't sure where to even start at this point. Several of the people at the edge of the dome were running into the anteroom. The boy from the bowling alley was sprinting in the opposite direction, like he was running away from them. He scurried across the rings in an apparent attempt to get to the platform, but the giant dog chased him, jumping from ring to ring with drool dripping from between razor sharp teeth. And then the kid rolled under one of the bridges and now the dog was coming her way. As it came closer, Hinata panicked and threw a smoke grenade at it. The thing went off in front of the dog’s feet and there was a short, satisfying yelp. Moments later, a wall of smoke formed around them, as the smoke bomb lay wheezing on a turning stone ring. Kageyama, still busy fighting, had just enough time to yell 'dumbass', before she had to sidestep her opponent, as he swiped to get her legs from under her.

She wasn’t going to last much longer, Daichi noticed. Kageyama was bleeding and she looked tired, out of breath. Mostly, she looked weirdly unmotivated. For a girl that was usually powered by righteous fury, she currently looked almost… meek. She was going to lose. Daichi laid a hand on Hinata's shoulder.

“Go help her, you two are a duo, aren't you?” she said, pulling up her sleeves. “I'll deal with the dog... somehow.”

She peered at the swirling vortex of smoke around the platform. Behind it, Daichi could hear yells. It sounded like some kind of scuffle. In the midst of the smoke, however, she could see the looming silhouette of the beast. It cleared the fog just as it pounced. “Eek!” Yachi yelled next to her. Daichi, on instinct, put a small shield above her and looked up just in time to see two large paws and a jaw that would no doubt haunt her nightmares for years to come. The dog landed on the shield with four feet and a soft 'wubwub' sound. And then it lifted off again, using it as a stepping stone to jump higher, over their heads and onto the ring just outside of the platform. There it stood, slowly turning around them.

“I'm going to be dizzy,” Yachi murmured.

“Then close your eyes and think of a plan,” Daichi said. They were going to need a good one to get out of this.

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March 25th, 23:36, Harbour District, Vaeda

Kageyama was fighting the Takeda person, and she wasn't doing too well. Hinata Shouyou could see that much from the cuts on her arms and legs. What she needed was time to think, he thought, so he stepped behind Takeda and kicked, trying to maybe make him topple. What happened instead, was he kicked and before anything else could happen, a dagger came his way. Hinata swayed backwards, out of its reach, and very nearly fell on his butt. “Whooaah!” he blurted out.

“Hinata, run.” Kageyama's voice was surprisingly soft, with an edge of desperation in it. She looked like she was actually scared and Hinata was starting to worry about the fact that her eyes weren't glowing. “Do the thing!” he shouted, as Takeda kicked out in front of him, hitting Kageyama square in the stomach. The hunter sagged to her knees and Takeda straightened up, ready to strike again. How he was still standing after pulling a move like that, Hinata would never understand.
“Oi!” he yelled. He placed a foot behind him to regain his balance, before running to Takeda’s side in an effort to distract the man.

“Kagayamaaaaaa!” Hinata shouted. She seemed to need an awful lot of time to get her act together.

“I can’t,” Kageyama muttered.

Hinata ducked under a dagger and skittered into a half turn, swerving to stare at Kageyama who sat on the stone medallion looking defeated.

“Bring it, Kagayamaaaa!” he screamed, willing her into action.

“Hinata I ca-” she started but Hinata whirled around and readied his fist.

“Now!” he screamed and Kageyama’s eyes flashed with a bright light.

“You idiot!” she cried, grabbing her forehead in pain.

Hinata, hand glowing, punched.

To all intents and purposes, it should have worked.

It felt the same as the last few times. His hand glowed with power, and it hit Takeda straight in the midriff.

Something this powerful should make him double over, explode maybe, something bad at least. What it did was make the man blink, before his face spread into a wide, menacing grin.

A handful of flies fell dead on the stone.

“What an interesting ability,” Takeda said and Hinata would be upset if he had the time to be. But a dagger came whizzing at him again and he needed every drop of his agility to dodge it.

March 25th, 23:37, Harbour District, Vaeda

Sawamura Daichi stood on the platform and squinted at the smoke surrounding her. It was clearing, fading slowly. She strained to keep an eye on the dog, but it had vanished.

In fact, almost everything around the platform was gone now. There were no more silhouettes of people behind the smoke.

“They're messing with us again,” she said through gritted teeth. Next to her, Yachi trembled.

Daichi listened intently, which made her ears hurt. It was hard to concentrate with the constant grinding and the shouting of Hinata next to her.

But she had no choice. She didn't just want to get caught in a bubble with Takeda.

All she could do was deflect any attacks until Yachi had come up with something, anything, to get them out of this mess.

And then she heard it, a deep rumbling growl to her right. She shot a shield its way and there was a soft 'wubwub' sound before the dog sprang away again.

“Yachi? Any moment now, if you please,” Daichi said.

The girl next to her nodded and dropped down to rummage through her backpack.

March 25th, 23:36, Harbour District, Vaeda

“Ok, what the hell?” Iwaizumi grunted as he punched a large man in a butcher’s apron in the face. The man crumpled where he stood in the small room, joining the rest of his group on the floor.

Oikawa Tooru walked up, dusting off his jacket.

“What was their problem? I've never seen regular people move like that.”

“Wisps, probably,” Oikawa said, flicking his hand with a pained expression on his face, “the little spirits we saw outside? This is what they do. They take over a body.”

Iwaizumi squinted at him. “You could have told me that before we fought a whole cloud of them.”

“I wasn’t going to let them near you, Iwa-chan,” Oikawa shrugged.

“Oh yeah, real heroic.” The bouncer rolled his eyes and looked through the doorway at the larger
“What the fuck is going on there?” he added.

Oikawa sniffed.
There was a massive column of smoke taking up most of the air but underneath that, he could smell magic.
“Stay behind me, something’s off,” he told Iwaizumi.
“Ya think?” the bouncer grumbled. “There’s a fucking hell gate right there.”
But he crossed his arms and stayed where he was, awkwardly looking at a wall while Oikawa dropped to all four feet and transformed.
Much as he enjoyed the perks, and fashions, of his human form, his smell was better when he was a fox.
In this state, he could almost see the shimmering trails of scents hanging in the air. Different threads of blood and sweat wafted off the humans lying in a bruised pile on the floor and the bright, comforting smell of Iwaizumi curled around his head, a mixture of anxiousness, determination and cheap cologne.

He sniffed again.
It was difficult to really discern people underneath the smoke and mass of smells, but Oikawa’s senses were, he had to admit, phenomenal.
He recognized Yachi, who smelled of fear and hope, and the hunter girl, all blood and soap and frustrated anger. There was a woman that smelled of coffee and donuts, and a boy who smelled like the sun, but somehow also like trust and chocolate chip cookies.
Carefully stepping into the domed room, he became aware of the Cerberus, who was going to be a problem. A few more people wafted by, another scared one, sending out enough cold panic signals that he was probably losing his mind, and one that smelled of books and rot and betrayal.
That must be Takeda, Oikawa thought. He’d have to find some way to deal with him, but first…

In the air in front of him hung another trail. It was a strong scent, close by. It had undertones of death. It smelled of dust and magic.
Oikawa tilted his head. The source of the scent trail was thin air.
His eyes could not see it. His ears heard no breath, no heartbeat.
The only thing he could hear was a soft wet sound, like someone licking dry lips.
From the air, a leathery black bird swooped down, claws outstretched.
It had no scent.
It wasn’t real but it was enough to spook Iwaizumi.
“Fuck,” the man said, dodging it.
Iwaizumi swayed, stepped out and fell onto a moving stone ring.
“Shit!” Oikawa cursed as the spinning floor moved his friend away from him.
The slick sound was back and he spun around, teeth bare and growling.
The illusionist was grinning. That’s what that sound was and it made Oikawa furious.
“You will pay for that, wisp man.”
The fox pounced, aiming straight at where he hoped the mage’s chest would be. He hit him in the shoulder and the man fell back, illusion broken.
In the room, a three-headed dog suddenly shimmered into view as it padded around the smoke wall, looking for a way in. Underneath Oikawa’s paws, the dead man punched up.

March 25th, 23:38, Harbour District, Vaeda

Yachi Hitoka crouched down and rifled through her backpack.
She had a flashlight somewhere that she could possibly use to at least blind and distract the dog.
Maybe he’d also like some sausage?
She wished she could remember how people got past the hell hounds in the old tales.
It was probably not sausages.
Certainly not rye sandwiches with smoked cheese.
Something about a lyre?
Next to her, Daichi shifted, and she could hear Hinata shouting things again. She felt worry crawling up and down her spine like a swarm of spiders but she had to focus.
Focus!

She pulled the flashlight out of her backpack and stillled, staring ahead of her. The giant dog was coming out of the smoke. It was shaking and yelping, and for a moment Yachi wondered what was wrong with it, before she saw the figure on his back.

Sitting astride the giant beast was a stocky man with black spiky hair. He was busily beating on the dog’s middle head.

“Iwai…zumi… san?” Yachi squeaked.

She watched in awe as her club’s bouncer coiled back his arm and punched again. The dog whimpered, stumbling across the rings toward the platform.

Iwaizumi prepared to strike once more, when the dog shook violently, nearly bucking him off its back. He was thrown in the air, only holding on by grabbing a fist of fur. That's when the right head snapped at him and flung him through the air.

“Iwaizumi-san!” Yachi shrieked as he fell in front of her, blood smearing the stone circle under his battered body.

March 25th, 23:38, Harbour District, Vaeda

When Sawamura Daichi caught sight of the hulking figure of the three-headed dog again, it was moving erratically.

It padded in and out of the smoke, moving confusedly from spinning ring to spinning ring, seemingly occupied.

That was a good thing, because she was really starting to worry about the scene next to her. Kageyama sat on her knees on the stone, while Hinata made a passing attempt at fighting. All he could do, however, was kick and punch, while the other guy was frustratingly good with a knife.

“Kageyama, I know it’s hard, but please get up,” Daichi heard herself say.

The girl blinked and groaned.

“I can't...” she said. “I'm a terrible fighter.”

She looked pretty badly hurt at this stage.

Hinata glanced to his side. “Kageyama, what are you talking about? Are you ok?”

And in that moment, Takeda struck.

The boy had no time to react, eyes growing wide as he looked back towards his opponent, and the point of a blade mere centimetres from his face.

The dagger crashed into the shield in front of him with a soft 'wubwub' sound.

“Oh,” Hinata croaked.

March 25th, 23:39, Harbour District, Vaeda

Hinata Shouyou took a deep, shuddering breath.

“Thanks, Sawamura,” he whimpered.

Right in front of his nose, a blade hung in the air and if he followed the arm, he could see the snarling face of mister Takeda, who really was way less mild-mannered than he’d first seemed.

A few things happened at once, at this point, and Hinata could almost see them in slow motion. First, a body smacked into the platform and Yachi screamed at it.
Then, the giant dog, eyes red with fury and wild with panic, came out of nowhere, and Hinata scrambled backwards trying to get out of its way. It snapped at Takeda, who jumped and vaulted onto one of the bridges with surprising agility.

And then someone started yelling “Iwa-chan” from the edge of the room. Hinata followed the sound to see a large white fox with nine tails jump gracefully from stone ring to stone ring, making his way to the platform.

“What in the ever loving-” Daichi muttered next to him and when he looked back, he saw that there were entirely too many people on this platform.

For instance. Where did that blonde boy suddenly come from?

March 25th, 23:39, Harbour District, Vaeda

Washijo Tanji sat at the edge of the Grand Gate with a gaping wound in his jugular. He was bleeding heavily and he wasn't going to make it. He knew that much from experience. The body wasn’t his, of course. The poor bastard it belonged to had been dead since early morning. But still he bled, and it hurt about as much as he remembered it. He didn’t have long, Tanji knew. Not in this body. He grinned. In his lap, his hands glowed one final time.

March 25th, 23:40, Harbour District, Vaeda

Kageyama Tobio’s head felt like it was going to explode. Her muscles hurt and burned from the strain and she wanted nothing more than to lay down and sleep. Breathing deeply, she looked up and suddenly, in a weird twist of fate, she saw her goal. He was just casually standing there in the middle of the platform, grinning at her. People around her were shouting, but she tuned them out, like she'd tuned out the incessant grinding grating on her nerves. Painfully, she got up and without so much as a thought, she thrust. Before her, the visage of Takeda flickered. The grin, the glasses, they were slowly replaced by wide, scared eyes and a mop of blonde hair. The boy from the bowling alley opened and closed his mouth a few times in silent astonishment, and Kageyama pulled back her blade, revealing a wound in his shoulder. “What?” she said, trying to make sense of the scene, but she couldn't think through the static. Images of blood and death shot across her vision. She’d killed everyone. They were all dead. She hadn’t managed to save any, and now she was all alone. She shook her head to try and get rid of more and more horrible imagery, but they just kept flooding her. As the boy crumpled onto the stone circle, she stepped back in horror, foot landing on one of the moving rings. And she lost her balance. Yachi - sweet, reliable, perpetually scared Yachi - sprang forward to catch her and Kageyama wondered for a brief moment why it felt so fitting.
March 25th, 23:41, Harbour District, Vaeda

The blonde boy fell to the floor and bled. Red liquid stained the seal underneath his body, mixing with the blood already there and flowing in rivulets as it found its way down tiny canals carved into the stone. The blood coursed through paths that were hewn centuries ago, forming a dark red drawing, a text in a long dead language that started glowing once it was completed. It was observed by an old god currently inhabiting a man called Takeda. He stood atop one of the bridges above the Grand Gate and his lips curled into a small smile. A real one.

“Well done, Tanji,” he said quietly “This was a play for the ages, my old friend.”

In his hand, he felt the weight of an elaborately carved dagger. He really only had one shot at this, but he had great confidence in his skill.

“Hey Daichi!” he yelled, and he threw.

The woman, busy pulling a first aid kit out of her backpack, looked up at the sound. Her eyes grew wide as she noticed the dagger coming straight at her.

A bubble formed.

With a loud, grinding ‘click’ the platform started moving.

March 25th, 23:41, Harbour District, Vaeda

“Iwa-chan!”

Oikawa Tooru was jumping from stone ring to stone ring, trying to get to the platform, when he heard a click and the stone circle he was standing on changed direction.

Every hair on his body stood on end.

In the middle of the room, the platform started moving slowly. Above him, the four bridges connecting it to the edge lifted up and began folding in on themselves. That seemed like a really final thing for them to do.

“Wait... they opened the gate? How the hell did they open the gate?” Oikawa cursed.

Letting himself ride a stone ring, he made the effort to change back into his human form.

When the stone he stood on stopped with a soft click, he looked up.

Yachi stood in front of him. She was holding up the hunter girl, who looked pretty terrible, and was looking around her in a panic when she spotted him.

“Oikawa-san!” she shrieked. “I think something went wrong.”

Next to her, the hunter girl unsteadily got to her feet.

“What do we do?” Yachi yelled.

“Oh, I have a hex for that,” Oikawa said, rifling in his coat pocket. He pulled out a small black velvet bag. “I would have liked to use them for something else, but I guess this will do.”

He opened the drawstring and felt inside.

March 25th, 23:41, Harbour District, Vaeda

Kageyama Tobio’s mind felt like it was wading through wet concrete. She unsteadily got to her feet and looked up, to see that everything was going wrong.

It felt painfully familiar.

Underneath her feet, the final rings fell into place, forming a large pattern, a bigger variant of the shapes carved into the platform.

And while Kageyama’s mind was slow to comprehend, her body moved like it knew what would happen next. She started running, dragging Yachi with her.
One by one, the tiles fell away.
The smallest stone ring around the platform dropped into the depths and then the next, and the next, faster and faster.

Ahead of her, the last man she ever wanted to meet in a situation like this was standing around, casually rifling through his pockets as if he was looking for change to tip a waiter.
“Oikawa!” Kagayama yelled.
“Yes I know, don’t rush me, hunter girl, this is-”
But Kageyama roughly grabbed his arm. “Run, you idiot!”
The ground underneath her feet was disappearing. Faster and faster the tiles fell, while the three of them ran desperately to reach the edge.
They did not make it.
Behind her, Yachi screamed as she fell into the void.
Kageyama pivoted to try and grab her, when she felt herself become weightless.
Her feet were no longer touching anything and with a loud curse, she fell into the black abyss.

March 25th, 23:42, Harbour District, Vaeda

Oikawa turned around at the sound of Yachi’s scream and felt his feet slipping.
For a moment, it was almost like he was walking on clouds. Beneath him, the hunter girl was screaming profanities.
He had just enough time to look towards the platform, where a wounded Iwaizumi opened his mouth in a soundless yell, and then everything fell away, up over his head as he soared into the depths.
Oikawa fell, as next to him some unspeakable horror was climbing up the pit.

His fingers fished into the velvet bag and closed around a small round object.
This was not how he had ever expected to go out, he had to admit.
It was quite a bit more spectacular than even he had envisioned.
Wind whipping his hair, he pulled out the Corinthian's eye and crushed it between his fingers, a cold, slimy mess that ran over his palm as he incanted an ancient spell.
It was weakness really, he thought, that led him to start caring for these silly creatures and the silly world they'd built.
Above him, the tiles slipped back into place, and the gate closed as fast as it had opened.
Oikawa smiled and closed his eyes, allowing himself to fall into the endless depths.
Chapter Summary

In which Ennoshita, Narita and Kinoshita set out to save the world.

March 25th, 23:44, Vaeda Coast

Every colour comes in different shades. This includes black. There is black, you see, and then there’s BLACK. One is the absence of light, or a very low amount of it. It's a dead tv screen. It’s the black of clothes and charcoal and printing ink. It's the darkness of nights, of basements, of deep forests. It's dark, but plenty of creatures can see just fine in it. The other one is more than mere darkness. It's not just a lack of light, but an active exclusion of it. This is a darkness that absorbs the light. That eats it whole. A dark so deep it doesn’t just suck in brightness, but takes all hope and life with it. And right now, there was a circle of exactly that sort of BLACK swirling in the ocean just off the coast of Vaeda. Even in the inky dark of the sea at night, Moniwa the Dragon could see it clearly, a darkness so dense it contrasted against everything else that humans called 'black' and made it look inferior.

Moniwa watched the column shoot up into the night sky and made a noise somewhere between a growl and an ‘oh dear’. He got up from the rock he’d been resting on and inspected his ancient body. There was a nasty gash in his side, but it had mercifully stopped bleeding now. The pain and the panic had subsided enough for him to regain control over his senses. He hated it when his natural instincts kicked in. Seven hundred years of enlightenment and the reptile part of his brain still went into overdriven whenever he got badly hurt. Moniwa was just lucky that when it came to fight or flight, his natural instinct was ‘flight’ and not, say, ‘burn down the entirety of Vaeda’. That would have been bad. But this vortex of BLACK could be worse. Carefully, the dragon stretched out his wings, testing the breeze.

March 25th, 23:55, Harbour District, Vaeda

Kinoshita Hisashi sat on the back of a very retro looking motorcycle and tried to disappear. Maybe he'd gotten inspired by all the random heroics going on around him, or maybe his survival instinct had finally jumped off a cliff, but he'd actually volunteered to join his companions on this little 'save the world' mission and he was kicking himself now that they were getting close to their goal. Because they were definitely getting closer. Narita was driving up the coastline, following the road north. And next to them the sea was, for want of a better word, boiling. It was rough and choppy and the waves moved in patterns that made very little sense. It was almost like some kind of maelstrom was forming nearby. A storm coming from
beneath the waves.

“I wonder how you recognize a hell gate,” Narita pondered out loud. “I'm sure we'll know it when we see one,” Ennoshita said. He was sitting in the sidecar of the bike, busily scribbling in a notebook. “I dunno, maybe we follow the hell beasts?” Kinoshita added. He pointed out three flying creatures in the sky ahead of them. From afar they looked like pterodactyls, or some other winged lizard. He squinted to get a closer look at them, but as they neared, he very much regretted that decision. They were utterly disgusting. They moved with weird, jerky motions and their fur wriggled in ways that itched Kinoshita's spine. As one of them swooped overhead, a bit of its 'fur' fell off, onto Kinoshita's shoulder, and skittered down his arm. With a loud and highly undignified scream, Kinoshita slapped the thick black spider away. It dropped onto the roadside, where it scuttled off into the weeds. “Are you fucking kidding me? Is that a flying swarm of spiders?” Kinoshita squeaked. “It would appear so,” Narita said, like this was the most normal thing in the world. “And they're not creatures I recognize. It does seem likely that they came from some other world.” “Hmm, that would mean the gate opened,” Ennoshita said next to him. “we’d better hurry.” Kinoshita ducked behind Narita’s back and pinched his eyes shut.

