“Helmet hair, above your left ear, it’s kinda cute but…” Marinette finally said, her eyes crinkling fondly as she kept herself from laughing as Kagami ran a nervous hand and tried to comb the terrible thing away. She tried her best to be stoic, and it was always amusing for Marinette to see the little cracks in the other girl's cool facade.

“Thanks for saving me, I guess,” Kagami said and there was something that flickered in these blue eyes that she couldn’t name. “So, where are we going? Berthillon?”

“Even better, André, he’s been spotted somewhere near Promenade Pereire,” Marinette answered. “You’ll really have to teach me how to fence someday!” And she started skipping down boulevard Malesherbes.
In which Kagami Tsurugi moves to Paris, finally meets Marinette Dupain-Cheng and slowly but surely falls in love with her. And also, something about a black cat and a ladybug.
There was apprehension in her gesture and she hesitated in front of the mahogany door for quite a long time. Mother hadn’t answered the phone, probably out of disappointment. Kagami wished she didn’t have to turn the doorknob, she wished she had won and that the entire Riposte incident hadn’t happened, not that she could remember it completely anyway, but… Standing around in the lobby wouldn’t do her any good, she reflected. Still, she wasn’t ready to feel Mother’s disappointed look on her — never a glare, never a raised voice, she never yelled at her, she just stared.

She guessed she wouldn’t live in Paris, then, and correcting that Wikipedia entry herself had been nothing but the foolish dream of a wide-eyed teenager. Maybe they would even move back to her Grandfather’s to intensify her training? She couldn’t just stay there doing nothing, it wasn’t her, she was better than this, it was just a stupid door to open. Besides, people looked at her as if she had grown a second head. She guessed it was the red fencing gear and the sabre, or the showy ring she didn’t even enjoy wearing, one of her grandfather's whims. Open that door, you are fifteen, not four, she told herself. She gulped slowly. She braced herself for what was waiting for her.

“Kagami, M. D’Argencourt and I decided to allow you a rematch tomorrow!” Itsuko Tsurugi spoke clearly from across the spacious hotel suite as the door opened and her daughter walked in. Hotel Ekta had been a good choice, not too ostentatious but definitely not the kind of hotel most could afford. “You should take a warm bath.”

It had taken one heated phone call from Armand D’Argencourt himself, retired Olympic champion Armand D’Argencourt, swordsman extraordinaire Armand D’Argencourt, for Itsuko Tsurugi to change her mind. The match that had taken place had not gone as he had planned it, it did not follow the rules at all, he explained in a doleful voice. He had been overenthusiastic about it and the referee hadn’t done their job properly. At least, it was the version he gave her, but she guessed that there was more to it than what he let out. That was Armand alright.

These explanations were all she needed to hear. In fact, it all made sense now, there was no way her own daughter could have lost in a fair match, if Kagami’s message was to be believed. Armand’s students were good, he ran the best fencing academy for young people in Paris after all, though his students rarely competed. He was good, but there was no way her own blood could have been defeated by one of his students.

They would have to cancel the flight they had booked for the next day but that was simply one detail in all the organising she would have to do when Kagami won. Her daughter hadn’t learned French, English and Italian for nothing, and though it had been a long time, her degree in
translation would certainly be useful. In September, Kagami would be schooled in France. She would let her choose which lycée she wanted to go to, even the most selective ones wouldn’t refuse her. Staying in France would not be a problem, and finding a job wouldn’t be overly complicated, wasn’t she Itsuko Tsurugi, former world champion herself? The door closed.

“Mother, I...” Kagami hadn’t expected that. Wouldn’t she want to discuss the whole akuma incident that had occurred? But it seemed that her mother hadn’t connected the dots between Riposte and Kagami, or that she cared about fencing before anything else. She was glad that she hadn’t picked up her phone. When she had told Adrien about that decisive match, it had been very foolish of her. She hadn’t wanted to disappoint the boy who could become a newfound friend, he had been a worthy opponent after all. Telling him that she would like to have a rematch against him at all and that it would happen someday had been risky, and a half-lie. Itsuko Tsurugi had never allowed second chances, after all, there was no such thing as second chances, or so Grandfather had told her, but she wouldn’t let this opportunity slip away from her. “Thank you. I won’t disappoint you this time.”

Kagami was in a pensive mood as her mother ran her a bath. Things would be very different in September if she won, and she knew that with Adrien’s sprained ankle, her rematch wouldn’t be happening before a long time. The fencer she would have to face would certainly be less proficient than Adrien. She would win, she didn’t doubt that. And then she’d go to school in France, for her first year in lycée. She would celebrate her sixteenth birthday in France and complete her secondary education there.

At least three years… She would miss Tokyo and the few friends she had there. She would make new ones in Paris, at least she hoped so. Marinette sounded like a nice person, Kagami genuinely wanted to meet her someday, or rather wouldn’t mind meeting her, but she had mostly said that because it was what was expected from her. Adrien didn’t seem to realise his feelings for the girl, but he might just be an unawarely lovesick teenager, she told herself. After all, he could be completely wrong about this Marinette.

She should stop assuming things about people she barely knew, she berated herself as she fumbled through her suitcase for a new change of clothes. Yes, Marinette had sounded nice enough, not that Kagami had had a real conversation with her. She did say she wanted to meet her... Had that been foolish too? She didn’t like this uncertainty. And then there was Ladybug, who had saved her and Kagami didn’t know what do make of it. It had been gratefulness and fascination. What had happened had been incredible and she hadn’t processed it completely yet. She would need to give it more thought but not immediately. Everything was still quite messy in her head.

“Your bath is ready,” Mrs Tsurugi called. “You should change before we go out for dinner, I don’t think that lamé of yours will do.”

“Of course, mother,” Kagami said, switching from Japanese to French as she shut the suite’s bathroom door behind her. Hadn’t her mother seen what she was carrying in her arms? She knew it perfectly well, dining in her present attire would be quite a faux pas. Mother was testing her. She
switched the radio on — France Musique was a channel she would listen to quite often in the near future, she decided. She removed her make-up first. The red lamé dropped on the tiled floor of the hotel bathroom. She dipped her toe in the water. It was quite warm, just the right temperature for her.

She slowly sat down in the bath. It felt as though she was slowly melting in the hot water, her shoulders relaxed and her mind was at peace. It was nice, this warmth and nothing but that, much better than the usual showers in changing rooms after competitions. She began washing herself, she missed her regular shampoo and conditioner. The water was slowly getting lukewarm and she didn’t want wrinkled fingertips. Bless whoever had designed bathrobes this comfortable and soft. She added “a bathrobe” to her mental list of things to buy in Paris.

She got dressed and winced. She had chosen her clothes hastily when she had packed her suitcase. She guessed the high-waisted blue jeans and white and green striped t-shirt one size too big for her would have to do, Mother had no say in that matter, she thought as she dried her hair. It wasn't too bad anyway, not a complete faux pas. Mother always tried to be chic all the time and to please everyone. Although Kagami liked to be elegant, she wasn’t like her.

The car, a courtesy of the hotel, Kagami had first believed, though it was truly far from free, drove them to the restaurant her mother had made a reservation at. And then came the dinner which, in itself, was rather uneventful if a little more tense than their ride had been. It wasn’t that Itsuko Tsurugi was cold around her daughter per say. Or was she? No, she showed her affection in other ways than many, and they didn’t talk much. That was besides the point. Either way, the food wasn’t half bad, the cuttlefish ink pasta were cooked al dente and while Kagami had managed to avoid eating seafood, her mother enjoyed the scallops that came with the dish. Being quiet and compliant right now, Kagami thought, was not the same as being submissive. She wasn’t doing that for Mother as if she were a puppy. Simply, there were times when she could raise her voice and others when it wall simply uncalled for.

And she couldn't really complain all that much. She had started to earn a little more freedom with every passing year, and disobeying Mother wasn't as hard as it used to be. She wished she didn’t care much for what Father had to say, she wished that they could have real, not one-sided conversations. Trying to get his approval was tiring. In Paris, she hoped she would find more independence, outside of fencing, of course. Mother had planned almost everything for her until now, but would that change here? Mother had behaved in an unusual fashion since they had landed France, and it wasn’t only the jet-lag. In spite of all of that, the question still seemed to come out of nowhere.

“Have you already chosen the lycée you would like to go to?” Itsuko Tsurugi simply asked in choppy French, a question Kagami hadn’t expected at all. “We have a few weeks to fill the forms, but I wondered if you had already made up your mind.”

“Well I...” Kagami hesitated. “Can I give you an answer once I’ve won? I am a little too focused on tomorrow’s rematch, I want to give my best performance. Monsieur D’Argencourt is an old friend of yours, isn’t he?” She carried her glass of water to her lips. Did that mean that she would have her word to say, or had she misheard her because she was too exhausted? “I wouldn’t want
him to think any less of the Tsurugis,” she added once she had put the now empty glass down. That would reassure Mother. Besides, she truly did want to win, it was what her strenuous training had been for, and the thought didn’t leave her as she slowly drifted to sleep in the pyjamas she had borrowed her mother.

Her alarm went off about fifteen hours later but she managed to wake up right away. The hotel room was very quiet, Itsuko Tsurugi nowhere to be found, but she had scribbled a note saying that she was away for the whole day, taking care of their visas and other matters. She had left her a doggy bag too; apparently, Kagami had missed breakfast and lunch. That was quite a lot of sleep, something she usually couldn’t get during the week. These few days in France, Kagami wrote in her travel journal, felt like odd holidays under pressure, during which she didn’t have school but still needed to be a good little soldier. Well, things hadn’t been like she had planned them to be. She sketched a small ladybug and closed the journal as she stretched.

Still about two hours to go before the rematch, according to the note. Kagami did not laze around. A quick shower would do this time, she would put on her fencing equipment once she got there. The day before, she had planned her dramatic entrance in Collège Françoise Dupont to intimidate as many students and aspirant fencers as she could, but there would be no one to impress this time, only the student M. D’Argencourt had selected to fight her and probably M. D’Argencourt himself acting as a referee. Today, she noted, was a Saturday which meant no schoolchildren to bother her.

The D’Argencourt fencing academy was usually closed that day… That was unfortunate. She would have to prove herself worthy in the eyes of the other fencing students in September, she guessed. She prepared her things and slowly put them in a backpack. According to her phone — no notifications whatsoever, but she was used to it — it was already two in the afternoon. Plenty of time, yet minutes are already ticking by. There was no need to run, at least not yet.

Marinette had never run so fast in her entire life, at least as her civilian self, but she had to make it in time. Would the door still be open? She dodged pedestrians and one or two cars, her earphones blaring an energetic Jagged Stone song. Usually, she would have enjoyed a simple stroll in the streets and the early summer breeze, but not today. In two minutes, it would start and she didn’t want to miss it. She hadn’t completely lied when she had told Adrien that she was interested in fencing, also she had yet to grasp the subtleties of it at all, and she couldn’t say that it was the case just yet. But it wasn’t the only reason she had chosen to watch the rematch. She had to apologise, and she wanted to make sure that everything was alright with Kagami after the Riposte incident.

Tikki might or might not have played a role in this decision. The two of them shouldn’t have eavesdropped on the conversation, she knew it. Adrien saw her as a friend and as a friend only and she would have rather done without that knowledge. But Kagami had said that she was looking forward to meeting her too. So even if it wasn’t Adrien facing her, Marinette felt like she had to be there. And she genuinely wanted to watch the match. There was the great wooden door at last, not closed, and she rushed inside. She wasn’t late!
The piste — that was how they called the fencing area, that was one thing she was completely sure about— was still where they had left it the day before, M. D’Argencourt was in position, a sabreur she didn’t know was clipping his body cord to his lamé and flailing the air with his sabre in intricate movements, which he punctuated with war-like grunts. Adrien would never do that, she observed. This boy was nothing but a show-off, she thought as she waved at the fencing master.

“M. D’Argencourt, is it OK with you if I watch the match?” she asked between huffed breaths.

“Well, err, that is unexpected but of course! I mean, two’s a crowd, as they say!” the master swordsman laughed in a boisterous and quite cartoonesque way. “So,” he whispered to her calmly once his fit of laughter had ended, “it seems that you’re quite interested in my fencing academy. Or is it the fencers? You’ll have to wait until next year, if you want to enter, I fear...” He pointed discretely at the sabreur and whispered, even more softly than before, “I fear young Vincent here doesn’t stand a single chance against the Tsurugi heir. I’m positive Kagami will make short work of him. But here she finally comes!”

What struck Marinette straight away was how Kagami Tsurugi oozed with confidence, not arrogance, when she stepped in the courtyard. The day before, she had seemed brash, her bravado intimidating enough, and Marinette guessed that it must have been the other girl’s intention, but then it had been tainted with a hint of nervousness, as if Kagami’s entire life depended on the outcome of her match against Adrien. She didn’t seem nearly as tense this time and it made her look even more powerful.

The way she walked with an air of pride, as if she were nobility simply claiming a throne she rightfully deserved, that walk seemed natural, as if she was born for this. No, not born for it, but moulded for it after years of work and discipline. Or perhaps Kagami was just naturally gifted, Marinette didn't know. She was wearing her lamé again, as if it had always been a second skin to her, it looked like it had been custom-made for her and it probably was, now that Marinette thought of it, just like her sabre.

Kagami’s determined demeanour was almost more intimidating without her fencing mask on. She looked regal, and, Marinette thought, very pretty. She had only watched her from a distance before, and as Ladybug she had been all business, making sure that the de-akumatized Kagami had been alright, but she couldn’t not see it now. Chat Noir would have talked about “the freckles that adorned her fair complexion, her high cheekbones, her slightly upturned nose, her amber eyes…” And though that phrasing was awful, he wouldn't have been entirely wrong. She was almost jealous of Kagami’s perfectly coiffed bob of charcoal hair, darker than her own messy pigtails... But she shouldn’t have let her mind wander in that direction, Marinette berated herself, she wasn't here to admire someone's hair, it wasn’t what she was here for in the first place.
Kagami’s eyes widened when she saw who was chatting with M. D’Argencourt. She had only caught a glimpse of Marinette — it was her, she was sure of that— when she was the default referee, quite a stressful job for an amateur. Was she there to watch her win? Was it to apologize? Her victory was what mattered most, she would focus on Adrien’s “friend” once she was done with her opponent. Sabre fencing comes first and everything else second to that, she reminded herself, although it would be an easy match, she knew it as soon as she looked at her adversary, a boy who looked a little older than her, his short gelled brown hair combed back. His lips were stretched in a confident smirk, almost a grimace and disdain flickered in his eyes when he took notice of Kagami. He almost scowled at her. Oh, she would wipe this smile off his face in a matter of minutes.

Kagami halted once she got to the piste and clipped her body cord to her own lamé. She almost wished she had someone more competent to fence against, someone like Adrien and as serious as him. Judging by her opponent’s over-relaxed shoulders, he had thought that she would be an easy fight, it took only a glance to understand that. She was not amused and disdain glinted in her eyes, a small scowl darkening her own features. She could mirror him all she wanted, and do it better than him. Her moment of grace was over. Did he think it would be easier because she was a girl and younger than him? Didn’t he know who she was and all she had achieved? She glanced back at Marinette, she would greet her later, she thought as M. D’Argencourt joined the two fencers.

“Mademoiselle Tsurugi, I am still so very sorry for yesterday, it was foolish and uncalled for. I should not have allowed that unhooked duel but that was beautiful sabre work,” he said, running his hand over his receding hairline. He took a step back and watched the competitors carefully as they tested their sabres, making sure that the material was functioning properly, unsurprisingly, it was. “Vincent, mademoiselle, let us start this bout, shall we?”

Eight valid touches, Marinette reminded herself as Kagami and Vincent put their fencing masks on and saluted each other, before they turned to their referee and saluted him too, with more respect in the gesture this time. She could only agree with the master swordsman, Vincent wouldn’t stand a chance.

“En garde!” Armand D’Argencourt’s voice echoed in the empty courtyard. There it was, Kagami thought as she breathed in and out slowly. The perfect stance for the likes of this opponent, slightly flashy, but exactly what she needed. She was ready to let him feint then lunge at her, and then the hit would be hers. He wasn’t worth the effort but she wanted to be impressive. She could see, feel everything around her, the afternoon sun, Marinette’s look, the weight of her lamé and the plastron underneath, the slight brushing sound of Vincent’s breeches.

“Êtes-vous prêts?”

Of course she was ready. The world shrank in the blink of an eye, until it was only the courtyard, the piste, her opponent and herself, the residual presence of the referee and the sole spectator. It was like the few seconds before a chess match and she already knew Vincent’s every moves, his
overture, the every details of this game. With a more proficient fencer, things would have been different, more challenging, somewhat more exciting than that. But she had to do it and she would, by the book, though she’d allow herself a few variations. Kagami’s mind raced and time began to stretch to the point of rupture. It elapsed slowly, and all she needed was one word to trigger it all.

“Allez!”

From Marinette’s perspective, it happened in a blur of motion and sound and the scoring box lit up red in the blink of an eye. She would have lied if she said she had understood all that had happened, but there were two things she was sure about. The first one, that she didn’t want to miss any of it. The second... “Touche,” M. D’Argencourt said, trying to conceal the amazement in his voice and doing a pretty bad job at it. Marinette herself didn’t bother trying to hide how impressed she was.

What he had just witnessed, though, was quite different from what an untrained eye could have perceived. It had happened fast, almost too fast for him and he knew that Itsuko had not exaggerated her daughter’s swordsmanship. Vincent’s feint and lunge had been too unrefined, they failed instantly when his sabre met Kagami’s.

The girl had executed a perfect yet effortless stop-hit, and the touch was hers. Her opponent shifted from one feet to the other. It wasn’t hard to tell who would be utterly crushed by the end of the bout, the fencing master thought. He couldn’t wait to train her. Kagami was even less amused than before, but stayed focused nonetheless. This was no challenge at all. How she wished Adrien hadn’t hurt his leg. She stole a glance at Marinette, the girl seemed quite absorbed in the match. Knowing that made Kagami repress a smile. It gave her a newfound motivation. She was going to impress Marinette even more with her next touches.

Exactly one minute and forty three seconds later, Vincent threw his sabre on the ground and refused to shake Kagami’s hand. He slouched and stomped off the piste in a rage, his nostrils flaring with anger. Marinette was immediately on the lookout for any suspicious-looking butterfly but she could only understand the boy’s frustration. Having lost like that must have felt quite humiliating for someone as arrogant as him. Kagami had been more precise and inventive with every new touch, never twice the same. Her compound attacks were unparalleled and when she had the right-of-way, her assaults always met their intended targets. Vincent’s defence was a vast joke compared with her own.

Watching her fight Adrien once more would be interesting to say the least, now that the pressure of joining the entering academy, was off Kagami’s shoulders. Come to think of it, that bout must have been quite tense for Kagami and as the girl in the red lamé took off her fencing mask, she heaved a sigh of relief. She shook her head so that she wouldn’t have a terrible case of helmet hair. All signs of tension vanished from her face and replaced with determination as she shook hands with M. D’Argencourt and started talking excitedly with him.
Maybe she should wait for Kagami to refresh herself and change into her civilian clothes before she talks to her, Marinette reflected, and it seemed that the other girl had the exact same thing in mind as Kagami made her way to the changing rooms after she mouthed Marinette an apologetic “not now”.

Kagami rushed in the changing room, and grabbed her phone to call Mother, but at the last moment, she refrained from pressing the icon. Would she be disturbing her in the middle of some important business? A simple text would do, she thought, and she typed one. The showers were nowhere near as comfortable as the bath in the hotel, she thought and she made it as fast as she could. The fight wasn’t even that draining, when she compared it to the one that happened the day before, with the addition of Riposte. She scrubbed herself rapidly and dried herself with one of the borrowed hotel towels.

She was not postponing the inevitable, she told herself as she winced at her choice of clothes once more, she was not putting back her meeting with Marinette. She would have to ask where she had bought her summer dress, she thought, she couldn't just wander around wearing… This. She gathered her fencing gear and put it the suitcase she had bought for the occasion. She cast one last look at the locker room.

She would spend quite some time there in a little more than two months, after the summer holidays, unless things changed for the D’Argencourt fencing academy. And with Mother’s tendency to overdo things, chances were, they would. She finally exited the room with apprehension but stopped and strained her ears She could hear a voice although she couldn’t make out the words. Someone was talking outside.

“Hey, congratulations for your victory you were really impressive and I’m really sorry for yesterday and ugh, that sounded even worse than before,” Marinette said to no one in particular, her back turned to the changing room as she waited the other girl to come out. She didn’t want to find herself with nothing to say in front of Kagami. “Hey, I’m sorry for my terrible refereeing yesterday, it was really bad and I couldn’t see much so the hit was probably yours, anyway, your victory was really something special, you truly are an impressive fencer,” she continued in a hushed voice. She did not notice Kagami creeping behind her.

“At least, it wasn’t like the chewing-gum incident, Marinette told herself.
“You heard everything, didn’t you?” Marinette asked mortified and the small smirk that formed on Kagami’s lips was enough of an answer, though it did not feel insulting like when Chloé smirked at... Most people like she did most of the time, really. “Well then,” she smiled to herself before she turned to Kagami, “I guess there’s no need to introduce myself but anyway... I’m Marinette Dupain-Cheng, it’s nice to meet you!”

“Kagami Tsurugi, the feeling is mutual,” she said and on an impulse, she outstretched her hand for Marinette to shake. The feel of Marinette’s hand brushing against hers was odd, not the same as when it had been Adrien’s, but she dismissed the observation quickly. It would take her some time to get used to the whole shaking-hands-without-gloves-in-a-casual-way, but at least it wasn’t as if Marinette had kissed her on the cheeks like she had seen so many people do to greet one another. That, she thought, was a French custom she would rather stay away from for as long as she could.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in Françoise Dupont...” Marinette said. Yes, she gave herself an imaginary thumbs up, that had to be a good conversation starter. “What collège do you go to? Or are you already in lycée?” Great. Not embarrassing at all. Congratulations Marinette. But the other girl didn’t seem to find it too awkward.

“I will only go to lycée next year, just like you, now that I got in the D’Argencourt fencing academy” Kagami said, “it will be my first year in France!” Did that sound too enthusiastic? She was Kagami Tsurugi, not some overexcited teenager who was about to make a new friend.

Marinette’s “Well... Welcome to France, I guess!” seemed to indicate that her excitement was adequate enough. And so, Kagami continued. “So far I still go to the Lycée International de Tokyo because my mother wanted me to but...” She stopped when she saw the quizzical look on Marinette’s face. “They call it lycée but it does everything from nursery school to secondary school, it does not really make any sense but it is not very interesting... And I have not chosen which lycée I want to go to yet... Where will you go in September?”

“The lycée Carnot! And so will most of the people from Françoise Dupont, so unless his father disagrees about it, this means Adrien too,” Marinette said, hoping that she wasn’t talking too much or drowning Kagami in useless information, but she looked quite interested — was it because of Adrien, she wondered. “I guess you don’t know many people here yet. So...” Her eyes looked up at the sky and Kagami thought that something interesting had just happened above her, but all there was was the sun.

Kagami’s phone was inside one of her trouser pockets (it had taken her hours to find jeans with actual pockets big enough to fit a phone but that had been worth the search), she was sure of that. Until it somehow appeared in Marinette’s hand and the girl’s blue eyes sparkled with excitement before she noticed what she had just done and the expression fell apart altogether. Inside Marinette’s bag, Tikki face-palmed, or did the equivalent gesture for a creature with no actual palms. Marinette herself winced. It seemed that old habits died hard, especially the embarrassing
Kagami was too amazed to be mad at Marinette, and instead of yelling at her like anyone else would normally have, she simply asked her, “How? Why? Can you teach me?”

“I’m sorry, it tends to happen sometimes... When you were looking at the sky, that’s when it happened, that’s the trick, making people look in the wrong direction, just like magicians do but it’s not very important and I swear I meant to ask you, I wanted to add my number so that you could text me if you had any questions or just wanted to talk or just, I don’t know, if you go to a different lycée or whatever,’ Marinette rambled. There was that spark of amusement in Kagami’s eyes again. “Do you want it back immediately?”

“No, please, add your number, I would really want to—” Kagami didn’t finish her sentence, afraid that it would come out wrong. “The code is 2-5-8-3, and no that is not a picture of my cat, it is my grandmother’s,” she almost laughed. She never almost laughed. What was going on here?

A few seconds and a selfie later, Marinette handed back the phone to her rightful owner just as a red car drove by. It was the cue for Kagami to leave, and was it wrong that she wanted to stay there a little longer to chat with Marinette? She saw why Adrien liked her now, and she genuinely wanted to get to know her better. The summer breeze blew softly as they finally exited collège Françoise Dupont, and how they secretly wished they could enjoy a carefree stroll around the city together. But Kagami had to leave, she knew that, Mother was probably waiting for her in the car. And so, she muttered a small goodbye, not quite meeting the blue eyes that looked at her worriedly. She hadn’t wanted this encounter to end that way, she wasn’t good with goodbyes.

But Marinette didn’t seem to mind and gave her an understanding smile instead. She squeezed Kagami’s shoulder softly, a silent encouragement and mouthed a small goodbye herself. It made things easier. not that things could possibly go wrong with her mother after her victory: when the chauffeur opened the door for her, she was greeted with Itsuko’s approving grin, all had went well for her too, Kagami guessed. She looked back at Marinette one more time and finally got in the car.

Marinette watched the car drive away. Well then, she sighed, that had been something. She dismissed the beginning of a pang of dissatisfaction before it could grow any larger.

Later that day, after an akuma-free patrol without Chat Noir, she allowed herself a few minutes of rest on the balcony, bathing in the last lights of the day while Tikki nibbled on a cookie. That day, she reflected, had been almost perfect, and the weather was just warm enough for her be in her pyjamas — that would be her next project, she noted in her sketchbook labeled, originally enough, “projects for myself”, making new pyjamas for herself. But that could wait. Yes, Marinette thought, taking a sip of homemade lemonade, today had been quite a good day indeed, almost
perfect. That was, until her phone buzzed softly.

She didn’t get it immediately. When she finally stretched her arm lazily to grab the phone, she was quite surprised. It wasn’t a text from Alya or even Nino, but an unknown number. She read the message and her eyes crinkled. Kagami — it had to be her, in fact she was sure that it was her before she had made it to the end of the message — had texted her, in the end, to tell her that she would go to the lycée Carnot in September too. She had even asked her how about the end of her afternoon and her evening! Now, Marinette could call this a perfect day. From her hotel room, Kagami shared almost the same thought.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

We are in for quite a long ride, about thirty six chapters or so, and I hope you will enjoy reading this story as much as I enjoy writing it. It is going to be quite a slow burn, so if you expect these two to make out in six chapters, you'll be disappointed. This is not the kind of fic I want to write.

When characters speak in another language than the default French, it will be specified in the narration and the dialog will be *italics*. I won't use honorifics because it feels extremely awkward and artificial in the context of this fanfiction. Plus it often has this bad animu fic vibe that I do not want.

Do keep in mind that I am a poor tired baguette, and thus my English skills are… what they are, lacking at best.

France Culture is one of the best radio channels in France (according to me, at least). They mostly play music — classic, modern and contemporary music, mostly orchestral but not only, most of it is really good — you can visit the website [here](#).

Follow me on Tumblr [here](#) if you feel like it, that'd be very cool of you. It looks a little bad but I'll make it look better someday. I hope so, at least. I sometimes post things about France and writing tips about it, and small excerpts of the chapters to come before I put them online. You can also ask me stuff and maybe submit art for this fic if you feel like it!

À bientôt!

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I edited this chapter one year after its original release, I think it's slightly less terrible now. I'll edit the next couple of chapters too, I think.
Kagami stretched in her bed and yawned. She was still a little sleepy, but snuggling down in her bed might wouldn’t do. On the other hand, couldn’t she just sleep until the end of August? The summer holidays almost felt like an eternity for her. Not that they were boring, on the contrary, and her mother had been as kind as to allow her to take a break from the Suginami Fencing Club for a week in the middle of July, the time for a trip to Kagoshima. Kagami had genuinely enjoyed it, the originally-named Botanical Garden and the aquarium, and simply being there. Mother had seemed more laid back then and Father too.