Excerpt from “Lesser known myths and mysteries of Japanese folklore” by Christopher Nicholson (published by Blackie and Son, Glasgow, 1826)

The curious case of the 'ageless man' is a story told in the Sendai region. Folklore has it that a man there failed to die, and that he walks the earth to this day, cursed to never age. The myth has similarities to the 'Wandering Jew' from European oral history. Considering the geographical region, this ageless man could also be a youkai or other mythological spirit that was turned into a campfire story. The difference between most folk tales and that of the 'ageless man', however, is that the latter appears to have a historical inspiration in a man named Ennoshita Chikara. Several government records and some otherwise credible sources indicate that this man very much existed, though several details about his life remain vague. This is what your humble author has found in official records and caches of letters from the time. In the autumn of 1665, Ennoshita Chikara, a minor official in the local administration under the Tokugawa shogunate, attempted to mediate between two angry drunks. He was struck in the head during the ensuing bar fight and when authorities arrived, they found him unresponsive and no longer breathing. He was proclaimed dead that evening. Two days later, Ennoshita Chikara, beloved husband and father of four, was carried to his grave. A week after, he was seen walking into the front door of his old home, with no prior knowledge of his circumstances and no evidence of his demise, save for a big bruise on his head. A neighbour's diary mentions that the discovery caused his wife's hair to turn white. Little is known about the next few years, other than that he was the subject of many consultations by Tokugawa doctors and scholars. Notes from one of the shogun's advisers paint the image of a man who has seemingly survived death, but who has no recollection of the afterlife. These researchers eventually pronounced him sound of mind and in good health. In the summer of 1666, Ennoshita Chikara took up his job again. In the spring of 1676, Ennoshita Chikara's eldest daughter, Chiyo, was married and joined the Suzuki household. In the autumn of 1677, Ennoshita Chikara's younger daughter, Aki, was married and joined the Mikoshiba household.
In the winter of 1678, Suzuki Chiyo died giving birth.
In a letter that could reasonably be dated to 1680 or thereabouts, a local dignitary visiting the town remarks of Ennoshita as having a 'never aging visage', a reference to his young complexion, despite his apparent age.
In the autumn of 1681, Ennoshita Chikara's oldest son, Ichiro, left the family home to enlist in the army. He died in a peace keeping mission, four months later.
In the summer of 1683, Ennoshita Chikaa's youngest son, Mitsuko, entered apprenticeship as a musician under the Tachibana household.
In the winter of 1685, Yuki, wife to Ennoshita Chikara was buried.
In the summer of 1686, Ennoshita Chikara went missing.
Local records speak of a letter he wrote to Mitsuko, explaining his decision to travel. In it, he left his belongings in the young man's care. The actual letter has not survived to this day.
In the summer of 1691, Ennoshita Chikara was declared dead, on grounds of having been a missing person for 5 years. His estate was inherited by his remaining son.

March 26th, 00:03, Harbour District, Vaeda

“I think we found it,” Narita said, slowing down the bike; Kinoshita Hisashi carefully opened one eye to see that they'd come upon a warehouse of sorts. In the air in front of it, several little clouds buzzed angrily about. Their patterns were wild and fast, like wasps whose nest had been disturbed.
“Please get off the bike,” Narita said. He took their helmets and Kinoshita stepped up to his friend. “So what do you make of those cloud thingies?” he asked.
Ennoshita finished his note and stuffed the book into the inner pocket of his coat.

“The wisps? Yeah they might pose a problem,” he answered.
“What, what do they do?” Kinoshita asked.
Compared to the flying spider swarm they seemed positively pleasant.
“They take over your body.”
Kinoshita shimmered out of view.
“They chase by smell, I think,” Ennoshita remarked.
Kinoshita sighed, flickering back into view.
“Would this help?”
Behind them, the bike had vanished and Narita stood there with three gas masks that wouldn't look out of place in an Ypres trench.
“Worth a shot,” Ennoshita shrugged. “Let's go.”
“Are we sure about this?” Kinoshita tried, but the others had already started walking.
He was an idiot, he told himself, and he shouldn't have come.
Sure, the coffee shop was probably overrun with minotaurs by now, but at least he wouldn't be the only one panicking if he'd stayed there.
Groaning, he pulled on the gas mask and sped up to a trot to keep up with them.

Three years earlier, Geraldine, New Zealand

It was Ennoshita who first told him that his ability to blend into backgrounds was a form of magic, and not just the result of a ton of experience at not wanting to be called up to the blackboard in high school.
The hostel where Kinoshita Hisashi was working lay some distance from the town, towards the mountains. A good place for hikers and back-packers to stop on their way to the national park. Most
of all, it was quiet, and no one bothered him there, as long as he called home once a week. He'd picked up the job mostly as a way to get out of his parents' hair while he figured out what the hell he wanted to do with his life but as it turned out, that period of indecision took longer than expected. He'd been there for nearly two years when the strange duo showed up.

The two hikers had come in one night in early autumn. Very polite, very friendly, ever so slightly out of place. Their clothes were ever so slightly out of touch. Like something his dad would wear, when it was obvious that they couldn't be older than mid thirties, max. They were also a bit more distant than the other guests. Tourists were usually bursting with stories about their big adventures, but these two just chatted to them about the weather and not much else. They were going to head into the mountains, they said, and they took the complementary hiking map but it was obvious they wouldn't use it. To Kinoshita they sort of looked like they should be teaching at university or something, but they were definitely too young for that.

“Ten bucks says they’re gay,” the girl working the reception told him that evening. Kinoshita just shrugged.

Over the next four days, they would leave early in the morning and come back late at night, where they quietly ate dinner in common room. One of them, with short hair, would just silently watch whatever the tv was playing, while the other spent the entire meal furiously scribbling in a notebook, occasionally asking the other to show him a picture on the digital camera they carried.

It was the fifth night of their stay, when Kinoshita sat outside sipping beer and avoiding his coworkers, that notebook man came out and joined him. This was cause for some concern, because that Never Happened. Not unless he wanted it to. People just didn't see Kinoshita when he was trying to hide.

But this man just casually sat next to him and pulled out a can of Epic beer, reading the label with an amused grin. “So did anyone teach you,” he said, opening the can with a hissy click, “or are you self-taught?” “Uh... sir?” Kinoshita answered.

“That disappearing trick of yours is pretty good,” the man continued. “I'm just wondering if you knew where it came from.” “Oh. Uh... no.” “People haven't talked to you about it?” “It's not something a lot of people notice?” Kinoshita said sheepishly. The other man chuckled. “Well, I guess they wouldn't,” he said. “I'm Ennoshita, by the way. Nice to meet you.”

For the next five nights, Ennoshita would come and find him. Kinoshita didn't really mind, since the guy brought beer to share and he had some pretty cool stories to tell. Even if those stories sounded like complete bullshit, half the time. They chatted about the surrounding countryside, about Kinoshita's hiking experiences and life in general. The man had some very detailed opinions on movie history and if he was perfectly honest with himself, he rather enjoyed their discussions, lively as they could get.

On the sixth night after that first conversation in the garden, Ennoshita came with a proposition that would change the course of his life. “You're familiar with Indiana Jones, aren't you?” he started, “Because my friend and I have run into something we think we could really use your help with.”

March 26th, 00:05, Harbour District, Vaeda
The wisps in front of the harbour warehouse floated around in weary, nervous little patterns as the three men neared.
“Look,” Ennoshita said, pointing to the ground. The concrete in front of the warehouse was stained with a strange oily substance.
“Ectoplasm,” Narita nodded. “Do you think the hunter destroyed a bunch of them?”
“Could be,” Ennoshita said.

Kinoshita shivered. His friend started walking next to him.
“Just stay calm and keep moving,” Narita said in his usual soft, almost bored voice, “They appear to be afraid of us, so we’ll use that to our advantage.”
So Kinoshita walked and concentrated on staying calm.
Deep breath, hold it for one, two, three, four. Exhale.
Deep breath, hold it for one, two, three, four. Exhale.
Deep breath, hold it for one, two, three, four. Exhale.
When they walked by several of them, his hands actually started shaking, so he clenched his fists.
Deep breath, hold it for one, two, three, ... Breathe. One, two, breathe, breathe.

A chill went up his spine. One of the wisps was circling him.
“Get away...” Kinoshita muttered. His friends were marching ahead of him and he was trailing behind. He needed to catch but that ... thing was now hovering in front of him and he was starting to panic.
He wondered, briefly, if they smelled fear, and that's when several more started coming his way and he ran. The wisps came after him, tugging at his clothes. He could feel them everywhere, like cold breath fluttering on his skin.
“Gerrof get OFF!!”
One of them was now trying to wriggle underneath his mask and Kinoshita snapped, flailing about. He didn't stop until a hand firmly grasped his arm and an honest-to-god war fan whacked the clouds away.
“It's alright,” Narita said, gently pulling him along. “Let’s get inside.”

Spring, 1843, Bay of Biscay

Christopher Nicholson, scholar, playwright and travel writer, born long ago as Ennoshita Chikara, was more excited than he'd been for years. He got so excited, in fact, that he set out to rent a boat as soon as he discovered the location in a dusty tome in the back of the British Library.
The place was remote, an island off the coast of France, and getting there took both a heavy portion of his personal fortune, and the stomach to handle rough waters being navigated by an obviously inebriated captain.
But it would be worth it to come upon Roman ruins, untouched by modern hands, or so he told himself.
The island was the presumed final resting place of a Roman general with an altogether unnatural knack for winning battles. It was the kind of thing he didn't mind dropping some money on.
And what an interesting case it was! What little history he'd found on General Naritus, had screamed 'wizard' to him from every page. Naritus had been very secretive, never really engaging in the politics of his time. He had commanded a small elite army with which he managed to bulldoze enormous forces.
Several of those victories had come with a little help from some highly unlikely weather conditions. One battle Ennoshita read about was fought on a large open plane, with Naritus' men huddled near a small copse of trees. A much larger force surrounded them from the adjacent fields and it would have been an easy win for the enemy, were it not for a freak torrent of hail dropping ice the size of marbles onto the entire scene. The larger force, black and bruised, surrendered without a fight, proclaiming Naritus and his men to be gods.
Ennoshita always loved stories like that. It gave him a giddy sense of excitement, knowing what he did about the world, and reading into history to see what he could glean with his own eyes.

He was a very happy man, therefore, when he finally finished climbing the small hill on this wind swept and sea beaten island.

What he expected to find, in a secluded glen protected from salt water and strong gales, was a broken ruin. Maybe, considering the roughness of the landscape, a few rocks or a floorplan, with some luck there'd be a statue or some pots.

What he found instead, was a perfectly preserved Roman villa with gleaming furniture that looked like it was made just yesterday. Even stranger was the young man sitting in the atrium. He had short black hair and spoke Italian so badly that it rivaled his own.

“Naritus?” Ennoshita said, taking off his hat.

The man shook his head, pointing to the middle of the atrium, where three small graves rested. General Naritus, his wife and a related name, probably a child of theirs.

“So who are you?” Ennoshita asked in broken Italian. “Tu chi sei? Errr... quid es?”

The guy blinked, seemingly pondering the question.

“Nescio,” he said. He formed the words slowly, as if he had to remember how to talk.

“O...k...,” Ennoshita muttered to himself, “So what are you? Che... uh... quod?” he pointed at the guy, racking his brain for Latin phrases. He was decent enough at reading the stuff, but actually speaking it caused a whole mess of trouble. But the man seemed to understand. He laid a hand on his chest.

“Lar,” he said.

“Eius lar.” And he pointed sadly to the gravesite.

When Christopher Nicholson, born long ago as Ennoshita Chikara, walked back to the boat, he left behind a crumbled Roman ruin. Without the protection of its very own guardian spirit, the villa had collapsed in an instant. Nothing much was left now, except for the base of the walls and three graves in the middle of what was once an atrium. What little he could salvage, amounted to a few shards of pottery, which he carefully placed in a bag to take with him back to London.

He wasn't too bothered, though. Christopher Nicholson and his new friend, Henry Narita, real name unknown, boarded the boat under the confused gaze of its drunken captain.

March 26th, 00:06, Harbour District, Vaeda

A flailing Kinoshita Hisashi was dragged into the warehouse, where Narita slapped the last of the wisps off of him. He bent double, trying to get his breath under control as his eyes slowly got used to the dark.

Behind them Ennoshita huffed, pushing the heavy door with all his might.

“Can I get some help closing this door?” he huffed.

“Of course,” Narita said.

Kinoshita stood straight, rolled his neck, and froze.

“Wait! No! Nonononono open the door!” he screamed.

It was hard to tell in the darkness of the warehouse, but something was already there. It was big and glistening and it shuddered slightly at the heavy thud of the warehouse door slamming shut.

“Jeez, Kinoshita will you calm-... oh.” Ennoshita stood stock still and blinked.

“Is that a snake?” he asked in a voice that was quite a bit higher than usual. “That thing is huge.”

“You think?” Kinoshita growled.

The dark silhouette towered high above them. It was a three story warehouse used to make friggin boats and over half of it was currently taken up by coils and coils of slimy possibly-sentient muck.

As his eyes got accustomed to the dark, it became clear to Kinoshita that is was definitely not a snake. He could only wish for something like that. At least he’d be able to place that.
This thing was somehow worse.
It didn’t have a head so much as the body just ended at some point, and that point consisted of a
mouth with several rows of teeth bent in a hundred different horrific directions. The rest of it was
featureless naked skin with some kind of moisture clinging to it, like it was an oversized intestine. It
seemed to be coming out of a hole in the floor near the other side, and judging by the slowly moving
coils, it wasn’t even fully done slithering out.
The creature stirred, mouth swaying. It seemed to be looking for something.
“That’s not good,” Ennoshita muttered, and he was pulled sideways by Narita a moment later, as the
worm lunged.

March 26th, 00:08, Harbour District, Vaeda
Ennoshita Chikara hit the ground with a smack and scrambled upright.
“Thanks,” he whispered, helping his up.
The worm had retreated, mouth now swaying wild and uncontrolled in the rafters of the warehouse.
It was surprisingly fast for something that big.
Kinnoshita, to their left, had disappeared.
“This is a definite sign that we’re getting closer to the gate,” Narita said, dusting himself off.
“Oh, good job. Yay us!” the voice of Kinoshita shouted from somewhere near the door. “How are
we going to deal with that thing, Narita? Politely ask it to move for us? Challenge it to a game of
fucking sudoku?”
The worm stilled for a moment, and then swerved in the direction of Kinoshita’s voice.
“AAAH!”
There was a crash as the mouth slammed into the wall, stunned for a moment, and the sound of
sneakers ran past.
“Kinoshita, please try to keep calm,” Ennoshita said.
“Fuck you!”
The worm retracted and went back to searching, its teeth undulating in a way that reminded him of a
centipede walking.
“I think you’re antagonizing it,” remarked Ennoshita.
“No shit!” came the voice of Kinoshita. It was followed by a pat-pat-patting of feet running off
toward the left side of the warehouse.

The worm moved again, following after him.
“I don’t see eyes,” Narita said next to him.
His friend nodded. “I think it uses vibrations!” Ennoshita said loudly. “Kinoshita, it-”
“Fuckfuckfuckfuck,” Kinoshita’s voice said as it sprinted across the floor. The worm shot forwards,
crashing into another wall.
Ennoshita sighed.
“Stop shouting!” he yelled, but it was of little use at this point.
The young mage was sprinting across the floor, loudly cursing under his breath.
Next to him, Narita was viewing a pile of debris. With a lift of his eyebrow, he motioned Ennoshita
and they set to work tilting an oil drum onto its side.
“Just a minute,” Ennoshita whispered, and he gathers some tools and trash, shoving it in the drum for
good measure.
“One... Two...”
With an ear-piercing rattle, the drum rolled across the dirty floor.
The creature bristled. It lifted up its mouth and let out a low moan, before it swayed again, heading in
the direction of the sound.
“We need some plan to get past that worm,” Narita pointed out.
“What we need, is a cannon,” Ennoshita sighed.
“I don’t think I can do that,” Narita said.
“I know.”
From across the warehouse, Kinoshita's hurried footsteps were coming their way again. He shimmered into view, doubled over and panting.
“Please – huff – tell me – huff – you know how to get rid – huff – of that thing,” he wheezed.
“We're working on it,” Ennoshita muttered.

He wondered for a moment if maybe he should start an oil fire, but he wasn't too happy about the chance of the three of them surviving such a thing, let alone anyone who had traveled further towards the gate.
He was still grasping for alternatives when a loud crash came from above.
The roof was gone. Slabs of corrugated steel came crashing down and Narita pulled his two companions back from a large iron beam falling centimeters from their feet.
“What the fuck!?” Kinoshita gasped.
“Oh god, I'm so sorry, I didn’t know anyone was here.”
A deep, booming voice spoke down to them.
Ennoshita looked up and found himself speechless.
Towering above them, outlined against the sky, was the enormous head of what could only be a dragon.
“AAAAAAAAAH” screamed Kinoshita next to him.

A ripple went through the worm and a giant mouth, several rows of teeth and a whole lot of disgusting looking slime was coming their way in an instant.
And much as Ennoshita tried to slap a hand over his mouth, Kinoshita would not stop screaming.
Next to him, Narita tilted his head, apparently pondering for a second, before pulling a large heater shield out of his coat.
“That's your plan?” Ennoshita groaned as his friend moved into the path of the monster barreling their way.
Before it ever got to them, however, a huge shadow came down. The jaw of the dragon closed around the worm, tearing its skin with a sickeningly wet sound, before lifting the whole thing bodily into the air.
Moniwa pulled, and coils and coils of hell beast followed, until the whole of the monster squeezed out of the trapdoor with a small pop, like an earth worm being pulled out of the ground by an enterprising blackbird. With a snap of his neck, the dragon flung the creature into the sea behind him. It landed with a demure splash and a second later, a large wave crashed into the warehouse wall, salt water spilling over and trickling down the giant hole in the roof.

“Holy shit,” Kinoshita said, finally done screaming.
The dragon's head came back into view.
“Go close the gate,” it said. “That's what you're here for, isn't it? I got this.”
“Are you, uh, sure?” Ennoshita asked, blinking up into the night sky.
“He says he’s got this,” Kinoshita yelled, tugging him towards the trapdoor, “you gonna argue with a fucking dragon?”
The boxer and the accountant

Chapter Summary

In which the barricade comes down

Chapter Notes

My apologies that this one came so late.
I struggled for a long time with what I want to convey in this chapter, and what it implies and how to go about it. It's still not perfect but I'm about ok with it as it now stands.
My thanks to bittersweetoranges for the idea that finally got me untangled.

March 25th, 22:50, Old Quarter, Vaeda

“Oh, 'I don't want anyone else hurt'. Good job Asahi. Way to go,” Azumane Asahi muttered under her breath as she climbed the ladder. It had been a spur of the moment thing. Also? A mistake. Her knees were already starting to shake.

“Who's a big damn hero now? You idiot,” she whined, and she carefully crawled onto the balcony.

Up top, Lev and the girl called Yui were looking over the barricade at something on the other side. “I think it's stuck,” Lev said, wringing his hands.

“What's stuck?” Asahi asked. She walked toward them just as the construction shook violently.

Shrieking, she grabbed the edge of the barricade and peeked over.

Underneath Asahi’s feet stood a massive monster, half bull, half man. Well, it sort of stood. Mostly it was kneeling, really. He or she had gotten their horns tangled in the debris and the glue holding the barricade together.

“Uh. Are you ok?” Asahi shouted down. She was answered with another violent shake.

“I think it’s upset,” Lev remarked. The creature roared.

“I certainly would be,” Asahi said. It looked painful and highly uncomfortable, getting your horns stuck in a barricade.

She could relate. She'd once snagged her hair on some tree branches and it still sometimes haunted her.

The barricade shook again.

“Guys,” Yui muttered.

The wood around them was now creaking dangerously. “We should get down.”

Lev looked at the smoke bombs in his arms with a small pout, while Yui gently tugged on his sleeve.

A small group of people was coming down the street, Asahi noted as she quickly checked the battlefield. There were less than the wave earlier that day, which was a small mercy. But they did look rather angry, and several looked far from human.

She hurried down the ladder again as above her, Lev threw some of his bombs over the barricade, causing the creature to bellow in confused panic. Then he shoved the remaining ones in his pockets and hurried down.

Another shake, and the wood gave out a strangled wail.
Asahi could almost see it happen in slow motion from her refuge near the wall. The first to go were the ladders, one of them missing Lev by a hair's breadth as he jumped out of the way. The planks of the balcony on top gave under the pressure, slipping out of their holdings and tumbling down. The minotaur roared again and the wood, the chairs and wardrobes that had protected them until now, finally gave under the strain.

“Oh no.”

Asahi watched the barrier crash down, wood flying across the cobbled streets. Daichi had been gone for literally a few hours and already the whole thing was falling apart. The barrier that had withstood literal waves of attackers couldn’t hold for ten minutes against a handful of people now that Asahi was in charge. And she had been the one to put herself in charge. What the hell had she been thinking? Without Daichi, without Suga she was nothing. She couldn’t protect anyone. She was not strong enough for this.

“Wow,” Lev said, “that dude is huge, huh?”

Bokuto, standing next to him, whistled.

Two horns peeked out of a large pile of debris. The creature shook its head and more planks and splinters rolled down.

The minotaur seemed a little dazed, slowly scrabbling up from underneath the broken furniture. Behind it, several silhouettes loomed up out of the smoke.

“Oh!” Lev said, pointing at them, “Is it show time? It's show time, isn't it?”

He was beaming.

“You're entirely too excited about this,” Yui sighed, shaking her head. Nevertheless, she rolled up her sleeves.

Across the street, wind whipped up a bunch of broken wood to form a protective dike in front of the garage, where the kids still resided. A stern looking Akaashi stepped in front of it. They adjusted their jacket with a look that said that it was definitely show time.

“We have no plan,” Asahi muttered. “There's so few of us and we have no plan.”

“Tell you what,” Bokuto suggested with a sly grin, “I’m going to punch some people. Maybe you can talk to the minotaur?”

“Talk to the… what!?” Asahi said as she watched him walk into the fray.

With a low rumble, the minotaur was extracting themselves from the pile of debris. Right. This was her job. She signed up for this. She was the big scary mage.

Remember that part.

Big scary mage.

Gathering every bit of her courage, she swallowed thickly and walked up to the minotaur.

“Uh, hi?” she said. It came out as a small, high-pitched wheeze.

The minotaur lifted their head and glared at her.

“So, uh. Could you leave? Please?”

With a small twitch of its eyebrow, the creature got up and swiped at her.

“Hey!” Asahi jumped back, releasing a stream of ice in her panic.

“Mage girl. You’re one of us. I broke your defences. Now would be a good time to surrender,” the minotaur said.

“I, uh, can’t do that.” Asahi shook her head, raising her voice to at least a sharp squeak.

There was a small smile on the minotaur’s snout.

At least that's what she assumed it was. The creature was mocking her.

Asahi huffed. This monster had some nerve.

“I will not do that,” she said, drawing herself up.

“Alright then.” They swiped again, this time missing Asahi by mere centimetres as she ducked out of the way of a massive hand.
“You anti-magic mages are the worst, you know,” the minotaur said conversationally as they picked up a piece of wood that had been a book shelf at some point in the recent past. “Just because you can pretend to be a regular human, doesn’t mean you have to look down on us.”

“What? That’s not what…” Asahi started, but then the book shelf came her way. With a yelp, she rolled sideways.

The minotaur was fast. Much faster than the giant she had fought earlier. They were used to their size. Limber and premeditated. Smart, too.

They swung again, and before Asahi could make a move, the wooden plank knocked her off her feet. She dropped onto the cobbles with a heavy smack and a concerned ‘ow’.

“Now then,” the minotaur said matter-of-factly, “if you guys don’t surrender and let go of your prisoners, I’m just going to-“

“OY.”

Something small appeared behind the minotaur and kicked them in the ankle.

“What the?”

The creature turned around, giving Asahi the opportunity to get back to her feet. Frowning, she threw an ice ball at the minotaur's head.

They growled, lunging at the small woman now skidding before them, but she disappeared in an instant and reappeared next to Asahi.


But Nishinoya was already running up to the minotaur again. “Probably,” she shrugged, and jabbed the creature in the knee.

The minotaur roared and grabbed at her, but Noya slipped between their legs. Asahi couldn’t help but notice a slight limp.

She quickly aimed another ball of ice, this time hitting the minotaur square in the jaw. “Annoying!” they bellowed. They snatched at Noya again, but she warped away before they got to her.

From where she was standing, it seemed to Asahi like Noya was using a specific pattern. She had a vague idea what the small woman was trying to do.

She might as well go along with it.

Asahi got to work laying out small patches of ice on the cobbles whenever the minotaur's back was turned. She pelted them with heavy snow balls when they turned back towards her.

Finally, Noya stood before the minotaur with her hands on her hips, poking her tongue out. “You big meanie!” she shouted. Asahi took the opportunity to lob a sharp spike of ice high at the minotaur’s shoulder.

The creature ducked and aimed for Noya. The next second she was gone and the minotaur slipped, falling onto the cobbles. “Freeze’m!” Noya shouted, so Asahi did.

With hands bound to the street, the minotaur grunted and huffed, straining their limbs before sagging in defeat.

Asahi let out a sigh of relief, just as Noya appeared next to her again. “That was so cool!” she said.

“You were amazing,” Asahi muttered. “But please don’t do that. You should be resting.”

“Hey, chill. I got your back,” Noya said, grinning widely. “We’re a great team, you and I.” Asahi blinked, realization trickling into her mind.

“Are you going to keep making ‘cold’ puns?”

“Definitely,” Nishinoya said, winking.
March 25th, 22:58, Old Quarter, Vaeda

“I would like to draw your attention to the beautiful lady to my right,” Haiba Lev explained, smiling his brightest showman smile. “Isn't she amazing? She’s could use some sequins, but I can assure you, she's amazing.”

He was standing in the middle of the street, holding up a shiny piece of cloth while around him various people were punching each other. It was hard to see them in the fog and the smoke, but the thuds and occasional pained ‘oof’ gave a lot of it away.

The lizard creature in front of him blinked, momentarily confused.

“And now I'm going to make my amazing assistant disappear before your very eyes!” Lev went on. With a bright grin, he waved his cloth around in front of Yui, shaking it like he was a bull fighter.

“What the hell are you-” the lizard man started.

“Now you see her!” Lev continued undaunted, “And now you don't.”

He dropped the cloth with a flurry to reveal that Yui was, indeed, no longer there.

“What, so she has some sort of invisibility power?” the guy said, frowning. “Am I supposed to be impressed, because-”

He didn't manage to finish the thought, since Yui crept up behind him and hit him over the head with a table leg. The lizard man gave a small, startled sigh, crumpling to the ground.

“Nice!” Lev said, holding his hand up in a high five.

March 25th, 22:59, Old Quarter, Vaeda

Bokuto Koutaro was having an altogether great time.

This was way more fun than fighting on top of a barricade. He had room to move, for one.

Also? No lemons.

He was dancing around his opponents, occasionally getting a sharp jab or kick in. The guys he was fighting were amateurs, obviously, but they were super strong. It posed a challenge he hadn't seen much in his kick-boxing career.

And then there were the tails!

He had three guys opposite him, and two kept swiping at him with their tail and that was just so cool. He hopped over one, feeling like a million dollars, and came down hard on his opponent.

“Hey hey hey,” he grinned, and punched his lights out.

Something whacked him in the back of the head and he ducked, sticking his leg out as he turned to take a swipe at whoever it was. He caught the guy and watched him fall to the ground, getting up quickly to stomp on his side. He whined briefly and laid still.

When Bokuto got back up, he noticed that his third opponent, a girl with no tail but a couple of pointy horns, was gone.

Looking around, he saw her marching towards the coffee shop.

She opened the door and screamed as a jet of flame came shooting out.

Scrabbling backwards, she bumped into creepily smiling Lev. He pulled a long string of little flags out of his sleeve and before the girl could figure out what was happening, Yui had tied her up in them.

Bokuto chuckled. Things were going ok, all things considered.

And then a bolt of lightning shot out of the smoke, singing his hair.

“Aww!”

A creature was coming out of the fog. It looked like a woman, with a face that hinted at a dog or a fox. She had stark white hair and lightning raced across her skin.

“Whoaah.” Bokuto was momentarily stunned at the sight, wondering how he was going to handle this one, when she lunged at him.

He dodged, whirling around to kick her, and felt a sharp sting in his leg.
The shock travelled from his shin up to his thigh, leaving a small burn mark on his skin.
That hurt.
“Mister Bokuto.” Akaashi seemed to materialize next to him. “Please don't try to punch the raiju. You'll get electrified.”
Bokuto pouted. He couldn't punch them? Then what good was he? He'd been doing so well, too.
Head drooping, he took a step back as the electrical woman swiped at Akaashi, who hit her with a blast of wind strong enough to knock her back.
“You did really good taking down those three kobolds,” Akaashi mentioned casually, making him feel a bit better.
“That's right, one against three, huh,” he chuckled.
“And it would be really helpful if Asahi could get over here,” Akaashi said, sidestepping another blast of lightning as a cloud of wood dust blew into the raiju's face.
“Oh!” Bokuto blinked. “I can do that.”
Feeling helpful, he trotted over to where the young witch was scolding Nishinoya. Something about bedtimes.
“Yo!” he said, “let's switch? There's a thunderstorm girl over there that needs icing.”
At this, Noya burst into a giggle fit.
“I'll, uh, guard your minotaur for you,” he added.
Asahi huffed.
“Right,” she said. “Please make sure Noya doesn't get in more trouble.
“Sure thing,” Bokuto shrugged and turned around to face the place the small witch had stood.
She was already gone.

March 25th, 23:02, Old Quarter, Vaeda

In the middle of the street lay the minotaur, hands frozen to the cobbles. They were struggling, trying to get free.
“I wouldn't do that if I were you,” Bokuto said, walking up to them with his hands in the pockets of his jacket.
“We got a guy in there,” he nodded towards the coffee shop, “got real hurt tearing himself out of one of those ice things.”
The minotaur growled at him and Bokuto sat down next to their head, legs crossed.
“You wanna tell me what this is all about?” he said conversationally.
“You are beneath me,” the minotaur barked.
“Well yeah, you're like two stories high, buddy.”
This caused a small huff.
Fishing into his jacket, Bokuto pulled out an apple. “Want one?” he said.
“I am not a horse, little man,” the minotaur replied in a deep, irritated voice.
“Neither am I,” Bokuto smiled, and he took a bite out of it.
“You're like super strong, aren't you?” He pointed at what was left of the barricade.
“My friend Akaashi says you guys are way smart, too. That you're librarians and stuff. Are you a librarian?”
The minotaur frowned at him, and sighed. “Accountant,” they muttered.
“Huh?”
“I'm an accountant!”
Bokuto whistled. “Woo, all those numbers. Doesn't that get boring?”
“I like the order and logic of administration,” the creature said, in a speech that sounded practised.
“Numbers are predictable. They make sense.”
“So I have to ask,” Bokuto went on, munching thoughtfully on his apple, “What brings you, an
accountant, here to bash down barricades and stuff?"

“You wouldn't understand.”

“So help me understand. I mean, that's a bit uncivil, isn't it?” Bokuto leaned forward. “I get being frustrated from sitting down too long and wanting to punch thing, you know. Show your wild side but-”

“I am not an animal!” the minotaur snarled, pulling at his restraints.


At this, the minotaur rolled their eyes. “Because you resist.”

“You know, that's a pretty weird reason to want to hurt someone,” Bokuto said, taking another bite. “You got a name, bro?”

The creature sighed again, apparently accepting that it was now their fate to talk until Bokuto got some kind of satisfying answer.

“Damara,” they muttered.

“So Damara,” Bokuto continued, not missing a beat, “You want some big magic government, yeah?”

The minotaur glanced at him.

“That's what that dude in there told us. One of your friends.”

“Father wants to install a government that will rip down the veil,” Damara explained, slowly. “So why are you here? We're not the government.”

“Small steps, little man. Start with the anti-magic people, then move on to the ones with the tanks. Also you haven't told me your name, that's hardly fair.”

“Bokuto!” he grinned. “But why do you think we’re anti-anything? Asahi’s a witch. Akaashi over there is a fairy. We even have a talking cat! Though he’s probably hiding somewhere.”

“Like I said,” Damara sighed, “Because you resist.”

She pouted, as if she was trying to make sense of her own thoughts.

Bokuto sat and finished his apple.

“So is that gonna make it better?”, he asked after a moment of silence.

Damara raised an eyebrow.

“The ripped veil thing I mean. Will that make things better? A lot of people freak out when they discover magic and stuff. I know I did. Akaashi was really nice about it though.”

“They will adjust, and we will defeat them if they revolt.”

Bokuto raised an eyebrow at the minotaur, and she coughed awkwardly.

“There's a lot more non-magic folk than there are of you though,” he said, finally. “And like you said, they have tanks and stuff.”

“It seemed plausible when father presented it,” Damara mumbled.

Bokuto just shrugged. “You're smarter than me, buddy. I just punch things.”

“I'm tired, ok?” the minotaur whined after a while. “So very tired. Of lots of things. For instance, I can't find a decently prized suit. They don't make them in my size, so I have to get it tailored. Do you know how much that costs? And I have to. It's hard enough as it is for me to blend in. The veil is only so thick. People expect accountants to wear suits, so if I don't, they'll freak out.”

“That's rough, buddy.”

“Human doors are not made for my size, and every other mage treats me like some dumb monster that couldn't count to two, even as I'm balancing their friggin taxes for them.”

“Sounds like you hang out with a lot of rude people,” Bokuto nodded.

“Gods, do I,” Damara chuckled. “It would just be nice, you know? To have, like, a place, even just a large building, that's adjusted to me instead of the other way around? Where I fit into the doors. Where I can wear a god damned dress instead of a stuffy suit. Where I can kick people out for being assholes.”

Bokuto hummed in agreement, and they sat in silence for a while, as an electrical storm went off across the street, only to die down in a crash of ice.
“Hey Damara,” Bokuto said suddenly.
“Yes, Bokuto?”
“Who’s in charge of the magic people?”
“What do you mean?”
“Place like this has lot of magic people like you and Akaashi. Someone in the government must know, right? For magic taxes or whatever. Who organizes all the magic people stuff?”
The minotaur blinked and stared at the strange man with two-toned hair sitting on the cobbles, playing with an apple core.
“You know,” she said, smiling a little, “I have no idea.”

March 25th, 23:39, Old Quarter, Vaeda

Akaashi Keiji stepped away from the improvised hospital bed and quietly walked out of the room. The raiju was conscious again, if suffering from a mild case of hypothermia. They nodded at the EMT on the way back up the stairs, and stopped by the counter.
“I think our patient could use some tea,” they told Lev, who had donned an apron and seemed to enjoy his new temporary occupation as a barista.
“Anything fancy?” he asked.
“Just mint or chamomile, thanks,” Akaashi said.
“You got it!”
They turned around and stretched, before strolling outside.

Akaashi noted with a small smile that Bokuto had made a friend of the minotaur. He sat on the street, talking to her, while Kuroo and Yui used magic and a blowdryer to try and gently remove the last of the ice keeping her in place.
Asahi stood a little further ahead, wringing her hands.
“I'm so sorry,” she muttered.
“You already said that,” the minotaur pointed out. “And I already said it's fine. I don't blame you.”
Asahi seemed unconvinced.
“You did well, miss Asahi,” Akaashi said encouragingly. “A lot more people could have gotten hurt if you hadn't done that. Besides, minotaur skin is very hardy. I doubt she's in pain.”
The woman just gave a worried little whine, before drawing herself up with a short nod. The whole ordeal had given her some residual self-confidence, at least.
“You're a powerful witch, miss Asahi,” Akaashi continued with a sideways glance, “you have a good environment to grow in.”
“Yeah, she's awesome,” Noya said, popping up out of nowhere.
Akaashi sighed. “Miss Nishinoya, you really ought to rest.”
The small woman just poked her tongue out. “Make me.”
“Really, Noya,” Asahi whined, “you want us to bargain with you over your own health?”
The little witch grinned. “Yes,” she said, looking incredibly smug all of a sudden. She put up a finger. “One date.”
“What?”
“Agree to date me, Asahi, and I'll be a good little girl and go to bed and stay there until morning. Promise.”
Next to them, Asahi turned an endearing shade of pink, and Akaashi slipped away, leaving those two to figure it out.

It was calm out here, they noted. Peaceful, almost. People were sweeping up the debris of what was once the barricade. The attacks had ended, a quick scan of the magic forum had revealed. No one was riling up crowds anymore.
Even the sirens in the distance had died down.
Nothing left but the soft murmur of people chatting and the occasional roaring laugh of mister Bokuto.
And then Akaashi felt it.
An creeping dread they could not explain, like a nightmare descending into a waking world.
It travelled up their legs and settled in their stomach, a wrenching, churning sickness dragging them down.
It was hopelessness so deep that it threatened to make their knees buckle.
For a moment it felt like they were falling into an endless vortex, cold sweat running up their spine.
And then, just as fast as it had come up, it was gone again.
Blinking, Akaashi turned to look North, toward the harbour.
All they could do at this point was wait.
In which a demon faces the difficulties of dying.

**March 25th, 23:43, Harbour District, Vaeda**

“Tooru!” Iwaizumi Hajime screamed as he watched his oldest friend fall into the depths. A moment later, the tiles around him closed up again and started turning, as if nothing had ever happened. As if Oikawa and Yachi hadn’t just been trapped underground.

“Fuck.” Iwaizumi sagged down to the floor and the pain in his sides came flooding back. He felt sick, empty. There were wounds across his upper body, where the dog’s teeth had sunk in, but the beast may as well have violently ripped him in half and it still wouldn’t feel quite like this. Next to him, a girl with long brown hair and white patterns dancing across her skin sat still for a moment, shocked, before she carefully, methodically started dressing his wounds. She had the set face of someone trying desperately not to cry.

There were two more guys in this bubble, a young man with red hair, sitting a little further ahead, hugging his knees, and a blond boy with a bloody shoulder, staring at the outside world with fear in his eyes.

It was quiet, every one of them retreating into their own little world while outside some flying creatures flitted around the dome. To Iwaizumi, they vaguely looked like a bird or reptile, but they wriggled unpleasantly. He watched them for a while, following their movements with blank eyes, if only to give his mind something to focus on that was not the image of Oikawa Tooru plummeting to his death.

It was his fault they even came here. Some security guard he was.

The woman finished bandaging him up and silently moved on, tugging on the blond boy's shirt to make him take it off.

“So, uh…” the blond kid mumbled after a while, question hanging in the air like a thick cloud. “Who the hell are you?” the woman said. She was holding a compress to his shoulder while trying to wipe entirely too much blood off his arm.

“Uh, Konoha.” He gave a little wave and a weak smile, suddenly very nervous under the gaze of the three others.

“You were at the bowling alley,” the redhead said.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” he whispered, blush rising in his face. The woman was observing him. It wasn’t a glare. Not really. More the cold, calculating look of someone sizing the boy up. Like she was deciding in these moments if she’d trust him or not. Still, it could have burned a hole in lesser creatures.

“Hold this.”

“Look, it’s been… a weird day?” Konoha said, obediently holding the compress in place while the girl rummaged through her first aid kit. “I was doing a favour for this guy I know online, but I’ve had a few revelations the last few hours and-”

“Like what,” the girl said, looking unimpressed.