Although it wasn’t the most exotic place for her to visit, it was still a nice break from Tokyo. Not that there was anything wrong with Tokyo, she liked it here, but it was synonym of hours of fencing practice with people older than her that usually left her too tired to fully enjoy the company of her friends afterwards. There was no such thing as lazing around, Grandfather would say when she was younger, and his daughter had passed down the lesson to her own child. It was not always the best of lessons, if you asked Kagami.

And so, she could hardly wait for September to finally come. She knew that the last week of August would be spent settling in Paris, and that was quite an exciting perspective in itself. There would be quite a lot of shopping to do, they wouldn’t be able to ship everything they owned off to France. She also learned that Father wouldn’t join them in Paris, but that was nothing new, he was never there with them in Tokyo anyway, always too busy working on… Whatever it was, he usually didn’t like talking about it, but it was science-related, from what she remembered. They didn’t talk much these, and it wasn’t as if she had tried to get closer to him. She still tried… But that did not stop her from enjoying these two months. She banished these thoughts from her mind and finally got out of bed. Kagami checked her clock, it read a quarter to eight in the morning, a nice time to wake up.

Come to think of it, these were quite good holidays, for reasons completely unrelated to fencing or her parents, a least not directly so. There was no schoolwork, no actual rush, only six hours of sports a day - her training wasn’t limited to fencing— and no competitions in sight. More importantly, she could talk to Marinette and follow Ladybug and Chat Noir’s exploits thanks to a blog Marinette had said was the best of all. And it really was. While in Tokyo, she had heard a few things about superheroes in Paris, but she hadn’t really cared back then, it had sounded like something straight out of a bad tokusatsu show, with animal-themed characters that children would buy merchandise and action figures, the kind of show she’d watch after a hard day to empty her mind. But the Ladyblog had proven itself to be quite interesting and quite time-consuming too, Kagami reflected as she turned her computer on. Still about four minutes before Marinette would usually text her, she noted. She logged in the site.

There was no new footage, so far, but it seemed that a fight had occurred during the day, and some
videos would be online soon. She couldn’t quite remember being Riposte, there were a few vague memories in the back of her head, but nothing quite as consistent as finding herself, her normal self, facing Ladybug afterwards, and the many theories published on the blog only brought up new questions. It seemed that Hawk Moth, or Hawkmoth, or whatever the proper spelling for his name was, wasn’t familiar with the concept of summer holidays, and he still tried to wreak havoc on Paris, though not nearly as often as during the rest of the year. Was it because Paris’s regular inhabitants left the city during July and August? There were theories about akumas being the manifestation of the Parisian’s foul mood contained in one person at a time. It had to be a joke, at least partly, she hoped, and at this point, she was too afraid to ask Marinette if that was actually true. She turned her laptop off and watered her small potted eucalyptus.

Kagami lazily pocketed her phone and walked to the kitchen. Mother wasn’t up yet. She put the bright red kettle on for her morning tea — she had tried coffee once and didn’t want to experience it ever again, her stomach wouldn’t allow it anyway and she wasn’t masochistic enough to try it ever again. She made herself some breakfast toasts while looking absent-mindedly outside the window. Mother had shown her the pictures, their future flat and even though it would be quite nice to live there, she would miss the days in Azabu, even in the rain like today that gave the street a watery green hue. It had been a nice neighbourhood and sometimes, she had truly been happy there, she thought as she beat two eggs in a bowl and added a pinch of salt. She zoned out for a little while. She was halfway through her spinach omelet when her phone chimed. She knew who it was before even checking it. After weeks of texting Marinette, in French of course, she had finally understood her patterns, or so she believed. Because of the time zone difference, Marinette would often text her at ungodly hours so that she wouldn’t disturb the other girl, something she had seemed very mindful about, and nothing Kagami said could make her stop doing so.

They had talked every other day at first, it had started with simple topics such as school but it had bloomed into something more. In fact, reading Marinette’s texts and answering them while having breakfast had slowly turned into a daily ritual they both followed religiously. Today’s message was short and vague, but it sounded like Marinette was feeling a little tired as she had to stay with her parents to help them at the bakery; it must have been quite a hard day, if her typos meant anything. She was quite secretive when it came to her hobbies, but Kagami didn’t want to pry.

She simply hoped that Marinette was alright, and her message was filled with care. She was a little worried but she hoped it didn’t show too much in her message. But also that it would show a little. Did that make sense? She hoped it did. Things were… Complicated. Either way, she pressed the “send” icon. Was her friend — could she call her a friend? She didn’t feel like a mere acquaintance anymore — alright? The thought kept nagging at her.

Marinette was not alright. Not by a long shot. Marinette’s back hurt. And her arms. And her legs. And her head. Everything hurt, really, and it wasn’t the nice kind of pain one experiences after a rewarding workout session, more of a “I tried to stop a bus driver turned-akuma and his vehicle with nothing but my yo-yo, my strength and Chat Noir’s help and nearly failed” kind of pain. Tikki had absorbed most of the shock, but her entire body still felt like it was throbbing or boiling or
both. If it could talk, it would scream, even when she tried lying on her back in her chaise longue the way she did right now. She couldn’t think straight at the moment anyway, and she didn’t even want to re-read the sloppy text she had just sent Kagami. It must have sounded whiny and sometimes, she wondered why the Japanese girl kept up with her at all. Not that she didn’t want her to.

A few minutes later, as her phone screen lit up with Kagami’s answer which she read carefully in a much better French than hers. She had recommended cold showers if Marinette didn’t want to be sore all over and she followed her advice after she typed back a few words of thanks and wished her a good day. It did help a little, she thought as a small stream of icy water trickled down her back. She stepped out of the bath and wrapped herself in a towel. Her parents were already fast asleep, and they had grown used to their daughter’s weird habits so they were no more complaints from them, Marinette was grateful for that. She tiptoed back to her room, hoping that she hadn’t made too much noise when she had opened the trapdoor, put on her brand new summer pyjamas and climbed up the stairs to her bed, put her phone on the bookshelf above the bed— she really wanted to chat some more with Kagami but she was too tired for that tonight— and collapsed immediately onto the bed. Then rolled to the side. And to the other side of the double bed. Then glanced at the night through the skylight. Her eyes wouldn’t close. Great.

She couldn’t sleep and her thoughts kept coming back to Hawk Moth, Chat Noir, Adrien, her friends at school and lately Kagami too. Some thoughts were more pleasant than other, Hawk Moth was not one of them. His very existence raised so many questions she had no answer to, but only theories that had proven themselves pointless as to his identity and how he had gotten his hands on the Butterfly Miraculous in the first place. She managed to get the idea out of her head and tried to think of Adrien instead. It did not work too well. Being away from him during the entire summer with no way to contact him — she had deleted his phone number by accident, and had been too shy to ask him afterwards— made her create the picture of a fake character she knew was not the real Adrien, and this very knowledge was irritating. She still cherished the lucky charm he had made her for her birthday, she had even slept with it and she still hoped she would end up in the same class as him but being away from him with no news made it feel somewhat off.

Despite all of that and her having to stay in Paris because of her hero duties — she had to make half-baked excuses not to go to her grandparents’s house in Charente, not that grandma was here for more than a day, following her motto, Gina Dupain had the entire world to explore— and the downsides that came with it, she didn’t hate the holidays as much as she had expected. Not that she didn’t usually like summers, but they were often quite lonely. This time, she had people to talk to, and although Alya had decided to spend the entirety of August in Martinique with her parents and her sisters, they had been almost inseparable in July. Now that she really thought about it, most Parisians went on holiday in August. Which explained why there were fewer attacks these days. Tonight was an exception to a rule, most of the time things were peaceful. She had hung out with other former schoolmates from collège too, once or twice, and it had been very nice and all. And then there was Kagami.

It had started with questions about the school life and Paris in general, to which Marinette had answered as precisely as she could without it feeling too stiff, and ever so slowly, the conversation
had turned into something more personal. It had been sharing music at first and then more, like how they had slept and what they did with their days, pictures and reading suggestions, advice on miscellaneous subjects. Marinette had convinced Kagami to give video games a try — in her fifteen years of existence, Kagami had only played once or twice for lack of interest in it—and they kept one another up to date on their progress when it came to the few games they had decided to play together, or at least at the same time. It had been older games, mostly, and Chrono Trigger soon became one of Kagami’s favourites. They tried newer ones too, and Shovel Knight had kept them busy for quite a long time. There were many games Marinette hadn’t dared suggest, but there would be time for them someday.

Lately, they were having a good time playing Pocket Camp, Marinette had always liked Animal Crossing’s laid-back atmosphere, Kagami hadn’t seemed so convinced at first but it had changed thanks to Marinette’s encouragements, and it was quite fun to visit each other. Marinette hoped they would play Ultimate Mecha Strike III together one day. Now, they usually chatted about anything and everything, and it was surprisingly nice, though Marinette had to be quite vague, more often than not lying by omission, a technique she had perfected. She couldn’t outright tell Kagami something in the lines of “hey, I save Paris on a daily basis thanks to the powers Tikki grants me, you know, Tikki, my kwami, who is contained in my earrings, which happen to be the Miraculous of Creation… Wanna grab ice cream?” Or could she? She hoped Kagami didn’t worship Ladybug.

Marinette knew sleep wouldn’t come to her this easily, and she groped for her phone in the dark while making sure not to wake Tikki up. Texting Alya or maybe Kagami it would be, then. She was too tired to do anything else anyway, she didn’t trust herself with climbing down the stairs at the moment. How she wished she had night vision, she thought as her hand fumbled around for what felt like hours but were really a few seconds. When had she become so impatient about texting? The summer before, it hadn’t mattered at all, there was no one for her to talk to, at least not as a friend. Friends. She was really lucky, she thought. The sudden light of the screen almost blinded her but that didn’t matter. It was half past one but she couldn’t have cared less. Tomorrow, or rather today, was a Sunday and she would sleep for as long as she wanted, unless something akuma-related came up. She sent Alya an overly dramatic message.

Then a second one and even a third after that. No answer came, of course, but that was to be expected. Knowing Alya, if she didn’t answer immediately, she must either be swimming or having dinner with her family. And with that, Marinette started typing a message, before she erased it completely and started anew until she found the perfect wording, or at least what she thought to be the perfect wording at this ungodly hour. She hoped Kagami would answer soon if she answered at all. She stifled a yawn. What was she doing? Marinette hit the “Send” icon and kept her fingers crossed.

Kagami was halfway through the sit-ups part of her workout routine when she heard her phone chime. None of her other friends would be up this early, she knew it. Mother was having a shower, so she wouldn’t notice if she stopped now, would she? She heaved a small sigh. She would stick to what she was doing first. Thirty more sit-ups and then she’d answer, she thought as she breathed out. Even if she wanted nothing more than to answer the text immediately, knowing who it might
be from. Twenty nine left… Seventeen more to go… Only five now… And done! It was quite gratifying, and she had a tendency to skip it during the school year… She would have to make herself a new schedule once in Paris, she mused as she snatched her water bottle from the table and took a long gulp. She took her phone in her hand and read the new message that could only have come from Marinette.

From: Marinette Dupain-Cheng

To: Me

Kagamiieee :o

The cold shower worked rlly well so thnaks ;)

But I can’t sleep, too much on my mind :(  

And before you ask, Ill tell you about it later but not now cause it wouldn’t make any snse

You doin anything fun? ;)

Sned me pictures of you and Tokyo and ur grandmas cat pleaaaase

Kagami’s eyes crinkled and she didn’t stop the bubble of laughter that escaped her lips. How could anyone be as adorable and dorky as her? She could hardly wait September to spend some real time with Marinette. Only a few weeks, she reminded herself as she sent back whatever pictures she could think of. Did Marinette ask for pictures of her? Somehow, it made her panic. She couldn’t just send her a selfie right now, her hair was a mess and she was sweaty, she would look dreadful, she thought, and that wouldn’t do. Kagami browsed through the few photos of her she had — she usually didn’t take many herself, mostly of her friends, new landscapes and a few other things, but if Marinette asked, maybe she could try — and settled for the few in which she didn’t find her face too horrible. This was exactly why she hadn’t started an Instagram account. Was that picture in front of that volcano too cliché? She decided against sending the one in which she wore her school uniform in the middle of the cherry blossom, it was a bit too much. When Kagami finally made her choice and sent her message, Marinette was already fast asleep, dreaming about what the new year would be.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

Next chapter, they’ll finally meet again in person, don’t worry!

If you don’t know what tokusatsu is, think Power Rangers. Or rather Super Sentai, Kamen Rider, Ultraman. It’s cheesy, dumb, with sometimes terrible special effects. Which makes toku very enjoyable and fun.

Follow me on Tumblr here, I post previews for the incoming chapters and sometimes writing tips about France. Submit your art for this fic if you feel like it or
ask me stuff, who knows, I might answer!

Keep in mind that French is my first language, not English.

À lundi!

I edited this chapter a year after its original release, so if you're reading this after April 2019, congratulations, you avoided an inferior version of this chapter!
Duel 3: The New Kid

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Parisian underground train was the very definition of chaos, with stressed out people running with little to no care for whatever or whoever was in their way, and quite honestly, this lack of consideration annoyed Kagami to no end. The Charles de Gaulle Étoile station almost felt too small. And why couldn’t they simply wait and stay in line? The crowd didn’t make any sense at all. Worst of all, if the métro happened to be late, and it looked as though it would be the case, then so would she, and being late for the first day of school wouldn’t do. Not that she would actually be late, she had carefully predicted every possible scenario, not excluding the likelihood of Hawk Moth attacking the city, to make sure that she would make it to the lycée Carnot in time, but still. Riding the métro was the least risky option, she knew that the traffic, a few metres above her head, was even worse. Paris could be quite messy and needlessly overcomplicated, she thought as she sent Marinette a short and quite panicky text—even though she tried to make it sound as detached as she possibly could.

They hadn’t managed to see each other in the week before the start of the school year and this for a good reason: moving house took quite some time and all the purchases that needed to be made too, and Mother had wanted her around the whole time. It would take some time to get fully used to it, but she liked the flat. It did not feel like home, at least not yet, but she hoped it would come soon. The hissing sound of the much-resented métro slowing down and its blinding light brought her back to reality, and the fact that she would need to elbow her way to the train. The doors opened, and a tide of passengers came out while a wave tried to get in.

Kagami turned up the volume of her music — SoKo for today— and tried not to notice the unpleasant smell of the crowd as she managed to find a place in the car. What was it with some passengers spreading out as much as they could, even though they quite obviously disturbed the others? She waited and tried to keep her calm, only four stops to go and then she would gladly get the hell out of this bloody overgrown tin can that rolled under the city. *Foutue boîte à sardine de mes deux, si tu pouvais magner ton putain de cul ce serait une riche idée.* Sometimes, cursing felt nice. Not a thing to do when her mother was around, but still.

Finally, she got off at Villiers, and was greeted with the sight of a crowded street hurrying up under the cool blueish light of an early September morning. She followed boulevard Malesherbes until she was making her way through a small crowd loitering right in front of the school’s entrance, some students smoking, most chatting happily. She had already seen pictures of the place but lycée Carnot looked straight from an engraving, with its combination of dressed stones and red bricks. She slowly made her way inside the school and checked her phone for any new message, and there were more than a few. Marinette telling her she wouldn’t be there before a few more minute, Taneda and Aiko wishing her good luck for this first day here — had they stayed up just to send her these messages? —and her mother too, she had never received so many texts in an entire day. Still nothing from Father… Should she stop hoping?
She straightened the collar of her red jacket as she arrived in the courtyard and she started to look for familiar faces but found none, no Marinette, no Adrien, no one she knew. Did she even belong here? There were so many people talking to each other and then there was Kagami Tsurugi looking haplessly for people she knew. She would have felt like an alien if she didn’t speak French. She turned her head to the right and saw that there were small gatherings around each pillar in the courtyard… A diminutive man was nervously taping sheets of papers on them, and he looked on the verge of tears as he left one his job done, muttering something about a broken photocopier.

Kagami stepped closer and saw the names printed on the closest sheet. There were the lists of students in each class, one document per class. It took her three pillars before she finally found her name. She would be in Seconde 4, it seemed. Her eyes travelled up and down the sheet. There were names she had seen in Marinette’s texts before “Nino”, “Alya”, “Chloé” —she almost winced—and a few others, but no “Adrien” in the list. She was almost disappointed, until she found Marinette’s name. Her heart skipped a beat and her moody state faltered instantly. They would be in the same class, they would be together and she felt much lighter.

She heard someone call her first name. Still a thing she would have to get used to, the French being so casual about the first name basis or sometimes not… She shook her head. It had to be a mistake. She knew the theory, but living it in practice didn’t quite feel the same. “Hey, Kagami, over here,” the voice called again. That voice… It was somehow familiar, in fact she had heard before, several times, without ever having met the person in the flesh. She tried to find the source of the voice until she found it. Her eyes widened, almost comically.

A girl with glasses and a mole on her forehead was waving at her, swinging along as she walked to meet Kagami and it felt almost surreal to finally meet her, as if a mythical creature had appeared before her. Of course, Kagami knew who this was, she was Marinette’s best friend, she had seen her in many photos Marinette had sent her, she ran the Ladyblog and her name was…

“Alya, right?” Kagami fought back a troubled frown. How did Alya know her name? Did—

“Marinette told me to take care of you before you arrived,” Alya grinned before Kagami could formulate her question, and the grin widened when she saw Kagami turn a shade pinker. That would be more teasing material for her, Alya noted as she fiddled with her orange hair wrap. “Welcome to Paris, I mean you’ve heard it all before, I guess,” she said and held out a hand that Kagami shook without hesitation. “First year here, right? I know the feeling. Don’t worry you’ll get used to it in no time. You can ask me anything if you want!”

Kagami understood why Alya was Marinette’s best friend. She had that way to make people comfortable with a few words, almost as if she were the big sister she never knew she had until now. They made small talk for a little while until the conversation was about Ladybug and Chat Noir. Kagami felt like she had already found a new friend in her. Alya stole glances at her watch every so often, but there was still time, and maybe, just maybe, Marinette wouldn’t be late for
once. Soon, it wasn't just the two of them, as Nino joined them, saying hello to Alya with a peck on her lips. Adrien was still nowhere to be found, and Nino complained about the blond boy not being in their class this year. He hoped he wouldn't feel too lonely. “We’ll have study sessions together anyway,” Alya reassured him.

Then, suddenly Alya and Nino fell silent, not a strained silence, instead they tried their best to conceal their smiles. It felt as though they were part of a plan, a conspiracy she had not been told about. It was as though someone was running towards them but their identity was meant to be a surprise. Of course, it was exactly what was happening, and when Kagami turned around to see what they were smiling for, she saw a blur of pink and dark brown and felt something—someone? — soft but firm crash into her, and it almost knocked the air out of Kagami. She squeezed her eyes shut. Were these arms wrapping around her back? She opened her eyes and recognised the pigtails. Of course, it was her. It couldn’t have been anyone else. Kagami tried to move her arms awkwardly but Marinette released her before she could do anything. Physical contact was still as weird as ever.

“H-hey,” Kagami said dazedly and she had a hard time meeting Marinette’s beautiful blue eyes without turning beet red but somehow she managed it. That had been close. It wasn’t because of Marinette’s sleeveless top that showed the beautiful freckles on her shoulders, simply that she wasn’t used to being hugged, yes, that had to be the reason why, Kagami told herself. Talking to Marinette via messages was easier than seeing the real her.

“You made it!” Adrien beamed as he shook Kagami’s hand. “You got in the fencing academy, I mean, that’s why you’re with us this year and not in Japan, right? I’m really looking forward to this rematch!”

“You should have s-seen her wipe the floor with that other guy, it was really incredible” Marinette piped up without stammering too much. Alya gave her a small thumbs up and Marinette found the courage to add, “How were your summer holidays, Adrien?” Were he and Marinette an actual thing, Kagami wondered. She looked at Nino and Alya and smirked. Of course these two wanted Adrienette to be a thing. She watched them talk silently. Then, something struck Kagami. She hadn’t expected Marinette to talk about that small victory of hers at all, it had been nothing, only what was expected from her, wasn’t it so? So why had Marinette praised her? It felt warm. She liked it.
“…were good, thanks for asking, Marinette how about—” Adrien was cut by the chime of the bell that announced the beginning of class. “How were yours?” he asked a little louder.

“Good, thank you,” she almost shouted as the two drifted apart, “c’mon Alya stop dragging me off, I can get to the classroom on my own! Look, Kagami can manage it quite well herself, she’s read the sheet, she actually knows where to go which is clearly not in that direction! Nino, tell her to let go of my arm in this instant!” Adrien vanished from her field of vision but she could hear the faint sound of his laugh. Marinette didn’t melt nearly as much as before when she heard that laugh, she would observe later. She was starting to mature, she thought as they climbed the steps to room 505.

A teacher was waiting for them in the classroom, giving his new students a strained smile that looked out of place on his horsey face, as he wrote his name on the blackboard — M. Hippolyte Dupuis, it read, in a neat cursive handwriting. His sunken eyes assessed the small crowd in front of him. There were a few familiar faces, sharing a table with a boy who took off his cap was the girl who ran the Ladyblog, and behind them, the Dupain-Cheng’s daughter sitting with a girl wearing a red jacket. He also spotted the mayor’s daughter and cringed internally. He cleared his throat so that his students would stop chattering. He needed their attention, otherwise, he wouldn’t be able to deliver his speech of the utmost importance. “How do you do, kids? As your form teacher, I…”

The rest was lost to the rest of the classroom. Kagami hesitated between voicing the sarcastic remarks that came up in her mind with every new sentence the teacher said, and yawning: she finally settled for the second option. Was she the only one to find the form teacher a complete bore? Marinette was doodling in the margin of her notebook and she could hear hushed voices all around. That was quite terrible to say the least. She started doodling as well, sketches of sabres and fencing helmets. She would have her first fencing lesson at the D’Argencourt academy tonight, and she could hardly wait. She looked outside the window, hoping to find something, anything more interesting than the teacher drawling in front of the blackboard, and shared a few glances with Marinette who looked as bored as she was. Writing her a note was too risky, even though she wanted to. She kept to herself instead. An eternity later, M. Dupuis handed them their timetables.

The chatter started again as the students started comparing their timetables. Marinette and Kagami shared most of their classes together, but there were a few differences here and there: besides her additional English classes Marinette would have a few classes with Adrien and extra social sciences lessons, Marinette would start learning Chinese — she had finally given up on Latin, but choosing between Chinese and Arabic had been quite hard— while Kagami would stick to a more classic combination, if not the most classic of all, English, German — her Italian had never been that good anyway — and ancient Greek. Kagami guessed she wasn’t too unhappy with her timetable. But still. School. Boring school where she had to be the perfect model student and tolerate the presence of other students. She heaved a sigh. If it hadn’t been for Marinette and the fencing lessons, she would rather have stayed at home and sleep all day. Marinette must have sensed her disappointment, though she assumed it was towards M. Dupuis. She mouthed a “don’t worry, he’s not like that when he’s teaching” that reassured Kagami a little. And Marinette was right. In fact, he proved himself to be a perfectly fine as an earth and life sciences teacher in the next hour and a
half that followed that false start.

And then the floor began shaking. Once, then twice, then a regular thud, as if something enormous was walking downstairs. It was no earthquake, Kagami was sure of that, and the roar that rang out from somewhere inside the building only confirmed it. Could it be? The fire alarm started blaring and the class started panicking, even M. Dupuis seemed rather distressed, some students ran out of the classroom and it was like a fencing match again. The entire world shrunk until it was only her and the residual but insignificant presence of other people.

The room darkened noticeably as the classroom emptied itself. Kagami looked outside the window but she couldn’t see. It was as if someone had covered the windowpanes with… Paper? A layer of documents that seemed to be covering the entire building, in fact. There was the smell of something burning from a distance, but Kagami was too focused on the state of the windowpane to notice it. A voice thundered from the loudspeakers, so loud that it could be heard from miles around the lycée, as if to draw attention. Kagami had watched — not willingly, of course— enough blockbusters films to know that it was exactly Hawk Moth’s plan.

“Ladybug, Chat Noir, it is I, the Administrator!” the voice boomed. “Surrender your Miraculouses, or watch Paris disappear under the mighty power of paperwork!” A louder thud shook the building.

The sound brought Kagami back to reality, and she found herself alone. Was Marinette safe? Were Alya, Nino and Adrien safe? Marinette wasn’t answering her call. It was bad. Very bad. She hurriedly made her way out of the classroom and struggled to open one of the corridor’s windows that overlooked the courtyard. A gigantic, kaiju-like creature, a terrifying heap made of purplish sheets of paper and deadly sharp staples, was spewing mountains of documents out of its enormous mouth. The Administrator extended a monstrous arm to grab a student with glasses and dark brown, almost red hair that was trying to film him with her telephone. Flashes of red and black caught her eye, followed by a small explosion. She only saw their silhouettes but she knew exactly who they were, and the squeals she could hear from a room nearby only confirmed what she had just witnessed.

“Hey, big guy,” Ladybug shouted, standing from a rooftop, burned scraps of paper swirling around her, her eyes gleaming with determination as she looked at the akuma down below, her arms crossed. “Pick on someone your own size!”

“Meowth, that’s right,” Chat Noir added mischievously and Kagami was pretty sure she heard Ladybug groan.

“Well,” Kagami said in her mother’s tongue as she watched the heroes rescue poor Alya and the akumatized victim within the eldritch abomination while dodging, or in Chat Noir’s case, while
trying to dodge a bullet hell of high velocity paper pellets and akuma-powered paperclips, “it looks like the beginning of quite an interesting year.”

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

Next chapter, some sabre fencing. And Kagami turning bright red.

The Parisian underground is as nightmarish as I make it sound, really. You heard me complain about it in Needles, Cookies and Catnip, but… Yeesh.

SoKo does things like this and I think it’s pretty good!

Someone ought to draw Ladybug doing the Gainax stance! Also, there's a not so hidden Inio Asano reference in this chapter.

Follow me on Tumblr here, I post previews for the incoming chapters and I sometimes post writing tips about France. Submit your art for this fic if you feel like it or ask me stuff, who knows, I might answer! Maybe. I made a post about the school system that might help you understand the story a little more, but I didn't want to make it an info dump. It's here.

Still a baguette, the bad English is not intended…

À jeudi!

This chapter has been edited on April 30th, 2019, so it's a little better now, I hope!
The regular sound of footsteps on the green linoleum floor, laid back conversations and sometimes the clatter of blades filled the gymnasium. It was now Kagami’s fifth fencing lesson at the D’Argencourt academy, and she was starting to find her points of reference. The warmth of this Wednesday afternoon would have been quite unbearable, if M. D’Argencourt hadn’t managed to relocate his academy within the walls of the lycée Carnot. The air conditioning was working at full capacity. Kagami wondered if her mother was partly responsible for this relocation, knowing Itsuko Tsurugi, she certainly was. And there was Kagami, practicing her moulinet with the master himself. He had insisted that it was not so much of an outdated manœuvre but rather a technique too difficult for most to use in actual competitions. It was a far cry from what Grandfather would have taught her, but she complied anyway.

It was time she tried her own style. Mum hadn’t chosen Armand D’Argencourt for nothing, he had been an Olympic Champion after all, and though he didn't look like it, he probably had a lot to teach her. And so, she parried the instructor’s sabre — Prime—her blade pointing down to protect her chest before she retaliated and winced as her circular cut missed completely. Her forearm was sore but she didn’t want to stop just now. She could feel the rest of the fencing students watching her intently, sizing her up. She needed to show them that she belonged there. She squared her shoulders a little more as she stepped back

“Do try a little slower, Kagami,” M. D’Argencourt advised from under his fencing mask, “you almost had it. Let us do it two more times and then I shall see how my other students are doing.”