“Like he’s really scary? And he had all these crazy people with him and a monster dog and I don’t know what he’s trying to do and what the ever loving fuck just happened, but I want no part in this.”

“Bit late for that,” she huffed, tearing open another compress pack.
“I know,” he whined, “If it helps, I wasn’t expecting my day to end with me being stabbed.”
The girl’s gaze was unblinking while she wiped disinfectant on his shoulder. She slowly raised an
eyebrow.
“Look, I’m really sorry, I know you guys probably think I’m evil but I just…”
His voice became lower. “I just want to go home.”

The woman sighed, apparently satisfied, and turned her attention to Iwaizumi, giving him a nod.
“Iwa-chan, was it?”
“Uh, Iwaizumi, yes,” he coughed. “I’m… I was a colleague of Yachi’s.”
She nodded again and finished taping the compress to Konoha, before sitting back and closing her
eyes.
Silence descended on the group.
Outside of the bubble, the flying creatures had disappeared. There was nothing out there now but the
constant churning of the tile lock and the muttering of a bespectacled man.
He was stalking around the rim of the dome, perpetually talking to himself.
Iwaizumi couldn’t understand what he was saying from this distance, but he was pretty sure the guy
was cursing. He sounded like a madman and from the looks on their faces, his three companions
were afraid of him.
He couldn’t really blame them.
The dude did look unstable. He was armed, too. He seemed to have taken a sword off of one of the
bodies in the room.

“So what do we do now?” Konoha finally asked, carefully following the back and forth of the man
outside the bubble like he was tracking a leopard.
“We wait for them to come back,” the redhead said, simply.
“They just fell into hell,” Iwaizumi frowned. “How the fuck do you think they’ll-”
“If anyone can claw their way out of the underworld, it’s Kageyama,” the boy said.
His eyes were big and wide and scary, and he spoke with a certainty that made the bouncer lean
back in alarm. “I’m sure of it.”
“What about Takeda?” Konoha whispered.
“We can’t beat him. Not like this,” the girl answered.
“So what, we just wait?” Iwaizumi was feeling more weak and useless than he’d done in a long time.
He lay back, eyes tracing the light shimmers on the bubble shield surrounding him.
“We’ll think of something,” the girl said. “Konoha, I’m going to need you to list everything you
know about Takeda, or Father or whatever you call him.”
The blond boy blinked.
“Uh, ok, but how long can you hold this thing up?” he asked, pointing at the bubble.
The woman hummed, like she hadn’t thought of that, and a ripple went through the shield.
“That, uh, depends heavily on how many sandwiches we have left.”

From the notebook of Ennoshita Chikara

Enemies unaccounted for:
- **Kindaichi**: Wounded. Compels bodies, could be dangerous if he hasn’t bled out yet. Mental
  fortitude required to break his ability (cfr. Kageyama), appears to only affect one person at a time.
  *Spread out and stay vigilant. Narita likely harder to affect.*
- **Wisps**: probably came from the dragon gate (cfr. Akaashi). Ability to take over bodies, possibly in
  weakened state. Research suggests they need a pathway to get in, probably nose or ears. *Masks,
  physical protection.*
- **Wisp controlled**: A group of them exist within the Village (cfr. Kuroo). Hive mind (?). Physical
attacks. *Avoid them I guess. Narita will figure something out when in conflict.*

- **The Illusionist**: A shambling corpse with a powerful illusion ability (cfr Kuroo/Bokuto). Possibly linked to the illusionist Washijo Tanji, as mentioned by Kenma. That would make him a wisp controlling a dead body and retaining magical abilities from a previous life (how is that a thing??). **Stay vigilant. Bring protection charms and fennel tea.**

- **Takeda**: Probably armed with a blade. Ability appears some form of persuasion, carried via voice (cfr. Kuroo/Kenma unaffected), or text (his following on the forum has been slowly but steadily growing, cfr. Asahi). *Ear plugs at the very least. Physical protection. Bring charms and fennel tea....Lots of fennel tea.*

**Elaboration:** Cfr. Kenma's story, there is a likely link to the events in 1756. If this is the case, there is possibly another (or several other) entity involved. Nekomata speaks of a government with advanced spying abilities. This suggests mind reading or some form of all-seeing eye. Maybe something as simple as commanding insects or rats.

**Note**: The most famous entity controlling any number of insects is the Lord of the Flies, a demon lord said to have escaped the underworld. He would have the means and the motive...

**Other likely suspects**: lich, a very powerful ghost, some currently undocumented demon (?? disturbing)

**Extra note**: Oh shit. *Precautions. Mind reading can be blocked with charms. Bring holy water and insect poison. Would a bomb work on a lich? Extra research necessary but we don't have time. Let's hope it's not a lich.*

**New sighted enemy**:  
- **Flying swarm of spiders**. *We should have brought more poison.*

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**March 26th, 00:16, Harbour District, Vaeda**

“Yes, that’s a demon,” Narita said, lowering the binoculars. They glowed with a soft, silver sheen. “Jesus fuck,” Kinoshita muttered.

“Hmmmm.”

Ennoshita Chikara was quiet as he pondered their next move. The three of them sat huddled by the wall of the small anteroom, peeking through a large stone-cut doorway at the dome. From here, he could see Daichi and Hinata, trapped in a protective bubble with some other people. Daichi looked tired, even more than usual, but they were apparently deadlocked. A deep fear of the demon roving around the dome like a hungry animal kept them from moving.

Takeda stalked the room, riding the stone rings and looking furiously unhinged. He was perpetually swearing under his breath and he carried a sword that he would swing around at random intervals, like he was fighting some imaginary foe.

“What’s up with him?” Kinoshita whispered.

“I don’t know,” Narita shrugged. “He’s not acting logically. That is not Kageyama’s weapon and it would seem that without it he has little hope of opening the gate again.”

“Where, uh, is Kageyama?”

Ennoshita shook his head. “We probably don’t want to think about that,” he said. She wasn’t among the bodies. He’d checked.

Neither was Yachi. He didn’t like that at all.
“Who would have thought Takeda was a demon,” Kinoshita muttered. “He seemed like a good guy, you know, trus-”
“Don’t say it,” Ennoshita shushed him.
“If that’s the Lord of the Flies, Takeda most likely nothing more than a host. Like Washio was before,” Narita clarified.
“Huh,” Kinoshita mumbled. He seemed to think about this.
“Can we get the demon out of his host?” he asked after a moment.
“That’s an interesting point,” Narita nodded. “How do you separate a demonic entity from its host?”
“Exorcism?” Ennoshita tried.
“True love's kiss?” Kinoshita said.
“Are you kidding me?”
“What,” he shrugged, “I read it in a story somewhere.”
“Either way, I don’t think we have Takeda’s true love here, unless you have some secrets to confess to.”
“Well YOU think of something then,” Kinoshita pouted, “this can’t be the first demon you encounter. How do you usually handle them?”

Ennoshita sighed and racked his brain. It was times like this that he hated being quite so… normal. He was, and always had been, a particularly average man. He was well aware of this. His Latin was terrible and he wasn't as proficient in modern day Japanese as he'd like. He was extremely slow at long division. He was allergic to pollen, prone to stinky feet and he couldn't, for the life of him, beat Kinoshita at Mario Kart. He had some basic strategic insight and a fairly good aim going for him. He'd built up quite a lot of experience at… life, he assumed, and his writing was good, according to several publishers throughout history. But that was about it. The only reason Ennoshita had managed to live so long was, he had concluded, that he was inexplicably bad at dying. Where most everyone else managed to keel over after a set number of days, he just... didn't. In the many years he'd spent living past his natural lifespan, he'd spoken to several immortals, or at least to very long living creatures: dragons, vampires, the occasional nightmare. At one point he'd found himself in a night club in Lima, having a long conversation about the human condition with a man in a slinky white suit. It was only after he woke up the next morning, that he'd noticed the heavy sulphur smell still lingering in his shirt. But all of these discussions had left him with the same conclusion: he was just a regular guy with a rather unique flaw.

One of the consequences of this, he'd noticed, was that his brain got overstuffed. A human mind can only hold so much. It’s not prepared for lengthy lifetimes. About fifty years into his world travels, Ennoshita had suddenly realized that he'd forgotten the name of his childhood friend. And no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get it back. This was the exact time that he had started writing books. And he was certain that somewhere in his journals, there would be a paragraph that explained exactly how one removes a demonic entity from its host, preferably without destroying said host. But right now he was drawing blanks and the only notes he had with him were that week’s observations. What he needed was an encyclopaedia, something that held more knowledge than simple pages and text could convey. Something like…

He could swear, for a second, that he saw something blink, a warm gleam in the corner of the little anteroom they were in. He recognised the package as Yachi’s book almost immediately. How weird to find it here, Ennoshita thought briefly.
Frowning, he crept from his position to take a closer look. A book with all the knowledge of the magical world in it. It almost seemed too good to be true. A brief voice in the back of Ennoshita’s mind protested that in his experience ‘too good to be true’ was just that, but he waved it away. It almost felt like the thing was calling to him, beckoning him closer.

“Ennoshita?”, Kinoshita whispered, “what the hell are you doing?” But Ennoshita paid him no mind. Slowly, carefully, he sneaked up to the book, before delicately lifting the front cover. “What do you wish to know?” the first page read, in wide, luxurious pen strokes. Intrigued, Ennoshita thumbed through the book. There were pages upon pages of descriptions, there were spells and creatures and locations even he had never heard of. It was a veritable treasure trove of knowledge, all held on the impossibly thin, almost transparent paper of this small book. It was amazing.

He flipped through the pages until an entry caught his eye. “Lar,” it said, “A protective house spirit. There are several types, but most have some ability to replicate objects they’ve used in daily life. This means, for instance, that a household with a lar spirit would realistically never run out of spoons. The nature of the lar spirit is further known to be that of a trickster, making it a dangerous companion when not under strict control.” Ennoshita frowned. Nearby, someone was urgently whispering his name. “The lar is thought to be related to the genie,” the entry went on, “and like the genie, it will protect its master and comply with commands. However, it will always look for an opening to betray said master. Traditionally, it will do this by interpreting a command too literally.” “Ennoshita.” came a voice, it was closer now. “Just a moment,” he waved. “Chikara. Step away from the book.” “What? No, what are you-” A night stick whacked the leather-bound book out of his hands. “What? No, what are you-” A night stick whacked the leather-bound book out of his hands. “I’m sorry,” the voice of Narita said, “but that thing is a terrible influence.” Ennoshita hissed, grabbing for it again, but Narita was too fast. He snatched it off the floor and the journal immediately disintegrated. In Narita’s hand, it crumpled into a swarm of flies and flew away. “What the fuck,” Kinoshita whispered to his side.

“More visitors? Dear me, it seems like there’s no end to you cockroaches. Wave after wave, ever more eager to save the day.” It was a cold voice, and it came from somewhere near Ennoshita’s back. His mind was still reeling from a mixture of unreasonable anger and relief, when he felt a sharp pain. A stinging hot fire was driving itself through his chest. Looking down, he could see the point of a short sword stick out from beneath his shoulder blade. “Oh,” he said, and the world turned black.

March 26th, 00:22, Harbour District, Vaeda

“AAAAH you asshole!” Narita Kazuhito watched an invisible force push Takeda away, and the man was briefly stunned as he was dealt blow after blow, holding up his arms to deflect. It only took a minute, before he caught whatever camouflaged limb was coming his way.
“Shit!” came Kinoshita’s voice.
“Wave, after wave, after wave,” Takeda said, and he pulled, dragging a now shimmering Kinoshita off balance, before he flung him across the room with surprising strength.
The young mage hit the wall and came down in a bruised pile.
With a fierce glint in his eye, the man in glasses turned back.
But Narita was ready. He’d pulled a heavy iron spear out of his coat. Feeling the weight of the thing, he twirled it once and took up a defensive position.

Takeda gave him a malicious grin.
“Well Roman, would you fight an unarmed man?”
Narita frowned, confused for a moment, before he realized the man was speaking to him in latin.
“I have no qualms about this, demon,” he said, and immediately sidestepped Takeda’s left hook, bringing the side of his spear down on the man’s hip.
“Did you know I was there? When the Visigoths came and sacked the old place?” Takeda said conversationally, jumping away as if the hit hadn’t affected him at all.
“I did not,” Narita answered truthfully.
“The screams. The raping. The fires. It was beautiful. You should have seen it.”
He bent backwards and grabbed the hand of one of the wounded people still lying around after Iwaizumi and Oikawa had punched the wisps out of them.
“At one point the entire city was burning. The smell was just like barbecue. But then you’d know that smell, wouldn’t you.”
In a fluid movement, he flung the man’s body at a mildly horrified Narita.
“I do,” Narita said. He dodged the body, but it left him vulnerable on his right side.
“Your general did love himself some burned villages, after all. This whole peace thing your new master is so fond of, was never his style.”
Takeda immediately kicked his shoulder with the force of a wrecking ball.
Narita felt the bones fracture and winced, stepping back.
“Are you trying to make a point,” he asked, “because I still have quite a lot of fennel in my blood.”

Behind Takeda, the others had finally made a move. They were walking across the bridge.
If he could keep the demon occupied for long enough, they might just get away.
That is, if he could keep this up.
Winning seemed impossible at this point, he’d concluded. The creature was too strong, even for him.
He switched hands and shot forward, jabbing the spear at the fleshy part of Takeda's arm.
And in all fairness the spear point should have penetrated.
It hit, he knew it did, but it left no mark.
The next second the demon grabbed the weapon and pulled Narita towards him.
“You’re rusty, Roman, too much time spent keeping the peace,” he said, and he crushed Narita’s shoulder in a vice grip that made all the splintered bone fragments clash together.
Narita screamed.
He was lifted bodily in the air, like a straw doll, and flew through the air, smacking against the wall.
This time, the impact was enough to shake the foundations of the cave they were in, and Narita was sure he felt more like a sack of glass shards than a body part, and he had trouble keeping the spear up.

How long he was out, Narita did not know, but when he did come to, he found himself on the cold stone floor.
With some trouble, and a whole lot of pain, he propped himself up against the wall.
He couldn’t feel his arm.
In truth, he couldn’t feel most of his right side.
When he dared look down, he found that most of his body was limp and bloody.
In front of him, the demon was now fighting Hinata and some man he'd never seen before. A buff sort of fellow, with spiky dark hair.
The man made an admirable attempt at boxing, considering he was already hurt and bandaged.
He suspected that Daichi was the only reason either of them was still standing upright. Because every time it looked like the demon would get a hit in, he would instead crash into a shield with a soft wubwub sound.
The girl leaned on the wall by the doorway, looking like she was about to faint.
But still she kept going. She had little choice, Narita thought.
The demon was now moving around with the speed of a tornado, throwing a punch here, swinging the spear there, kicking the air as if he would never run out of energy.
But none of his hits connected.
Takeda growled and with some satisfaction, Narita noticed that he was frustrated.

His joy was short-lived.
Two more punches and a faint were thrown, and in just a moment of indecision, the shield went up in front of the wrong guy.
“HA!” Takeda bellowed as his foot smacked into the wounded man’s belly with enough force to knock him backwards, into the pile of bodies.
The demon huffed, stretching out a hand behind him.
In a single move, he snatched a golden bird out of the air and squeezed it until it crumpled into gold dust.
“It’s so hard to find trustworthy pawns these days,” he said, casting a grim glance at a blonde kid sitting by the doorway. The guy grew pale and scrabbled away.

They were done for, Narita thought.
By the looks on Hinata and Dachi’s faces, the messenger bird had been a last ditch plan.
It had been a decent one, all in all, because you couldn’t just fight a demon like this, and expect to win. All you could do was ask for back-up and hope to hold out.
They’d given it a good try, they really had.
But they were only a few, after all, and it would take an army to bring down this creature. They were not enough.

Narita closed his eyes and let his head lean against the wall, allowing the pain take hold.
He was about to pass out, when something moved next to him.
“I think I’ve figured it out,” a familiar voice said.
Narita’s eyes shot open. “En-no… shita? How?”
He blinked, before staring at his friend with wide, questioning eyes.
“It hurts like hell, but I can breathe,” Ennoshita shrugged “I think he missed my lungs.”
This made Narita smile.
“I can’t believe you survived that,” he muttered, giggling slightly as he felt his throat seize up.
Something warm was spreading through him and he felt lighter, drunk almost.
“Yeah well, let’s try not to bleed out,” his friend mumbled. “But what I was trying to say. I think I remember how it went now. Can you do silver?”

March 26th, 00:41, Harbour District, Vaeda

There’s a plant called Silphium. It doesn’t exist anymore.
Narita Kazuhito knew this, because he searched for it for two hundred years.
The Romans used it for anti-conception and accidentally ate it into extinction. As people are wont to do when it comes to not having unplanned babies.
But the thing about the silphium was that it had a flavour unlike any Narita had ever had before, or after. Dissolved in water, it made a really, really good tea that he had always been very fond of. It made him sad and a little wistful to know that it had disappeared off the face of the earth.

Something happens, Narita noticed, when you live long enough. You start thinking of people and empires in different ways. What seemed endless once, stretching across large swaths of Europe, ever expanding, becomes a chapter in a history book. ‘The Romans’.

Several lifetimes, his whole world, reduced to a single chapter in between ‘The Greeks’ and ‘The Goths’.

The idea that they had been given a ‘the’ label irked him, as if they weren’t thousands upon thousands of different people and personalities, of families and cities each with their own atmosphere, but instead a single class of humans.

Even worse, the way it rolled off the tongue suggested a bygone era. Like ‘the Spartans’ or ‘the Phoenecians’ before them.

To Narita, it had always felt like the Roman Empire would be endless, stretching into infinity like his supply of silphium tea.

It had hit him hard when he first realized that the empire and its people were no more, that its culture was, if not forgotten, then at least moulded and transformed, re-imagined and duplicated into a mockery of what it had been. After his initial euphoria of making it off the island that had trapped him for centuries, the knowledge that the world had simply moved on had made him, for a dozen years or so, wary and unmotivated.

Why do anything when the world itself is transient?

Why rake the garden when the leaves will fall again next autumn?

This was the thing he admired most about Ennoshita. He never grew weary. He never stopped trying to help.

Even if he was in the middle of a besieged, starving city, surrounded by the worst humanity had to offer, he would think of something. He would come up with some plan, even if he was unable to fix everything.

If it was only one tiny thing he could make better in a massive whirlpool of misery. He never stopped trying.

He would rake the garden, while the leaves continued to fall around him.

With a tired smile, Narita delved into stores of energy he didn’t realize he still had, and pulled a small silver dagger out of his coat.

“This is all I can do, I’m afraid,” he said.

“Good enough, my friend,” Ennoshita grinned.

And while Hinata, bless his little heart, bounced around the demon like a frightened deer, Ennoshita slowly crept up to him.

He was close, so close when Takeda spun around and slashed the spear across his throat.

“Did you really think you could do that?” the demon asked, and he stillled, baffled, when he noticed that Ennoshita had, almost accidentally, leaned back at the last second with a swing of his arm. A small red line bloomed from the man’s skin, but the cut was superficial.

Furious now, Takeda lunged, hands clawing towards Ennoshita’s throat, only to miss again as it crashed into a bubble shield.

“WHY DON’T YOU JUST DIE!” the creature screamed.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Takeda,” Ennoshita said, swaying a little, “That’s something I’m just really rather bad at.”
Takeda moved to attack again, but he stopped, shocked, and looked down. Hinata had stuck a silver knife in the demon's side, where it started glowing. The effect was almost instantaneous.

“What is this?” he said, and his voice sounded strange, like it was being run through a broken speaker. There was a trill to it that Narita had not heard before.

“Silver,” Ennoshita said simply, and he took a step back before he slowly slumped to the floor. “YOU!” Takeda screamed, and it sounded like a swarm of wasps. In a fit of rage, the creature threw his weapon, only to watch it hang in the air in front of Ennoshita’s face. There was a soft wubwub sound, before the spear clattered to the ground.

Takeda laughed. “There really is no end to you, is there.” His movements were becoming rigid. From the wound in his side, things were unravelling. Flies crawled out of the hole in his skin, escaping one by one as the man halted and hung his head.