She nodded and they resumed the exercise. Saying that it was no picnic would have been quite an understatement. Her first try wasn’t good, in fact she barely managed to see her instructor’s attack. She gritted her teeth and managed a last second parry, almost losing her footstep as her blade pointed forward — a sloppy Seconde. He wasn’t going easy on her, and she was quite grateful for that. The flick of her wrist was once more too fast, her circular cut missed him again. The second try was a little better, almost a touch, the fencing master said, but still nowhere near as good as what Kagami wanted. There was still quite some work to do before she would get there. Not that she would use the moulinet anytime soon, but this was the reason why Mother— no, mum— had decided to come here in the first place, for her daughter to get even better.

M. D’Argencourt left her after a word of encouragement and barked at a student referee who was slacking off. Adrien must have been somewhere in the room, she simply didn’t see him. Kagami took off her fencing mask as a younger student handed her a water bottle, looking at her with admiration. She refrained the need to roll her eyes, simply took the bottle with a silent “thank you” and took a couple of swallows before she looked around her. There were about fifteen students, but none she could recognise yet, and she blamed the uniform for that. Then again, not all could afford a custom-made fencing gear like hers.
The doors opened and she saw Nino, Alya and Marinette enter the gymnasium. They look around before they sat down on a nearby bench. Why were they here? Was it to watch? Weren’t they supposed to study? They had asked her to come and join them, did that mean that there had been a change? And why would they come at all? It was only a fencing lesson like many others, it was so plain, Kagami thought as took her helmet under her arm and walked to join them.

They did not share her point of view, it seemed, as Nino was taking notes in a small notebook — for a short film project of his, he said with a wink— and Marinette was almost jumping up and down in her seat with enthusiasm. Why was she always so adorable? Alya didn’t look as thrilled as the other two but she didn’t seem to mind too much. Kagami tried to be as much of a professional as she could, there would be time for small talk later. Were they only there to watch a simple training session with not much going on, Kagami wondered.

“We were thinking of going for ice cream after your rematch with Adrien, I mean, the five of us,” Marinette said and Kagami had to fight the smile that was about to form on her lips. She would have all the time for it later, but now she had to be all about fencing. And with what Marinette had just said…

“A rematch? What do you—”

“Your attention, please, everyone.” M. D’Argencourt yelled, his hands cupped around his mouth. What was it with the entire universe answering Kagami’s questions before she could even ask them at all? “As some of us here seem to think that this is a tearoom where you can chat all day long and do nothing else,” he glared at two boys who immediately straightened up, “I would like M. Agreste and Mlle Tsurugi to join me on the piste for a little demonstration of what fencing in my academy is truly about.”

Kagami blinked. And blinked once more. Had it been Marinette’s idea? She would ask later. She turned her back to her three friends and put her fencing mask back on as she walked to the piste, an aura of confidence and power emanating from her every step. She looked regal as always. She was finally going to face Adrien, a worthy opponent, but also a friend. Hadn’t he introduced her to the rest of the fencers? After all, they had even trained together a few times, she could call him a friend. It did not meant she would let him win. The blond boy flashed her a smile before he followed suit and put his mask on as well. They clipped the body cords to their lamés and saluted each other with a vigorous handshake.

He would not hold back, and so neither would she, their eyes said. Doing otherwise would have been disrespectful. She touched his lamé with her sabre, and he did the same with hers, the scoring box flashing up each time, a red light then a green one. Voices were starting to cheer for Adrien from every side of the gymnasium, none for her, but that was to be expected after all. If she won, it
would be different. “You two, do your best!” a voice shouted from behind her, and Kagami didn’t need to turn her head to see who had just said that. A small fire began to burn in her chest.

“En garde!”

Here they were. Her feet shifted slightly until she was in position. No flashy stance this time, although it was really tempting. Instead, she adopted the most perfect en garde posture she could manage. She would not give everything away just now. Grandfather would be proud if he could see her, and mum as well. No approximations, only the very best of her abilities. She breathed in and out. Kagami’s world started to turn black as it got smaller until it was only Adrien, M. D’Argencourt, the piste and her, nothing else.

Her focus was perfect and when the referee yelled “prêts?”, time slowed down for the three of them. M. D’Argencourt’s steely gaze was on them. Adrien stayed as still as his opponent, his grip firm on the hilt of this sabre. She must have waited months for this rematch, he thought. He couldn’t think of a proper strategy… It didn’t matter, he told himself as he took a deep breath. With a sabre in his hand, Adrien Agreste was quite formidable, and he would not disappoint his opponent, nor his friends or his fencing instructor.

“Allez!”

Adrien opened his eyes, his pupils almost slits, and Kagami lunged at him before he could move, the point of her sabre getting dangerously close to his body. He hadn’t expected her to attack him first. She was good, scarily good, at least as good as him if not better. Adrien winced as he did a passata-sotto to escape Kagami’s blade, but failed to land a hit. She interrupted his tentative remise with an immediate parry. Adrien knew what was coming now. She had the right-of-way but he managed to parry her incoming blow. What he had not expected was her blade whipping over his guard right after.

“Touche!” M. D’Argencourt roared and Adrien straightened up. He would not let her win the next point.

“En garde!” Adrien readied his sabre. “Prêts?” He was going to win this one. “Allez!” He started with a simple an appel, his foot stamping to the ground before he advanced and extended his arm in a simple extension but retreated in the last second. His feint worked to perfection as Kagami made a quarter turn to conceal her front. He lunged before she could recover but she parried, shielding her back with a neuvième just like he had expected. She failed to move her feet backwards to a passe arrière in time as he returned to his en garde position and executed a perfect reprise.
He didn’t need to hear M. D’Argencourt’s voice to know that he had won this point. Only four more to go and he would be declared the winner of the bout. He frowned as he adjusted his footing. He was sure that Kagami was smirking under her fencing mask, as though she had heard his thoughts. He tried to keep his cool. She was not Riposte, he reminded himself, and there was no danger at all, her smirk, if she had smirked at all, wasn’t filled with a malicious intent, it was only friendly competition.

Marinette clenched her fists as she watched Adrien and Kagami move around each other and she bit the inside of her cheek. Blinking meant missing part of the action and there was so much going. Kagami’s blade grazed her opponent’s in a perfect press and Adrien’s sabre was forced out of line. She could see his arm twitching for a second before he tried to disengage. By simply looking at the way his feet dragged, Marinette knew that he had failed to be fast enough to make it a simultaneous touch that would have saved him.

The point of Kagami’s sabre hit his lamé in a simple thrust. She would have to ask Kagami to be her personal fencing teacher if she ever wanted to enter the D’Argencourt fencing academy as a student, Marinette thought as Kagami stepped back to her en garde stance. She seemed as focused as she had been a minute ago, not letting her advantage go to her head. Adrien was equally serious. Marinette gulped.

Kagami won the next point too, and the one after that as well. She tried slightly different approaches each time, that proved themselves to be quite efficient. Marinette noticed a slight change of atmosphere in the gymnasium. They had been quite surprised by Kagami’s almost flawless strategy to counter Adrien’s attacks. Her glide proved itself quite efficient when Adrien tried to make contact between their blades, the way her sabre slid down Adrien’s before she got the hit a split second later elicited more than a few oohs from her audience.

Some of the other fencers in the gymnasium seemed to have finally understood who the girl in the red fencing gear was, not only an aloof, stuck up girl who didn’t like to chat once her fencing lessons were over, but as much of a champion in the making as Adrien was. Still, not all of them thought so. Nonetheless, when Adrien managed to interrupt Kagami’s trompement, the crowd stayed silent and his clean riposte was not met with as much applause as before. The air was electric. If Kagami managed to land one more hit, he would lose unless a foul happened, and knowing her, it was unlikely. Adrien’s stance shifted slightly, his footwork becoming more nimble, cat-like even as he waited for his opponent to lunge at him.

She acted exactly the way he had planned she would and if it hadn’t been for his fencing mask, all could have seen a very Chat-like smirk. His parry and the riposte that came after were merciless, but Kagami successfully escaped Adrien’s sabre anyway, sidestepping for as long as she could, until she couldn’t. She glanced at her left foot and her eyes widened. His plan had worked, as much as she hated to admit it, she was in the end of the piste and unless she succeeded in miraculously pushing him back to the centre of the piste… She parried his next blow and the one after until she couldn’t keep up without stepping backwards.
His blade finally connected with her fencing mask and the scoring box blinked green. Kagami’s breath hitched. He could still make in a victory if he managed to score the next touch and then, knowing his master’s habits, there would be one more point to score. They made their way back to the middle of the piste, their breathing a little ragged. Adrien needed to end this quickly before he lost his focus. Kagami’s expression remained unreadable under her fencing mask.

“En garde. Prêts?” They had the exact same idea. “Allez!” The both of them lunged at the other in the same time in a blur of white and red. Their blades met halfway, mirroring each other perfectly. Did she want to do it that way? Alright then, Adrien thought, and he sped up the pace, hoping that she wouldn’t last as long as he would. He saw how futile this wish was when she beat his blade out of line and extended her arm to strike him. He did not take the time to think, he did the same.

From that distance, there was no way either of the two fencers could miss, not with their accuracy, no way they could have dodged either. The scoring box lit up, but none of them dared move and the gymnasium was silent. They stayed perfectly still, not able to tell who had hit their opponent first. “Simultané, pas de touche!”, M. D’Argencourt boomed. Adrien heaved a sigh in relief. He desperately needed a break, it seemed that it was the same for Kagami, but neither of them asked the fencing instructor. If they played by the rules, they would respect every detail, even if that meant being a little thirsty and out of breath.

Kagami’s en garde stance shifted slightly when the referee simply said “Allez!”, but Adrien did not attack immediately. He even seemed to invite her to attack and dropped guard completely, even spreading his arms apart and sliding his sabre behind his back. Recollection flashed in M. D’Argencourt’s eyes. He knew exactly what his student thought he was doing and he appreciated the homage to his glorious ancestor. Under her mask, Kagami smirked before she lunged at Adrien and stopped at the last second, successfully sidestepping the sudden thrust that was meant to hit her lamé, a risky esquive but it had worked.

And now, Kagami thought, it’s show time. She skipped past her opponent, faster than he had ever seen her move, and Adrien turned around just in time to dodge what he thought was meant to be a decisive cut to his side, an attack that only missed him by a hair’s breadth. Her feint had worked. Kagami passed backwards and returned to her original position before Adrien could recover. She feinted once more when Adrien started to face her, then slipped her sabre under his guard as she bent her knees. The scoring box blinked, and red flashed over the green linoleum floor of the gymnasium.

“TOUCHE!” M. D’Argencourt yelled, breaking the two fencers’s concentration and the spectators started to clap, reluctantly for some like Vincent, but they applauded nonetheless, Marinette even stood up as she kept on clapping. Kagami rose up from her crouched position and removed her fencing mask, turning away from the crowd. Her gaze fell on Adrien’s outstretched hand. There was no resentment in his eyes, only respect and admiration. They shook hand and saluted each other like it was expected.
“How did you know?” Adrien asked. “About the D’Argencourt secret technique, I mean. Isn’t it supposed to be, you know, secret?”

“Mum told me how it worked,” Kagami grinned, “but I was impressed, that was quite brave of you to try that on me! If she had not told me, you would have won the bout. I have never done that technique myself, but you on the other hand seem to be quite the master.”

“I shall teach you, Kagami,” M. D’Argencourt said in a low voice so that only the two students could hear. “Adrien, I am very flattered. I am proud of you two, and so you can be proud of yourselves too!” He cleared his throat and roared, “lesson dismissed! Remember what you’ve seen, this is what you must strive for!”

Kagami tried to refresh herself the best she could and took a quick shower, not caring about the weird looks the three other girls were giving her. She made sure not to wet her hair — she’d enjoy a nice bath in the evening if she found the time for it— and did her makeup in no time. Looking dead-tired wouldn’t do well for her self-confidence, and these dark rings under her eyes were quite persistent, but she managed to conceal them nonetheless. She didn’t need to steal a glance in the mirror to know that it was perfect. When Kagami finally got out of the changing room to join her friends, she only found Alya, Nino and Marinette.

From the corner of her eyes, she could see a steel grey car drive away. Based on Marinette’s slightly disappointed look that vanished when she saw Kagami arrive, she could only guess that the boy had obligations somewhere else. Well then, she thought as she readjusted her blue denim overalls, that would only be the four of them instead of five, too bad that she wouldn’t be able to tease Adrien about what she had dubbed the Density Problem. Alya and Nino were having a passionate conversation about which kind of sword would suit Ladybug better but Marinette did not seem so interested in the conversation. She mouthed something at Kagami, but the girl didn’t understand and looked at Marinette quizzically. Marinette made intricate gestures around her head but Kagami still couldn’t understand.

“Helmet hair, above your left ear, it’s kinda cute but…” Marinette finally said, her eyes crinkling fondly as she kept herself from laughing as Kagami ran a nervous hand through her hair. She tried her best to be stoic, and it was always amusing to see the little cracks in the cool facade.

“Thanks for saving me, I guess,” she said and there was something that flickered in these blue eyes that she couldn’t name. “So, where are we going? Berthillon?”

“Even better, André, he’s been spotted somewhere near Promenade Pereire,” Marinette answered. “You’ll really have to teach me how to fence someday!” And she started skipping down boulevard
Alya took Nino’s hand and dragged him along. Kagami followed and took part in Alya and Nino’s discussion for a little while. She tried her best not to stare at Marinette’s toned legs. She really tried. That pleated skirt really looked good on her, Kagami almost thought before she chastised herself. Marinette is only a good friend, she told herself, only a good friend, and I bet she would look even better without that skirt. Kagami fought the blush that threatened to form on her cheeks and decided to look up at the blue September sky instead. She felt so lucky to be there with them. It had only been a week, but it felt as though so much had already happened, she was getting used to the whole métro situation, class was… alright, she guessed, she would have to try to meet her other classmates, although they didn’t interest her the slightest. But she wasn’t lonely. Marinette was her friend. And Marinette’s friends were slowly starting to become her own friends too.

Kagami hummed to herself, simply enjoying the sun’s caress on her skin. That would work wonders for her freckles. The smell of roses and magnolias filled the air, and she knew that they had arrived at last. Promenade Pereire felt like a small haven of peace and vegetation, lawn and shrubs, spots of red roses and creme magnolias. And there was André, Kagami thought. The portly man beamed at them from behind his ice cream cart and beckoned them over. Kagami simply stayed there, a little distant from it, until Marinette grabbed her wrist to lead her to the ice cream cart. Kagami did her best not to focus on the tingling sensation Marinette’s touch left on her skin.

“Alya, Nino, and Marinette too! How glad I am to see you!” the ice cream vendor sang. “Coconut, banana and a touch passionfruit, for you two?” Alya and Nino nodded as André’s ice cream scooper moved at an impressing fast pace. He handed the couple a perfect ice cream cone. “And you brought a new face! Hello, mademoiselle?”

“Her name is Kagami,” Marinette said helpfully, putting her hand on Kagami’s shoulder. André’s eyes sparkled with playfulness, and it seemed as though he was trying very hard not to look too joyful.

“The two beautiful ladies now! Strawberry with black chocolate chip, blackberries and oh! a touch of vanilla with hazelnut chip… Marinette, Kagami, I am very happy for you…” and he handed Marinette a single ice cream cornet, not finding a proper rhyme to end his sentence. He had given them one ice cream for two, just like he had for Nino and Alya. Kagami couldn’t hide her flush as Marinette paid for the ice cream, calling it a gift, but she didn’t dare look at her after that. She couldn’t help the thoughts that started whirring in her mind either.

Had André just called them a beautiful couple? Did he think they were in a relationship? Why did it make her knees go weak and her heart beat so fast? It had to be hypoglycaemia, there was no other possible explanation. She had thought about Marinette that way once or twice but they had only been thoughts, her thoughts, merely figments of her too tired imagination late at night. What was she going to do? To Kagami, the promenade fell uncharacteristically silent for a Wednesday
afternoon, if it weren’t for Nino and Alya chatting casually. As if nothing had happened. As if there were nothing to be worried about. Marinette was enjoying the ice cream, it seemed, if her satisfied smile meant anything.

“Kagami, please, have some with me?” Marinette asked, almost too casually. She really hoped Kagami hadn’t noticed how red her cheeks had been a moment ago. Kagami cleared her throat discretely, and decided that she didn’t trust her voice at the moment. She simply nodded instead and took the small plastic spoon. She started with the vanilla ice-cream. It was delicious.

When she finally got home a few hours later, Kagami could say that it had been one of her best, most confusing Wednesday afternoons ever. She would have a lot to write in her Paris journal.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

Next chapter, school life, music and maybe a ladybug?

Many things going on! Writing fencing matches is hard because everything goes ridiculously fast. Also, refereeing in fencing is chiefly done in French. So that's not gratuitous, for once.

Follow me on Tumblr [here](https://example.com), I post previews for the incoming chapters and other things too. Also, my Tumblr looks a lot better now!

Still as French as before, the bad English is not intended…

I edited this chapter in April 2019, so that it's a little less terrible for new readers and old readers alike!

À lundi!
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

“Lǎoshī, it means the time words are normally placed after the subject but before the verb phrase?”

“Yes, Marie-Pierre,” Madame Michaud answer. “Now class, I know that we will have our first test on Monday and that it can be quite intimidating, but I’d like you to follow , but I would like you all to remember that my grading system will not allow approximate knowledge.”

Marinette stifled a yawn. She wanted nothing more than a good night of rest, but she scribbled in her exercise book nonetheless, even though her wrist still ached from the akuma attack that had happened during lunchtime. Being Ladybug didn’t excuse her from studying Chinese properly, after all. The akuma attack… Chat had been late and although Hawk Moth had chosen a rather weak champion this time, as always, it had been no picnic. Who knew angry food critics could be this pugnacious? She was glad she hadn’t invited anyone over at her house this day, explaining why she had to vanish suddenly would have been quite awkward.

She’d get home and take a nap before dinner time, she was sure Alya wouldn’t mind her missing whatever Ladybug-related activities she had planned for them tonight. She sneaked a glance at the wall clock. Still about seventeen painfully slow minutes to go, she noted as she bit the inside of her cheek. She would be at home around a quarter to seven. She didn’t like finishing school so late.

She yawned again. She couldn’t focus on anything right now, left alone her Chinese exercise book, which frustrated her to no end. She yawned once more. How she wished she could have rested properly… School work, fashion designing, having a social life and her superhero duties left her with very little time for anything else. Marinette was mostly happy with her life, but if she could add six more hours to each of her days just to get some rest, she would be even happier.

“Hey, Karim, what’s the answer for number ten?” she whispered as softly as she could. Which was too softly for him to hear. She poked at his arm with her pencil instead. “What did you write for number ten?

“I don’t know… I think the answer’s ‘C’ but…” The boy brushed a hand on his nape. “ What did you write?”

Madame Michaud gave Karim a piercing stare and a hint of red coloured his olive skin. He fell silent and looked almost outraged, as though it had been completely her fault. She couldn’t blame him, honestly, but giving her the cold shoulder wasn’t helping. She almost wished she had sat next to Kim, she knew he was there, somewhere behind her, trying to look for the proper answers himself. Marinette had successfully convinced him to learn Chinese, after all. But in the end getting
to know other people from her new class instead of staying stuck with only the friends she had made in collège felt nice too. Besides, if everything went well, Kim and she would have their monthly Vietnamese and Chinese cuisine dinner soon. She’d apologise to Karim once Madame Michaud was done.

And so, she resumed filling the answers in the multiple choice questionnaire in complete silence. Couldn’t they do something that would feel a little more alive than that to want to learn the language? Something that could give them the impression that Chinese was indeed a spoken language, an aspect that disappeared completely in that method of teaching. It almost felt like Latin all over again. Marinette wrote ‘B’ as the answer to question number ten after a long deliberation. It made more sense, or at least she thought it did. She’d ask her mum if she could tell her more about it, she decided. She hoped that Nino’s Arabic class were going better, and that Kagami’s German class wasn’t too painful. Little did Marinette know that what was going on one floor below her was pure torture to the girl.

“Und deshalb, Ich glaube dass der Naturwissenschaften ist sehr wichtig für unsere Zukunft!”

Kagami rolled her eyes, openly, something she wouldn’t have done had Marinette been there. She was bored out of her mind and… Was his name Enzo? Whatever his name was, his German grammar was dreadful and he hadn’t even bothered with the accent at all. Was it really that hard? She didn’t like the classroom, its ambiance, the students. They looked as though they were trying to follow whatever Enzo had just tried to say, and she couldn’t understand why. There was nothing worth following here. She had a hard time interacting with her classmates when they weren’t Marinette’s friends, in fact. She didn’t find them interesting at all at first glance, and they hadn’t tried to initiate any sort of conversation with her.

No one sat next to her anyway, so why even bother? She didn’t find the energy or the motivation for any of this, really, Marinette, Nino Alya and Adrien were more than enough, she often told herself, and so it didn’t really matter if the other people at school were little more than background characters to her. There had been elections for their class representatives and one Sidonie had won. Kagami hadn’t even been aware of her existence until the very day of the vote. She really needed a break, she thought. Between school, fencing practice and trying to fully settle in, which meant busy weekends with her mother—which meant stressful shopping sessions most of the time, unless she had fencing lessons like this Saturday—she had very little time to focus on other things she liked outside of sabre fencing. In a few more weeks, it would be a little less tense. Tonight would be a little more entertaining than most nights, she thought.

There was some new Ladybug footage online, which meant that Alya would probably run a live show with some friends of hers to dissect it. Kagami would watch it if she had nothing better to do, and knowing how easy the homework was — she hardly needed to work at all, really, she would be done in a matter of minutes — it would be what she’d do, until Mother came home. And maybe text Marinette too, if she wasn’t too tired. Somehow, she had the feeling that her friend was
overworked lately.

Kagami sighed and rolled her eyes quite a lot until the bell rang. The German teacher freed her and the room was immediately filled with the sound of lively conversation. Kagami snatched her earphones from her pocket as soon as she walked out of the classroom and untangled them carefully as she came out of lycée Carnot, not paying attention to the students chatting and the few ones smoking nearby. It was a Thursday, and that meant going back home right away, no fencing practice, no curricular activities, nothing. She hadn’t dared ask Marinette if she wanted to walk home with her. That would have been silly anyway, Kagami thought, she knew that her friend lived above her parent’s bakery but she had never been there. She had no idea where it was, maybe it was the complete opposite direction to hers.

Kagami wasn’t creepy enough to stalk Marinette or to google every single aspect of her life. Marinette’s Facebook account was even more secretive than hers, she only posted new things every so often, and her address had never popped up in any of these posts. Kagami decided she would ask Marinette were she lived when it would feel appropriate to ask such a question. And so she was alone as she made her way to the overcrowded Métro station. Jagged Stone was doing nothing to lighten up her mood, but at least it gave her the energy she needed for the moment. She could understand what Marinette enjoyed in this music, the sheer power of the riffs.

Marinette felt light on her feet and almost wanted to dance. Karim had accepted her apology and even admitted that his behaviour had been uncalled for, and knowing that people were trying to get better was really heartwarming. She needed an uplifting, relaxing song, she thought as she grabbed her headphones from her bag. She scrolled through dozens of playlist on her phone, many of them made by Nino, until she found the right one and hit the play button. She didn’t recognise the song, but she knew she liked it, the guitar sample — it was something she wanted to learn— and the beat the drum kit played, the way the strings made their apparition subtly, at the right moment, the atmosphere. It wasn’t the kind of music she usually listened to, but it was exactly what she had needed.

She walked to the beat, enjoyed the evening light, not wanting to end the moment by immediately checking her phone to find out what the song was. When she finally checked, she had a little surprise. Nujabe’s Aruarian Dance, that had been one of Kagami’s few suggestions. That, Marinette decided, would be the subject of their conversation tonight. She wondered if Nino and Kagami talked about music. If they didn’t yet, she would bring up the topic innocently when the moment would be right. She finally arrived home, waved at her parents ran upstairs and collapsed on her bed. She would chat with Kagami later.

Kagami unlocked the door to her flat. “I’m home!” But of course, no voice answered her. Mum was still busy teaching her own fencing classes at the university. She took off her shoes carefully before
she went to the bathroom to wash her hands. She liked the noise the wooden floor in the corridor made when she stepped on it, the sound of the ceramic tiles on the bathroom floor. She liked the sound of the rushing water against the marble of the bathroom sink. She liked the soft ticking noise of the clock. Yes, that flat was a good place to live in.

Her hands clean, Kagami went straight to her room, not bothering to look around as she sat down in her chair and turned her computer on. I need to buy some more potted plants, she thought. She hoped her eucalyptus was doing well in Japan. One hour before the beginning of the Ladybug Live Show, and mum would be home around half past nine. Plenty of time for herself! First, she’d do her homework, then she’d work out and take a bath. Maybe she'd play the cello for a little while if she felt like it.

She hurriedly opened her handbag. There wasn’t much that needed to be done after all. She dashed off her mathematics in four minutes but she didn’t have to check twice to know there were no mistakes in her calculations. She would have rather devoted her intelligence to something else, and she knew she had plenty of it. She didn’t enjoy homework one bit, she found it dull, completely uninteresting, even, but she would not skip it completely. She skimmed through her social sciences textbook instead.

She hated reading these heavily truncated texts that looked nothing like the originals. She didn’t care if some of the kids thought it was not a real thing, or just a way to legitimate some behaviours, they had it all wrong. She would read Bourdieu again now that she could actually understand what he was writing and maybe even Lordon about whom she had only heard good things. Kagami had finished her homework faster than she had originally planned. She browsed through her personal library — a little too empty for her taste, she would have to remedy that soon. She settle for a few pages of André Gide’s *Paludes*.

The bedroom was silent, if it weren’t for Marinette’s soft snores. Tikki jumped up and down Marinette’s bed, hoping to get a reaction from her. She knew it, her young Ladybug would be quite panicked if she didn’t do what she had to right now. If jumping up and down didn’t work, she’d have to resort to a different course of action… But it seemed that her plan had worked. Marinette woke up lazily, got out of bed. Once she was completely ready for her homework, she read her exercise sheet carefully and answered each question with great care, checking twice for every result she had. She didn’t want to make silly mistakes in her equations, after all. Maths were alright, she guessed. It wasn’t all that hard, if she had to be honest with herself, but she kept a slow pace until she was fully done with her homework. She was still a little sleepy when she helped her parents close the bakery, but at least she was quite happy to help them. Finally, Sabine called it a day.

Tonight was Tom’s turn to get dinner ready, and tonight, Tom said triumphantly, was pizza. He
had decided to use his own grand-grandmother’s legendary super secret recipe, which he had reworked in secret so that there wouldn’t be any meat on it. So many secrets for a pizza which wasn’t even truly his grand-grandmother's invention. But it made him cheerful to say it every time so they let him have it. That had been hard, it had taken months but his spouse and daughter convinced him that his health would only get better if he stopped eating that much meat. Tom had begrudgingly agreed. In the end, he hadn't regretted this decision, not once. He should have known that eating that much salami wasn’t good for his arteries. Perhaps it was psychological, but he truly felt better now.

The bakery still sold meat pies, although less than before, but in the Dupain-Cheng household, meat had become almost unheard of. And so, Tom arrived in the kitchen, covered in flour but looking quite happy with himself. He bowed to an invisible audience before he presented his wife and daughter his masterpiece. It looked quite mouth-watering. Sabine, Marinette and Tom shared a nice meal together. Between mouthfuls of homemade pizza, Marinette couldn’t help but wonder how Alya’s conference was going.

Kagami took off her sweat-soaked tank top and threw it nervously in the laundry basket. Her workout session had gone well, of course, but something else irritated her to no end. Kagami had decided to mute the Ladybug Live Show and to take a bath with another background noise instead. Poor Alya, stuck in this conference room surrounded that participants that didn’t let her finish her sentences. She particularly hated that one man wearing a filthy-looking Ladybug t-shirt, green cargo shorts and fingerless gloves. Why did he have to start every single one of his sentences with “Actually”? Who did he think he was? Poor, poor Alya indeed. And they hadn’t spoken about anything new, really, they had simply rehashed what she had read many times over. It couldn’t be helped, she guessed. Otakus had always creeped her out, and she guessed some of Ladybug’s fans were no different. It didn’t mean that she would get rid of her small Ladybug shrine yet, but… She’d have to rethink it, maybe.

Her bath was ready. How mum had managed to get them a bath so big and almost as deep as the one they had in her grandparents’ house, Kagami didn’t know. But she enjoyed it all the same. She turned the radio on — France Musique, of course, as always — and glanced at her reflection in the mirror. Was she attractive? Did she find herself attractive? She was alright, she guessed. Not too bad. Good enough. Mum often told her how lovely she found her, but she didn’t know what to think of it. She guessed mum wasn’t completely wrong. Not feeling completely and adult and yet not being a child anymore was weird.

She hummed as she entered into the warm water. Janáček’s Sinfonietta played as she thought about what she’d do next, maybe review the footage of Ladybug’s latest fight, chat with Marinette and go superhero watching. She hadn’t bought night vision spectacles for nothing. But for now, she simply enjoyed her bath.
Marinette was starting to get really tired. Still, she kept on doodling in her sketchbook. She had given up designing new clothes after a few disastrous tries. It had felt forced. And so, she drew other things instead. Objects in her room, things in her mind. She reworked a few sketches she had made during the day. The subjects of these sketches were often a dreamy boy with gorgeous green eyes and blond hair. She didn’t see him nearly as often as before, but she somehow felt as though she was starting to know him a little better. She had stopped stammering around him, and them being teamed up in that English class had helped them actually talk to each other. He was polite, very polite in fact, and as friendly as always.

But then again, he tried to be friendly to everyone. She blinked and dropped her pencil. Her sketch didn’t look like Adrien at all, in fact it didn’t look like anyone she knew. She decided to draw something else, and settled for two fencers, one lunging at their opponent who parried the blade. She was having a hard time giving the illusion of movement. She’d have to ask Kagami to show her. And she’d have to ask her to actually teach her. Maybe this week-end? She grabbed her phone as silently as possible, making sure not to disturb Tikki. Her kwami took most of the exertion, it seemed, and Marinette could never thank her enough for that. She sent Alya a short text asking her how that conference had went, and a slightly longer one to Kagami asking her about fencing practice, and resumed sketching afterwards.

Kagami cracked her fingers, satisfied with the message she had written to Alya. She wasn’t sure if her “Let’s thank Ladybug and Chat Noir” Project would make it to the front page of the Ladyblog, but she would have tried anyway. She watched the footage again, for the fifth or sixth time this evening. Ladybug was so brave, she looked as though she could solve everything. She would keep her Ladyshrine for now, she decided. It didn’t cause any harm, now, would it? She wondered if Marinette had seen the videos yet.

She went to the living room and opened her cello case, took her bow and started rosinning it. She tuned her instrument and started to play. Ligeti’s sonata for cello wasn’t easy, but she enjoyed it greatly. She was halfway through the second movement when her phone buzzed, at the exact same moment the doorbell rung. She put the instrument back in its case carefully but quickly. Whoever had texted her would have to wait, she had more urgent matters to deal with. Kagami hastily pocketed her phone in her pyjama bottoms, ran to the corridor and opened the front door slowly, stepping back as she did so. That had to be Mother.

“I’m home,” Itsuko Tsurugi said in a tired voice, and her daughter gave a “Welcome home!” in response. Itsuko was tired but satisfied, her hair still wet from the shower she must have taken while in the university. Itsuko removed her shoes and lined them up next to Kagami’s. She hung her pristine blue trench coat on the coat stand before she walked to the kitchen, which still looked
like a work in construction, but Kagami held a hand before she could make her way to the cooker. “Leave it to me,” the gesture seemed to mean. And so, Itsuko Tsurugi watched her daughter mince eggplants, courgettes and red pepper effortlessly and put them in the frying pan, allowing them to simmer slowly. She cooked soba noodles in the mean time. Itsuko sipped on her evening tea and savoured every moment of it. Kagami checked her phone and almost smiled to herself.

“Thanks for the meal!”

“So, how is school?” Itsuko asked. “Please, there is no need to embellish the story for me, I am not your father,” she added when her daughter opened her mouth almost too quickly. “I hope it is not too lonely… Have you made friends yet? I know that it isn’t always easy for you. I know I shouldn’t worry but it can’t be helped.”

“I… I miss my friends in Tokyo, Mo—”

“Please, Kagami, we’ve already discussed it… ” Itsuko looked almost sad. “Try to call me ‘Mum’, please? There’s no need to be this formal when we’re at home…”

“Oh…” Kagami felt quite lost. “Of course, M-Mum. Well… I miss Aiko and Taneda and… Everyone really, I know it’s silly. I don’t feel lonely here, I think I made a few friends, but it doesn’t feel the same. I don’t think my grades will be a problem but I’m not very passionate about any of it. It isn’t always as exciting as I hoped it would be… Safe for fencing, of course, M. D’Argencourt is really great.”

“That, he is,” Itsuko agreed. “He told me that he is quite impressed with your fencing, I’m very glad. About your friends… I miss my old friends back in Tokyo too. Would you like to invite your friends over someday? The flat is still messy but with a little work I’m sure it could look great. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Well I…” Moth—Mum had started to show this side of her a lot more often now that they were away from Japan. Kagami decided that she liked it. “Maybe not invite them, at least not for now, but there’s that friend… Well, she wants to start fencing lessons, and I wondered if you and M. D’Argencourt could find us a salle for Saturday before my usual practice time…”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Itsuko said in a French that sounded much better than the one she had spoken in June. “Is she a good friend?”
“Yes, a very good friend.” Why did she sound like Adrien Agreste right now? The kitchen settled into a comfortable silence and Itsuko excused herself. Kagami finished doing the washing up — they had yet to buy a dishwasher — and checked her phone again. She sent Marinette a quick text, opened the French window to the balcony and settled into the deckchair. Tonight, she’d go Ladybug watching for the first time. And waited. And waited. And waited. She was glad to have Marinette to keep her company while she waited for Ladybug to show up, if she showed up at all. It helped her feel warmer. Earphones in her ears, Kagami trained her binoculars on the Eiffel Tower. At least, Debussy would keep her company.

She was sure she had just spotted a silhouette standing on a rooftop nearby, but she wasn’t so sure. That had to be a trick of the light, maybe the night vision didn’t work that well after all. She kept on watching, growing more and more tired with every minute that passed. She noted her observations in her newly bought polka-dotted Ladybug notebook. In her bed, Marinette answered Kagami’s texts as they came as her vision turned blurrier and blurrier. She was too tired for patrol tonight. She knew Chat Noir would be out, but she was too exhausted for it. He wouldn’t mind, she was sure, Paris wouldn’t mind. Kagami blinked. She was pretty sure she had seen the silhouette do a cartwheel followed by a backflip. It was almost midnight when Marinette bade Kagami goodnight and advised her go to get some rest soon. There was no answer.

A few minutes later, Itsuko Tsurugi carried the sleeping form of her daughter to bed as delicately as she could so that she wouldn’t wake her up.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

Next chapter, the long awaited fencing practice!

First of all, sorry for the purposefully terrible German. Entschuldigung. Es tut mir leid… Ich kann nicht so gut Deutsch, aber ich weiß, dass es gar nicht korrekt war.

And now, the music and books and authors mentioned in the excerpt!

Pierre Bourdieu is quite hard to read (at least it was for me, at the beginning and even now) but he really was one of the greatest French sociologists, an interesting philosopher too. His work is mostly a social critique of many things, from language to the judgment of taste, gender dynamics. Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, Language and symbolic power and Masculine Domination are worth your time. Well, he “borrowed” the last one from more interesting sociologists than him, but…

Frederic Lordon is an economist, a director of research in political sciences, whom I really like. He often writes in Le Monde Diplomatique, but his work is not often translated in French. Anyway, Willing Slaves of Capital is really a valuable book.

Also, André Gide is quite interesting, but you may know him better for The Counterfeiters. He’s a novelist.
Nujabe’s Aruarian Dance is really great, anything by Nujabe, to be honest.

Janáček’s Sinfonietta, and yes, that's a 1Q84 reference.

Ligeti’s sonata for cello/a>! I'm only a pianist and occasional ukulele player but if I happen to learn how to play the cello, that's one of the things I want to play. Also, yes, neckbeards gross me out, I'm not sorry for saying that. Follow me on Tumblr here. I post previews for the incoming chapters and I sometimes post writing tips about France, also I complain life in general. Submit your art, ask me stuff, who knows, I might answer! Maybe.

Sadly enough, I'm still French, my mistakes are not intentional but they're still there, plaguing this text…

À jeudi!

I edited this chapter in April 2019, it sucks slightly less now!
Duel 6: Right Foot, Left Foot, Now Go Even Faster

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter has mentions of child abuse. Also, racism.
Please, read the end note for this chapter, it is quite important for the update schedule and all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marinette hesitantly looked at Kagami’s text then at the doorway that supposedly lead to the gymnasium. So this was where she was supposed to be. She opened the door and shut it behind her immediately after. And that was… An empty fencing hall. She cleared her throat once, but there was no reaction. Yes, empty, right. She walked to the centre of the room, each of her steps echoed quite loudly. The wooden decor gave an ancient charm to the place, she thought as she clapped in her hands, the sound reverberating. She turned her head right and left. No one to watch her, and Kagami nowhere to be found. She would change when she arrived, she thought. And so, Marinette started her gymnastics routine. She stretched first, until she was fully ready, and started with a simple cartwheel.

Being Ladybug had made her faster, stronger. By saving Paris, she had also started to turn into quite a proficient acrobat outside the suit. She tried a butterfly twist and successfully landed on her feet. She regained her equilibrium and continued her routine. A few backflips followed, and she didn’t notice than the door had opened until she decided to walk on her hands. This was the position in which Marinette looked at Kagami at last. Marinette waved at her, using only one hand to support the weigh of her body as she did so.

Kagami seemed quite confused and even more amazed at the same time. Marinette’s frame should have given it away, yet she had never thought the girl to be such an accomplished gymnast. Marinette let herself fall down from her position, rolled on the floor and scrambled to her feet. It was a very disheveled girl who met Kagami’s wide open eyes, her right pigtail almost completely undone. She is very cute that way, Kagami thought, but she kept it to herself.

“Glad you came,” Kagami said, her mouth incredibly dry, once she managed to regain her composure. She had wanted to make a cool and classy entrance that would have impressed Marinette greatly, but she guessed there was no use to it anymore. She had even rehearsed a small speech in front of her mirror— not that anyone needed to know that— but there was no use to it anymore. “Here, let me show you the… I… prepared some stuff for you to wear.” Great, Kagami shouted to herself mentally, you sounded oh so very smart here.
Nonetheless, she lead the way to the newly renovated locker rooms, which were conveniently empty for a little while. They would have a full hour to practice before Kagami’s real fencing lessons would begin — not with M. D’Argencourt but with her mother and older students of hers. How she wished they had more time for this… Marinette oohed as she saw the gear spread out before her eyes.

Of course, she already knew the name of every item, she had come well prepared, but she decided to let Kagami tell her all about the beauty of each one nonetheless. It would certainly be a little more lively that way. Kagami’s eyes brightened as she began her small lecture with a small introduction on the necessity of a proper fencing gear. She looks so beautiful, even more so when she talks about things she’s passionate about, Marinette thought… She barely saw that side of her when they were in class, she wondered why.

“… And so, let us start with the basics,” Kagami said. “The shoes are… Quite obvious, I guess, but you will notice the flat soles. I hope you will get used to it quickly.” Marinette nodded and that was the cue for Kagami to continue, more confidently. She wasn’t only being polite, Kagami noted she looked genuinely interested in what she had to say! Could she even get more likeable? She kept herself from sounding too excited about being a teacher, but her eyes betrayed her.

“Moving on, the socks! They’re quite long, they go up to the knee, and that’s where the breeches come next, they end… Below the knee, obviously. Those are mine but I think they will fit you, you are barely smaller than I am.

“There is the… The plastron to protect your sword arm and the jacket, the one for sabre fencing like this one is different from foil and épée jackets, I will tell you about it someday. It won’t stop you from feeling the impact of each hit, but believe me, it’s a lot better than fencing without, in fact I am certain that is not allowed at all. The glove is for your sword hand. Then, there is the mask, please make sure the bib is in good shape, I don’t want you to get hurt. I do not think we should use it just now so don’t put it on just yet. Finally, the lamé, it covers most of the target area in sabre, as you know. This one has sleeves because it is a sabre lamé; of course. And… I guess this is it! If there are any questions you want to ask me…”

“So, that’s the chest protector, right?” Marinette said, pointing to the plastic garment and Kagami shifted uncomfortably. “Do I have to wear it? I mean, it looks pretty uncomfortable…”

“Believe me, you don’t want bruises on your boobs, not that way,” Kagami blurted before she could put a hand over her mouth to stop herself from being so embarrassing. She turned redder than her fencing jacket. But instead of pointing out how awkward that had been the way Kagami feared she would, Marinette giggled, whispered a “I’ll keep that in mind” and started unbuttoning her shirt. Kagami hadn’t suspected she could turn this red. She squeaked a small “I’ll let you get changed, I’ll be waiting for you outside with a sabre so that we can start this lesson” and ran out of the locker room.
She tried to slow down the beat of her heart, she tried to stop the vision she had just witnessed from reappearing in her head. It didn’t quite work, at all. She was a little scared, if she had to be honest with herself. as she meant to have this kind of thoughts? Was she allowed to have these kind of thoughts about Marinette, about girls? It felt so weird, almost scary, and she didn’t want to be afraid. She needed some help to figure it out. Then it struck her. She didn’t know who to ask. Definitely not Father. If it turned out that she really was attracted to girl, and not completely insane, things with Father would be even more embarrassing. She didn’t even want to think about Grandfather. Who, then? Maybe Aiko or Alya maybe, once she’d get to know her better?

She’d have to find a way to word it properly if she wanted to ask them about it. Maybe she could ask mo—mum? She had never had these thoughts about men, but she had assumed that it would eventually come one day. It had to. It was what was expected of her. How would mum react? Would she hate her daughter? Kagami had never felt like a normal person, but never for these reasons. Finally, a fully equipped Marinette waved at her. Kagami could already see her being taught by M. D’Argencourt next year.

“I guess there is no need to remind you about the anatomy of the sabre, so to speak. As you know, it’s a thrusting weapon and a cutting weapon too. Here, take this one,” she said, and Marinette carefully took the sabre she was handed in her hand. “As you know, our first goal is not to make fancy moves but to be efficient. Your target is not your opponent’s sword, forget every film you have seen starring Errol Flynn, that is certainly fun to watch if you forget that he was a nazi, but definitely not what we want here. Sabre fencing is the the combination of quick thinking, accuracy, and efficient footwork, and only a few can master it,” Kagami ended in a proud tone.

“Wow… You’ve made it this far all by yourself, that’s really impressive,” Marinette whispered, completely captivated by the other girl. What she hadn’t expected was the other girl’s reaction. Her amber eyes were almost sad.

“No one is self-made, Marinette, no one, whoever told you that… Did I give that impression?” Kagami said with a pained expression. “If it were not for my family, I do not think I could have become so proficient. They knew the best fencing instructors, my grandfather and my mother are some of the best fencers still alive, I even had personal instructors all to myself when I was younger, people to encourage me to become the best I could possibly be. They have the money, we could afford moving to Paris. If I were someone else than Kagami Tsurugi, if I had wanted to become a great fencer… I do not think it would have worked that way. I mean, sure, willpower has its role to play, but that is not enough. If you do not know the right people, it takes so much time and it can be fruitless.

“If you’re lucky, your performance will get you noticed, but this is so rare. And even then, this is not only your own work that will give you the opportunity to become a champion, but someone else noticing you. Sure, I played a role in it all, but it is only part of it… I have been shaped by other people too. I mean, look at you! If you had wanted to start fencing but didn’t know anyone to introduce you to it, what would you have done? Would you even have wanted to start fencing at all? I do not think many people will ever be as good as I am, not only because they are less
talented, but because they do not have the means and the relations they need to make it this far.”

Marinette remained speechless, and Kagami cleared her throat. Great speeches were decidedly not her forte. “So anyway, we won’t need our fencing masks for that. Let us start with the most basic position, en garde, if this is fine by you?”

“Oh, right,” Marinette said. “Keep your stance wide, keep your body lowered, as you’re moving forward balance is the key,” she sung to herself as she shifted her feet until she found her en garde stance, which was quite good for a beginner. “You so have to watch this show! I mean, definitely not the French dub, but… I’ll send you a link someday!”

Kagami looked positively impressed, and silently praised Marinette’s stance. She hesitated before she put her hand on Marinette’s shoulders to correct her posture ever so slightly, and the feel of Marinette’s skin under the fabric sent sparks through her body. She didn’t know it, but it felt the same for Marinette. She tried to focus on her student instead of overthinking that sensation. Slowly, Marinette straightened up a little. Kagami helped her adjust her sword arm in the right position. She was almost sure she would have combusted instantly had she touched Marinette any more than now, if she wasn’t wearing the lamé and the jacket under it.

“Good, we are almost there,” Kagami said appraisingly. “You have done that before, haven’t you? It shows.” She was patient and kind to Marinette, more patient than with anyone else, and kinder too. Had it been one of her fellow fencers, or a student from Carnot, safe for Alya, Nino or Adrien, had it been anyone else, really, she wouldn’t have bothered. Was she wrong for behaving that way? She didn’t want to think about it right now, it didn’t really matter and she decided to fully focus on Marinette and Marinette only. Kagami stepped back, looked at the other girl and smirked. Her en garde stance was almost perfect until she dropped it. All that was left to do was…

“Again!” Kagami said. “I will do it next to you, and we’ll try to hold the pose for thirty seconds each time. If you are fine with me telling you what to do, that is, if you want to do something else please tell me about it, I mean, I woulddd totally understand if you changed your mind.” It was funny how Kagami went from what was probably an imitation of her mother to this. Nonetheless, they started the drill. Ten minutes later, Marinette was a little unnerved and her body ached a little. It wasn’t that Marinette didn’t have the stamina for that, she could have continued the exercise for hours if that was required, and she hadn’t broken out in a sweat yet.

The real difficulty was that she was used to moving and jumping around a lot, staying so static for such a long time was very new to her. How could Kagami make it seem so easy? Years and years of training with people who had pushed her to continue, she had told her. She believed her. Kagami seemed to do it without even giving much thought about it. Marinette understood why she had asked her to bring a water bottle. Kagami stepped back until she faced Marinette, a few metres of distance between them. She motioned for Marinette to put on her fencing mask.
“I want to show you the most basic attack but it might sting a little, we can do something else if you wish but I believe that you knowing that should be important. If you say yes, I won’t go easy on you,” Kagami warned before she put on her own fencing mask.

“Bring it on,” Marinette said. She would have to act as though her reflexes were slower than they actually were, but— “OUCH!”

Kagami immediately removed her helmet, dropped her sabre and looked at Marinette worriedly, she couldn’t guess what expression she wore under the fencing mask. “I am so sorry,” she started, ” I thought it would be a good idea but I hurt you and I am sorry maybe we should—“

“It’s alright, Kagami,” Marinette reassured her, “I was mostly surprised. But you’re right, it stings, quite a lot actually. How are you not covered in bruises all the time?”

“I used to be, believe me, and my sword arm is always a little painful after my fencing lessons, I even had to wear long-sleeved shirts in the summer when I was younger because Father didn’t want my teachers to believe that I was a battered child who endured constant abuse at home. It was really the fencing, in fact,” Kagami added when she saw Marinette’s horrified expression. “And that’s why most fencers rely on parries more than on their abilities to dodge. Most of the time, swords find their targets fairly easily, not matter how low you try to duck.”

“So that was a lunge, right?” Marinette asked. “It looked complicated, how do you not lose balance? Can you show me?”

“Well, I will describe my actions as they happen. First, I break from my en garde stance, and I extend my front leg from the knee and push my front heel. I am careful not to bend my ankle or to lift up the ball of that foot, see? It means my rear leg has to do the pushing and my rear arm counterbalances the motion. See, my torso remains relatively still. And I thrust my sword arm. Only, it does not take more than one second or two for all of that to happen. Of course, there are a few more complications when there is an opponent facing you. And it feels like a different thing when you do it. I wouldn’t expect anyone to succeed on their first try, but… Would you wish try anyway? Oh, and also, put your fencing mask back on, I do not want you to lose an eye.”

Marinette nodded and tried. And groaned as she lost her balance halfway through the motion. She felt slow and clumsy. Kagami looked so graceful when she lunged, once again it looked as though she had been doing that all her life, and that was probably the case. She fell down on her third try but she got back on her feet before Kagami could help her up. They continued the drill. That was hard, focusing on the perfect motion of her feet while being aware that she had to move her hands a certain way, adding that to the fact that her opponent would have the opportunity to hit her first…
But she kept on trying, and on her sixteenth try, she managed to hit Kagami. Or she thought she did. Kagami simply shrugged and the gesture said it all. That had been more of a caress than an actual hit. She needed to actually put some weight in the sword arm, not only in her feet.

And so she started again. And again. And again, until she noticed how the vibration that travelled down her arm were different from the ones before. She put a little more strength each time until she found the perfect amount of pressure. That was it. And so, she continued until Kagami parried the blade of Marinette’s sabre and beat it away when the other girl expected it the least. She lost her momentum and fell down. That was so… Vexing. She accepted Kagami’s outstretched arm gratefully. It wasn’t a condescending hand she took. The things it did to Kagami… Touch was weird.

“And that,” Kagami said loudly, letting go of Marinette’s hand, “was a parry, a beat parry, if we have to be precise here. You already know the use for such moves. Look, we do not have much time left, but let us try it, if you want to! We won’t go into the subtleties for now, I just want you to understand the feel of it.”

“I’d really like that,” Marinette said. Her face darkened. “Does that mean I’m going to get covered in bruises during the next ten minutes?”

“Don’t worry, that won’t happen,” Kagami tried to say in a reassuring voice. I will go easy on you, I promise.”

And Kagami stayed true to her words. Her movement were slower, much slower than what Marinette had seen when she had faced Adrien or even Vincent. Which didn’t mean that Marinette managed to parry right away, and she took a fair share of hits before she managed to parry Kagami’s simple thrust. Each time, of course, Kagami had explained what had gone wrong. The lesson paid off quickly. They would continue with the cutting motion another day, Kagami decided, if Marinette was still interested in learning sabre fencing with her.

They continued to practice this simple exercise, but they didn’t lose their focus. Marinette was a fast learner with a great ability to adapt, which made Kagami think of someone else, although she couldn’t quite pinpoint who it was with certainty. Oh, she would make her a good fencer, worthy of the D’Argencourt fencing academy. Maybe it was too late for Marinette to become a champion, besides she wasn’t interested in that, but this wasn’t the reason why she had come to Kagami in the first place, now, was it? She decided that she liked it here, with Marinette, and that it was one of her best Saturdays in France yet.

That was, until the doors to the fencing room opened in a loud clatter and a small group of university students, she guessed they could not be older than twenty-five, barged in noisily. Marinette removed her mask to greet them, and Kagami did the same. She recognised a few of
them. She had a bad feeling about this. They were not greeted with smiles, but with sneers, and Kagami was pretty sure she had heard one of the girls whisper something about “fucking Chinese everywhere” that “should stick to karate chops”. Marinette clenched her fists and gritted her teeth. Kagami was too shocked to say anything, but there was something that made her stomach churned with complete disgust. These were her mum's students? Even back at school she never heard such rubbish.

Marinette looked at the clock — she had to leave in about three minutes— and made her way to the locker room, giving the small crowd quite a nice view of her middle finger, which was received with sniggers and heckles that didn’t falter when the door to the locker room slammed shut. If Tikki hadn’t stayed in Marinette’s purse, with the rest of Marinette’s things, she would have turned into a kwami of pure destruction and anger. The small group burst into a small fit of laughter, and so, Kagami simply looked at them, an icy glare that made the temperature drop instantly. They fell silent.

When Marinette finally came out of the room, Kagami walked with her for a little while, still in her fencing gear, a worried look on her face. Why did it have to go so wrong, why did they have to show up earlier than she had planned? Mum had warned her that some of her older students were overly confident and a little rude, but that was nothing short of unacceptable. They stopped in the middle of the corridor.

“Look, I really like fencing with you,” Marinette said and she couldn’t quite conceal the anger in her voice. “I had a great time but these guys… I don’t know if I’d be ready to continue having fencing classes here, and I’m sorry if that sounds rude, I mean, it’s what they are, but with these guys acting like complete racist pricks, I don’t think I’ll feel comfortable here if that continues. I want to keep on learning with you, I like it a lot when you teach me,” she blushed, “if you’re still willing to teach me after today, that is, I mean…”

“Well…” Kagami’s heart skipped a beat. Marinette wanted them to fence together again. She had enjoyed it. “Do not worry about them. My mum is their instructor, I mean, she is my instructor too but I will tell her about it discretely and it will have consequences. Believe me, that won't happen again. She can be quite scary when she is angry, and no one wants to see that and only a few have lived though it, I think? So let us train together, someday in two weeks, or even before, at the D’Argencourt Academy, if you feel like it?”

Marinette simply smiled at Kagami, fondness in her blue eyes before she gave her a small “goodbye”, a “I’ll tell you when I'm free.” and left the building. Kagami’s heart didn't stop fluttering as she slowly walked back to the fencing hall for her lesson. She didn't quite know what to do about it. After this Saturday, the small group that had almost ruined their afternoon never showed up at Itsuko Tsurugi's fencing classes.
Bonjour, bonsoir.

Next chapter, eating curry, drawing things and awkwardness.

France still has a “problem” acknowledging that racism against Asian people and people of Asian origins exists at all, some “comedians” have entire skits entirely dedicated to such “humour”. The rubbish these people sprout is still all too common in France.

Also, Stephen Galaxy references, lots of them. And the French dub is horrendous. I think Marinette discovered the show when she was babysitting Manon and really enjoyed it so she kept on watching it in English on her own.

And now, about the update schedule and all of that.

Depression is something I’ve been struggling with for quite a few years now, and let's simply state that I'm typing this from my bed, which I haven't left for three days now because of how terrible everything feels. It's incredibly shitty. I either feel nothing, or I simply don't want to exist. Life's pretty shit. I'm pretty shit. I can't focus on writing satisfactory content or simply doing things I usually enjoy. Also, I write "shit" quite a lot, apparently.

I will finish this fic, but I cannot promise that there will be a new chapter next Monday or next Thursday. It will be finished, everything has been planned. Right now, I can't get to it, it doesn't feel like it matters, nothing feels like it does and I hate that but I can't block it.

I'll keep you updated on Tumblr [here](https://example.com), if you can stand me writing boring stuff about not wanting to be alive and my life being a constant source of disappointment.

I am sorry for letting you down.

À bientôt.

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I really wasn't in a good place when I wrote that end note. It's now April 2019 and I'm editing this chapter to make it more like what I had wanted it to be. I'm much better now.
“Alya and Nino want to put their things in their lockers, is there anything you’d like to put in your own?”

“No, thanks for asking, Marinette, I will just wait for you all outside.”