“Wave after wave after wave. Scuttling across the earth like so many ants,” he hummed. The sound was barely recognisable as a voice now, it was more like static, angry buzzing.

As more flies left him, the glow from the silver spread to his abdomen and up to his chest. The insects flew around him, forming a raging cloud that slowly obscured him from view.

Painfully, Narita leaned over and reached for Ennoshita’s bag. They’d brought it. He knew they had. Ennoshita always had some plan.

Digging into the backpack, his hand closed around a small can.

“Hey Hinata,” he yelled. The redhead had backed away, watching the spectacle before him with open mouth. Startled, he turned to Narita.

“Catch.”

March 26th, 00:43, Harbour District, Vaeda

Hinata Shouyou had never seen a person literally fall apart before, and he kind of wish it had stayed that way. Takeda was dissolving into a cloud of flies before his very eyes, and he wanted very much to look away but he couldn’t. It was a relief, then, when Narita’s voice pulled him out of his shock.

“Catch,” he yelled, and Hinata jumped to grab a small can out of the air. He peered at it curiously. “Really?” he said, “Bug spray?”

“Oh my fucking god,” came the voice of Daichi somewhere behind him, but Hinata was way past asking questions at this point. Pulling his t-shirt up to cover his nose, he turned back toward the swarm, and sprayed the entire can of poison at it.

The air quickly became thick with an acrid smell, a dense fog that prickled his throat and made everyone around him cough. When it cleared up, the swarm of flies had mostly fallen to the ground, and he could see Takeda sitting on his knees.

He looked utterly pitiful. Smaller, somehow. Thinner. Beat up. There was a wound in his side from the dagger, but his abdomen also showed a massive, dark red bruise. It looked bad enough to have broken several of his ribs.

Hinata’s punch, he suddenly realized. It had hit after all.

Takeda’s arms and legs were also covered in deep lacerations, there was a cut on his cheek. He was bleeding heavily.

With a realization that made his stomach turn, Hinata realized that he’d taken every hit. Every one of Kageyama’s jabs, every one of Hinata and Iwaizumi’s kicks. Even Narita’s spear. The only thing keeping the shell of Takeda together, had been the demon swarm.

“I’m sorry,” the man muttered. “I didn't want it to be like this.” And with that, he fell to the ground.
By the time Konoha’s message was composed and sent out again, the authorities were already making their way down the stairs. Few things motivate a magical administration quite so much like an angry dragon telling them the world’s about to end.

Special police units, tired from a long day of battling magic riots, now swarmed the building and healers were busy loading up the wounded.

Daichi watched them pull a sheet over what was once Takeda and wheel him out.

She was tired. So very tired.

“Miss Sawamura, I’m going to have to ask you some questions,” one of the cops was saying, pulling out a notebook. He was a skinny guy with freckles and a kind looking disposition. He glanced up into her face and gave her a shy smile. “But I guess it can wait until tomorrow. Crow’s Roost, yeah?”

Daichi nodded.

“I’ll give you guys a lift once the medic's looked you over,” the man said gently.

She nodded again.

Next to her, Hinata was watching the proceedings with hollow eyes.

“You ready to go?” she said gently.

He blinked, turning slowly to look behind him, to the domed room. More people were in there, taking pictures and examining bodies.

“I could have sworn Kageyama would make it,” he said softly.

Daichi laid a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Hinata.”

The boy sighed.

“Let’s go?”

He nodded, trailing her as she made her way back to the stairs.

They stopped when the people in the domed room started shouting.

Daichi anxiously looked back.

The stone medallion was swivelling.
Grey skies

Chapter Summary

In which a surreal and symbolic shenanigans happen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

???

Kageyama Tobio's eyes snapped open and darted around.

Above her was an expanse of grey. There were no clouds in the sky, and she couldn't really see any stars, either.

Huh. This was a weird ass dream, even for her, Kageyama thought.

She shifted a little and her body protested, all the aches and pains of the last few fights springing back to life like she had just opened a tupperware full of locusts.

But she did figure out she was lying on something soft, and when she moved her fingers, they sank down into it. Nearby, maybe a few metres away, she could hear a wet sound, like little waves lapping at the shore. The air around her smelled musty and vaguely chemical, but the temperature wasn't unpleasant. Sort of cool.

Still, though, everything felt weird and she wasn’t going to get any wiser by lying here.

With a groan, she sat up.

She was on a beach.

No big surprise there, she thought, but she never really dreamed of beaches much, certainly not beaches like this.

Black sand stretched out in a wide band to her left and right. It felt very fine when she ran it through her fingers and if she looked close, she could see specks of silver and blue. If she had to be honest, it was kind of pretty.

It looked like the night sky.

The beach sloped up behind her into a series of dunes, and ran down into a large body of water ahead. Small waves lapped at the sand and the water was clear, though she could see orangey red pools on the surface further in, like grease spots on soup. It gave the lake an unpleasant marbled look.

A few metres away, in a small crater, she spotted her backpack.

Kageyama rolled her neck and carefully got to her feet.

She’d made quite a dent in the sand. She rubbed her butt. It seemed fine. At least not more bruised than it had already been.

Her head hurt, but that was starting to feel like a default state by now.

She slogged through the sand to reach her bag and it wasn’t until she pulled the zipper open, that she realized how loud it sounded.

And by extension, how quiet everything else was.

Curious, she looked around. There was no wind, no animals, no insects.

Nothing moved but the occasional tiny wave rolling onto the sand.

She was completely, utterly alone.

“Hmmm,” she said and it sounded like a drum in the dead quiet around her.
Wincing slightly, she rummaged through the bag and pulled out a painkiller and a drink bottle. This was by far the weirdest dream she’d ever had, she thought, as she opened the bottle with an entirely too loud hissing sound.
Usually there was at least some loved one running away from her, or dying in front of her... or something. This was some next level nightmare shit.
She swallowed the pill and sipped, and slowly realized that tasting apple juice was really not something that should be happening in a dream.
Putting the cap back on, she sat back and pinched the skin on her arm.
Huh.
She was not dreaming.
She blinked.
That meant she was awake.
Possibly in hell.
_Alone._

Something very much like dread was rising in the pit of her stomach, but she pushed it back down as best she could.
Blubbering wasn't going to help.
To keep herself busy, she put the water back and rooted around in her bag, checking her supplies.
Her hand came back up with a small rice ball. Asahi had packed them carefully, wrapped in plastic with a little floral napkin. She’d even drawn a smiley face on it.
Cute.
Her stomach made a low growling sound at the sight.
Swallowing away a lump in her throat, Kageyama sat back and opened the package.
She was going to deal with hell after she’d had a bite to eat.

???

Yachi Hitoka awoke in an uncomfortable position.
She was sitting in a cold chair, tacky leather sticking to her arms. Her neck was bent at a strange angle, her feet were lifted up and she was tilted back way too far.
A bright light shone in her face, making it hard to see.
She struggled to get up, but found that something was pinning her to the chair. Some sort of slab went around her head and was fastened to the chair on both sides. It crinkled when she moved.
Reaching up, she tried to pull it away, heart beating faster and faster as she felt the panic rise in her blood.
And then she heard it. The sound of nightmares.
A high pitched droning sound started up, vibrating into her very bones.
Tiny little fingers slithered out of nowhere and wrenched her mouth open, pulling back her lips before the biggest dentist drill she had ever seen came into view.
Yachi screamed.

???

Oikawa Tooru shook his head and stretched groggily, only to find that his paws clattered painfully against metal. He blearily opened his eyes.
He was in a cage. Too small and quite dirty.
It was hard to move in here and the rusty bars were already drawing brown and black lines onto his silver fur. He shook again, trying to figure out how sturdy this thing was.
The answer: very.
Outside his cage was darkness but the floor seemed to be moving. Occasionally, they would hit a bump or something, and everything shifted slightly, metal cages sliding against each other with an unpleasant screech.
He sniffed, briefly, to try and figure out where he was, but he quickly thought better of it. The air in here was thick, dense with the smells of several more creatures, probably also in trouble, if the predominance of fear wafting all around him was anything to go by.
He felt his instincts trying to take over, panic rising as he rattled the cage again.
The bars didn't budge.

A few metres away, a flap was opened and a blinding light fell in. He recoiled, squinting his eyes against the sudden intrusion.
“Oh look, it's awake,” came a low, drawling voice and Oikawa became aware of a figure drawing closer.
In the gloom and the shadows, he could see two beady eyes peering at him.
“Hello, pet.”
Oikawa bristled.
“Who the hell do you think you are? Let me out of here immediately!” he said.
Or tried to. What came out was a long, drawn out fox bark.
“Fierce little bugger, aren't you,” the creature outside the cage said.
Chuckling, it poked a claw through the bars and Oikawa squeezed himself in the back trying to stay away from it.
The cage rattled.
“Don't rile it up, Tsumu,” a second voice said. “Nine-tails are pretty dangerous.”
“Oh yeah, what's he going to do, bite me?”
“Probably.”
'Tsumu' huffed and the claw retreated. “Hey Samu, how much do you think they go for?”
“A lot, I guess, some of the higher ups think they're pretty,” Samu said.
“Lucky! Aren't they some kind of delicacy?” Tsumu drawled, beady eyes sizing up Oikawa again, “This one's fairly old, though.”
“Don't know, don't care,” Samu said.
There were footsteps and a flash of light fell into the room, illuminating several rows of cages as Samu left.
“You're grossly mistaken if you think you can sell me like some kind of livestock,” Oikawa snarled, “I'll rip your throat out!”
It worried him to no end that the whole threat came out as nothing more than a series of high pitched screams.
Tsumu jabbed a sharp claw between the bars, grazing Oikawa's side and leaving a red streak.
“Shut up, you little shit,” it growled, and it turned away.
“I hate the loud ones,” it muttered as it walked across the space, its exit punctuated by another flash of light as the flap opened and closed.
Oikawa was left in the dark, trying to stop his brain from going full feral while he sat in his cage, jostled left and right, as it rumbled to whatever destination it had in store for him.

A beach of some sort, Hell (presumably)

Kageyama Tobio had been slowly making her way along the beach for what felt like at least half an hour. She was vaguely aiming for some structure in the distance, but it didn't seem to come any closer.
She had found nothing.
Met no one.
The only movement came from the water and the sand she displaced, the only sound she could hear were the soft lapping of the waves, her own shallow breathing and the annoyingly loud crunch of her feet on the sand.  
She was certain that if she stood still long enough, she'd be able to hear her own heart. Possibly even the rushing of blood through her veins and whatever it was her organs were up to. That was something she really didn't want or need.

She was thinking of taking an alternate route, maybe going into the dunes, when she saw a figure huddled on the edge of the water.  
“Hello?”
Her voice rang out like a fog horn.
The figure was did not react.
She hesitated a second, before she slowly walked up to it.
On closer inspection, it turned out to be a bird, and it was very much dead.

The creature sat on the edge of the lake, washed up against some branches. It was a large bird, perhaps a heron, and it was completely grey. Looking closer, she saw that it was almost skeletal. All flesh was rended from its bones, but its feathers and skin were still there, turned into brittle stone.
Petrified, Kageyama thought.
No, that's what gorgons did.
Calcified. She wasn't sure why she knew that word.
Frowning, she looked out over the lake, its weird smell, the red spots. She made a mental note not to swim in it. Feeling uneasy, she left the bird and walked on, listening to the crunch, crunch of her own feet on the sand, until she came up to a tree hanging over the water. Another creature was hanging in its bleached, dry branches, a dead bat this time. Its little stone eyes looked out over the lake as it hung from a wayward bough, crusted over and completely grey, almost white in colour.
In a tree a little further away she found yet another dead thing, a small dove this time, sitting on a branch looking out at the lake. Its wings were spread, like it was about to take off, and the wind had made peaks of its feathers. It was, in a very melancholy way, beautiful.
Kageyama knitted her brows together.
“Who put you up there?” she whispered, and her voice carried the weight of a storm.
The dove didn't answer, and she wasn't exactly ready to touch it, so she walked on.

She kept hiking along the beach for what felt like another half hour, before she stopped to take a drink.  
The village or structure up ahead had not come any closer in all this time, it seemed. Kageyama huffed. She put the bag back on and took a right, grumbling under her breath while she climbed the dune.
When she reached the top, she saw another dune, and another, and behind that, something shiny. Intrigued, she trekked over to the next hill, until she finally reached the top of the third, heaving as she looked out.
Down below was a lake. On the beach at her feet stood a dead tree, small petrified bat hanging from its branches. “Fuck,” she whispered, and it rang out like thunder.

She slid and jumped off the dune, feet thudding heavily as she made her way back to the beach. And then she stopped, frowning at her own footsteps. Something was... off.
Ok, many, many things were off, but something very specific was off about her own footprints in the sand, where she's walked like half an hour ago.
Didn't they seem... awfully large?

Swivelling around, she looked at the imprints behind her. They were the same size, and it was nowhere near her regular shoe size.

Kageyama took a step forward.

Crunch.

She took a step back.

C-runch.

Blinking, she stood still. The one she'd just made was definitely smaller than the ones behind her. Suddenly, her throat felt awfully dry. She took another step forward.

Crunch.

She took a quick jump.

Ca-crunch.

The sound didn't line up.

She was not alone.

Heart beating in her throat, she started running.

Crunch, ca-crunch, ca-crunch, ca-crunch.

And stopped.

Ca-crunch, crunch-unshh.

Turning around, she drew her sword. “Alright, show yourself.”

Nothing.

“I don't care who you are or what you're planning, but I swear I will run you through if you don't immediately show your fucking face.”

There was a short, awkward pause, and then a figure appeared in front of Kageyama. It just... materialized, appearing out of the background like she was adjusting the zoom on a camera and had only now found a way to focus on it.

It was large, about a head higher than her, and fairly thin. Its body was obscured by a long, grey coat, in a material that looked crunchy, calcified like the birds and bats around the lake.

Most of all, where its face should be, was a blank white space.

“Who the fuck are you?” Kageyama said, voice way, way higher than she'd like.

The creature did not react.

“Release me, demon.”

Nothing.

Lifting her sword menacingly, she took a deep breath and pulled out her 'authoritative voice'.

“I am Kageyama Tobio, daughter of Kageyama Ishikawa, granddaughter of the great Shizawa Yukiko. I am a Hunter in a long line of Hunters and I have no business being in your little playground. Release me now.”

The creature tilted its head at her, but remained silent.

“Look buddy, you either let me go or I slice your fucking head off.”

“Is that always what you do when you don't like something?”

The voice was soft, but it startled her enough that she nearly dropped her weapon.

It sounded more like wind than anything else and it didn't come from the creature, so much as from the very air around her.

“What are you so nervous about, anyway? This is a fairly chill hell, don't you think? I'm not even torturing you that much.”

“What the fuck? Let me out of here right now!”

“Why?” the creature said.

“What do you mean, why? I don't belong here!”

“You're in hell, there's nowhere else for you to go.”

“I'll have you know I have plenty of places to go and things to do,” she huffed. “There are people out there that need my help.”

“Is that so?”
This creature was infuriating. “Of course that's so,” she mocked his tone. “I didn't fall in here by myself. There's Yachi, for one. She is definitely not going to be good at handling a place like this. Probably had a heart attack when she found that first bird thing. She'll need saving. Heck, there's even Oikawa. Big bloke, foxy, very full of himself. Don't know if you met him yet.”

“Would you save him?”

“I... might,” she said.

“I thought the whole point was to get him here.”

“How... would you know that?”

“I know everything.”

Taken aback, Kageyama lowered her sword.

“What are you?” she said, slowly.

Before her, the demon gained the face of Oikawa Tooru, shooting her a mocking grin.

“Who knows,” the figure said. “Perhaps I am your enemy, coming to laugh at you.”

“Oh fuck off with that,” Kageyama said, irritated.

The creatures face changed again. It gained sunglasses and a sly grin.

“What makes you so sure you do not belong here?”

The voice of Hanamaki said. “You've killed, have you not? Murderers go to hell.”

“Killing nightmares is my job. I'm doing this to protect people.”

“But I have killed many, To-chan. Stay here to keep me company.”

The voice was unmistakably her brother's, as was the face of the man before her.

“Stop trying to mess with me, you ass!”

“What makes you think your brother wouldn't be here?”

The creature was back to a blank face and Kageyama was losing her patience.

“He's not fucking dead, for starters!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!” Kageyama said, exasperated.

She took a deep breath. She really wished she'd paid more attention to some of the lore she'd learned on trickster gods. Were you supposed to lure them with riddles? She sucked at riddles. Maybe she needed to confess all her sins or something.

But if there was one thing she remembered about morality tales and stupid tests like this, it was that they definitely weren't solved by stabbing.

She put her sword back and huffed.

“Alright, demon,” she said, sitting down on the beach and crossing her legs. “If you're going to be playing games, let's play an actual game. That's how these things go, isn't it?”

The creature chuckled, and a black and white marble board materialized in front of her.

“Checkers it is!”

“What is it with demons and playing checkers?” Kageyama frowned.

“Hm?”

“Nothing.”

A market (or something very much like it), Hell

Oikawa Tooru growled as his cage was put on top of a metal table with a sharp clang. He was in a market. Or something very much like it.

A wide concrete plane stretched out in front of him and he could see stalls all around. The merchandise was bizarre. Flowers that snapped back at whoever handled them, unpleasant looking concoctions in jars, an awful lot of meat and assorted... things on sticks. The merchants and customers were demons, werewolves, imps and other magic folk. Very few of them looked human, and they were the ones that were probably most dangerous. The others surely seemed to stay out of their way.
Oikawa had tried several times to change back to human form, but he had failed.

His cage, and that of several other creatures, had been placed under large metal canopy and the two handlers, Samu and Tsumu, walked around shouting at people.

In the stark light of day, it became clear that they were harpies. Their feet had claws like a hawk's, and feathers ran up their legs and torso. Their arms ended in wings, while their face was a weirdly distorted cross between human features and a nasty looking beak.

They looked identical but one of them definitely had more of a mean streak than the other.

One time a bluish demon with sleek wings came to look at his cage, and he barked at it, baring his teeth until it went away.

“You little shit!” the mean one said when he was gone, coming up and slashing him on the side again.

“Don't ruin the merchandise, Tsumu,” came the bored voice of the other.

The harpy hummed in protest, grumbling under its breath.

He looked up when people started screaming in the street in front of them.

Before Oikawa's eyes, the very fabric of the world was tearing.

It was a profoundly disorienting sight, but something sharp was sawing a slit into the air above the street, before a hand tore it open.

The next second, a person fell through.

“Ow! Fuck you!” she said.

“Kageyama!” Oikawa barked excitedly. “Kageyama, come get me out of here!”

Tsumu kicked his cage.

The girl got to her feet, cursing loudly. Around her, the crowd was backing away.

It seemed that even in a place like this, a girl falling out of the sky was a pretty rare occurrence. Or maybe it was because she looked human.

She dusted herself off and looked around, her eyes glancing over the harpies' stall.

“Kageyama!!” he barked again.

The girl seemed to think for a moment, before she came marching his way.

Face scrunched up in curiosity, Kageyama perused the harpies’ stall.

She knitted her eyebrows together, looking through the different cages. There were snakes, and birds and… snakebirds.

A whole bunch of really weird things she had probably never seen before, but Oikawa wasn’t exactly happy with her window shopping.

“Oi! Kageyama!” he barked.

The girl peered through the grates of his cage.

“Don’t get too close now, little lady,” Tsumu drawled, sidling up. “This is a mean one.”

The girl tilted her head again. “Oikawa?” she asked.

“Yes! Who else would I be?” he barked.

What came out was a bunch of increasingly more frustrated barks.

Kageyama frowned.

“Oh come on, hunter girl, do something! Don’t just leave me here! It’s ME!” he huffed, hopping up and down in a way that shook his cage. “I know we've had our differences, but surely you recognize an ally when you see one!”

“He doesn’t seem to like you much,” Tsumu noted and Oikawa growled in frustration.

“Animals rarely do,” Kageyama deadpanned.

“Oh come ON!”

The girl stilled for a moment and Oikawa saw a brief flash of bluish light in her eyes.

Then she shot a glare at the harpy and untied something from the top of the cage.