Kagami made her way through a tide of students, trying her best to keep as much distance as she could between them and herself. She sped up her pace when she believed to have spotted a small bob of wavy brown hair a few meters behind her. She didn’t want to have to deal with Gustave right now, she had much better things to do anyway. She tried to walk a little faster, and fortunately, he disappeared from her sight. She breathed a small sigh of relief. So much for avoiding unwanted company…

The end of September had gone by too quickly, and the beginning of October too. The truth be told, these had been busy weeks, filled with tests and homework, more and more fencing classes. Things had started to move a little, slowly but surely. Itsuko and Kagami’s flat looked less and less like a battlefield and more and more like a place one could fully live in, and the cardboard boxes that had once cluttered up the kitchen, the living room and Kagami’s bedroom started to disappear discretely into the recycling bin. And the flat felt homely, even more now that they had bought houseplants. Little things…

Everyone had started to make new friends, although it wasn’t always easy. Marinette’s old friend for collège had been split up in different classes, but it didn’t stop them from keeping connections with one another. Marinette could be quite the social butterfly, even more than Kagami had suspected, but the same couldn’t be said about herself. Kagami still had a hard time not purposefully isolating herself from the rest of her peers when Marinette, Adrien, Nino or Alya weren’t around.

Kagami couldn’t have cared less for the rest of the students, she hadn’t bothered trying to purposefully remember their names, and quite honestly she didn’t want anything to do with most of them. She didn’t know them, but she was almost sure they were dull people with dull little lives, conformist doormats and background characters at best. They had to be, right? She was having a harder time trying not to roll her eyes all the time when one of them dared open their mouth to sprout an idiotic answer. She hoped Marinette hadn’t noticed that. She kept an aloof demeanour when she was sure none of her friends were watching, and only talked to the others when it was necessary. Was that wrong? It hadn't gotten her in trouble yet, so she guessed it wasn't.
Still, she was no longer completely alone in their absence. Marjane Khadivi, an impressively clever and equally soft-spoken girl with incredibly long dark brown hair had decided to sit next to her in ancient Greek class one day. Marjane had simply asked Kagami about the book she was reading — she wasn’t that much of a manga enthusiast, Aiko was, but she had chosen a somewhat lighter read that day, Naoki Urasawa’s *Billy Bat*— and they had ended up talking a lot more than any of them had first expected. They sometimes worked in the school library together, and Adrien often joined them to work on literature from time to time, pretexting that his teacher was awful.

And Marjane wasn’t the only one. Kagami had truly gotten to know Kim when they had ended up playing volleyball in the same team. Saying that these two were unstoppable together would have been an understatement. Kim wasn’t only the jock Kagami had believed him to be. He may not have been a rocket scientist like Max, but he cared. She sometimes shared comfortable silences with Nathanaël too, and he often came to draw during her fencing lessons. But other than that, she rarely spoke to the other students unless she absolutely had to.

Kagami didn’t mind the drizzly weather outside, she had brought an umbrella, she almost didn’t mind having mathematics this afternoon, they were minor annoyances at best. Today would be much more than a regular, unexciting day at school that would have left a bland taste in her mouth. Today, Marinette had invited her over for lunch. Nino and Alya were invited too, and she was glad for that. The more the merrier, wasn’t it so? Kagami guessed they were regulars at Marinette’s home. She hoped she’d become one too, but today would be a first for her. And so, she waited for them in front of the lycée’s entrance. It wasn’t a long wait, and very soon, the four of them were walking down avenue de Villiers.

Nino snuck up under Kagami’s umbrella and took the wooden crook handle after he asked for her permission. He was taller than her, after all. She didn’t mind Nino, he wasn’t as loud as most of the boys at school, not as rude as them, and it didn’t look as though he wanted something out of her. He had that tendency to call everyone “dude”, but she didn’t mind that. The plane trees’ leaves were slowly turning a soft dark copper hue, soon, she thought, they would be strewn over the sidewalks. Alya seemed to enjoy the crisp noise they made when she stepped on them purposefully, not missing a single one. It was a little childish, a little forced perhaps.

After about ten minutes of a rather slow walk punctuated with snatches of conversation and the sounds of hungry stomachs, they finally arrived. Tom & Sabine Boulangerie Pâtisserie looked quite charming, and a faint smell of freshly baked bread filled the air. Marinette waved at her parents through the windowpane, and so did Nino and Alya. Kagami did the same, although awkwardly. One of the many things she didn’t know how to do, how to interact with most people when it wasn’t related to fencing.

Madame Cheng unlocked the door for them and lead them upstairs. Nino carefully took off his cap and Alya ran a hand through his hair to tame it. And here was the living room and the kitchen, an array of somewhat mismatched furniture and bright, almost too bright colours. But somehow, it suited the place, Kagami couldn’t have imagined it any other way. She could very well see Marinette hurriedly having breakfast over the counter, enjoying freshly baked croissants. She could
Imagine Marinette’s lazy days, the girl laying on the couch doing absolutely nothing. A faint smile formed on Kagami’s lips.

It was very different from her own flat now that it was fully furnished. Itsuko Tsurugi’s vision of interior design showed everywhere (though she’d never tell her daughter that she had asked for a little help here and there). She had managed to create an atmosphere both elegant and comfortable, stylish and homely too. Now that she thought of it, Kagami really wanted to invite her friends over someday. Asking them would be a little awkward, though. Marinette’s flat was something else, really. But not in a way she disliked. It looked like a happy place for those who lived in it. The door closed softly and Sabine Cheng gave her guests a broad smile.

“Alya, Nino, welcome, it’s so good to have you here again!” Mme Cheng said and kissed their cheeks. “And you must be Kagami! Marinette told me so much about you!” She shook her hand energetically but gently. Had Marinette told her about that? She was exactly the woman Sabine Cheng could be like, kind and benevolent, with a speck of flour on her shirt and hair darker than her daughter’s. She made her feel instantly at home. Kagami didn’t know what her friends would think of her own mother.

“Nino, come help me with the cooking, I think it will do for you weekly practice,” she called and the boy followed her to the kitchen. She had started teaching him how to cook a few week before the summer holiday when he had come to her, driven to despair after he had somehow managed to turn his pound cake into ashes. He had managed to keep it secret from Alya, and had begged Marinette not to tell his girlfriend anything about it. In the end, it had paid off quite well.

“That’s right, ma’am,” Nino grinned toothily. He looked around the room dramatically, then squared his shoulders exaggeratedly and took a serious expression. He carefully put on an apron Mme Cheng handed him and remained very earnest.

Kagami smirked at the display. Nino wouldn’t admit it openly, but he was putting on a show to impress his girlfriend, and she faked indifference and even faux-huffed in good humour, maybe a little too forcefully, but she ignored that last thought. Alya whispered in her ear, “I only know how to cook things for my kid sisters and he always teases me about it, but he’s not too bad of a cook himself. Sabine taught him well, so I don’t really mind.”

“So, what should we start with, ma’am?” Nino took his phone out of his pocket and connected it to the kitchen’s sound system. “A little manouche jazz?”

Marinette lead them up a flight of stairs and pushed the trapdoor open. Kagami had already seen parts of the room thanks to the few photos Marinette had sent her, but being physically there changed quite a lot of things. Marinette’s room was, for a lack of a better adjective, pink. And full of cat-themed items. Kagami decided that it was one of the most adorable things ever, and
completely unlike her own room in a way that she liked. Most of the furniture looked customised in a way, from the carpets to the very fabric of the chaise longue. Marinette sometimes talked about her fashion designing projects, but Kagami hadn’t suspected her to craft daily life objects like these. That certainly explained the odd curtains downstairs.

She’d have to buy Marinette some houseplants for her to put on her windowsill, or so Kagami thought. That was the only thing that was truly missing in this otherwise lovely bedroom. Or perhaps there were other missing things too. Like her. Stop having these thoughts, Kagami berated herself. Instead, she focused intently on Marinette’s small mineral collection on her desk, a garnet, an amethyst, for some reasons a pearl, and a rose quartz — which was cut as though it were a diamond.

Alya plopped down on the chaise longue and Marinette sat on the wooden floor while Kagami’s eyes travelled across the room in a comfortable silence. There were so many details, so many things that were so, completely Marinette and she didn’t want to miss any of them, from the paper chain that ran up the wooden beam to her desk and the various design sheet she had pinned to her wall. Marinette apparently slept in a queen-sized bed, which, if you asked Kagami, looked quite cosy.

Marinette had made paper flowers she had sticked to the wall among many photographs and Kagami found it adorable. There were pictures of her family, Alya and… How could she have missed it? There were more than a few pictures of Adrien, some looked as though they were cutouts from magazines or pictures taken without him being aware of that. Later, Kagami would learn that it used to be worse and she’d laugh about it, but for now, it didn’t feel that way at all.

Her stomach lurched. She didn’t know whether she should show how jealous it made her feel to see Marinette’s wall or if she should have smirked knowingly. She decided the second option would be more acceptable and if she had to be honest with herself, Kagami found it funny, in a way. She wasn’t the only one with an embarrassing shrine at home after all. Yes, teasing Marinette a little would be alright. Alya understood what Kagami was smirking for and a smirk slowly crept on her own face. They stared at Marinette and their friend looked at them quizzically.

“Hey, what are you two smirking for?” Marinette asked. “Hey!”

Marinette’s reaction, when she finally connected the dots, wasn’t what Kagami had expected it would be, at least not completely. Marinette did turn into a blushing, stammering mess, but she regained her composure quickly. A few months ago, she would have first tried to find a good way to justify the presence of her shrine as being not what it looked like, this time she didn’t. In fact, she even muttered a dejected “I don’t think he sees me as anything but a friend anyway. Maybe I shouldn’t see him as anything but one too… I mean, I can’t make him love me, right? Maybe I should take these pictures down, it’s completely hopeless…”
The room fell in an awkward silence only filled with the pitter-patter of the rain outside — it had started pouring — until Alya cleared her throat and oh so subtly tried to change the subject to something Marinette would certainly be more comfortable talking about, a subject that wouldn't make anyone feel left out, Ladybug. Kagami followed along with the idea. Alya's theories were always a little far-fetched, and today she seemed to be exaggerating them on purpose just to lighten up the mood. And it worked, they chatted together happily, and the uncomfortable subject that was Adrien was left aside.

Kagami even added theories of her own, some of them jokingly nonsensical, that made Marinette laugh, and how Kagami wanted to hear her laugh again… Marinette hadn’t imagined Kagami to be a big Ladybug fan, she was always so reserved about her likes and dislikes and didn’t share things unless someone asked her. When she proposed serious hypotheses, Marinette didn’t know what to think of Kagami being so seemingly… Obsessed, as much as Alya. And so she decided to take part to the conversation before it could get too dangerous for her. She had more than a few theories of her own, some which were quite thought provoking to say the least.

“I mean, we don’t actually know where they come from” Marinette started, “what if Ladybug is a rogue super soldier of some sorts, engineered by the government? And Chat Noir too, obviously. That would make Hawk Moth a scientist trying to recover his precious projects using unorthodox methods and experimenting on the population… I mean, they’re trying to cover up many things Ladybug-related, they almost took your blog down and…”

“Oh girl I had never considered that possibility!” Alya said, almost too excitedly. “Besides, if that happens not to be true, that would make such a good AU for fan fictions!”

“I know! I’ve even drawn redesigns for their costumes!” Marinette beamed, and with that, she ran to her desk and came back with a sketchbook.

She sat on the chaise longue, leaving room for Kagami to sit next to her, which she did gladly. Marinette opened the sketchbook and leafed through it. Kagami caught a glimpse of a series of sketches, two silhouettes dressed in fencing gears fencing facing each other. The drawings felt more accurate than anything Nathanaël had drawn, much better than anything Kagami had ever tried sketching before she usually stopped halfway through the process. There were signs of erasing on some parts, but she had not given up on any of these drawings. The result was impressive. And there were the drawings Marinette had wanted to show them.

“Oooooh…”

“Alya, you’re drooling”
Still, oooooh…"

There was something about this blend of organic and electronic that fascinated Alya, and Kagami could very well see why. They may not have been scientifically accurate at all, but these redesigns were quite impressive, impressive enough for anyone to overlook that. These prototypes looked bulkier too, not yet the iconic skin-tight suits Ladybug and Chat Noir wore, but it only reinforced the coolness factor of it. Marinette didn’t look like she was done impressing them, and when she turned the page, there was a new drawing.

“I don’t remember her name, but since that new superhero showed up, I felt like I had to draw her too!”

Kagami could have missed the sudden dullness in Alya’s eyes at that, had she blinked at the wrong moment. The girl with the glasses almost looked bitter for a split second. Rena Rouge had been drawn in the same fashion as the two others, her suit all biomechanics and awesomeness. The details were quite precise and it was quite odd for Marinette to know exactly what the super heroine looked like without quite knowing her name. Kagami was about to ask Marinette where she had gotten the idea from, when Nino called loudly from the kitchen in a sing-song voice.

“Children, lunch’s ready!”

Kagami decided she was too hungry and that the question would have to wait for later. The three girls went downstairs and were greeted with the sight of Nino still wearing his apron, a small stain on the tip of his nose, a fist on his hip, the other hand holding a steaming dish. He was trying too hard, Kagami thought, but she couldn’t help her lips from turning upwards. Alya giggled and the boy grinned widely. He couldn’t hold the pose for too long and his arm started twitching. The dish was quite heavy, and Mme Cheng relieved him of its weight by putting it on the table. They all sat around the table as Marinette’s mother served everyone quite generously.

“Bon appétit!”

Nino’s curry was delicious, there were no other words to describe it better than. It was nourishing yet it didn’t feel too heavy, forkful after forkful, there was always something new to discover, the faint flavour of sesame, the way the red peppers and the green onions combined to perfection. The tofu dices didn’t taste too bland, the coconut milk didn’t feel too out of place and complemented the white rice nicely. Mme Cheng had taught her student well, she looked at him with pride and Nino puffed out his chest playfully when his girlfriend reluctantly praised his cooking. Kagami ate calmly with an tranquil smile on her lips. She liked it here.
The conversation was lively, but the meal was over sooner than Marinette would have liked, and their afternoon classes would begin in about half an hour. She wished they could have stayed longer and play video games, anything but school, really. She started clearing the table. Nino and Alya starting piling up the plates while Kagami did the same with their glasses. She then asked if she could help with the dishes, but Mme Cheng wouldn’t allow it. Instead, she gave Kagami a lunchbox filled with the curry they just had, with a small cup of coffee and a fork.

“Kagami, could you please go downstairs and give this to Tom? He must be hungry by now,” Mme Cheng said. And in a very loud whisper, she added, “I wouldn’t really trust my daughter with it, the last time I asked her… Ouch, it was ugly. Her hair was completely soaked and—”

“Mum, I can hear you!” Marinette yelled.

“I will do my best, Madame Cheng,” Kagami said very seriously. She stole a glance at Marinette and went downstairs. The bakery was no longer as busy as when they had first arrived. And there was Tom Dupain, cleaning his glass display cabinets patiently behind the counter, singing to himself. He immediately noticed Kagami coming in and gave her a warm welcome.

“Kagami, right? Marinette talks about you all the time! And you even brought me lunch! That’s perfect!” Tom’s voices overenthusiastic, it felt like a well-rehearsed role.

Kagami didn’t quite know how to react to any of that. Why were the Dupain-Cheng so nice to her? She didn’t trust her voice, and so she decided to simply nod and give the man his lunchbox. He took it gladly and all but inhaled the curry it in a matter of seconds. “I’ll take care of it,” he said when he saw Kagami glance at the empty box. “So… How’s the weather? Oh no that was bad conversation starter, wasn’t it.” An awkward silence settled in the bakery, and neither of them knew what to say. Tom gave Kagami a sheepish smile; he wasn’t so good at the whole small talk thing when he didn’t play the role of “Tom the baker”, he explained. It lightened up the mood immediately.

It was almost weird, staying in the bakery with M. Dupain like that, nothing like what Kagami had expected. They exchanged a few words from time to time, anecdotes about the bakery, questions about bakery in Japan, bread-related puns, but nothing that felt forced or out of place. And sometimes, nothing but a pleasant silence. It was nice that way too, Kagami decided, and M. Dupain seemed to share her view. Marinette was lucky to have parents like him and Mme Cheng, she thought.

It had stopped raining outside when Kagami finally exited from the bakery with a bag of chouquettes for her to share with her friends. Marinette had picked up Kagami’s bag. Yes, Kagami
decided as she followed Marinette down the street, it didn’t matter if they had maths in a few minutes, it almost didn’t matter that she’d have to bear with most of her classmates. Because Marinette and her parents wanted her to come back for lunch or dinner someday, and the thought of it made her feel incredibly light on her feet. She almost felt like singing. When Kagami would open her bag that evening, she would find a page from Marinette’s sketchbook, one that had caught her eye. Two fencers facing each other. It was perfect.

Chapter End Notes

Me revoilà! It’s nice to be back.

Things are a little better for me now, I’m still a little slow and I’m not sure my writing will be consistent in the next chapters but I’ll try my best.

Next chapter, explosions. Lots of them. Everywhere. Boom.

I’m pretty sure Nino has a playlist for every occasion, he has to.

Naoki Urasawa is really that good, if you haven’t read Monster or Pluto yet, do yourself a favour and read them. And Billy Bat is pretty good too. I think.

About the Ladybug redesigns, if you feel like drawing them, I had envisioned them as a mix of Tetsuo’s arm, Major Kusanagi’s Ghost in the opening scene of the very first animated movie (the live action one was hot rubbish) and Eva Unit 01 without her armour. Marinette’s a nerd.

Follow me on Tumblr here, I post previews for the incoming chapters and I sometimes post writing tips about writing fiction taking place in France.

English is still not my first language, sorry for the terrible mistakes everywhere…

À lundi! Et encore merci pour votre patience, vous tou.te.s !

This chapter was cleaned and edited on April 30, 2019.
Duel 8: About to E-X-P-L-O-D-E

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was the noise that woke Kagami up, a loud rumble, followed by flashes of light that even her shutters and curtain could not block. Kagami tossed and turned, trying to go back to sleep. Even though it had been a fencing-free day, she had left school exhausted, her conversation with Marinette hadn’t lasted for long and she had had a hard time not falling asleep while doing her homework, and not only because she found it boring. But she couldn’t sleep, no matter how hard she tried, the noise outside, the flashes of light, none of it would stop. Something was happening outside, something highly unusual. Itsuko Tsurugi was a heavy sleeper, but the same couldn’t be said about her daughter.

Kagami drowsily got out of bed and fumbled for her binoculars. She tiptoed out of her room, and to the balcony to get a clearer view of whatever was going on outside. She struggled to open the French window and a gush of cool wind blew at her face. She should have put on something a little warmer than these pyjamas, she should have put something on her feet. She couldn’t button her top more than that. But it didn’t matter to Kagami. She gripped the railing firmly with one hand, using the other to hold her binoculars to her eyes. She started looking around until she found where it was all coming from.

Although she couldn’t see much yet, the scene was too fascinating for her to go back to sleep, she didn’t care if she was barefoot in the cold. It wasn’t everyday you could see Ladybug and Chat Noir in action with your own eyes, especially when you had a schedule as tight as Kagami’s. Kagami noted the absence of Rena Rouge, but at this point she had stopped hoping to see her each time. Rena Rouge showed up every so often, but less and less lately. It seemed that Ladybug and Chat Noir could handle most akumas on their own. Kagami winced as Ladybug almost lost her footing.

Saying that Marinette wasn’t having the best night of her life would have been the understatement of the month. Most akumas were kind enough to show up during the day, and she could sleep peacefully at night. Patrols weren’t time consuming and most days, she could get a proper amount of sleep. But not tonight. Tonight, she was busy saving Paris and dodging fireworks, swinging from building to building with her yo-yo, sparks of yellow and green barely missing her. Chat Noir’s strategy — hitting the rockets with his staff so that they’d fly back to their sender— was more risky than it was successful. Maybe she should have brought Alya with them. But Master Fu had not been too happy about the idea.

The Pyrotechnician let out a small huff as one of her rockets flew past her. They were such
irritating spoilsports. Why couldn’t they simply give her their Miraculouses and let her burn her former supervisor to death? Kids these days…

Ladybug’s poor attempt at outspeeding the fireworks was short-lived, and she soon had to take cover while Chat Noir tried to use her strategy again, unsuccessfully. How could the Pyrotechnician set up her fireworks that quickly? In a wave of her hand, they were all ready to blow up. How come she had so many of them? It a flick of her wrist, her lighter lit the fuses and a new barrage of rockets flew in their general direction, none of them quite hitting their intended targets, but it was enough to force the two heroes to fall back. Sometimes, Marinette wondered if Hawk Moth’s akuma were just plot-convenient characters in the story of her existence, with no other purpose than to make her daily life a living hell.

Ladybug climbed up a building so that she could get an overview of the situation, Chat Noir followed and Kagami’s breath hitched. She took off her binoculars. There was her heroine, her silhouette standing out clearly like a shadow puppet, the fireworks’ aggressive flare only accentuating Ladybug’s outline as she cartwheeled away from a bursting rocket, using her yo-yo as a shield. This sight was worth feeling a little cold. Chat Noir extended his staff and tried to hit the Pyrotechnician. Even without the binoculars, Kagami could tell he had barely missed his target as his cat ears twitched.

“It’s over, Pyrotechnician, I have the high ground!” Chat Noir yelled, and even from a distance, Kagami could hear the slight laughter in his bravado. He seemed to be having quite a lot of fun for someone who had almost died more than a couple of times in the last few minutes.

It was far from over, really. Kagami had to lean against the railing to see what the Pyrotechnician was doing. The akumatized woman seemed to focus quite hard and an impressively large smoke bomb emerged from her gloved hand. The Pyrotechnician looked at the two heroes with a ferocious smile, and threw the smoke bomb. A thick layer of purple mist started to fill the street, and even with his night-vision, Chat Noir couldn’t see a thing. The two heroes glanced at each other and Ladybug stayed still, ready to strike.

Kagami couldn’t really call herself a good judge of character, but based on his body language, she could tell that Chat Noir was flirting with his partner, who didn’t look very interested. That was both brave and foolish of him to do something like that in such a situation. Kagami couldn’t hear what the two could possibly say to each other, but Chat Noir straightened up a little and his feet shifted to what looked suspiciously like an en garde position.

Ladybug had started summoning her lucky charm when rockets were fired in gust from different corners of the smoke-filled street, simultaneously but poorly aimed. They couldn’t tell where the
Pyrotechnician was hiding, but it seemed that it was also true the other way around. Paris fell silent, if not for the sounds of police sirens from a distance. And the faint rumbling noise that grew louder and louder.

There was a bright flash of light, and a shape sprang up from the mist. Kagami nearly dropped her binoculars. That was insane, completely insane. The Pyrotechnician had created two gigantic rockets and was using them as a jetpack. Her arms were laden with fireworks. Chat Noir started spinning his staff, providing cover for Ladybug who summoned her lucky charm — what looked suspiciously like a water bomb. Kagami couldn’t quite hear them, but Ladybug had whispered something to Chat and he nodded gravely. He stopped spinning his staff, spinning wasn’t that much of a good trick anyway, and extended it instead, knocking the Pyrotechnician in the shoulder. She crashed on the roof. It was enough for Ladybug to jump behind the akumatized victim and to shove the water balloon inside one of the rockets. Ladybug ripped the glove off the Pyrotechnician’s hand and threw it to Chat Noir who turned it into shreds with his Cataclysm.

It had been like a fencing match, short and intense, an efficient strategy that had paid off. Ladybug captured the akuma and a white, luminous butterfly flew to the sky. It was the first time Kagami had witnessed a de-akumatisation in person, she couldn’t remember clearly what had happened when she was the one being used by Hawk Moth. A wave of light swept through the streets, and all the damage caused by the fight disappeared as though it had never been there to begin with. Ladybug comforted the confused woman standing on a rooftop in the middle of the night, and left her in Chat Noir’s care. The two heroes parted ways.

Kagami let out a breath she didn’t remember holding in the first place, a sigh of relief. She shivered and yawned. She was too tired for anything right now, a little too cold too. She made sure to shut the French window carefully and tiptoed back to her room. She fell asleep almost instantly, her dream weird and disjointed, filled with pictures she didn’t quite understand, memories of Riposte. Somehow, she felt even more tired when she woke up six hours later, the uplifting scene from early this morning had completely vanished from her mind. And the first thing Kagami Tsurugi did that day was to sneeze. Her nose was stuffy and runny, her eyes slightly bleary, her throat a little hoarse. She had caught a cold and she should have seen it coming. Today was the last day of school before the autumn holidays, she had a suitcase to pack for Japan and she was supposed to have fencing classes in the evening only a few hours before they left. And now she was sneezing. Awesome.

Her tea tasted somewhat bland, so did her fruit salad. Her mother looked at her with concern in her eyes and gave her cold medicine. Later that day, Kagami would learn that it hadn’t worked all that well, in fact in hadn’t helped at all. She took a quick shower, washed her hair — she’d have to get a haircut soon, it had almost grown past her shoulders — and dried herself just as quickly. She couldn’t stop shivering. She decided to wear slightly warmer clothes this time. She hoped it would be enough. At least, there was no way it could make things worse, she thought. She’d have to buy herself a scarf and more jumpers.
She put two extra packets of paper handkerchief in her bag, and one extra layer of concealer under her eyes, applied one extra line of eye pencil, hoping that no one would notice that she was tired and a little sick. She wasn’t the only one with a cold, it seemed, and many other people were sneezing in the métro. Great, Kagami thought to herself, I so desperately needed more bacteria in my life. Why couldn’t they wear surgical masks like responsible people not wanted to spread the disease? She had brought her own, of course, and people looked at her as if she had grown a second head.

She removed the mask when she got near the school. She didn’t need to hear the sniggers of the other students. As often, she was one of the first to make it inside the classroom, and she immediately started reading Yasmin Reza’s ‘Art’. She didn’t bother greeting most of her classmates as they arrived one by one, she only waved at Nino and Alya. The latter had been quieter these last few days, and she waved back weakly. They didn’t need to hear her croaky voice. That day, like most days, Marinette was late. Unlike most days, she looked tired, her hair was slightly unkempt. Kagami stole a worried glance at her friend — just a friend, just a friend — and tried to focus on the geography curriculum.

Kagami tried her best to hold in her sneeze. And failed. In fact, she sneezed all morning long, and it was Marinette’s turn to be worried for her friend. Kagami continued taking down notes even though she couldn’t quite focus. She hadn’t suspected her day could have gotten any worse but it did when the geography teacher, Mme Vidal gave the class a ridiculously time-consuming kind of homework for the holidays, a case study on coastal regions in France and their attractiveness. And it started pouring outside. Marinette almost fell asleep and Kagami had to prod at her softly in the arm to wake her up before French class.

Kagami tried to read the text before the class actually started but she couldn’t quite focus. Maupassant’s Bel-Ami didn’t feel nearly as interesting as what she had hoped for, she had no empathy for Georges Duroy and his rise in social status was almost disgusting. It was certainly the point of the text, when she came to think of it, and it was exactly what Mme Berthes said right away. Unlike most of Kagami’s former teachers, she didn’t spend her time trying to play the role of an historian, explaining everything based on the life of Maupassant and of historical context of the late 19th century, she didn’t try to act like a sociologist or a psychologist. Maybe that was the reason why the young teacher was so unpopular among her colleagues, but Kagami found her brilliant.

Mme Berthes stayed as close to the text as she could, and did not pretend to be an almighty source of authority. She made literature class highly enjoyable, lively, even, and Kagami almost forgot about her stuffy nose, her occasional sneezes and her departure early this Saturday morning. Kagami was completely absorbed in the lesson and didn’t want to miss a single word of what her teacher had to say, and although she didn’t write everything down, she’d remember almost all of it for years. It was Kagami’s sneeze that woke Marinette up again. Kagami hadn’t even noticed that she had fallen back asleep, and she gave Marinette an apologetic wince.
The lesson couldn’t last forever, and soon, too soon, the bell rung. Kagami was back under the
weather and out of handkerchiefs. She almost felt like going back to bed and never leaving its
warmth ever again. Marinette patted her back with a small, sad smile. They didn’t share any classes
together that afternoon, and they wouldn’t see each other for the next two weeks. They’d miss each
other. They finally walked out of the classroom and Marinette looked as though she had something
to ask of Kagami.

“Is it alright if I hug you?” Marinette asked. “I know you’re not always comfortable with that so…”

“Yes, yes it —” Kagami sneezed before she could finish her sentence. “Yes, please, do.”

Marinette closed the distance between the two of them and slowly hugged the other girl.
Hesitantly, Kagami hugged her back, making sure not to allow her hands to go any lower than
Marinette’s shoulders. They remained like this for a little while, and Kagami was almost sure she
heard Marinette hum. Neither of them wanted to let go, but they knew they had to, and they did so
reluctantly. Kagami felt cold. Of course, they’d still text each other, even if they were several
hours away from one another, but now that they had spent almost two months in each other’s daily
company, sharing the same classroom most of the time, sometimes having lunch and more recently
fencing lessons together, it wouldn’t feel the same as during the summer when they were barely
getting to know each other. Not that they knew each other a lot better now, but still.

They parted ways, Marinette going home before her extra English class with Adrien and a few
others while Kagami stayed at school to have lunch before her regular English lesson with the rest
of her class. Nino and Alya were nowhere to be found. Alya sometimes tried to act in a completely
over-the-top manner, but it felt like a caricature of herself. Sometimes, she was quieter than what
Kagami had grown used to, she even kept in the background. Adrien was nowhere to be found, and
she usually didn’t share lunch with other friends of hers.

Kagami had lunch on her own that day, purposefully staying away from the other students. The
food in her lunchbox was dull, almost tasteless, even though her mother had made it slightly
spicier. Kagami blamed her cold for that. Her nose was still stuffy, she still sneezed and now she
missed Marinette. What a great day. Marjane came to keep her company but she failed to lighten up
the mood. She tried to talk about literature, but the conversation didn’t last for more than a few
awkward minutes. They went to the school library to work, and the librarian asked Kagami to
leave. As if she could choose to sneeze noiselessly. When she sat down next to a quiet Alya in the
English classroom, she was in a foul mood.

Today’s English class was uneventful to say the least, Alya and Kagami didn’t chat at all and as
always, M. Rafroidit droned on his own. Most students, if not all of them, didn’t speak English at
all during class, which was better for Kagami. She wouldn’t have to listen to her classmates’
terrible accent and grammar which meant she wouldn’t roll her eyes all the time, only as much as
usual. Also she wouldn’t have to make a fool of herself in front of her classmates because of her
Adrien had told Kagami that his English class was only about twenty students, all of which were given the opportunity to talk and improve their English. M. Rafroidit did all the talking and gave them duplicated notes. It felt as though he was teaching ancient Greek, but not a living language spoken by living people. Nino and Alya wished Kagami a good holiday in Japan before she left for her fencing lessons, and it gave her the energy to make it to the gymnasium where M. D’Argencourt was waiting for her.

Sneezing while wearing her fencing mask was completely new for Kagami, and she wished she had never experienced that. Adrien had looked as if he was trying his best not to crack a pun at her when it happened. Both her friend and the fencing instructor looked concerned about her health, still, but she stayed until the end of the lesson anyway. She’d spend two weeks away from her best teacher yet, not counting her mum, and away from one of her friends and best opponents. She didn’t want to make this last lesson shorter because of her cold.

She usually trained with Adrien, but this time she worked with some other students after M. D’Argencourt asked her to. It wasn’t as bad as she had expected it to be, it allowed her to work a little more on her footwork. Her opponents didn’t share her view on the matter. In fact they felt like practice dummies more than actual people. She didn’t have the patience to explain them what they had done wrong and how they could improve their fencing, and she remained mostly silent. Still, two notable things happened during the fencing lesson. The first one, Kagami finally mastered the moulinet when practicing with her fencing instructor. The second one…

“Your attention, everyone!” M. D’Argencourt all but shouted. “As you may already know, the Junior Fencing Competition… Bless you, Kagami. As I was saying, the Junior Fencing Competition of Paris will take place this November. Our Academy has stayed away from such events for quite a long time, and I think it is time for that era to end! And so, we shall join this competition! Lesson dismissed!”

The gymnasium was filled with the excited chatter of the fencing students as they walked to the changing rooms. Adrien and Kagami shook hands, wishing each other a happy autumn holidays. Kagami stayed in the gymnasium to have a small chat with her fencing instructor. Also, she didn’t want to share the changing room with the other girls, but M. D’Argencourt didn’t need to know that. And so, they talked for a little while, about her training regimen and what she should work on while in Japan. Not that she’d follow all of his tips, not completely at least, she’d also ask her mother for some more advice. Finally, she bade her fencing instructor goodbye and had a quick and rather unenjoyable shower.
Kagami came out of the lycée Carnot, not using her usual exit door. She felt exhausted and lonely and still sick, and none of that could be helped. She looked for her earphones but couldn’t find them where she usually left them. There was no use staying there, she had so many things to do, and cold medicine waiting for her at home. She searched her pockets and found her earphones at last. She started walking to the métro station right away, but almost stopped in the middle of the street. Had someone just called her name? She must have misheard, at least that was what Kagami told herself, and so she didn’t bother looking around to see who could have possibly yelled what sounded like her name.

Kagami’s music — Ryuichi Sakamoto’s Amore— was playing a little too loud for her to hear the sound of footsteps getting closer until the last moment. “Hey, Kagami, could you please slow down a little?” a voice asked loudly and Kagami turned around at last. A very out-of-breath Marinette stopped right in front of Kagami with what looked like a small package tucked under her arm. Why was she here? Had she run all the way from her house to here? She’d ask these questions later if ever, Kagami thought. Seeing Marinette now made her incredibly happy.

“I’m so glad I finally found you!” Marinette said between huffed breaths. “I know it’s not much but you had me worried today… Please, take it!” And with that, she all but shoved the package into Kagami’s hands.

On closer inspection, it wasn’t a small package at all, but a red woollen scarf. It felt incredibly soft and smooth to the touch, except for an odd seam the shape of an “M”. Kagami wound it around her neck slowly, afraid to damage it. She felt much better already. Warmth bloomed in her chest and—

“You… You knitted it yourself, didn’t you?” Kagami smiled at Marinette fondly. “I wish… I wish I knew how to thank you for all you have done for me…”

“Just wear it, alright? Seeing you sick worried me a lot, I hate seeing you like that and… But you have a métro to take and tonight you’re going back to Japan and I just wanted to see you one last time because I’m going to miss you and I should probably stop talking now I think,” Marinette rambled.

Kagami did something incredibly brave and foolish, something that made her heart pound in her chest as never before. She hugged Marinette, slowly, pouring all her gratitude in the gesture. She was going to miss her plane if they kept on hugging like that, but she didn’t want to let go, and neither did Marinette, it seemed, but they both knew they had to. Kagami took a step back and brushed a hand through her hair in an attempt to look very smooth and not red-faced at all. Kagami’s phone rung as if on cue, and she had to pick it up.

“Mum?”
“Turn your head to the right! Hello!”

There was the sound of a car window rolling down and here was Itsuko Tsurugi, waving at her daughter from a taxi, mere centimetres away from her daughter. Kagami jumped and dropped her phone. Luckily, Marinette caught it before it could fall on the ground and Kagami’s mother clapped as though it had been a show. Marinette was quite an acrobat, after all, but still…

“You must be Marinette!” she beamed. “Kagami told me so much about you, it’s nice to finally meet you! You should come and visit us someday!”

“I-it’s nice to meet you too, Mme Tsurugi,” Marinette said, not quite knowing what she could add to that. She was quite impressed by the woman.

“Kagami dear, get in the taxi, there is still much to do.”

Kagami nodded dumbly, looked at Marinette one last time and opened the taxi’s door, getting inside the vehicle. The taxi drove away as soon as she closed the door. Kagami could feel her mother grinning at her without even having to look at her. She shifted in her seat nervously, bracing herself for whatever question her mother could throw at her. She couldn’t have guessed what her mother had in mind.

“You looked really happy when you were talking to her,” Itsuko Tsurugi noted with a satisfied smile on her face. “This Marinette looks like a nice person.”

“Yes, she really is,” Kagami said, fiddling with her scarf… “Mum? What is it?”

“You’d like her to be more than a friend,” Itsuko said, still grinning. “I’ll be happy not only to have her over for lunch but also for dinner, you know that?”

“You would?” Kagami hoped she didn't sound like an excited puppy.

Itsuko Tsurugi nodded, satisfied, and Kagami’s small smile did not leave her lips for the rest of the ride.
Hello there!

Next chapter, Tokyo, haircuts and merchandise.

Prequel references, lots of them, because that fight wasn’t silly enough!

The idea of Marinette knitting a red scarf for Kagami was one of my firsts for this fic!

Ryuichi Sakamoto’s Amore. I really like his work as an actor in Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence and his work as a composer in general

Follow me on Tumblr here, I post previews for the incoming chapters there (sometimes) and other stuff.

Still a baguette, the bad English is not intended…

À jeudi!
Itsuko Tsurugi decided that her daughter needed to rest more, and although Kagami had tried to sleep for most of the twelve hours of the flight, she still looked quite exhausted when the plane finally landed in Haneda. Itsuko was febrile, and she hoped it didn’t show too much. Would everything be alright in their Parisian flat? And more importantly, would her husband come to pick them up at the airport? Of course not, she told herself bitterly, he’d have someone else do it for him. And Itsuko Tsurugi was right. Kagami received a short text from her father, a very short “Can’t come. Sent someone to pick you up around 6:45PM.” In twenty minutes. Hadn’t Kagami been so tired, she would have been fuming. She was slightly irritated instead, which was no better. It was the way Father worked, she should have grown used to it.

She tried to cool down and decided to message Marinette to tell her that she was back in Tokyo and that her flight had gone well enough. The girl answered her right away. Kagami was too tired to smile at this answer. She’d have to send a few messages to her other French friends, but that would have to wait. For now she just sent a few texts to her friends in Japan to tell them that she was back. She’d have to ask Taneda if he could cut her hair if he found the time for that. Maybe they could hang out with Aiko if she managed to find the time for that between her homework, her fencing training and the rest. Two weeks were more than enough for all of that, she thought. At last, there was the car, big enough to fit all of their luggage. Still, Itsuko Tsurugi didn’t relax, and her daughter looked equally apprehensive.

The drive from the airport to Tokyo was silent, rather tense, the driver didn’t quite know what to say and neither Kagami nor her mother were in the mood for conversation. The only thing Kagami wanted was to go back to sleep, and her mother had to wake her up when the car stopped at last, a few hundred metres away from the Tsurugi flat. Kagami wound up her scarf tightly around her neck as they walked down the street and somehow, it helped. It only struck her now that Tokyo was indeed very clean, way cleaner than Paris. She had always assumed this was normal until now. She had missed this. Kagami yawned and stretched. Her suitcase felt too heavy. She needed sleep.

Of course, the flat was completely dark when they arrived, if not for the late evening light that filtered through the windowpanes. Not that it really surprised either of them. Of course, there was nobody there, least of all Teppei Tsurugi. Itsuko unlocked the door. The two women stepped inside, took off their shoes, looked at each other for a second and made their way inside the flat. The floors seemed rather clean, but a thin layer of dust covered the bookshelves. Some things never changed, Kagami guessed, Father only came home to sleep and then went back to work, he had never really lived there to begin with. She pushed her bedroom door open.

Nothing had moved in the past two months, from that flashy family ring Kagami had forgotten on purpose so that she wouldn’t have to wear it all the time in France to a boxful of books she had asked Father to give away. It was as if the man hadn’t come in her room once. Of course, he hadn’t
watered her eucalyptus, and the small shrub looked like it had died a few weeks ago, completely dry. She shouldn’t have expected to see it alive, but Kagami was disappointed. She decided she wouldn’t buy a new one, there was no use to it. At least, mum had asked the neighbour to take care of their plants in Paris, the same couldn’t be said about here. The room felt both familiar and something completely foreign to her. It was the room of a girl who had gone missing.

They had to order food that night. The fridge was almost empty, Teppei probably ate outside all the time and never cooked for himself. Kagami and her mother looked equally worn out and unhappy although they avoided the subject completely. They still loved Tokyo, but this flat didn’t feel like theirs, only a soulless copy of it. They slept all Sunday long so that they would not be too jet lagged, and when Kagami woke up in the evening that day, her Father was there, his face grave and unreadable if not for a hint of disappointment in his eyes. Kagami and her mother didn’t speak much, but they came to a common understanding: they’d better go out as much as possible. Staying here would be too uneasy.

Every single day, Kagami would wake up early, work out and find an excuse not to stay at home. She did most of her homework in public libraries, which took her only a few hours the first two days, but she pretended she had more and stayed there to read. Anywhere but home would do, really. She practised her fencing even more than she usually did, spending even more time than before in the salle. She followed M. D’Argencourt’s advice, at least partly. That competition was drawing near, and she wouldn’t allow herself to lose, or finish second for that matter. In fact, she intensified her training regimen, making sure that it would take place in the evening so that she’d be too tired to do anything afterwards; she’d go back home, have dinner, take a bath and sleep.

It was a rather exhausting routine, and training with her mother made it even more complicated than before. Itsuko knew her daughter too well to fall for her feints. She was a former olympic champion, after all, and to her, Kagami’s appels were a little too predictable, she thought, her daughter stamping her foot didn’t distract her in the slightest. And if didn’t work on her, it wasn’t good enough. Itsuko would shape her daughter into the best duellist in the family, better than her father, better than herself, even. It wasn’t because Kagami was fifteen that her mother expected any less of her than the very best. Did that make her a bad mother? Was she doing the right thing? Her daughter didn’t say a thing, even when she was pushed to her limits.

Although fencing was something she genuinely enjoyed, Kagami’s life felt somehow emptier now than it had in the last few years, and not only because a part of it was in France; the Ladyblog had become less and less active. Even while in Paris, it had been where Kagami used to get her daily fix of Ladybug. There used to be new posts, new footage uploaded by Alya every days. The same couldn’t be said anymore. Her contributors helped, of course, but it wasn’t the same, it lacked that unmistakable flair. The forum seemed less interesting than before, and Kagami muted many Ladybug-related subscriptions of hers. Marinette had complained that Alya took quite some time to answer her when she answered at all, and the girl with the glasses hadn’t answered Kagami’s own “I’m back in Japan” text. Kagami didn’t know what to think of it.
Kagami still had a lot of spare time, despite the homework and her practice; she had never been so glad to have friends. She hadn’t expected Marjane to text her but she did, with quite a few mythology puns. Nino texted her too, although not that often, and even more occasionally Adrien’s name showed up in her messages. And a name she had rather not see, too. Kagami didn’t know how, but Gustave had managed to get her number. She didn’t bother answering him, hoping that he’d get the hint and just stop texting her. And of course, he didn’t. In the end, Kagami decided to block the boy completely, and regretted she hadn’t done that before.

Of course, Kagami tried to text Marinette as often as she could, they still chatted about everything they could think of, and Marinette sent many sketches and pictures, of her work and of herself Kagami tried to do the same, and it was quite nice in itself, not different from what they had done all summer long. Still, Kagami had thought she had grown used to missing people, but it had rarely felt like that. It was a nagging feeling, not that she couldn’t focus on other things, but if she let her mind wander too far… And it was almost everywhere, especially when she played video games Marinette had suggested they played — the Minish Cap was giving her a harder time than planned. She hated that feeling.

Kagami was glad Aiko and Taneda were there, and she had a lot of catching up to do. She had tried to keep up with the two of them, but she felt like she had been missing out a lot. Messages weren’t everything, it seemed. When had Taneda grown up so much? Not that he was that tall, he’d still be a little shorter than Kagami even though he was older than her, but still. Aiko used to be the loud one in their group of friends, but she had finally learned how to lower her voice when needed. Small, but noticeable changes she had never seen coming. Kagami wondered if her friends thought she had changed, but if she had, they told her nothing of it.

Together, the three friends tried to make the most of the time they had, and Aiko had planned many things. They tried something new everyday, from going to the cinema to strolling around Shibuya and going window-shopping there, or simply staying at one of the two friends’ places — Kagami’s flat was a big no, and she had told them so immediately. Teppei Tsurugi was an unpredictable man after all.

They almost fell back to their former routine when Kagami lived in Japan, and it felt reassuring, somehow. But it wasn’t exactly the same. The small alterations felt welcome, even. The next ten days passed in a blur of pictures, sounds, flavours, sensations Kagami had grown used to, the familiar sight of the city bathed in the morning light, the noise of the Ladybug-themed pachinko when Kagami scored a high score, Aiko’s purposefully terrible singing voice, the kikigori they shared in Ikebukuro, sore muscles after training session. Kagami was seldom bored, and for the most part, she was happy about the way her days went, if not for Father being his usual aloof, unsupportive self.

She had a lot to write in her Tokyo journal. She missed Marinette, but it didn’t keep her from enjoying what she had here in Tokyo. Soon enough, she would be back in Paris and she didn’t want to regret her holiday.
It was the ninth day when Kagami finally asked Taneda to cut her hair like he had done in the past, and he reluctantly agreed. She didn’t want to bother her mother with it, nor pay for a hairdresser. And Taneda worked wonders with his scissors in his hand, his living room was better than any salon, even if the cheesy drama playing in the background wasn’t her thing. Taneda hadn’t lost his edge, and though Kagami only wanted him to shorten the length of her hair just like he had done the year before, she knew that she could have asked for something more complex. After a full hour of a very minute work, Taneda was satisfied with what he had done, and Kagami was too. He was good.

Taneda’s mother had rather he became a businessman like his uncle, but he had plans of his own, he told Kagami that day, if he didn’t make it to university. And he had made it very clear by experimenting on his own hair first. During her years in Tokyo, Kagami had seen Taneda dye his hair quite often. He tried to hide his enthusiasm when he spoke about it, but Kagami saw right through it. Why couldn’t he allow himself to speak up more openly about the things he liked? It wasn’t something to be ashamed of, was it? Not that Kagami was very open about these sorts things either, she reflected.

“Hey, what do you want to do when you’re out of lycée?”

Kagami didn’t know what she possibly answer to that. She had never considered her near future. She would become one of the best fencers of her generation, of course, but the thought of being this and this only dissatisfied her. She answered Taneda’s question with an evasive “How about you ask me the same question some other day?” and that was it. Aiko brushed her hand through Kagami’s hair appraisingly that day, Itsuko noted the change and was happy about it — had Kagami asked Taneda for any other type of haircut, she feared that her mother might not have been so supportive —while Father, when he showed up for dinner, didn’t seem to notice any change. Sometimes, she wondered why her parents were married at all.

Kagami took more than a dozen pictures that evening before she found one she believed to be good enough to be sent to Marinette. It was the middle of the day in France when Kagami went to bed and usually, Marinette would answer her within an hour, usually a few minutes, but this time she didn’t... When Kagami woke up the next morning, she almost found herself smiling at the message Marinette had sent her while she was asleep. It was a heartwarming compliment, and it made her heart skip a few beats... But something was off, as though it had been hastily typed. It was odd, Kagami thought, Marinette hadn’t said she would be busy. Marinette was more of a secretive girl than Kagami had remembered her to be. Kagami got up and didn’t bother checking the Ladyblog that morning. There was nothing new on the site. Besides, she had other plans for the day, and for that, she would need to ask her mother.

Itsuko trained her daughter until noon, and at last, she was satisfied with Kagami’s sabre technique. She seemed to have stopped trying to imitate her mother’s compound attacks, and her feints were getting more and more convincing. Itsuko hugged Kagami before they parted ways. It was a happy
Kagami who joined Aiko for lunch, not minding the cold weather —she hadn’t forgotten the scarf, in fact she wore it as often as she could. The city would be even more crowded than it usually was, but Aiko was used to it and so was Kagami.

They were in the middle of Shibuya Crossing chatting about their plans for when Kagami would come back when Aiko’s phone chimed and the girl could barely keep herself from squealing when she checked it. She all but shoved the phone in Kagami’s face. And Kagami could see where Aiko’s excitement was coming from. Maybe she should have checked the Ladyblog after all. The Japanese fan-translation of the website had just uploaded something new, a public statement from Paris’s superheroes. These rarely happened, and Kagami had a hard time trying not to look excited about it too. Aiko was even worst than her when it came to Ladybug, it seemed, and it didn’t surprise her.

And so, the two friends went to Aiko’s small and cramped flat after a short trip to the konbini. They may have been hungry, but there was something more important in their minds. And watching that video on a small phone screen would be a crime. Aiko’s laptop would do the job properly, the girl ran to her room to bring it to the kitchen where Kagami was waiting for her. They’d cook later, they decided. Why couldn’t the page load any faster? The wait felt almost unbearable to them. They needed to know, they had to. Finally, the video loaded without stuttering, Aiko clenched her fists and Kagami held her breath.

“Citizens of Paris,” Chat Noir spoke. He looked worn out, and so did Ladybug. “As you all know, a young man was almost harmed during yesterday’s akuma attack. In spite of our warnings, he… He found himself in the way of our fight and although we managed to rescue him, he was nearly crushed by a projectile fired by the akumatized victim. This kind of incident has happened in the past, and it’s not the first time someone who calls themselves an overzealous fan of us does this. However, we’d like it not happen anymore. Paris, we are here to protect you, but acting irresponsibly just to watch us in action is dangerous and unhelpful.

“Our mission is to protect you, to help you, but we cannot always keep you safe if you purposefully throw yourself in harm’s way. This is not a silly cartoon or a fun show for you to watch, these confrontations are dangerous and violent. We appreciate all the support you give us, Paris, but you are not background characters in a story of heroes, you are not expendable and we don’t want to be considered as gods of some sorts. If you don’t act with safety in your minds, you only make things harder for us.”

Kagami kept her eyes on the screen, biting the inside of her cheek as Chat Noir stepped back from the line of journalists. It was going to be Ladybug’s turn to speak at any moment now, and next to Kagami, Aiko bounced in her chair. Of course, it felt like a show to her, she wasn’t there, she didn’t live there. Of course, a leather clad boy wearing cat ears and a domino mask would feel like a silly character in a kid’s cartoon. To many, it wouldn’t feel real. At least I’m better than that, Kagami thought. Ladybug had stepped forward and Kagami felt her breath hitch in her throat. In her eyes, an expression Kagami had never seen in hours of footage and personal sighting.
There was a hint of disappointment and anger in these blue eyes.

“I wish to come back to what my partner said,” Ladybug said and her voice all but quivered, “about our status as new idols of some sorts. This is not what we are. This is not what we want to be. And I think you are completely wrong if you think that idolising us helps at all. By doing that, you make me feel like a movie star of some sorts and that’s a very grave mistake. Many of you love our iconic costumes, you love how cool we look in action… But is that just it? Is that all you think we’re here for? It feels nice to have this support, it’s nice to know that you like these symbols and I appreciate it, but does it help us make Paris akuma and crime-free?

“I don’t think buying merchandise with our names smashed on it helps in the slightest, and I don’t want to be associated with that at all. We personally don’t make any profit out of it and we don’t want to make any profit at all. A few weeks ago, I was made aware of how most of this merchandise was made and where it was made. I don’t support it at all, and knowing the working conditions of the people who certainly made all these fancy toys and action figures… It makes me feel sick.

“As heroes, we are not looking for any kind of profit in terms of money, but whatever business trying to sell you these is. I think buying this kind of merchandise is a mistake, and it shows something even more disturbing. I think you completely missed what we stand for. We are not just animal-themed superheroes created to sell toys, this is not what we’ve chosen to be. There are better ways to spend your money, ways that would actually help us and show appreciation for us as more than suits. We don’t need Ladybug and Chat Noir idolators, and romanticising us, being obsessed with us that way is far from healthy.”

It felt like someone had knocked the air out of Kagami’s lungs and poured icy water on her skin. Something was shaking within her, and Ladybug’s voice had started stirring it. Had she been wrong this whole time? Had it been wrong of her to create that shrine and collect all these items? Did that make her a disgusting person? Had she missed the point completely? She hadn’t helped Ladybug at all by doing any of that, all she had done was make some companies a little richer Her stomach churned. She felt sick.

She had hoped it would serve as a way to thank Ladybug but all she had done was satisfy herself and put herself in danger instead. Kagami’s intentions hadn’t mattered in the slightest, all she had done was collect things devoid of the meaning she hoped they held. She felt like she had been lied to, she had been cheated and in a way she caused more harm than good. She wasn’t used to being wrong like that. Aiko paused the video and looked at her friend with concern.

“You wanna go outside for a little while?”
“Ladybug is not done speaking yet,” Kagami answered weakly, as if to convince herself. “Let’s try hearing all she has to say, right?”

Aiko hesitantly unfroze the video.

“But in saying that, I am being too harsh on the many of you who believed it would help,” Ladybug said and her eyes softened. “Please, try not to be too hard on yourselves. You couldn’t have known, and you are not the ones who disappoint me. You were not the ones who chose to sell things en masse, and you were tricked into believing that it would support us actively. You deserved better, and there are ways for you to help us in our fight against Hawk Moth, there are ways for you to help us make our duty easier, there are ways for you to help us make the world a better place. This is what we stand for.”

“We try to be healers as much as we are fighters,” Chat Noir added with a small grin, “of course we fight evil and that’s pretty pawesome in itself, but that’s not just it. And this is where you can play a role.”

“First and foremost, try to keep away from any akuma-related situation, and by that I mean that onlookers may be in danger,” Ladybug spoke clearly. “Don’t try to be a hero. If the police and the army failed to contain akumas, I don’t think you stand a single chance against one of them. Don’t be a vigilante, chances are you’ll only hurt yourself and possibly others too. I’m sure you mean well, but you can mean for the best and end up creating a disaster.

“Secondly, trying to track us or to reveal our identities is also risky, it may be used by malevolent people, possibly Hawk Moth himself. Be sure that you are in a safe place when you share this kind of information. Nothing good will come out of it, we’ll only become easier targets for villains. And the consequences for our families… You can well imagine how disastrous they could be. Please, be careful about it, and think about the consequences your actions could have. Is taking the risk worth it? What is it that you really want out of it? Ask yourself this simple question.”

At this point, Kagami went in the kitchen and poured herself a cool glass of water. In the meantime, she sent Taneda and her mother a few texts; she’d be back in France in two days and there were still things to do. Kagami could still hear the sound from a distance, Aiko had been mindful of that, but a good part of what Ladybug said was lost to her.

“Thirdly and maybe more importantly, we now know that Hawk Moth uses negative emotions as a fuel for his powers, this helps him create his sbires,” Ladybug said. “And there’s only one way to prevent it from happening, and it is through understanding, caring, patience and empathy. We can’t ask you to love each other, although it would certainly help, but at least have some respect for each other. Many akumas were born of injustice and prejudice, it could have been avoided easily. Not only will it prevent the creation of new akumas, but I think it will feel better for everyone.
“We all have negative emotions from time to time, even the two of us and I think we should be able to talk about it. Even Chat Noir and I can be angry, and sometimes having such feelings is far from abnormal. But it’s sometimes we can talk about and I think it is what would be for the best. But we know it isn’t always that easy. Sometimes, a hierarchy gets in the way of equal treatment. I don’t know if this is the right place to discuss it but I’ll simply ask you this: managers, bosses, treat your employees with dignity, teachers, treat your students with respect, they deserve it, parents, be kind and patient with your children. Hawk Moth has used and will use unfair situations and weaponise them. I wish I didn’t have to say that, it seems so obvious to me, but it seems that it isn’t and—”

The speakers on Aiko’s computer weren’t the best, but the girl and her friend were sure they had heard a faint beep —Ladybug’s earrings?— and the speech was cut short. The superheroes gave the journalists their apologies, and Kagami felt like the words were also meant for the viewers, and Chat Noir and Ladybug parted ways. The video stopped and the room was silent for a while, neither Kagami nor Aiko dared their mouths for a little while. After an endless minute, Aiko cleared her throat.

“Do you know where I could sell all that merchandise?” Aiko asked. “I’m not sure I feel comfortable having these figures in my room.”

“I don’t know, but I’ll ask myself the same question when I’m back in Paris,” Kagami said. “There’s no way I’m keeping that shrine.”