“Oi!” he yelled. “Don’t touch the merchandise!”
“I’m just going to talk to him,” Kageyama said sternly, holding up the small amulet she’d taken off. The harpy huffed, but backed away, keeping an eye on them.

“What’s going on?” Oikawa said. And what came out was ‘What’s going on’.
“Oikawa?”
“Oh, finally. Get me out of here.”
The girl pouted.
“What? Get me the HELL out of here!” Oikawa said.
“What do you do if I release you?” Kageyama whispered.
“What do you mean ‘what will I do’...” He stopped. Kageyama's brows were knitted together, her eyes to the ground. She looked torn, possibly scared all of a sudden.
“Do you honestly still think I’m a monster,” Oikawa asked, tone calm and serious.
“My family has been hunting you for centuries. I finally got you in captivity, in the actual underworld. What kind of Kageyama would I be if I just... set you free now?”
Oikawa blinked. “I closed your stupid gate,” he pointed out. “I sacrificed my own gorgeous self to stop the hordes of hell from invading the living world. I saved Iwa-chan, and, like, the rest of humanity. If I was anyone else, I'd be a hero.”
Kageyama thought about this.
She made a face.
She huffed.
“I mean, you did kill one of my ancestors, didn't you?” she said, finally.
“I did. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done,” Oikawa sighed.
“You're lying.”
“You're right,” he shrugged. “I don't regret it. He was a horrible man.”
Kageyama blinked at him.
“Did they forget to tell you that part of the glorious Kageyama history? Several of your ancestors worked for anti-magic governments, but he was one of the worst. Basically made his living assassinating anything with a tail that could talk.”
“To protect...”
“Do you honestly believe that?”
Kageyama was quiet.
“This was in a time when the Veil wasn't fully instituted yet. Certainly not in Japan. So youkai were pretty common. And yes, some of them were dangerous. I certainly was. But none of that mattered. No one checked. There was an ogre that terrorized a village and got killed for it, but I also know several tanuki's and at least one spider jorougumo who just went about their business, not hurting anyone, and still got their heads lopped off. This illustrious ancestor of yours would banish healers to hell for using their magic on the wrong kind of client.”
“He was one of the strongest warriors in my blood line,” Kageyama said defensively.
“Mmmm, he probably was. Horrible human being though.”
She pouted again and folded her arms.
“Do you want me to get you out of here or not.”
Oikawa sighed. “Well they do say you end up in your own worst nightmare when you drop into hell. Mine is apparently being saved by the Great Kageyama.”
“So is that a yes?”
“They're going to string me up and sell me as a delicacy, hunter girl.”
“Ok. Fine. I'll cause a diversion,” she whispered, “Figure something out fast.”
“What?”

Kageyama marched up to the harpy lazily manning the stall and held up the amulet accusingly.
“Your merchandise is a grade 715B humanoid,” she said loudly “You're using ward amulets to keep
him in his animal form.”
“What of it?” Samu said.
“That violates the several laws on the transport and treatment of higher beings!” Kageyama started, and then she stopped when she saw the grin on the harpy’s face.
“You do know where you are, don’t you, little miss goody-two-shoes?” Samu said.
“Fine. How much are you asking for him?” Kageyama said, not blinking an eye.
“Nine-tailed fox. Real delicacy, him,” Samu grinned, sporting the smarmy voice of a salesman. “I’m thinking… 2.000 souls. At least.”
“I don’t deal in souls, harpy.”
“Well how about that pretty sword of yours then?”
“No! Does your brother not have a better offer for me?”
“Like what?” Tsumu said, looking up.
“Like my services. You need someone whacked? I’m good at stabbing demons, nightmares, even. Something like that would fetch a lot of money, right?”
This intrigued the creature, and he waddled over.
“What kind of nightmares are we talking here?” he drawled.

For someone as unwavering as her, Kageyama was remarkably good at bullshitting, Oikawa thought, but she would only be able to keep them occupied for so long.
Right, he’d have to be quick about this.
Now that the amulet was gone, he tried again to change back into his human form. This time it worked, though it left him in an extremely uncomfortable position. He inched his hands through the bars, trying to reach the locking mechanism on top of his cage. He nearly had it, too, when the shift in his weight caused the cage to tilt, and it tumbled off the table with a loud crash.
The thing sprang open on impact.
“You little shit!” Tsumu yelled, and the next moment he was flat on the ground, tripped by a remarkably gleeful Kageyama.
This upset Samu, who lunged at her.
She dodged the wing and took a step back, before turning around and sprinting off.
That was new, Oikawa thought briefly.
But he’d have to ponder that one later.
Samu was now baring down on him, and his animal instincts turned Oikawa back into a fox.
He ran off, in between legs and buildings, until the screeching of harpies chasing him finally died down.

The outskirts of a demon town, Hell

Kageyama sat against the wall of an abandoned building just outside the little market town.
She took a tiny sip of water, ears tracking the sniffing sound outside. The snuffling got closer and she tensed, ready to spring up, when the head of a silver fox peeked through the doorway.
“Oikawa,” she said, sagging back down.
“So good to see you, too,” the fox snarked.
He changed back into his human form and stretched luxuriously. “Got any for me?”
She handed over the bottle. “Careful with that, we don’t have much left and I don’t know how long we have to make do.”
“What are you talking about?” Oikawa said, “There’s plenty of booze out there. I ran by at least three bars.” But he took a measured sip nonetheless, before giving it back to her.
“We shouldn’t drink that,” she said. “Don’t eat anything, don’t drink anything...”
“Don’t stab anything?” he smiled, raising an eyebrow.
She glared at him.
“I’ve never seen a Kageyama run away, before. It’s refreshing.”
“Shut up. I'm trying to figure out how this whole underworld thing works, ok? It seems like a good idea to leave as little of a mark as we can.”

“So where do we go from here?”

“I dunno, you tell me.” she said, hugging her knees while she knitted her brows together again. It was hard enough to think with all the stuff that was happening, and now this asshole was bothering her, too.

“What do you mean, 'you tell me'. I saw you slash through the air.”

“That wasn't me. I just sort of... ended up here.”

“How?”

“I, uh, won a game of checkers against death, I think.”

Oikawa just stared at her, while she awkwardly rubbed the back of her neck.

“It was... weird. Look, I don't get it myself, not really. But what I think, is that we each fell into little... pockets? A separate dream world or something. Our own personal nightmare, like you said. I... defeated whatever it was that kept me in mine, and told the guy I had people to save, so he sort of dropped me into yours.”

Oikawa pondered for a moment, carefully taking a seat on the floor. “Well, this place is certainly filthy enough to be a nightmare,” he said, looking around with disdain.

Kageyama rolled her eyes. “We need to find Yachi, and then, like, an exit.”

“You think there's an exit?!” He laughed, leaning back on his hands. “Oh you're precious! I don't know if you've noticed, but we're in fucking hell.”

“Well, you go ahead and be a demon then. I don't need your sorry ass.”

“Ahhh, there's the Kageyama I know and despise!” Oikawa said, sitting back up. “Alright miss smartypants, why do you think there even is an exit? The whole point of all those gates is to keep the demons in. Remember how convoluted it was to open them? Your friend in glasses spent years coming up with the perfect circumstance. Now imagine doing that from the inside.”

“But we don't belong here,” she said, stressing every word. He shrugged. “Several people don't belong here.”

“No, I mean...” She sighed and glared at his smug face.

“Ok, fine, but most people don't bodily fall into this world. It's just their spirits. We're already stronger than most creature here are used to. You saw how they reacted to me. You broke an iron cage with your body. We're weird here. We're...” she threw up her hands, searching for a word.

“Aliens.” He was grinning widely now.

“Sure....” Kageyama said, sounding very unsure.

“Alright,” Oikawa said. “So we need a teleporter.”

She just closed her eyes and shook her head.

“Or a doorway,” he went on. “Some method of reaching Yachi-san, at least.”

Kageyama lifted her head when a new idea popped up.

“You don't happen to be able to travel through liminal space or anything, do you?”

“I... what?”

“It's a demon thing.”

“I am not a fucking demon, Tobio-chan.”

“Don't call me Tobio-chan!”

“Then don't call me a demon.” He pushed out his bottom lip.

“Come to think of it, it was the imp that had the actual travel powers.”

“I'm not an imp either!”

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*A dentist?, Hell*

Yachi Hitoka screamed.

More tendrils were coming to wrench open her mouth, there was the unmistakable drone of a dentist
drill drawing near and Yachi just couldn't take it any more.
In one day she'd thrown lamps at eye-teeth monsters, she'd gotten caught in a smoke bomb, had been eaten by a bowling lane, had been confronted with the image of Kiyoko Shimizu and fallen in to a deep, deep well and she just...
With a nearly feral yell, she slapped at the little hands on her face and tore at the slab holding her until it broke.
The drilling sound stopped immediately. The tendrils slunk back with an accusatory hiss.
“Excuse me,” she said, rolling off the chair and swaying slightly. “I can't do this right now.”
She squinted, eyes trying to adjust to the sudden dark now that she wasn't staring straight into a bright lamp.
The room was bare. Sterile. The ceiling had old fashioned popcorn tiles and the walls were painted in a white-ish colour. Bone white, the designer part of her brain provided.
She stumbled around, not wanting to face the chair again, until she found a door.
“Sorry again!” she said to the room at large, before slipping through.
She closed the door and leaned on it, breathing in and out, trying to get her heart to slow down. It was making a valiant attempt at escaping from her chest and she would really prefer to keep it in there.
It was alright. It was ok. Mild vandalism and property damage was probably not the end of the world.
It was maybe even expected, considering the situation, a little voice in the back of her head suggested.
What situation? Yachi briefly thought as the realization of where she was came hurtling towards her at full speed, like a tanker truck where someone had stolen the brake pedal.
Well, she was in hell, wasn't she?
The gate, the spells, the falling...
Yachi's heart stopped trying to escape, and for two seconds, just stopped altogether.
Oh, she thought, as the little voice in her head waited patiently for her thoughts to catch up. Oh god.
OH NO!
She was in hell.
She'd really messed up this time. She'd fallen and now she was in hell.
Like some... some... rebel!

Her eyes snapped open.
Hell was... surprisingly clean.
Yachi was in a hallway, much like the room she'd just run away from. Sterile. Bare. Bone white. It was wide and tiled and very, very busy.
In front of her, a stream of people were walking. They were colourless, gray-scale, and oddly translucent. They looked a little like ghosts, Yachi thought, but they gave the impression of being firm. Their feet stomped heavily on the tiled floor and the sound mingled with a constant chatter of people whispering.
Yachi swallowed and carefully stood up, stepping to the side so she wasn't blocking the door any more.
Her movement had an immediate effect on the crowd in front of her. Faces shot in her direction, glaring eyes looking her up and down, judging her. It was only now that she could make out some of the words they were saying. “Bad egg,” was one of them. “Good for nothing.” “Never will amount to much.” “Worthless.” “Weak.”
She frowned, taken aback for a moment, before she drew a deep breath and walked off, down the hall. She had not come this far only for people to be... mean to her, she told herself. They probably weren't even real people! And the voice in the back of her head, that was always slightly faster on the uptake than the rest, hummed in appreciation.
That's right. She was not worthless. She did good things. She had helped people and now she was
going to deal with this, too.
Somehow.

She walked down the hall and the whispers followed. By the time she'd finally found a side door, she was holding back tears.
It was an empty room. With a small sigh of relief she closed the door behind her.
It was mercifully quiet in here. She sagged to the floor and hugged her knees and just sat there, crying, until she felt better.
A big part of her wanted to just stay here, in silence, forever.
She'd probably starve to death or something, the little voice in the back of her head pointed out.
And it was right, of course, assuming she was even still alive.
Starvation was also one of the worse ways to go, the little voice insisted.
Yachi sighed.
Fine.
With some effort, she got back up.
She could do this, she told herself. She just had to find the way out, get to Oikawa-san and Kageyama-san.
She really hoped they were alright.
But if it was Kageyama-san, she wouldn't get upset at some mean people whispering about her.
Kageyama-san didn't seem to care too much about what people thought of her, and Yachi respected that.
She could be like that, she told herself, and taking a deep breath, she opened the door.
Immediately, the glares and whispers came back.
“Honestly, I feel bad for the mother.” “Always a bridesmaid never a bride.” “And what is she wearing?” “Seemed like such a bright child when she was younger.”
Yachi huffed. “Well you can all just... stay in hell, I guess,” she said, and she strode down the corridor, face bright red from a mixture of embarrassment and rage.
“Such a mouth on her.” “Who does she think she is?”

Yachi tried three more doors, all leading to empty rooms, before she heard something besides snide comments.
It was a soft whine and it was coming from beyond a broken door a little further off.
The whispers here changed slightly. “Good for nothing,” they still said. But also: “Terrible creature, just stinks up the place.” “Tie it to a tree and leave it to rot.” “Kick it to teach it its place.”
She quietly peeked her head through the doorway.
It was another white room, equally bare, except for the giant three-headed dog lying in the middle of the floor. One of its heads was bruised rather badly, there were cuts on its paws and scratches on its hind quarters. It lifted one head and whined at her.
Yachi froze.
“Um... hello,” she said.
Behind her, the whispers picked up. “Bad dog,” they said.
This really seemed to affect the creature, as it just laid the head back down on its paws.
Oh no.
It looked, well, sad and Yachi really didn't do well in the presence of sad, wounded animals.
She whirled around.
“Um! Dogs are not inherently good or bad. A lot of it has to do with owners and...” she faltered as the whispers rose up over her. “Why don't you shut up for a minute!”
There was a brief, merciful moment when all the voices stopped talking at once, all eyes on Yachi, who became increasingly embarrassed under all this attention.
It lasted all of two seconds, before the voices picked up again. “The nerve!” “Kids these days, no respect.” “I hope someone teaches her a lesson.” “Just kill yourself, you worthless piece of shit.”
Frowning at that last one, she turned back to the dog, who was watching the proceedings wearily.
She couldn't just leave a wounded animal. Even if it was a ... cerberus.
She couldn't.
Sighing, she slipped into the room, careful to stay near the door.
“Um, so um,” she said uncertainly, “How are you doing?”
The dog gave a low growl.
“Right, uh... not good, I guess,” Yachi swallowed. “I'm... I'm not here to hurt you. You know that, right? I'm trying to, uh, help you.”
The dog looked unimpressed.
“Oh,” Yachi said, “You must be really hungry, huh...”
The left head perked up. “Please don't eat me. Just, uh, wait,” Yachi quickly added.
She opened her bag and rummaged through it.
“What would you like? I have, uh... cheese sandwiches, and what looks like a rice ball. I think there's some kind of donut in here somewhere, too, but sugar is probably bad for dogs so you shouldn’t,” she muttered to herself.
The creature watched with interest as she unwrapped a rice ball and carefully rolled it across the floor.
“Go on, try it,” she said. “It's teriyaki chicken.”
Warily, the dog sniffed at it. Its heads took turns smelling the little morsel, before the middle one went ahead and gobbled it up. This was immediately followed by the two outer heads snarling at it.
“Oh!” Yachi said, “Please don't fight. I... I think I have more.”
She pulled out two more rice balls and rolled them to the outer dog heads. They scarfed the things down while the middle head looked at her with puppy eyes.
“I'm sorry! That's all I have,” she pleaded.
The middle head sank down again and Yachi racked her brain on how to proceed.
The creature was obviously injured, and she was itching to at least disinfect that nasty cut above its eye, but whenever she moved to get closer, it growled at her.
She sat back. In the silence between them, the whispers from the outside picked up again, and they weren't exactly helping matters.
“Hey,” Yachi said softly, “you can understand what they're saying, can't you?”
The dog glanced at her, and back to the floor.
“You know that's not true, right?”
Three pairs of eyes looked at her.
“I mean, I'm sure you're a good dog.”
Three pairs of ears perked up.
“Yes you are, you're totally a good boy. And I know you're hurt and probably upset and sad, but I just want to help you get a little bit better.”
Three heads tilted curiously.
“I mean, you're a cerberus. You're all kinds of awesome. Why would you listen to what a bunch of mean people think about you?”
Slowly, she crept closer.
“Like, you're super strong and... and you're loyal.”
The right head barked happily at her.
“And I bet you'd be much happier if someone actually took good care of you. You certainly deserve better than this,” she huffed.
There was a soft thump, as the dog wagged its tail uncertainly.
“Are you going to be a strong little doggie and let me take care of your wounds?” Yachi tried.
The middle head glanced at its compatriots, who were very much on board with that plan. With a small whine, it sagged down obediently.
“Alright,” Yachi said, opening her bag. “We'll take it slow, ok?”
She pulled out a wet wipe and carefully wiped away some of the blood crusted on top of the middle head. It whimpered a little, but didn't move, while the outer heads watched her work with interest.
Next up was a bottle of disinfectant. She took the cap off.
“Would you like to sniff it?”
Three noses came closer, before pulling back in disgust.
“I know, I know. Now this may sting a bit, but you're a strong dog, right?”
She dropped some disinfectant onto a cotton ball and delicately placed it on the wound.
The dog immediately yelped. The middle head was crying now, struggling while the other two looked on in alarm.
“Hey, shhhhhhhhh,” Yachi tried, “shhh you’ve been such a good boy until now!”
It was to no avail. The dog freaked out and she scuttled away until her back was against the wall.
Outside, the whispers picked up again.
“Evil through and through.” “Just put it down, it'll be a mercy.” “Did you really think you could do that? You're so full of yourself.”
Yachi leaned against the wall and sighed. She'd made it worse. Go her. In front of her, the dog laid back down, whimpering.
She couldn't blame it, really. It was scared and lonely. She knew what that was like.
When she was little, she'd come home crying after school so many times, with stories coming out in short bursts between bouts of tears, about mean kids pushing her, or yelling at her.
But her mother always managed to soothe her then, she thought.
An idea struck, and her cheeks heated up at the thought of it.
“Ahem,” she coughed, and the dog glanced up.
“Little darling,” she sang uncertainly, “it's been a long cold lonely winter.”
The outer heads blinked at her in mild astonishment.
“Little darling, it feels like years since it's been here.”
The middle head's scared little eyes were looking at her, trying to discern what was going on.
“Here comes the sun,” Yachi's continued, picking up volume. “Here comes the sun.”
The whispers outside seemed to die down and the dog relaxed a little, enraptured by this fragile, broken voice singing to it in an empty white room, in a strange world.
“And I say, it's all right.”

It took more than half an hour, and about twenty more renditions of 'Here comes the Sun', before Yachi was finished patching up the dog. It got up carefully, one head sniffing its hind quarters. They sported streaks of deep red disinfectant, just like the middle head.
She would have preferred to give the animal a proper bath, but she figured that for now, this would have to do.
“There, isn't that better?” Yachi said happily.
The right head barked at her.
“Do you think you're good to go? We should look for a way out or something.”
The dog wagged its tail, so she put her backpack on and walked toward the door.
“I wonder if there even is an exit,” she mumbled, looking down the hallway with its judging ghosts.
“We should find Kageyama-san and Oikawa-san first. They fell in here with me... they should be around?”
She pondered for a moment. “Oh! I hope that dentist didn't get them!”
Behind her, the right head pushed its nose against her back.
“What is it?”
It barked at her.