On a cold November morning, a very jet-lagged Kagami Tsurugi walked to her room with one idea in her mind, getting rid of that shrine and all of her Ladybug merchandise. She hadn’t unpacked her suitcase yet, but she had more important things to do than that.

She was glad to be back in Paris. Father had been awful the last day, there had been a lot of yelling, and she was happy to be away from him for a while. Her goodbyes with Aiko and Taneda hadn’t been easy, but she wasn’t sad to be back. More than that, she was happy to find that their next door neighbour had taken their responsibilities seriously. Jérémy Belpois and Aelita Stones had struck her as an odd couple, but they had taken care of the Tsurugi’s plants in their absence, Itsuko even found a freshly baked cake on the kitchen table with a note from the young couple. Itsuko smiled to herself. She was glad to be back home.

Kagami gathered everything Ladybug-related she owned — safe for her observation journal, of course, she’d keep it although she wouldn’t try adding new content to it—and put the pile of things in a cardboard box. It took her a little while to clean everything up, but at last she was satisfied with her work. Kagami wrapped her red scarf around her neck. She’d give the box to a charity, she decided, that’s what Marjane had suggested and it was quite a good idea. Kagami felt
lighter, a little happier too, as if a weight had been lifted from her. The next weeks would be great, she decided. On Monday, she’d see Marinette and her friends again… She could hardly wait.

Chapter End Notes

And so… I'm back. Yay…

Things have been complicated and not very easy but I'm in a better place now. I haven't given up on this just yet, and if you are patient enough, I think I might be able to finish this fic (which is clearly AU with the way season 2 has developed). I'm trying to work on other things too, and the next update may not come until I'm satisfied with my work, but it will come before the end of the year if nothing terribly wrong happens to me, or if I don't spend too much time gushing over Deltarune.

I'll start posting other things (not always related to this fic) on my tumblr here so visit it if you feel like it!

The existence of Miraculous merch in-universe is something that has always ticked me off, and I'm sorry if that was heavy-handed but I wanted to address it.

Also, yes, that's a Code Lyoko reference, Kagami's neighbours.

I'll see you in the next chapter,

À bientôt, et merci encore pour tout, vous êtes les meilleur.e.s !
She wouldn’t be late today, she wouldn’t be late today, she wouldn’t be late today. But her bed was so warm, so comfortable and she still felt a little tired; staying there would be alright, wouldn’t it? Marinette stirred and snuggled up against her blanket. Her alarm clock would start ringing in a few minutes but she couldn’t help feeling sleepy. Being herself was tiring. She slowly opened her eyes and closed them again and she hid her head under a pillow so that she wouldn’t be forced to hear the metallic sound that was meant to wake her up.

Besides, days were getting shorter and shorter, the night sky lingered longer every morning, so it was completely natural for her to want to go back to sleep again, and so, Marinette didn’t wake up when the alarm clock rung. Five more minutes could have easily turned into a good half hour, and a few years ago, it would have been the case. Not anymore. A minuscule silhouette snuck up under the pillow and heaved a small sigh. How Tikki hated doing that… But it couldn’t be helped, she guessed. And she had to admit it, she found Marinette’s reaction to be quite funny every time she did that. Tikki got closer to her young Ladybug’s ear and opened her mouth. Her small, razor-sharp teeth glinted in the dark and—

“OUCH!”

Marinette jumped out of bed, completely awake now, cupping her ear in her hand, small tears in her eyes. Sometimes, she wished she hadn’t asked Tikki to take care of waking her up, even though that had always proven to be tremendously efficient. Marinette patted her kwami’s head menacingly and Tikki whispered a small “sorry” though her eyes said otherwise. Marinette went to the bathroom and showered quickly. She got dressed. She had a quick breakfast, kissed her mum goodbye and took an umbrella —the one Adrien and given her— before she walked out the door. She waved at her father who waved back at her from inside the bakery.

And she did make it in time. The November weather was far from enjoyable, but she didn’t mind waiting for Alya in front of the school and she wasn’t the only one waiting for their friends. Many students were chatting around lycée Carnot, which was a good sign. She didn’t have to wait too long for her friend to arrive and she beamed when she saw Alya walking towards her.

“Hey! how’s it going?”

“… Hey, girl, how’s it going?…”
There was something off with her friend, Marinette decided as the two of them walked to the classroom, but she didn’t speak the thought out loud. She couldn’t quite pinpoint when it had started, maybe a few weeks before the holiday, maybe even before, in the aftermath of the Sapotis situation. It hadn’t gotten better. Alya looked tired, as if she wasn’t quite there. And also… Thinner? Something was decidedly wrong, and Marinette couldn’t help but want to ask her questions.

Alya wasn’t in a very talkative mood today, not that she had been particularly chatty these last few days. She had cancelled most of their plans in the last few weeks, and even now, she purposefully didn’t look at Marinette when she could help it. In fact, she seemed to look at nothing at all most of the time. Alya’s eyes were dull. It worried Marinette.

They stopped in front of the classroom’s door and Marinette spied what was going on inside from the corner of her eye. All the students there were having lively discussions, all but Kagami who was sitting, cross-legged, the red scarf Marinette had knitted for her wound around her neck, a book in her hand. Had she always been so gorgeous? Marinette had known Kagami to be pretty, but never this beautiful. She stood out in the middle of her classmates, and Marinette almost forgot they were there at all. She dismissed it, dismissed all of it, came back to her senses quickly and berated herself; she had eyes for Adrien and Adrien only, even if they didn’t see each other very often. She turned to Alya, and the two friends stepped inside the classroom.

Kagami finally closed her book and greeted Marinette and Alya from a distance with an almost perfectly composed face, the one she used in class, only betrayed by the hint of a blush on her cheeks. As Alya and Marinette came closer, Kagami’s neutral mask fell off, revealing a girl happy to reunite with her friends. They had a few minutes left before M. Dupuis would show up. Marinette almost let Alya keep in the background, as she and Kagami started to plan their next fencing lessons together — Kagami’s competition would be this week, of course, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t find the time to practice together— and shared their experience playing the games on their ever-growing list.

Nino looked more openly worried about his girlfriend when he joined the small group, he looked as though he knew more than Marinette about his girlfriend’s state of mind. And that was highly unusual. Not that Nino was dense when it came to her, but Alya normally told Marinette everything important about her, and sometimes even more than what Marinette needed to know. The conversation went on anyway, with Alya sinking more and more in her chair. At last, the teacher arrived and everyone went back to their seats. Today was a slow day, almost a sick day.

No matter how hard she tried, Marinette could not focus on the lesson, her mind was too busy racing to different directions at the same time for that. First, Hawk Moth. He had been strangely silent these last few days, and she was almost sure he was planning something big. Then Alya. Marinette was having a hard time making sense of her friend’s behaviour, it worried her a lot. It all got muddled with her excitement of seeing Kagami after two weeks of only messaging her, and her
feelings for Adrien. She wasn’t sure of what they were anymore and it only confused her further.

She’d have to pay a visit to Master Fu soon, there was no way Chat Noir and her would be able to face whatever Hawk Moth had planned on their own. And it looked as if Kagami didn’t get along with the rest of the class. She hadn’t texted Adrien in more than a week and he hadn’t texted her back ever since he had answered her question about homework. And then there was Hawk Moth who still had to be taken care of. And Kagami. And Alya. Adrien.

Marinette snapped out of that spiral and forced herself to write the lesson down even though she didn’t really understand what M. Dupuis was saying. She was almost sure she had caught Kagami glancing discretely at her and it only added to her confusion. All in all, she was very glad when the bell rung. She could have used the opportunity to ask Alya what was going on with their way to math class, but decided against it. Didn’t they tell each other almost everything? Safe for the two of them being respectively Ladybug and Rena Rouge, of course, but that didn’t matter. No, Marinette decided, she wouldn’t press on the matter, if Alya had wanted to talk about it more openly, she would have done so. That, and Kagami seemed to have something to ask of Marinette.

“So… There’s that girl in seconde sept, Marjane,” Kagami said, not quite meeting Marinette’s eyes. “And she’s working on a project about Greek tragedy… I told her you were really great at designing clothes and costumes so…”

“You really think so? Well… It makes me happy that you think so… But you’ve never seen any of my actual creations, I mean, safe for your scarf and some of my clothes, but these are pretty modern designs, I’ve never shown you…” Marinette added. She then fell silent for a few seconds as they walked to the math classroom. “Wait a minute, you found my blog?”

“I… might have.” Kagami was almost sheepish and Marinette couldn’t help finding it adorable. But the expression turned into something else, a spark of mischief lit up Kagami’s eyes. “I think that Chat Noir headband is really adorable. Are you a fan?”

It worked just as Kagami had expected, and she smirked at herself as Marinette spluttered and turned beet red. The blushing girl turned to Kagami and looked at her with faux indignation. Marinette mouthed an exaggeratedly mortified “how dare you” and finally giggled to herself when she saw her friend’s confused face. Oh, she needed to spend more time with her. She sobered up as they got to their seats and finally answered the question Kagami hadn’t been able to ask properly in the first place.

“I’ll be glad to meet Marjane and talk about her project with her! Thanks for mentioning me in that conversation, really, I appreciate that,” Marinette whispered to her friend as Mme Artigue started to talk about vectors. Kagami nodded and mouthed a small “At lunch, would that be alright?”,
which Marinette whispered a small “why not”. Kagami texted Marjane from under her desk, discretely enough so that the teacher wouldn’t notice. She was getting good at getting past everybody’s radars.

Once more, Marinette could not focus on the lesson and she tried to doodle to chase these intrusive thoughts of her. Three things happened during the class. The first was that she missed most of what the teacher told the class, which meant she would have to ask someone for their notes —Maybe Karim?— if she wanted to ace the test. The second one, she sketched a few designs she was quite happy with. And finally, she made up her mind as to her plan considering Hawk Moth. She’d go see Master Fu before the end of the day, be it as Marinette or Ladybug, they’d talk about the recent events, or rather the complete lack of Hawk Moth activities altogether, and see if they could recruit some more heroes and have Rena Rouge become a permanent member of team Miraculous. Also, she needed to find a new name for it.

She was lost in her own thoughts, too lost to pay notice to Kagami rolling her eyes when a student gave the wrong answer to the question. Or maybe Marinette saw it, but decided not to take note of it. And roll her eyes, Kagami did. If only the class could end sooner… In Marinette’s bag, Tikki sneezed softly. Her Ladybug’s stressful thoughts could be very tiring for a small kwami like her.

Kim’s stomach made a pretty good impression of a whale’s song around a quarter to noon, and that was the sign that lunchtime was drawing near. At last, after what felt like forever, the bell rung and very hungry teenagers stormed out of the classroom without caring much for what the teacher had to say or their assignments for the next class. And once again, Alya was as distant as she could be without it seeming overly rude. It was made a child’s play thanks to the noisiness of the canteen, and to the fact that Marjane came to join them. And Marinette quite busy trying to follow what the girl was saying. The crowd was noisy but Marjane’s passionate voice made up for it. And Marinette almost understood everything. Almost.

“…and so,” Marjane said with a quiver of excitement in her voice as she ran a hand through her hair, “if we take in consideration that we now know that Greek temples were not pristine white buildings but that they were actually painted in many colours, sometimes quite garish ones, and the statues too… I think we should go with something colourful don’t you think? If you’re cool with that, that is.”

Kagami had to suppress a grin when she saw Marinette nod with a frown. She looked quite lost with all these explanations. Marinette had the courage to ask more than a few questions and each answer got her more and more thoughtful. Even though the other girl didn’t make it that easy to follow, Marinette looked rather interested in what Marjane had to say anyway, and this alone was rather heartwarming for Kagami to watch. She completely missed Alya getting up and walking away from the table, not looking back. She disappeared in the crowd before Marinette or Nino could catch her.
Alya skipped school this afternoon, without telling her boyfriend and best friend beforehand. Not that Nino seemed that surprised, but he didn’t stop stomping his foot during the entirety of their history class, and it wasn’t out of excitement for the syllabus. Marinette knew that if he had known anything, he would have told her. Nino was quite secretive when he wanted to, but that wasn’t very often, and besides, Marinette could easily tell when he was lying. He wasn’t sure of what Alya was doing but he probably had a few guesses. And here they were, listening to the teacher drone instead of doing anything for Alya. A feeling of dread settled in Marinette’s stomach, and there was nothing to be done about it for now.

Marinette was relieved when the bell rang after two tedious hours, and though she hid it rather well, Kagami seemed to feel the same. Kagami was harder to read when she was in class than when she was around a smaller number of people. Marinette had almost forgotten about that side of her. Marinette excused herself and the two girls parted ways outside the classroom, Kagami would be going to the library to study before her fencing practise, Marinette was going home so that she could work on a personal project, or so she told Kagami. Nino decided to go home too — there was no Adrien to hang out with before his fencing class, and he wasn’t in the mood for anything school-related anyway. Nino and Marinette parted ways in front of lycée Carnot.

Of course, Marinette didn’t go home at all. Instead, she decided it was high time she paid a visit to a small man in his massage parlour. Talking with a man who knew everything she needed to know about how to save Paris could qualify as a personal project, no? Even after an entire year of being Ladybug, she still felt guilty about lying to her friends. These were half-truths, she reasoned, and it couldn’t be nearly as terrible as openly and completely lying to… About anyone, really. Paris was grey and dull that afternoon, but at least the rain had stopped. Still, Marinette hurried her pace.

The young Ladybug and the old man had a lot to talk about, and no one would disturb them. She had the feeling that the massage parlour would be empty and she was right. It seemed Master Fu had no customers this afternoon, at least no one waiting outside, Marinette noted as she approached the building. She hesitantly walked inside, her feet shifting to an en garde pose. The lights flickered, a strong smell of incense washing over her. What was Master Fu doing? It felt an awful lot like one of his many mysterious rituals he refused to tell her about.

She knew there was no use calling his name, he’d come and greet her soon enough, and so she sat down and took off her shoes. A few odd noises disturbed the silence of the building, followed by an equally strange chant. Marinette could make out Master Fu’s voice, and… Was it Wayzz joining him? She couldn’t quite tell what it was that they were singing, the language was definitely not one she knew, she was sure of that. Tibetan, maybe? The entire building pulsed softly, a small cloud of dust filled the air. Tikki winced inside Marinette’s bag but said nothing. The lights went out completely.

“Hello, Marinette,” a weary voice said.
Master Fu was wearing a ceremonial gown, a deep forest green cloth embroidered with golden symbols. Threads of silver light ran across the man’s entire body in an intricate pattern. The jade bracelet he usually wore was missing from his wrist. Marinette couldn’t shake the impression of déjà vu. A Ladybug must have seen something like. The old man knelt next to her.

“The ritual has worked rather well, I must say, and I should be protected for the next few days, even without Wayzz by my side,” Master Fu whispered weakly. He had never looked so old and tired.

“Are you alright?” Marinette asked.

“Yes, yes there is no need to worry. I think the time has come for Trixx and his master to meet again, but in case things go awry, I trust you with Wayzz as well, for a few days at least. I have the feeling that Hawk Moth’s next attack will be quite dangerous, and you should have all odds on your side. It will happen tonight, I am certain of that and you have to be ready.

“You’ll return the Miraculouses once this… Crisis is over, will you? Now you must go, I am expecting a guest very soon,” Master Fu said before Marinette could open her mouth, and he walked her to the door briskly, all but shoving two identical black and red boxes in her arms.

Marinette tried to keep her anger in check. Tried being the key word. Why did Master Fu have to be so secretive about everything, why did he keep things unexplained even though she needed to know? She bit the inside of her mouth to keep herself from yelling. Master Fu’s attitude was so… unlike him. Was he afraid? She couldn’t tell, but what she knew was that he wasn’t telling the whole truth and that was insulting. She felt like a fool, a mere pawn in his game, and it all left a bitter, coppery taste in her mouth. What a frustrating day that has been so far, Marinette thought to herself as she checked her phone for any new messages.

Unsurprisingly, there were very few of them, Kagami was still at fencing practice, Nino was certainly busy doing… Nino things and Alya often replied hours later with excuses. Marjane had sent her a few links for the project. The girl sounded quite enthusiastic about it, Marinette noted. She was a friend of Kagami’s, which meant, probably a nice person. And Kagami had shared some things about her life without anyone asking her to. The small burst of warmth in Marinette’s chest stayed with her all the way to Alya’s flat.
Back in lycée Carnot, Kagami was bored and overall very frustrated with that fencing session. What was M. D’Argencourt thinking, pairing up with little Éloi? The kid’s footwork left, to say things politely, a lot to be desired, his lunges had even gotten more predictable during the holiday. If he kept up with it like he was at the moment, all he would achieve is— She parried the boy’s uncertain blade and riposted. He stumbled and fell flat on his back.

“Get up,” Kagami said cooly, not even bothering to remove her fencing mask. “I do not want you to waste my time.” Why couldn’t he just get it? She managed it just fine with her mother, she’d try and try until she found the solution on her own. The boy lacked training and discipline and basic observation skills. How Adrien had managed to bear with him, why M. D’Argencourt had decided to keep him, was a complete mystery to her. “Get up,” she repeated.

The boy did as he was told, mumbling to himself though what about Kagami couldn’t hear. Having her train with him was a mistake. Had it been someone else, she could have been more patient. But after an hour at the library with Gustave trying to hide his staring at her from behind a book he had picked at random and what felt like an eternity of Éloi trying and failing to score a single touch against her…

Adrien’s voice, though slightly muffled by her mask, carried from across the gymnasium. Here he was, his own mask laying somewhere on the linoleum floor, discussing animatedly with the girl he was paired with. It appeared that she had managed what Éloi couldn’t achieve himself. Whatever it was they were talking about surely couldn’t help for Friday’s competition, could it? She had scored a touch, it was nice and good but that didn’t mean anything if she couldn’t repeat that. Training with Mother meant silence, repetition, exertion also, but more importantly results. What Adrien and his partner —was it Louise?— were doing was a waste of time, she thought.

“En garde!” Éloi yelled. That brought back Kagami to her own partner

She made short work of him once again, exactly the same way she had done before. This wasn’t even amusing. What was so hard to understand about a simple, well timed riposte? Or was it some basic footwork that he didn’t get? Adrien would have managed to escape it. And in a few months, so would Marinette. That kid was not worth her time, at all. He stumbled back to his en garde position, grumbling under his breath.

“En garde,” Kagami said mechanically, not even looking at him. She could probably defeat him with her eyes closed, she thought to herself. With a flick of her wrist, she deflected Éloi’s poorly executed lunge and the tip of her sabre hit the boy’s mask without a sound. Nothing enjoyable about any of that, she ruminated, Marinette being there would have made practice so much better. “At least she is having a better day than I am,” Kagami mumbled.
Marinette was not having a better day than Kagami. She had arrived in front of Alya’s building. She wasn’t ready for that conversation but there was now escaping it now. She took a deep breath. It was time for Alya and her to talk. Her best friend had to be home, she had texted Nora to warn her of her arrival. It would be so easy. She had faced golems, giant babies and an akumatised Gabriel Agreste, a talk with Alya wouldn’t be so difficult. Besides she couldn’t do it over the phone, she knew it. Marinette’s hand hovered above the doorbell. It was just a talk, just a friend checking on her best friend. Easy. Just a button to push. She couldn’t do it.

Tikki popped out of Marinette’s bag. They could do it together, even without a transformation. The little kwami pushed the human girl’s finger on the doorbell button labeled “Césaire” and zipped back inside the handbag. The entryphone spluttered, Marinette answered as clearly as she could. The massive entrance door opened at last. Marinette rushed in and climbed the stairs to Alya’s flat as silently as she could manage.

Impressive, formidable, these were words that Marinette often associated with Nora Césaire. Worried was not one of these words, yet it was exactly what the older girl looked like. If there was one thing about her that Marinette admired, it was her fighting spirit. Nora was a fighter, to a fault sometimes, but worry was never an expression the younger girl had seen on the older’s face as she opened the door to greet her.


And so, Marinette walked to Alya’s room, slowly, reluctantly even. Getting there felt like forever. The door was ajar but no Alya to greet. Marinette took her time to push it open, carefully, as if it was an akuma in the room rather than her friend. The fact that the lights were off probably certainly didn’t help. No use overthinking it all, Marinette repeated the mantra in her head, no use overthinking it all. She was here to talk with her best friend who had been avoiding her for weeks. She stepped inside.

The room was surprisingly tidy, even by Alya’s standards. Not that she was usually messy but everything seemed so tidy, almost unnaturally so. The complete lack of official Ladybug memorabilia was also striking. And there was Alya, lying on her bed with an unreadable expression on her face. She got up, closed the door, switched on the light and sat back on her bed. Marinette sat in the desk chair the way she’d always do. The two women locked eyes at last.

She had changed to a pair of baggy pyjama trousers and an equally large shirt that made her look even thinner. Alya’s makeup had barely concealed the bags under her eyes, but now it was painfully obvious. Marinette had seen her friend with a cold, she had visited her when she had caught the flu. This looked nothing like it. Her friend was not alright. Asking her how she was
would be stupid.

“You can let your kwami out, Marinette, there’s nothing to worry about, your secret is safe with me,” Alya said simply.

“Kwa— What are you talking abo—” Marinette’s eyes widened. Tikki flew out of her bag before her human could even finish her sentence and gave her an apologetic smile.

“Hi Alya,” Tikki said softly. “I’m Tikki, I’m sure Trixx told you about me.”

Alya nodded. “Before you ask, Marinette I think I always knew you were… Her, but it took my meeting Trixx to fully realise it. That, and you’re really bad at hiding things from me. You should never have given me that Miraculous, girl… Trixx, he… They call him the kwami of Illusions but I don’t think the name’s right. He doesn’t play by the rules, he makes his own. He’s all smiles and laughter and kind words of encouragements, but it’s not just that.”

Instinctively, Marinette reached out for the Fox Miraculous and looked at its box with apprehension. Master Fu hadn’t told her anything about that, he had all but encouraged her to give someone she trusted that Miraculous then take it back when the danger was over. Did she do something wrong? “Did I—”

“This is not you we’re talking about, Mari, it’s me, and no I’m no longer mad at you for keeping it secret,” Alya said flatly. “Anyway, Trixx must have thought it was a nice joke to implement thoughts into my head without me knowing it. He must have found a way to access my memories, he must have guessed I wanted to know who you were and what you were planning to do, ‘cause he planted the thought in my mind and not just that.”

“And then I had asked you to give back the Miraculous and somehow Trixx knew it,” Marinette said in a low voice.

“When you gave me the Fox Miraculous, when I turned into Rena Rouge…” Alya said. “No, when Trixx turned me into Rena Rouge… That felt amazing at first, even better than what I had imagined… I thought it was all I’d ever wanted to be. And I didn’t want it to stop. I think he knew we’d be separated, and he didn’t like it. The thing is, it had felt so great, too great, and I had to give up on it almost immediately after. Then you’d pop up as Ladybug every now and then to ask me to help you with an akuma, you’d lend me the Miraculous, for what, an hour maybe? It didn’t feel like I had an use, like Ladybug… No, like you thought I was worthy of… Being a superhero too, I thought I was good enough but—”
“You are, Alya, you are good enough, the man who gave me the Fox Miraculous made me promise that I’d return have you give it back to me whenever your presence was not required, he ever explained me why,” Marinette cut in. “It’s not your fault I had to take it back, it’s not what you did. And now that I know what… Trixx can do, I understand if you don’t want to see it ever again. I should have asked Master F… The person who gave it to me and I didn’t and I’m sorry I hurt you.”

“Tikki… He had been locked in his box for so long…” Tikki said sombrely. “I should have known something like that could happen. When some kwamis are left on their own for some time… The way they act with the new bearer of their Miraculous… It’s so hard to explain in human terms…” Tikki frowned and flew around the room, reviving a potted cactus in the process.

“Marinette, we transform together, we work together, wouldn’t you say?” Tikki continued. “I keep a safe distance so that you don’t become… Addicted to the transformation, but I’m not too distant either. You’re as much in control as I am, we’re partner, right? I suspect it wasn’t the same with you and Trixx, Alya. I should have seen that coming… We have rules, it’s not like that fox is a rookie, he knew what he was doing and you’re not responsible for any of that… It’s not your fault.”

At that, Alya fell silent, her hands twitching. Marinette got up, pushed the chair back, took off her shoes and sat on the bed. She scooted closer to her best friend and remained silent. She put her arms around Alya’s shoulder. The red-haired girl turned to Marinette.

“Trix… I think he was the one in control,” Alya whispered. “I… Most of the things I did as Rena Rouge, I think he suggested I do them, I never thought about doing them differently… Being Rena Rouge was… amazing, everything felt exhilarating, maybe too much. Maybe it wasn’t just me.

“Once I de-transformed, it took a few days for the euphoria to wear off. And then everything became just so… Boring and annoying and dull, little by little, you know? Nothing is as exciting as it used to. Things I used to enjoy, they feel so bland now. At first I couldn’t find the energy to write articles for my blog but it was OK, I have a few bad days like everyone else. But it wasn’t just a few bad days, it just… Continued, I guess. Then my dreams got weird, I think Trixx’ll have some explaining to do… And I always felt restless when I’d wake up. Even eating, taking a shower or answering texts… It’s just too much. I’m just a terrible person to be around these days…

“And I tried, I swear, I tried going out more often, I tried hanging out with you, with Nino, I thought keeping my room clean would be a good idea but I just… Can you believe that I had my mom and dad help me with my room? I’m not even angry, I’m not even sad, it’s like… Like I’m somewhere two centimetres behind where my body is. And it’s… I have an appointment with someone this Wednesday and I don’t know what will happen after that but it can’t get any worse,
right? I’m not well now but it can’t stay that way forever, right?”

Alya looked at her lap without a word. A shiny purple moth flew into the room, its great wings outstretched, ready to land on Alya at any time. The room was growing darker and darker by the minute, the wind outside howling louder and louder. Marinette kept her eyes on Alya. The girl was shivering now.

“It… It can’t stay that way forever, right? Mari, I’m so scared.”

“Alya… It’s going to be alright, I promise,” Marinette said softly. She closed the gap between her and the cold, frightened girl and hugged her. “You’re not a terrible person to be around, you’re my best friend and I won’t let you call yourself a terrible person. I’d tell you if you were one. I’ve been a lousy friend, huh? I kept important things from you, and it hurt you. It won’t happen again, I’m sorry for that. I can only imagine what it’s been like for you these last few months and… Alya. I’m proud of who you are, and I’m happy you’re getting some help. I… Don’t think I can magic everything away, I don’t think I can help you that way, but… Well I’m here, alright? I’ll ask your parents if we can have dinner together soon, that sounds good to you?”

Alya buried her face in the crook of Marinette’s shoulder. Tikki switched on the lamp on Alya’s bedside table before she snuggled next to the two friends. The great purple butterfly flew aimlessly in the room without a place to land. Minutes passed by without either of the two girls noticing it. The butterfly’s light grew dimmer until it melted away without a sound.

“Alya, I think… I think Marinette will give Nino the Turtle Miraculous, would that be OK?” Tikki broke the silence. “We’ll tell him anything. I know Wayzz, he’s the kwami of protection and we can trust him, but we won’t give the Miraculous to Nino if you don’t want to.”

Alya simply nodded against Marinette’s shoulder, mumbling a “s’OK” before letting go of her friend. “You gotta leave, Mari, my dad’ll be here soon and he doesn’t need to know I skipped school. Nora can cover up for me but you’re such a terrible liar about stuff like that…”

Marinette felt her face heat up. She tried to retort but Tikki gave her a look that made her keep quiet. “I’ll keep you posted on that whole Nino thing,” she said before kissing Alya’s forehead. “I love you, Alya,” Marinette put on her shoes and jacket, and walked out of the room, Tikki now hidden in her backpack.

And bumped into Nora. Had the older girl been eavesdropping all along? Before she could do anything, Marinette felt Alya’s strong arms lift her off the ground and pull her close in a bone-crushing hug.
“Thank you for everything, Ladybug,” Nora said, “and thank you for being Alya’s friend.” She put Marinette down, ruffled her hair. The doorbell rung and she opened the window. “Dad’s here early… You may want to transform rather than take the stairs. And thank you again for everything! Don’t worry, I’ll ask him to invite you over, even tomorrow you want. But now you go!”