Oikawa's Hell, probably

“Do you even know where we're going?” Oikawa Tooru pouted.
He kicked a can for good measure.
'Devil brew', the text on it read. 'Probably the best beer in hell'.
“I don't even know where we are right now,” Kageyama grumbled in response.
They were walking on an empty stretch of road, nothing but dirt on either side of them. In the distance he could see some mesa’s but on the road itself, there was nothing to help them orientate.
Not even a road sign.
Above him, the sky was an equally featureless grey, but at least that meant the temperature was mild.
The most unpleasant thing about this place was that he was lost, and that his travelling companion had been grumpy since the moment they set off.
“Alright, spill it,” he said, when the silence became unbearable again.
Kageyama said nothing, staring fixedly at the concrete two meters in front of her feet as she walked.
“Something's obviously eating you, you've been grumpier than usual.”
“How would you know?”
“I've watched you.”
She stopped and turned to look at him. “Everyone and their mother has been fucking stalking me, huh.”
Oikawa shrugged. “That's what happens when a Hunter comes to town. It's like an apex predator, all the magic folk just sort of go into panic mode.”
Kageyama shoved her face deeper into her coat and muttered something while she started walking again.
“Hmmmm?” Oikawa poked.
“I said, we're supposed to be the good guys.”
“Oh! So meeting me is turning your world upside down, huh?”
He grinned, and the girl shot him a glare.
“Don't flatter yourself.”
They walked on in silence, Kageyama quietly stewing.
“It's just,” she said after a while. “All day I've been fighting people that hate me. Not just, like, nightmares and monsters, but regular people. The ones I'm supposed to be keeping safe. And they oppose everything I stand for.”
Oikawa raised an eyebrow.
“They're telling me we should just let magic creatures loose, that magic folk should rule. They want to tear down the Veil, which is the very foundation that modern magic society is built on and... and... then you tell me my ancestors were evil and what if we've been wrong all this time and all the people in here are innocent and-”
“Kageyama.”
“I'm supposed to be one of the good guys,” she said, again, sounding utterly distraught.
Hoo boy.
Oikawa took a long, deep breath.
“Alright, hunter girl,” he said softly, “Don't let anyone know I told you this. Don't tell a soul but...”
He sighed. “You kinda are?”
The girl's shoulders sagged.
“I mean... Your attitude is horrific, of course. And boy do you have some strict interpretations of what constitutes 'the law', but you don't seem to... inherently hate magical creatures? You're trying to protect people and that's a good thing, even if you're entirely too gung-ho about it.”
Kageyama protested weakly. “But all those people... and the Veil.”
“The Veil is fine where it is,” Oikawa said with certainty. “Every couple of decades there's someone that pledges to tear it down and 'free' all the magic folk. They usually forget the part where the Veil is there to protect us. It's doing a decent job at it, too. I'm not saying the situation is perfect, but it could be a whole lot worse, believe me. I've been there.”
The girl just walked on, eyes fixed to the ground.
“Look,” he went on. “You've made it your duty to protect people, so that's what you do. There's baddies on both sides, in case you haven't noticed. There's nightmares that will eat your eyes and
hurt everyone you love. And there's villages where they'll burn you as a witch as soon as they look at you. There's idiots everywhere. You just have to hope that there are enough non-stupid people to keep the scales from tipping.”

“But that doesn't fix anything!” Kageyama bristled.

“You can't always fix everything,” Oikawa said, and he sounded surprisingly gentle. “Do you think you can carry the weight of the world on your shoulders? That you have to?”

Kageyama pouted.

“There's billions of people out there. A few billion more in here, probably. They all have their own thoughts and views and a lot of them are incredibly stupid. I cannot stress this enough. You can't just change the course of the world in one go. But you can start by getting a few people to a better place. By which I mean us. Out of here. Right now.”

She stopped and blinked at him.

“I'm saying we need a plan.” He waved his hand at her. “Do the glowey thing. Come on!”

“We've done this before.”

“Do it again!”

“Fine.” The hunter huffed and concentrated. Her eyes filled with a soft blue light.

She tilted her head. “Oikawa,” she said, taking a step back. “Dodge.”

There was a tear in the fabric of reality.

Again.

It opened quickly, just a slit of a claw, and then a giant dog jumped through.

Oikawa rolled sideways, just barely missed by a massive paw, and Kageyama immediately drew her sword.

“Um! Wait! Stop! Please.”

The voice came from somewhere on top of the creature. Squinting, Oikawa could see a head of blond hair.

“Yachi-san?”

“Oh! I'm so glad I found you! Excuse me,” she said to the dog, struggling to get off its back.

She walked up to Kageyama and pulled the shocked hunter into a hug. “I was so worried, it was so scary!”

“What, uh, happened to you?” Kageyama said, awkwardly patting the blond while turning three shades of pink.

“It was horrible. I woke up in a dentist chair!”

Oikawa raised his eyebrows. “That sounds pretty awful, actually.”

“How did you get out?” Kageyama asked, carefully extracting herself from the girl's grasp.

“Oh, I... I might have broken things when I kicked out of the chair. I should really go back and apologize.”

“You broke out by yourself?” Kageyama said.

“Well, uh, um. Yes, I...”

“Nice.” There was a glint of pride in Kageyama's eye and Oikawa could practically see the resulting glow travel through every fibre of Yachi's body.

“Wh-what about you guys?” she asked, helping Oikawa back up.

“Uh, well,” Kageyama started.

“Well I escaped from an iron cage guarded by monstrous captors,” Oikawa interrupted. “And the hunter here won a board game.”

Kageyama squinted at him but he ignored it, dusting himself off.

Yachi, meanwhile, was duly impressed. “That sounds super scary!” she said with wide eyes, and he nodded mournfully.

“I've been meaning to ask,” he went on. “But how exactly did you win? Checkers, I mean. Against
death or whatever. You don't look like the board game type.”
“I cheated,” Kageyama shrugged.
“Wh-what?”
“It was a demon!” she said defensively. “I wasn't expecting it to play fair... Anyway, what about him?” Kageyama nodded at the giant dog now sitting a few metres away, panting from three different mouths.
“Oh, I patched him up and he helped find you guys. We're friends.”
“You just... befriended a cerberus?” Kageyama mumbled.
“The ability of small girls and women to befriend animals, especially large and dangerous ones, is pretty well-documented, Kageyama,” Oikawa said.
“It has to do with attitude,” he added, noting her pout.

“Well then,” he clapped his hands. “Now that we've all found each other and had our tearful reunion, let's go find a god damn exit.”
The other two looked at him.
“Oh!” Yachi said. “Do you have a plan, Oikawa-san?”
“Of course not, I was hoping you did,” he said.
“Why would we be the ones with the plan?” Kageyama snarked. “You're a friggin... supernatural fox. You're like millennia old! You should know this stuff much better than us.”
“I'll have you know that I am 768 years old thankyouverymuch,” Oikawa huffed. “And I have spent those years trying to stay away from death's door.”
Kageyama folded her arms. “Well how about we just ask the dog?” she said.
The dog tilted two of its heads. Yachi gave her a confused look.
“The cerberus traditionally guards the entry to hell, doesn't he? There's that whole story with the dude who came down for his dead wife and sang it to sleep or whatever. Shouldn't it at least know where the entrance is? Isn't that like... home? For him, or her or... whatever?”
Yachi looked at the dog with wonder. “Do...you? Know where the exit is?”
The dog barked.
“Um, could you take us?”
It barked again, tail thumping against the floor.
Oikawa rolled his eyes. “You really think it will be that easy?” he said, but Yachi was already praising the beast, muttering words of 'good boy', which only seemed to rile it up more.
Kageyama shrugged. “Let's see where it takes us,” she said. “It's not like we have anywhere else to go.”
She slowly, carefully approached the creature. “G-good boy,” she muttered, blushing under the wide smile of a happy Yachi.
“Oh fine. Please, o great Cerberus, take us to the exit,” Oikawa incanted.
The dog got up and barked, single claw slicing through thin air.
“I can't believe this...” he said.

**Hell's entryway, maybe**

Kageyama Tobio had found a trend when it came to magical travel. Distance to the ground, it seemed, was not a stable thing across space and time, so whenever there was a tear or a portal or some magic gate to somewhere else, it involved falling from an unpleasant height.
This time was no different.
She crawled through a tear in reality and found herself, unsurprisingly, in mid-air.
“Fuuuck!”
She managed to come down on her feet and rolled, out of the way of the others crashing behind her. She was pretty damn proud of herself.
The place they'd ended up this time, was a cliff face. They were high up on a mountain, on a small plateau overlooking an enormous chasm. The tree line was below them, Kageyama noted. When she looked down, the could see pine trees sticking out of the fog.

She really, really didn't want to know how far down that went.

Above them was a single snowy peak, and the same grey sky as everywhere else in this place. A thin path led down the side of the mountain, but Kageyama assumed, with her luck, that that wasn't where they were going.

Because on the other side, anchored to the rocks jutting out over the edge, was a bridge. A creaky, rusty, thin bridge made of rope and chains holding up old looking wooden and metal planks with wide gaps in between. It led off into the fog and swayed lightly in the whipping winds.

“Please no,” Kageyama said. Next to her, Yachi sunk to the floor in apparent despair.

Oikawa strolled towards the edge and peeked at the sign stuck in the ground there.

“Bridge of Absolution,” he read out loud. “Only those not weighed down with sin, are able to cross.”

He folded his arms. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“You did say there’d be some kind of mechanism,” Kageyama pointed out. “If it was just a matter of finding the right door, the world would be overrun with demons by now.”

Oikawa sat down and ran his fingers through his hair, sighing.

“Well, better hop to it. You should go first, Yachi-san.”

“M-me?!”

Kageyama nodded. “You're the lightest,” she said, coughing in her hand. “We can't have the first one over breaking the bridge, now can we?”

Yachi grew pale and inched up to the bridge on hands and knees. She looked over the edge and the wind whipped at her hair.

Oikawa could see her trembling from where he sat.

“Come on,” Kageyama said encouragingly, “you're like super brave.”

“Right,” Yachi said, swallowing thickly.

She stood up and then turned around.

“Just a moment.” She walked up to the dog, who whined softly when she petted all three of its heads.

“Thank you,” she said gently. “You've been really helpful and you're such a good dog, don't you ever let anyone tell you otherwise.” The middle head pushed it's nose against her and she chuckled sadly.

“You'll be ok, won't you? Find yourself someone nice to take care of you. I'll miss you.”

The dog laid down on his paws, watching sadly as she walked up to the bridge again.

She took a deep breath. “Ok, here I go,” she said, and she very, very carefully placed a foot on the bridge. It barely creaked.

Tongue between her lips, she placed one foot before the other, hands gripping at the rope railings so hard that her knuckles went white.

Oikawa closed his eyes and leaned his head back. “This better not be some ruse, dog,” he growled, casting a sideways glance at the cerberus. “There'd better be an actual exit on the other side.”

The dog huffed.

Yachi disappeared into the mist hanging over the bridge, and after what felt like a very long time, they heard her voice.

“I made it! There's a door here!” she shouted.

“Alright, I'm on my way!” Kageyama yelled back.

“Right,” she said, cracking her knuckles. “Here I go.”
She'd strapped her sword and backpack in tight. She'd fully closed her coat against the wind, she'd even put a scarf on, but she still felt goosebumps on her skin.

Stepping up to the bridge, she hesitated and cast a glance back at Oikawa, sitting on the ground looking miserable.

He waved. “Go. You'll be fine. Make sure Yachi doesn't faint on the way up or something.”

“Are you not coming?”

“I'm still thinking about it. I hear Hell is really nice this time of year. Might make it a vacation. Don't wait for me.”

She nodded and let a long breath past her lips. “Ok.”

Carefully, slowly, she placed a foot on the metal plank. There was a strangled creak, but the thing held.

Swallowing heavily, she took another step, and then again, and again.

The wind whipped at her hair and at times the bridge swayed dangerously but she was fine till she made it about halfway.

“You're doing ssssurprisingly well,” the wind said, and Kageyama nearly slipped and fell down the chasm in shock.

“Sorry, did I sssstartle you?” In the air next to her hung the ghost of Hanamaki.

“Fuck! I know it's you again! What the hell are you trying to do?”

“Just checking up on you.” the creature said, and its face turned into a blank space.

“I'm fine. Go away.”

“Is that any way to treat people?”

“You're not people,” she pointed out. “Is this another test?”

“No. You passed all the tests by leaving my little world.”

“Good, then go away.”

“No tearful goodbyes for me? I know you feel sad about the dog.”

“Alright then, goodbye,” Kageyama said, giving a half-hearted wave.

Then she stopped, suspended in the air between two cliffs.

“One thing, demon.”

“Hmmmm?”

“If you know everything, you must have known I was cheating, right? You knew I used my magic to figure out the best move,” she said. “Why did you let me go?”

The creature chuckled. “Because it was never your honesty that was in doubt.”

“Oh.”

And with that, it disappeared.

Kageyama made it across the bridge without further trouble.

She found Yachi on the other side, lying flat on the ground, hugging the dirt like it was her long lost lover.

“I'm here!” she yelled back across the chasm, and she went to sit next to the blond, who was still, she noted, a little bit paler than usual.

“Do you think he'll come?” Yachi asked sheepishly.

“Hmm?”

“I mean... you guys don't get along, right? You said he did awful things. He k-killed people.”

“He did,” Kageyama said.

“So will the bridge break?”

“I don't know.”

Kageyama sighed when Yachi kept throwing her fearful glances.

“He sacrificed himself to save the world,” she mumbled, barely audible.

Yachi frowned at her.

“Redemption. That's how it's supposed to work,” she explained. “You do a bad thing, you atone for it, you prove that you've become a better person. If that sign is real and if he means it... he has a
chance, at least.”

**Hell's entryway, probably**

“I'm here!” came the soft voice of Kageyama through the mist.
Oikawa Tooru rolled his neck.
“What do you think, dog? In your expert opinion, would I make it?”
The cerberus tilted his left head.
He sighed.
As far as he could tell, there were three ways he could go from here.
He could take the path back down the mountain and settle down in the underworld. Maybe take the
dog, too. That's one mildly confused friend for him. He could probably find some place to fit in. Start
a fried harpy restaurant. Whatever.
If he took the bridge, he'd probably fall to his death, which at least put an end to this whole hell
adventure. Assuming that he'd pass on somewhere else if he died.
Path three required a miracle. The hunter girl seemed to believe he'd make it, but the hunter girl was
also *incredibly* naïve, he noted.
Smiling to himself, he got up. There was ever only one thing he was going to do, of course.
And he realized very well how stupid it was, as he transformed into a fox and stepped up to the
bridge.
Iwa-chan had, at most, fifty years or so. If nothing bad happened to him first.
That was nothing, in terms of lifetimes. And it didn't matter at all.
He'd been apart from him long enough. He'd take whatever time he could get.
“Goodbye, cerberus,” he said, looking behind him, “have a good... afterlife or something.”
The dog whined and barked pitifully, but Oikawa turned to the path before him.
One more chance, he thought. Just give me one more chance.
He put a paw on the bridge and it gave a loud, tortured groan.
Undeterred, he walked on, until all four of his paws were precariously balanced on a thin strip of
rusty metal.
Progress was slow for him.
The bridge creaked dangerously with every step. The wind tried its level best to blow him down and
occasionally, bits of metal or wood would splinter and fall away, threatening to make him lose his
footing.
He was almost halfway, fog obscuring both cliffs, when the ghosts started appearing.
There was a young girl who had tried to heal him after he fell down a mountain, centuries ago.
He'd been so hungry, in so much pain, that he'd lost it. She was the first human he ever killed.
There were hunters, woodcutters, lost children.
There was a beautiful woman who'd run away from home, dark bruises on her arms and shoulders,
seeking solace in the arms of a stranger.
There were scores and scores of soldiers, wasted away in the many wars he'd fought as a general.
There was Hanamaki and Kageyama's ancestor and many more, all lives he'd taken, all flitting by to
swear at him before settling in his fur like lead weights.
They made the journey last forever. As the bridge groaned and his legs threatened to buckle, one of
the spirits whispered in his ear.
“You belong here, you monster. Give up now.”
Oikawa gave out a laugh. It sounded haughty, almost hyena-like.
“I know exactly what I'm doing this for, you bastards.”

The fog became thinner and he saw a dark shadow in the distance.
The other cliff was getting closer and he toiled on, feeling lighter with every step as, one by one, the

Another step, and the bridge swayed heavily. Kageyama got up. “What the hell is going on?” she yelled. Oikawa struggled to regain his footing, but a ripple went through the bridge, kicking him up in the air. The moment he came back down, a second ripple lifted him up again. And again, and again.

“Move!” Kageyama was yelling. Oikawa, claws scratching at the metal tiles underneath him, kicked off and started sprinting. “Go go go!” Kageyama shouted. “Something’s coming!” She came closer to the edge, peering into the mist behind him. “Yachi, get the door!” she shouted back.

The blond snapped out of her momentary shock and ran down the little plateau toward the mountain. Nearly out of breath, Oikawa ran to the edge of the bridge, ready to leap onto the cliff’s edge, when the metal grate beneath his back paws fell away, and he missed his jump. He fell hard onto the final step, just to see it crack underneath him, tumbling into the depths below. Before he could follow, a hand roughly grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hoisted him up on the platform.

“Fuck, you’re heavy,” Kageyama grunted. Heaving, he looked behind him.

Something was coming. A large shadow was bounding across the bridge, a dark beast barely visible through the mist. It quickly came closer while Kageyama and Oikawa scrambled upright. Six bloodshot eyes cut through the mist, and six sharp rows of teeth snapped at the air, foam clinging to the bone. The cerberus was coming their way, mad with panic. Behind it, was a storm.

“Into the doorway, now!” Oikawa yelled, running up and dragging Kageyama with him. It was a storm like he’d never seen. A heavy black wall, thick with lightning. A moving front of destruction. He wasn’t sure if it was coming for him, or for the dog, but it sure wasn’t going to let any of them leave if they got caught in it. Yachi had wrenched open the door and stood there, looking torn. “Oh no! He’s going to get hurt!” she whimpered. “He’s going to destroy us!” Oikawa snarled, “Yachi, we need to go!” He shoved his companions into the small hallway and looked back. The dog was outrunning the storm, but only barely. If he timed his jumps right, he just might make it to the platform.

Fuck, Oikawa thought. “One chance, pup,” he whispered, and he left the door open, running after the other two.

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**March 26th, 01:01, Harbour District, Vaeda**

Kageyama Tobio was falling upwards. It was a novel direction, at least, but at this point she was too tired to even yell. Besides, Yachi, behind her, was doing enough screaming for the both of them. They’d run into the dark tunnel and at one point gravity had switched and now she was falling up, at pretty high speed, toward a blinking light. She peered at it, trying to make out what it was, but it wasn't until she was nearly on top of it that she
noticed it was a swivelling disc, opening and closing to the world outside. She braced herself for impact, but coursed through the opening with a small 'fwump' sound and then she was in the air, back in the domed room.
Right up until regular old gravity realized she was there, and sent her crashing down again.
“Oof!”
She landed on one of the bridges, next to a perplexed police officer.
“Kageyama!” a voice shouted in the distance.
She rubbed her head painfully and hoisted herself up on the railing, just in time to watch two more people fly through the medallion.
“Kageyama, you came back!”
A happy voice was running up to her, and she recognized the orange hair.
“Of course I came back, you dumbass, what else-”
Hinata pounced and held her in a tight hug.
“I knew you'd come back!” he babbled while she felt the blush rise in her face. “I kept telling people but they wouldn't believe me!”
“That's, uh, nice,” Kageyama said. “Will you get off me!”
“I almost thought you were dead,” the boy said, with big, wide eyes.
“Well, we're... fine, I think,” she answered, giving up on struggling and awkwardly laying an arm around his shoulders.
Behind her, paramedics were running towards Oikawa, and Daichi had flung her arms around a crying Yachi.
And it suddenly hit Kageyama that they'd made it.
Fuck.
They were actually back.
She started to feel dizzy.
“Kageyama, are you ok?” Hinata said, his voice sounding distant.
“Yeah just let me, uh, sit down for a bit,” she muttered, and her eyes felt really heavy.
They had made it back, she thought, before she passed out.

Chapter End Notes

Fun factoid: Kageyama's lake location, and the calcified creatures, were inspired by a real place:
lake Natron in Tanzania.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

In which things are wrapped up

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Several weeks later

Central District, Vaeda

The entryway to the Governor's house, Vaeda's historic parliamentary building, sports a large, elaborate hall with a grand, swooping staircase. Its marble steps lead up to an antique carved balcony, from which many speeches have been held in the centuries since its inception. But if, instead of going up the stairs, you ducked under them and went through the small wooden door you'd find there, you would come upon a very different staircase. It is small and wooden, barely illuminated, and the hand rail is a piece of tarnished rope. It leads to an equally nondescript hallway in the basement. Paintings of stuffy-looking people hang on the walls, and there is an old, dusty carpet on the floor. The wooden boards creak ominously underneath your feet when you step on them. If you were to keep walking through this hallway, taking a left, a right and another right, you'd turn into an even dustier, even smaller hallway, and eventually you would find a door to your left. It looks, to all intents and purposes, like a broom closet, but there's a tiny gold-plated plaque mounted to it. It reads, in very pretty lettering: 'Vaeda Special Affairs'. Were you, for some mysterious reason, to open this door and step through it, you would enter an enormous library. Book cases tower up at least two stories high. A balcony runs down the length of one wall, while the other is stacked high with a strange jumble of metal filing cabinets and ancient wooden card catalogues. A wide copper chandelier hangs from the ceiling, washing the whole place in a soft glow. In this library, you can stroll past the small reading table and the overstuffed leather chairs huddled around a reading lamp, past the wheeled ladders and through the hallways filled with books and records, towards the back. You will pass towers upon towers of loose files and books that spilled over, not making it into the actual shelves but stacked, neatly, in piles with little colourful notes sticking out of them to indicate their eventual, hopeful placement. Behind all that, you would find a small office. And it is on the door to this office, that someone is currently knocking. It's a short, urgent tap. The kind of knock that is polite, but promises to become bothersome if not answered swiftly. Startled, the man working in the office puts down his mug. "Uh, yes?" The door opens and a large minotaur squeezes through. She is wearing a crisp suit and her high heels tick on the tiles as she struts across the small distance between the door and the little iron desk where the man sits. "Mister Hartford Cooke, commissioner for all Magic Affairs in Vaeda?" she says.
The man blinks, and swallows.
“That's, hmm, me,” he says. “Can I help you?”
“Damara Minoa, accountant and activist,” she replies, and she places a thick folder on his desk.
Curious, the man peers at it. He glances up and she nods, so he carefully opens the cover and leafs through it.
There are building plans. There is a large budgeting list. Testimonials. Recommendation letters from various Sanctuary holders. There is a petition that runs several pages.
“What is this?” the vampire asks, looking at the papers with mild bafflement.
“The Haven Project,” Damara says, “I'm head of a civil platform urging for the building of a Veil-free office tower here in Vaeda, and I'd like to have a little chat with you.”
The man lets out a low whistle, taking in the sheer volume of plans.
“Hmm,” he says, “Please take a seat.”

Central District, Vaeda

A cop with dark red hair walks into a small apartment on the sixth floor of a boring, brown building and lets out a low whistle.
“Daayyumm,” he says, eyes slowly taking in the blood on the ceiling, on the walls, on the floor.
The forensics team is scurrying around the room, dusting things and carefully picking up shards of glass from the window.
He tilts his head and creeps closer to what looks like the remains of a skeleton, lying in the middle of the room.
His colleague, a tall man with blond hair, is crouched next to the body, taking a picture of what must be a rib cage. He gets up when he hears him approach, plastic covers on his shoes crinkling against the carpet.
“Watch your step, Tendou,” he says, turning around. His voice is muffled by the handkerchief he holds over his face, but it still sounds as cold as always.
“I don't know how you handle the stench,” he goes on. “Must be something you're used to?”
“Maybe I just don't care,” the redhead shrugs. “So what have we got?”
His colleague rolls his eyes and pushes up his glasses, fishing out his phone and clicking it open.
“Unidentified male victim,” he reads out, “We're running the name of the renter through the database, but it sounds like an alias. The coroner says the bones look youngish but doesn't want to put an age on it. Apparently he... exploded.”
“Cool,” Tendou murmurs. “A truly spectacular way to go.”
His colleague raises an eyebrow at him.
“Probably dead for a few weeks,” he goes on. “The window indicates a break-in, but none of the neighbours heard of an attack, let alone an explosion. Considering the timing, it's likely that he died during the riots, or that someone at least used the chaos to mask the crime.”
“Who found him?”
“The land lord. Got called over because of the smell.”
“Alright, we'll talk to him in a bit,” Tendou says, “Exploded, huh. Hey, do you-”
He is interrupted when a very large, broad man walks through the door, carrying the air of someone who is utterly convinced that no one in their right mind would ever cross him.
“Vaeda Homicide Department?” he says, and he pulls out a signed piece of very official looking paper. “I must ask you to leave.”
Behind him, his colleague pushes up his glasses with an irritated air. “Who the hell are you?”
“Lieutenant Ushijima. Vaeda Special Police. We will be taking over this investigation. Please leave everything as you found it and step out of the building.”
“You can't be serious. Someone explodes and it's not even my investigation?”
“That is correct,” the man deadpans.
Tendou elbows his colleague. “You hear that? They think they can just swoop in here and... are you even listening?”
He isn't.
The cop in glasses is rigid, eyes on the doorway.
Standing behind Ushijima, somewhat obscured by the man's wide frame, is his partner.
The young cop, freckled face and a friendly looking disposition, coughs into his hand as heat rises in his cheeks.
“Hi Tsukki,” he says, raising his hand in a shy wave. “Long time no see.”

The Plaza, Vaeda

A tall guard with pointy black horns politely waves a guest through the door of a large bank building. He scrutinizes the visitor, taking him in with what could be considered a stern gaze, before going back to his position in front of the door.
Motionless, he watches the crowds pass before him, dozens upon dozens of people scuttling across Plaza. There are workers making their way to offices and shops, kids hopping the bus to school.
The mass of people rushing by never seems to notice this, but they all unconsciously fail to come too close to the guard, like a shoal of fish instinctively avoiding a shark.
And then, the faint sounds of a beatboxer start filling the air.
On the guard's shoulder, a small golden weasel lifts up its head.
“Ooh,” the creature says, “you hear that?”
Aone nods.
“Is he actually doing Hamilton?”
The oni frowns for a moment, listening, before he nods again.
And then Futakuchi, never leaving the guards shoulder, starts singing along.
Aone closes his eyes and softly shakes his head, but does not try to stop him.

Commerce District, Vaeda

Bobata softly shakes his head and chuckles at his friend.
The room they're in is located in the closed wing of the hospital. It overlooks the park outside, but a young man with blond hair is busy swiping through pictures on a tablet.
“Bobata, look,” he says, “they have these prosthetics, see, that are even better than normal human legs.”
He excitedly shows the tablet to his friend sitting by his bedside.
“They're called blade runners, and they look really cool. If I can get those, I could probably jump even higher than before.”
“Whoah dude,” Bobata says, dutifully impressed with this prospect.
In the bed next to them, Towada looks up from his magazine, smiling quietly, until he notices a small fly on window, sitting on the outside of the glass pane.
The shadow mage sits stock still for a minute, regulating his breathing. Then he slowly reaches his hand out to his night stand and picks up an apple.
The fruit hurtles through the air, bouncing off the window with a sharp bang.
The lift off and Towada lets out a breath.
Terushima looks up from his tablet. “You're getting better with that, huh?”
His room mate nods, once, before quietly returning to his magazine, hands only shaking a little.
Commerce District, Vaeda

Down the hall, there's a knock on the door and a blond boy enters the hospital room where a black haired man sits up in bed.  
“Yo, Kindaichi,” he says, “I brought you the video.”
The man looks up, talisman around his neck dangling at the sudden movement.
“Hey,” he says. “Konoha.”
Konoha puts a bag of apples on the little side table and takes a usb-stick out of his jacket pocket.
“It's about an hour,” he says. “This dude named Yahaba made a touching speech. He's amazing with words.”
Kindaichi nods.
“There was also this guy called Oikawa? He made the whole place cry. All in all, it was a good service. Did your buddy proud.”
He puts the usb on the side table. “Watch that whenever you have the time.”
“Thanks,” Kindaichi says.
Konoha walks over to the mini-fridge and pulls out a soda.
“So I heard you get out in a few days, huh?” he says, taking a swig.
Kindaichi nods, fingering the little storage drive. “On parole,” he adds.
“Mmm, well that's to make sure you stay out of trouble,” Konoha winks, and he finishes the drink in one gulp, before letting out a loud belch.
“Tell you what,” he says, smirking at Kindaichi's disgusted face. “When you're all better, come see me sometime. I got a few games I wanna introduce you to.”
And he walks back toward the door.
“Hey Konoha,” Kindaichi says.
“Hmmm?”
“Why are you doing this? You barely know me.”
Konoha blinks for a moment and then turns around with a charming smile.
“We're not that different, you and I. I figured you could use a friend," he shrugs. "See ya!”
And he's out the door.

Old Quarter, Vaeda

In an old shop by a cobbled courtyard, a door opens onto a strange scene.  
A white haired, lanky magician is trying out his new trick to the audience of one rather unimpressed looking calico cat.
“What do you think?” he asks when he's finished.
“I can see the string,” Kenma replies, pointing his paw.
“Ok, but you’re a cat,” the magician pouts.
“I can also see the string,” says Yui, walking through the door with two paper cups.
She's wearing paint-stained overalls and carefully closes the door with her hip. The walls around them are wet with fresh paint and the place looks weirdly empty now that they've hauled all the broken furniture into a skip outside. The stuff still left is hiding under large sheets. The shop windows, still broken, are covered with clear plastic.
“I think you need thinner string,” Yui says, handing Lev his cup.
She places a newspaper on a chair and sits down.
“That's exactly why we need the sequins,” Lev explains patiently. “It draws attention away.”
The magician places a thick catalogue in her lap, waggling his eyebrows.
“I don’t even know if I look good in glitter!” Yui exclaims, but her friend isn’t really listening. He's in the process of untangling his magic string from the claws of a playful cat.
Harbour District, Vaeda

“One more order for a salted beef bowl, and two veggie noodles,” the waitress says, untangling a bead curtain before walking through it to pin the order to the wall.

In the small kitchen, Koganegawa the demon hums happily, sloshing water into a cooking pot with one hand, while the other stirs ingredients in a hot wok.

The restaurant he runs with his friend is not much more than a shack, hiding in the shade of a large warehouse by the sea shore. It is, however, doing rather well, and it's quickly gaining in popularity.

Sakunami waddles through the door into the kitchen, counting a thick wad of cash to put into the little vault they hide under one of the cupboards.

“Doing good, buddy,” he says.

“Thanks!” Koganegawa beams. “What will we do with the money this weekend?”

Sakunami thinks.

“Hmm, we already went to the beach, and to the amusement park. Let's go to the zoo,” he says, “I know you want to see the emus, but I hear they also have these seal things, and you can sit in the stands and watch them do tricks!”

A shiver of joy runs through Koganegawa and he gives a thumbs up. “That sounds ‘cool,” he says.

The Village, Vaeda

A nurse climbs the stands in a small dojo and takes a seat overlooking the mat.

The place is packed, people coming in to watch a long-awaited set of practice matches.

“You don't look like a typical boxing fan,” the man next to them says, conversationally.

“I suppose I'm not,” Akaashi answers, hands placed delicately in their lap.

“What brings you here, then?”

“I wanted to see mister Bokuto fight,” the nurse replies.

“Oh him?” the man says, huffing dismissively. “Raw talent, that one. Good technique, also. But a bit wonky if you ask me. Gets moods, you see. Could be doing real good but he's not very consistent. If he'd do som-

“You're wrong, of course,” Akaashi says softly, and two almond shaped eyes with the colour of storm fix him in his seat.

“When mister Bokuto is on a roll, he's a human highlight reel.”

There is a small, almost dangerous curl to their immaculate lips and the man sits back, silent for the rest of the afternoon.

Old Quarter, Vaeda

“Did you even see the original film, or are you basing yourself on remastered editions and highlights?”

At a table in the back of a coffee shop in Eagle Street, two young men are squabbling.

“I just can’t believe you’d call something like that ‘stupid’. It’s one of the greatest movies in the history of cinema!” Narita is saying, surprisingly worked up for someone with a usually calm demeanour.

“It’s just a sled, though,” Kinoshita points out.

“It’s symbolic,” Narita insists.

“I’m just saying it’s kind of a dumb thing to have as a ‘final word’, you know?” Kinoshita insists. “I just like Star Wars better.”

“That’s not even in the same ball park,” Narita grumbles. He eyes Ennoshita, looking for support, but the man is engrossed in his notes. He's brought some very old ones out of storage and has been
rifling through them all afternoon. They look weathered, fragile, and he’s very careful in dealing with them. They go back to arguing, until Ennoshita suddenly shoots up.

“I knew it!” he says, tapping a pencil on the open page of his notebook. “Look.”
The note is a small one, explaining how Ennoshita found a strange plant in a valley somewhere in the Urals. There’s a drawing.

“Silphium,” Narita mutters, awestruck.

“Guess where we're going next?” Ennoshita grins.

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Old Quarter, Vaeda

By the bar of the same coffee shop, a small woman sits on a stool, feet dangling. She's talking animatedly with a young man sporting a shaved head.

“And then we went for ice cream afterwards,” she is saying. “And I made her blush!”

“You always make her blush, Noya,” the bald guy says. “It's not exactly hard to do.”

He moves slowly, wounds not fully healed, but he grins at the barista, who is indeed currently blushing. She finishes making a drink and hands it over to a man in glasses and an EMT uniform.

“Thanks Shimada, come again,” she smiles, before turning to the woman at her counter with a hurt look on her face.

“You don’t have to give him all the details, Noya”, she complains.

“Sure I do, it's part of the deal,” Noya says happily, and sips from her latte.

“The deal was one date. That's all.”

“Yeah, and we already went on three!” She holds up three fingers.

“You know you like me. Hey Tanaka, you know what that means?”

“Do I... want to know what that means?” Tanaka says, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Noya...” Asahi pleads.

“It means next time I get to kiss her.”

“Noya please, that is not a rule,” Asahi splutters while Tanaka grins widely.

“Well, can we make it a rule?”

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Old quarter, Vaeda

Down the street, underneath the basement of the Nekomata Museum, the ghost of Madam Nekomata floats.

She's bobbing up and down softly in the middle of a large stone dojo.

In front of her, on one side of the room, is a golden, glowing door. It's been there for as long as she remembers, but as far as she knows, it is only visible to the dead.

She knows that if she ever goes past it, she can not come back.

It is a simple rule, and she has implicitly understood it since the moment she laid eyes on the door.

She quietly ponders going through it, for the third time that day.

She's running out of excuses, she tells herself.

The boy will be fine. So will his cat.

She's seen the next generation come to fruition.
The world is safe, for now.
It's time, Nekomata thinks, as she gently glides towards the golden door.

**Light District, Vaeda**

Golden afternoon light streams into a room at the back of a popular host club, barely blocked by the teal curtains in front of the windows.
A muscular man with spiky hair is lying in a large, comfy looking bed, sleeping peacefully. Next to him, a beautiful man with immaculate hair leans his head on his hand.
He watches the rise and fall of his lover's chest, listens with a small smile to the soft breathing, until he can't contain himself and reaches out, fingers dancing on the other's forearm.
His lover scrunches up his face.
“Oikawa?” he blinks up blearily, knotting his brows in confusion. “What'd you wake me for?”
“I'm sorry, Iwa-chan,” Oikawa smiles, “I just like the attention.”
And he runs his delicate fingers through Iwaizumi's hair, while the other rolls his eyes, blushing furiously.
“Come here, ya big baby.”
Iwaizumi reaches out, folding Oikawa into an embrace and tucking him under his chin in one smooth motion.
“Shut up and go back to sleep, you idiot.”
“Mean, Iwa-chan,” Oikawa says, but he smiles and inhales, taking in the scent of his old friend before closing his eyes.
By the open window, the curtain ripples softly in the wind.

**Sendai, Japan**

A gust of wind tugs the first cherry blossoms from the trees as Ukai Keishin lies on a chequered blanket with his hands behind his head and looks up at the sky.
“I swear you nearly gave me a heart attack when you suggested this, dear,” his mother says, kneeling on the cloth and rummaging through a bag.
“Tea?” She holds out a thermos.
“Thanks,” Ukai smiles, sitting up and taking it from her. “I just figured it'd be nice, you know. Getting out of the house.”
“We haven't done this in years,” his mother chats happily, accepting the cup he offers her.
“Whelp, it was about time, then.”
Ukai pulls out a box and opens it, revealing about a dozen pork buns.
“Keishin there's just two of us!” his mother laughs. “What are we gonna do with that much food?”
“Oh, you know. Times like these, you gotta share,” Ukai grins.
In the tree above their head, a very fat, unnaturally large pigeon flaps its wings.
“Oh you better, buddy,” it caws.

**Oregon, United States**

Bluebirds flap their wings, lifting off from a dogwood tree, and a single bloom falls on a fresh grave.
*Sugawara Koushi*, the delicate engraving on it reads, *Taken from us too soon.*
Knelt before it is a young woman.
Kuroo digs his hands deeper into his pockets as he walks the gravel path to where she sits.
She stirs as he comes closer, and makes a small movement, wiping her face, when he lays a gentle hand on her shoulder. “I'm almost done,” she says, voice sounding weak and small. “Take your time.” He walks off again, strolling between the graves before taking a seat on a bench overlooking a mountain ridge in the distance. He looks up when he hears footsteps approaching. “We should go,” Daichi says, “we have a ways to travel.” They walk the path side by side, all the way back to the entrance and it's about halfway that her hand finds his, and she squeezes. When they reach the gate, Kuroo hands her a helmet. “So where is this coyote you wanted to talk to,” he says, putting on his own and zipping up his jacket. “We'll have to drive into the mountains, but I know a really pretty scenic route I've been meaning to show you,” Daichi says. “Alright, just point me in the right direction,” Kuroo nods, and he swings his leg over the chopper. Daichi gets on behind him. “Just head to the interstate,” she says, “I'll tell you where to go from there.” And she wraps her arms around him tightly to hold her balance as he kicks off. Kuroo, underneath his helmet, can't help but cast a lopsided grin.

**Vaeda Outskirts, Vaeda**

Hinata grins at the girl next to him. “See! I told you it was transmogrification, Kageyama!” She just sighs. They're sitting in a cave in front of a dragon, surrounded by notes. For someone who only got introduced to magic a few weeks ago, Hinata's been learning fast. He's eager, not quick to give up, and Kageyama watches his progress with interest. “That's enough for today,” Moniwa the dragon says. “I believe the café is opening outside.” “Ooh! Milk break!” Hinata bursts out, jumping to his feet. “I'll race you, Kageyama!” he shouts, and off he runs. “Oi!” she yells. “No fair!” She quickly shoves her books into her backpack and nods to the dragon before running after him. In her mind's eye, a wall looms before Kageyama. A tall, tall wall. And she needs help to see the view from the top, but luckily she's no longer alone. “Oi! Get back here, dumbass!” she shouts, running onto the green grass of the mountain. She squints against the sudden brightness of the sun, but she keeps running.

**Sendai, Japan**

Yachi steps out of the office building and squints against the sudden brightness of the sun. “Hello Santou, I hope you didn't wait long,” she says, and she unties a leash from a bike rack. Santou barks happily, three times, and wags his tail. To bystanders, the dog doesn't look like much, a regular if slightly large black doberman, but he seems to take up much more space than his small frame would allow. Crowds give him a wide berth and animals flee in panic at the sight of him. The girl doesn't seem to care, and neither does the dog as it follows her, panting happily. “I think I made too many copies,” she's telling him. “But I didn't want to suddenly be on the other
The dog barks in agreement and they walk up to an advertisement board on the side of the street. Yachi painstakingly puts the poster up, making sure it's straight. The design is probably her greatest achievement so far, bar the bit where she had to walk up to the bureaucrats in city hall to register her own business. “Yachi Hitoka,” the poster reads in bright, pleasing letters, “Freelance graphics designer.” But if you were to look at it from a slightly different angle, and perhaps with a different point of view, it reads as follows: “Trouble with hauntings? Transmogrification? Plagued by imps? Yachi Hitoka, freelance supernaturalist is here to help. Guaranteed ethical relocation of creatures.” Taking a step back, she tilts her head, looking at the poster critically. She likes it, she must admit. It's fresh, it's colourful. It holds promises of friendly conversation and creativity and maybe, just a little bit, of adventure.

Chapter End Notes

So, uh. That's it. Holy crap. That's the whole thing. I hope you enjoyed it, because it certainly was a lot of fun to write. If you comments, criticism or reviews, don't hesitate to post them below. If you have questions, feel free to hit me up on tumblr.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!