Marinette transformed and noiselessly jumped out the window and climbed down the building as discretely as she could manage before turning back into her civilian self. She checked her phone and sent Nino a text to warn him of her arrival. Kagami’s (and Adrien’s) fencing class was almost over, so she sent Kagami a quick “I hope practice went well!” She kept herself from waiting for an answer even though she really wanted to. She had to give Nino his Miraculous in case something happened in the next days. Whatever it was, Ladybug would be ready to face it.

In his lair, Hawk Moth looked at his assistant with a mixture of anger and fear. What was she thinking, trying to use that cursed Miraculous? And it had been all for nothing, he hadn’t been able to akumatise the girl in the end. How the little Dupain-Cheng brat had managed to thwart him without even noticing it, he didn’t know, but she had done just that. And now Nathalie was coughing repeatedly, her legs shaken with spasms. Nooroo did not look too good either. Why couldn’t things just go his way for once? He de-transformed.

Adrien would be back from school soon. His son did not have to see Nathalie like that. With Gorilla waiting for Adrien, Gabriel would have to drive Nathalie to the hospital himself. The Miraculouses could wait, just this time. He’d reschedule his attack for another time.

He’d just have to find the right receptacle.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

I hadn’t updated this in quite some time, and I missed it. According to the text file, I started writing this chapter on May 28th 2018. Which feels like an eternity ago.

So what happened then? Many things, some of them more pleasant than others, I got very busy with life, university work (dissertations are great but time consuming things) and some other projects including music for short films and other projects like that,
and a video game idea and some other texts. So here is a long one to make up for it.

I'm not really a fan of the direction Miraculous has taken even though I can understand why these decisions were taken, and I find canon Kagami (and her mother even more so) quite boring and I quite dislike all these canon!Kagami plot lines. Heh. I'll probably write a long Tumblr post about that, or maybe put it in my next chapter's notes.

So what will I do now that I have said all of that?

I'll keep my original plans for this fic, add some things from canon if I think they work with what I have written this far (I have a few chapters that I need to work on more seriously but they mostly ready).

I don't think there's much that I need to explain about that chapter… The thing about Greek temples is true, and hopefully we’ll see more of Marjane in the next chapters! And Adrien too! And Itsuko! And hopefully not Trixx.

Follow me on Tumblr [here](https://example.com), I post previews for the incoming chapters there (sometimes) and I sometimes post writing tips about France and other stuff, I wrote a post about food “recently” (in February) that can be quite useful [here](https://example.com). Ask me stuff if you feel like it, I’ll answer as soon as I can, if I can!

Am still a baguette, so mistakes were not intentional.

À bientôt!
Friday had come much faster than Kagami had imagined, but that didn’t matter much to her. Nothing really notable had happened in the last few days, Alya still wouldn’t answer the text she had sent her on Monday, no akuma attack had occurred in more than a complete week, something very rare. Adrien had been to the library more often, coincidentally when she and Marjane were there, even though he hadn’t seemed to have any kind of homework to do. No, not a very eventful week. Besides, Kagami had dedicated most of her efforts towards training, she had kept herself from staying up too late to read or play. She had even made an exception to her habits: she hadn’t played the cello at all and had used that time to stay longer at practice, though she had continued writing in her Paris journal. She felt ready for the hours to come.

And getting ready for that competition meant that she should and could sleep for much longer than she would on a regular school day. Her mother had phoned lycée Carnot, and Marinette would give her the notes for the classes she had missed, so there was nothing for her to worry about. She’d be there after classes were over, just in time for the interesting part of the competition. Kagami managed to wake up on her own before her alarm could force her out of bed. Yes, today would be great, it would be her first real competition in France after. She wouldn’t let her guard down, of course, but she knew she had fair chances to win. She would make everyone proud, including herself.

She rubbed her eyes, stifled a yawn and walked out of her room. No looking at your phone, she told herself, you don’t want to let yourself be distracted, she told herself. She went to the bathroom, splashed water on her face. She looked… Incredibly ordinary, calm, well-rested and collected. Mum had prepared her well, she mused. A few years back, she’d have been an anxious, sleep-deprived mess. But these days were behind her. Sure, there was still some stress, but nothing she couldn’t manage. Kagami didn’t bother combing her hair to prevent it from sticking in all directions, she’d have time for that later. Mum wasn’t there so she wouldn’t say anything about her daughter still being in her pyjamas with a bed head. Kagami made her way to the kitchen.

She turned on the radio. To her surprise, she didn’t have to tune it to France Musique that morning. She took her time to eat her rather hearty breakfast — rye bread with apricot jam instead of her usual white bread and strawberry jam, but still her good old cup of tea. Kagami followed through with her schedule for the day. She would have to prepare an outfit for after the competition once she got back home, something elegant that would work with the weather. For now, she chose some clothes for the warm-up session and put them in her kit bag. Now is not the time to be on your phone, even if you want to read Marinette’s — or anyone else’s— texts, she told herself once again, you have an alarm clock if you need to know what time it is.

Kagami brushed her teeth and went back to bed to read. Her alarm woke her up this time. She took a quick shower, washed and combed her hair at last, got dressed, picked up the kit bag in which she
had all that she needed for what was to come. Just as planned, she was ready as exactly 11 o’clock. The competition would only start in about four hours so no hurry, she repeated for the twentieth time that day, but M. D’Argencourt wanted his fencers to be there hours before the beginning so that they could train and warm up. The first phase of the competition would be a team effort after all, only after that, and if they managed to win that round, would she have the occasion to truly shine against capable fencers. Being there in early was exactly what she would have done on her own anyway.

She found a small paper bag in front of the door, next to her shoes, with her lunchbox already packed in it. She was sure she’d fine a note from her mother inside. Kagami smiled to herself, put on her duffel coat and her shoes. She made a mental check-up one last time. Clothes? OK. Phone? In her coat pocket. Water flask and lunch? In the paper bag as well as other things to eat. Keys, wallet and everything else? In her coat as well. And the scarf Marinette had knitted for her wrapped around her neck as always. Everything was the way she wanted it to be. Perfect. She made sure to lock the door behind her as she walked out of her apartment.

The crisp November air hit her face as she walked down rue Troyon to the Charles de Gaulle Étoile metro station. She was in for a good half hour of “commute”, if she could even call it that. But it was nothing to be stressed out about, she reminded herself, she would be able to worry about not winning once she got to Gymnase Elisabeth Kagami still had quite some time. Was it three hours and fifty minutes now? She waited for her metro and since there was nothing else to do, she checked her phone at last. And was surprised at the number of messages she had received. She deleted Gustave’s and read the other ones slowly, taking her time. Besides, it was a thirty minutes ride.

From: Marjane K.

To: Me

I might come but not sure yet

Keeping my fingers crossed!

In the same fashion, Kim had sent her a “GO GET’EM TIGER” followed by an ungodly amount of emojis. Kagami hadn’t expected him to send her anything but it was a nice surprise, it certainly made the trip easier. The train she needed to take arrived at last, she even found an empty seat. That would be the perfect place to continue reading her texts.

From: Nino L.
To: Me

hey! good luck for your competition! ill be there with Marinette & maybe Alya to watch you kick some arses

She certainly hoped so. She knew Nino was equally interested in Adrien’s performance, but it was always nice of him to cheer for her too. Unlike most of the fencing team when Kagami and Adrien dueling against each other. Maybe she wouldn’t kick arses but at the very least she’d try to, as long as it followed the rules.

From: Aiko

To: Me

You’re going to do great!!!! Also Taneda says hi and shares my mind :p

From: Taneda

To: Me

You’re going to blow their minds! Aiko thinks so too, also she says hello ;)

She must have looked weird, smiling at her phone in that overcrowded, smelly carriage. Still, these messages were exactly what she needed, especially in the metro. Of course, Father hadn’t bothered sending her words of encouragement but she hadn’t expected him too. What she had expected, however, was a message from her paternal grandfather and he didn’t disappoint.

From: Tsurugi Ando

To: Me

Hello, granddaughter

My wife and I hope you do well. Do not dishonour our name.

Well, grandfather Ando always had this grand idea of the Tsurugi prestige, but taking it this far…
It was ridiculous, outdated even. His decision to change his surname to that showed how grandiloquent he could be. At least he seemed committed to being a living, talking cliché and had always been that way for as long as Kagami could remember. Maybe he’d never change. At least his daughter had toned it down, if not for that terrible signet ring though she suspected that wasn’t her idea. Well, grandfather Ando wasn’t here to tell her what to do. Besides, the other messages from her family sounded much better.

From: Grandmother Kiyo

To: Me

Hello dear,

Do not worry about what your grandfather wrote, I am sure you will do well!

I hope to hear from you soon.

From: Mum

To: Me

I hope you’ll enjoy lunch. Text me when you’re here!

I will be there before the competition starts.

Do your best! I love you

This was exactly what Kagami needed to read. And it made the rest of the trip — a change of train at Montparnasse, followed by ten minutes of horror in a cramped carriage with barely any room for her bag and her legs at the same time — that much better. She had saved Marinette’s text for later, but she could barely move her arms, let alone reach for her phone. She mentally cursed in every language she knew to make the situation somewhat more tolerable. Not that it concretely helped in any way but it did make her feel better.

At last, she got out of the terrible thing at Ports d’Orléans. That entire trip had felt like half an eternity if not for the messages. Still, she was here right on time, even a little early. She looked around her, but found no familiar faces. Out of all the competitors she knew about, she must have been the first to get here. Kagami walked out of the métro station and checked her phone for directions, even though she knew exactly where to go. Traffic was quite dense and Parisian drivers were impatient as always. And so, Kagami read Marinette’s message at a pedestrian crossing, with cars zooming right and left.
From: Marinette
To: Me

Heyyy :) 

hope you slept well!

i’ll try to be there as soon as i can

you’re the best, Kagami!

Kagami all but floated all the way to Gymnase Elizabeth, her feet barely touching the worn out concrete. There was no denying it, Marinette was someone special. She had a hard time keeping herself from grinning. Now, how could she make her understand that she liked, liked her? But that would be a question for another day. Her bubble of giddiness burst. She had reached her destination at last.

Gymnase Elizabeth did not look particularly impressive, with its dirty and austere grayish facade and its burgundy steps. Cars were parked all around the place, and she recognised M. D’Argencourt’s old Alpine among them. She’d see him after lunch, she decided. The car Adrien’s butler drove was nowhere to be found, perhaps Adrien would be there is a couple of minutes. Kagami had seen very little of him outside of fencing practice, now that she thought of it, he had kept in touch with Nino but with the rest of his former classmates, not so much.

He’d be there, sooner or later, she thought. Hesitantly, she pushed the heavy doors of the Gymnase and walked inside. That was it, then. Without waisting a second, she went straight to the locker rooms, following the conveniently placed sign. Yellow door, her fencing instructor had repeated, you don’t want to find yourself face to face with the students you’ll compete against. Seven other teams from all over the region… But she would only have to face three of them, if things went well.

Kagami found herself alone in the surprisingly clean locker room. There was plenty of room for four people, and a corridor which lead to showers. Her fencing gear and sabre were there, without a single scratch on them, lined up next to those of her three other… Teammates, she supposed she had to call them that. She knew she had been chosen, but M. D’Argencourt had only revealed the names of the team meant to represent this fencing circle two days before the actual competition. She’d be with Adrien, Vincent who had supposedly improved greatly, and the girl Adrien had worked with that other day, Louise. But none of them were here just yet.
Thirty minutes and one empty lunchbox later, Kagami greeted her fencing instructor on top of the terraces, wearing her workout clothes and a perfectly composed face which the man failed to mirror. He looked nervous and proud at the same time. He hadn’t been in that position, watching his students compete, in quite some time, or so he told her. The gymnasium and its wooden floors looked nothing like a proper fencing area yet: down the terraces, workers busied themselves but the result of such efforts had yet to be seen. They traded a few words about the competition, and more importantly the competitors. It came as no surprise that M. D’Argencourt despised most of the older fencing masters, though he was curious about the newcomers.

“Oh, I do not worry about our team at all, dear,” he said loudly as a grim looking man wearing a lamé passed by. And in a lower voice, he added for Kagami, “Boisse, that two faced… Let us hope he won’t make a scene this time. Back in 1997, he… But I shouldn’t be talking about that, we have better things to do.”

The gymnasium looked more and more like a fencing area by the minute. So M. D’Argencourt and his student discussed fencing tips and strategies as discretely as they could, but soon they ran out of things to talk about. At least he didn’t try to talk about how blue the sky was for a November day, Kagami wrote in her Paris journal that night.

“Will you be recruiting new students next year? Students my age, I mean,” Kagami asked.

“Well… I must admit I have not made up my mind yet. I like the way my school looks like now, and I only take those with the most potential, not that I want to make Olympics champions out of you all, not yet at least. I might do the same thing I did last year, a small competition to see who is worthy. Perhaps you had someone in mind?”

“I… Marinette Dupain-Cheng is a fast learner and… A student of mine, if I can call her that.”

“She was the girl pining Adrien, the one who came to watch your rematch all these months ago, wasn’t she?” M. D’Argencourt said with a hint of mockery in his tone. At that, Kagami visibly tensed.

“If you are the one training her,” he said more neutrally this time, “I do think she will join you in regular practice next year… If she is as good as you think she is, of course, but I trust you have an eye for that sort of thing. Well, the team should be there anytime soon, you should get a little rest before it all starts.”
Well, that certainly wasn’t awkward at all… Kagami allowed herself to doze off in the locker room. She woke up with the noise of the door opening and Louise, Adrien and Vincent coming in dressed in their workout clothes. She greeted them, trying to sound as friendly and relaxed as she could without it sounding fake. And she was quite relaxed, in fact, much more so than her teammates. Louise seemed mildly nervous, Adrien had his model smile on, which was not a good sign, and “twitchy” was the best word that could define Vincent.

“So, I guess we gotta warm up now,” Vincent said shakily, running his hand through his always perfectly gelled hair. “I mean, it’s what he asked us to do, no?”

He was met with three identical nods. Without a word, the small team fell into a routine of warm up exercises, a routine which proved to be quite beneficial. When they walked out of the locker room wearing their fencing gears, they looked much more relaxed, much more self-confident than the four teenagers who had walked in that very same room half an hour ago. Adrien truly behaved like a proper team captain now. There was determination in their steps, and it did not waver when they arrived in the gymnasium. The terraces were crowded now, with familiar faces from fencing practice. Adrien spotted Itsuko Tsurugi before her daughter did, and Kagami nodded at her with a faint smile.

Most of their competitors were already there, scattered around the gymnasium, practicing on their own before it all started. The D’Argencourt Team (they couldn’t come up with a better name) introduced themselves to the referees before they practiced as well, though they toned it down, to save their energy and so that they wouldn’t give away how good they were. Somehow, it made Kagami trust Vincent and Louise a little more. The judges, on a small platform, had a perfect overview of the fencing salle, but she didn’t pay too much mind to them. A referee came to inspect their gears and sabres. He gave the fencers a satisfied nod before he left.

An amplified voice called their names, and it was the signal Kagami had been waiting for, for almost a month. The competition had just begun. Her mind shut down all sources of distraction around her. There were four pistes, each with its set of referees, and on a small platform above the bleachers, the jury, composed of other fencing masters Kagami knew to be her mother’s colleagues, had a nice overview of everything. Kagami followed behind her teammates, wordlessly. They would fight in order, first Vincent after which came Louise, then it would be her turn, or Adrien’s since they hadn’t decided who would be the alternate here. Not that she minded much. All they had to do was to score touches, as many as they could. She’d be there to rectify her team’s mistakes, she told herself.

Kagami looked at her opponents for this series of matches. They didn’t look all that impressive, three boys and one girl, obviously ill at ease. It was probably their first competition ever. She stared at them, regal. Vincent readied himself, Louise readjusted her lamé over her lanky shoulders and tugged her chignon at the back of her fencing mask. Adrien gave his team a small smile (I’ll go first, then it’ll be your turn if that’s OK with you, he told Kagami) and a pat on Vincent’s back
as the boy stepped inside the piste. The referee uttered the words.

“En garde! Prêts? Allez!”

Saying that M. D’Argencourt had prepared his star students for this would have been an understatement. M. Jondrette’s students didn’t stand a single chance against them. Half an hour later, four very discouraged fencers stepped out of the competition. Kagami had to admit, Vincent had come a long way since their encounter in June. Louise, who usually kept in the background, was much faster and stronger than her lanky frame suggested. Had Kagami paid attention to Vincent and Louise, she would have noticed that their fencing instructor had spent more time with these two than with the rest of his students lately. His choosing them should have been quite obvious. Adrien had been as good as she had expected him to be. Her own performance was adequate.

Kagami didn’t feel too tired, this first round had been yet another sort of warm up to her. Her fencing had been efficient, almost effortless. But she didn’t expect to keep it that way for ever. She took one last sip of water from her flask, stole a glance at the terraces again and spotted a black-haired girl followed a boy with a red cap trying to find their seats. No distractions, she reminded herself. She still waved at the terraces hoping that they’d notice her, before putting her fencing mask back on.

“Dude, I told you we didn’t have to run, we didn’t miss anything too important, Kagami and Adrien are still in the competition” Nino rasped, slightly out of breath. “Is that… Is that her mum? Hey look, there are empty seats next to her, maybe we should go and sit there?”

“It’s okay, Nino, I’ve only met her like, once, wouldn’t it be a little awkward if we just popped up and… Well never mind, she saw us.”

Itsuko Tsurugi greeted her daughter’s friends with a slight smile that did reach her eyes. Marinette and Nino discreetly joined her, formalities were exchanged (“Marinette! It is nice of you to be there! Oh, and you must be Nino, a pleasure to meet you!”) and the two teenagers sat next to Kagami’s mother who was watching her daughter again. The D’Argencourt Team was facing M. Boisse’s students now, and they were much more of a challenge than their previous opponents.

Marinette couldn’t help but wince when Vincent lost four consecutive touches in a row, his footwork becoming more dreadful with each passing minute. Louise tried to do better, but she barely had the upper hand, and she looked relieved when it was Adrien’s turn to face his opponent.
Adrien briefly turned to the terraces, looked at Marinette’s right — she turned her head to see Gabriel Agreste himself, sitting next to M. D’Argencourt— before he put on his fencing mask. He barely looked at Marinette and Nino, but to Marinette’s surprise, she didn’t mind. Kagami seemed too focused on the competition to record Marinette’s presence, at least for now.

It was no secret that Adrien had been M. D’Argencourt’s star pupil for some time, and it was hard not to see why. Even Mme Tsurugi looked at him appraisingly at first. It was true that every new touch he scored was a delight to watch, at least for most people who weren’t M. Boisse or his supporters. Though she couldn’t have explained why, Marinette could tell by his body language that he was confident, but slowly getting tired. Which was weird, because she had never seen Adrien do anything that would leave him exhausted in her entire life.

There was no obvious sign of Adrien’s exertion, however. He never allowed his opponent, one Rémi Maulet, to get the right of way, each of his attacks were unpredictable, cat-like, yet perfectly timed, and was almost exuberant in the way he seemed to purposefully get close to Rémi’s sabre without ever letting it touch him. There was no tension to the bout.

Marinette let her eyes wander around. In the gymnasium’s other half, Mme Legrain’s students were crushing M. Doisnel’s. In the meantime, Vincent and Louise were drinking and chatting with Kagami though the girl didn’t seem to be a very active part of the conversation. When Adrien walked out of the piste and unclipped his body cord, the scoring box had not blinked a single time for Rémi. Not that the boy had been a bad fencer, their bout had lasted for quite some time, but Adrien had simply outdone him. Rémi didn’t seem to be a sore loser, however. The two boys shook hands, exchanged a few words before they bowed to the terraces.

“Yes Nino, your best friend is really good. But he put on a show for his father… It’s not a catwalk, it’s a fencing piste. He could have saved all this energy for later,” Marinette said softly. A few months ago, she would have been blown away by Adrien’s performance, but with Kagami teaching her, she knew better. Nino seemed thoughtful for a moment. He glanced at Gabriel Agreste and shrugged.

Itsuko Tsurugi nodded at Marinette appraisingly. The referee called Kagami’s name, and the girl went on his right. Vincent had asked to rest and Kagami had taken his place. Her opponent, a boy named Léo Fontaine, strutted to the referee’s left. The two fencers checked their materials, making sure that the scoring box worked well. They shook hands, or rather, Léo tried to crush Kagami’s hand, before they stepped back, right behind their respective on-guard line. Itsuko’s grip on her scarf tightened slightly, but Marinette barely noticed. She had her eyes on Kagami and Kagami only.
The scoring box blinked red as soon as the words left the referee’s mouth. All Kagami had needed to do was extend her arm before Léo’s sabre came in line. His lunge had been sloppy at best, Marinette noted, and it was quite clear that Kagami would remain defensive for most of the fight if Léo kept making it this easy. And the boy made it ridiculously easy. Kagami moved as little as she possibly could, anticipating her opponent’s every action as if he had spelled them out himself in painstaking detail before executing them. Léo’s lunges and remises were fruitless, and the boy did all the moving.

Not once did Kagami need to beat his sabre out of line. Léo’s attacks became more and more desperate, and more dangerous as well. He finally scored a touch, catching Kagami’s lamé with the back of his blade, but it seemed like an accident more than anything. Léo refused the one minute break the referee offered him. He looked so… Puerile, like that. The sort of kid who would get angry if he didn’t get what he wanted immediately when he wanted it.

Kagami was much faster than her opponent, and much more confident too. She didn’t need to strut to look powerful, she didn’t have to punctuate her attacks with screams to actually win anything. Léo managed to hit her lamé again, at the same time her sabre touched his. “Simultané, pas de touche,” the referee called. Léo audibly groaned and Marinette shook her head.

Just two more touches and Kagami would have won against him. Unless things went poorly with her teammates, they’d compete against Mme Legrain’s students. Louise looked as though she had recovered and Adrien was sitting cross-legged doing breathing exercises. Yes, they seemed ready enough, Marinette thought.

Being on the defensive was starting to get boring, so Kagami tried something Marinette recognised immediately. She slammed her feet to the ground, extending her sword arm slightly. Léo reacted too slowly and Kagami continued her attack, scoring a touch again. The training had paid out, Kagami’s feint had worked just fine. The tip of her blade met her opponent’s sword arm.

One last point, Come on, Kagami. Léo lunged at his opponent, faster this time, but it wasn’t enough. Kagami’s sabre grazed his and scored the hit. That was it, then. She had won this bout without losing her calm. Perhaps things would have been different with another opponent, Rémi seemed more level-headed. The team would only need seven more points and they’d be sure to make it to the final. Kagami didn’t seem let that temporary victory go straight to her head. She outstretched her hand for Léo to shake, but the boy refused to shake it and started arguing with the referee. After an awkward minute, Léo begrudgingly did as he was told.
“Unbelievable,” Itsuko Tsurugi scoffed as M. Boisse got up from the terraces to talk to the referee. Though Marinette couldn’t hear what they were saying exactly, the conversation was cut short, the balding fencing instructor walked out of the gymnasium angrily with Léo. The boy could have been disqualified from the competition for such a behaviour. The rest of the encounter was tense to say the least. Rémi and his teammates fought with newfound vigour but it proved fruitless.

Louise scored the last points the D’Argencourt Team needed with great efficiency, and M. D’Argencourt clapped loudly when she parried a particularly sneaky cut from her opponent and riposted immediately after. After that, it was only a matter of having the best score possible. Though M. Boisse’s team wasn’t completely demoralised, it was obvious that they weren’t trying their best: the first bouts had been enjoyable to watch, the following ones not so much. Marinette couldn’t even remember the name of these fencers outside of Rémi.

“Well, that was underwhelming…” Nino said once M. Boisse came to collect his pupils. “Is it just me or that team composition was terrible? I mean, look at the guys on the other side of the gymnasium, M. Doisnel’s students are still gonna lose but at least they don’t throw a tantrum when they do, and it’s not like they only have one and a half decent fencer and the rest of the team is just… Meh… I mean, they’re not great but at least they all have roughly the same… Level, if that makes sense to you.”

Both Marinette and Kagami’s mother looked at him, impressed. Nino had never struck Marinette as a fencing enthusiast, and there he was making completely correct assessments about team compositions.

“What? My friends are fencers, your daughter’s gonna be an Olympic champion someday, so it’s normal for me to read about what they’re doing. And I’m writing film about fencing, so I guess I did my homework,” he said sheepishly.

M. Doisnel’s students did lose against Mme Legrain’s in the end, and the jury took it as a cue for a much welcome thirty minutes break. The gymnasium became very noisy in very little time, with people moving in all directions. Marinette waited for M. D’Argencourt to finish his briefing with his students, though from where she was sitting, it looked more like he was congratulating them and giving informal advice than a proper, serious briefing. At last, the fencing master walked back to the terraces. Itsuko Tsurugi did not move from her seat to meet with her daughter, choosing to chat with M. D’Argencourt and Mme Legrain instead.

Marinette and Nino, on the other hand, rose to their feet, hoping they’d join their friends. Yet it seemed that the other students from the D’Argencourt Academy hadn’t gathered around their champions, to leave them some space to breathe and rest, probably. Louise had vanished, and Adrien was a sweaty mess, Vincent and Kagami were chatting calmly. Perhaps leaving them alone
Kagami saw this, got up and waved back with a smile on her face. Marinette didn’t need to know she was trying not to grin too openly and make a complete fool of herself. It seemed Nino had stopped wearing that bracelet, she noted. Too bad, it had suited him quite well… Marinette had opened her bag and was scribbling with a black marker on a sheet of paper. She held it over her head and Kagami had to squint her eyes to see what the girl she definitely did not have a crush on had just written.

“GO, KAGAMI, GO!!!!” it simply read, accompanied with a crude doodle of Marinette giving a thumbs up. It was absolutely silly. And endearing. So of course, reading these words filled Kagami’s chest with warmth. If that was even possible, Marinette’s smile grew even wider. And it was contagious, it made her want to run to Marinette and hug her close even though she knew perfectly well she wouldn’t be able to gather the courage to do that. Fortunately, before their staring contest got too awkward, the rest of the D’Argencourt Team started moving to the locker room to freshen up. Kagami simply mouthed a “I have to go now” and followed behind Vincent. She had to get ready for that final, yes. Freshen up, stretch up some more maybe. She really wasn't sure she'd win the next series of bouts, but she'd do her best.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

I hope you enjoyed that kind of tournament arc! The final will be quite something. I tweaked the rules quite a bit but it'll be justified later, trust me on that (please do!), it's not entirely gratuitous.

When I finished writing the original chapter 11, I noticed it was twice as long as the longest chapter I've posted for this fic, so I decided to split it into two parts and so here we are. When will the second half be uploaded? I don't know yet, probably in two weeks? If things go well and I'm not completely overwhelmed by my finals.

Even after 7 chapters, Kagami still can't stand the Metro, and neither can I. Lots of fencing terminology! But we've discussed all of that in the previous chapters.

Trying to create some sorts of character development when the main point of view for the story is a kinda self-centred, kinda scornful teenager is hard! Especially when said teenager only notices some things and completely ignores (and despises, to a certain extent) most others things, and arguably most people who are not Marinette or her friends.

If you want to watch a show which features good realistic fencing scenes (though not only and that's the point), watch Utena. Hell, even if you're not particularly into
fencing, Utena is a great show, and a personal favourite, the way I name my chapters come from there too. I'd suggest going in blind. And if you're from Americaland, Nozomi has made the anime available on their YouTube channel, both subbed and dubbed (though the dub is not very good). Miraculous borrows a lot from Utena and doesn't execute what it borrows half as well as Utena does. There's also a movie, but I suggest you watch it after the series, otherwise it doesn't make as much sense.

I tried to explain why the Tsurugi name was what it was, which is to say ridiculous and a cliché and almost as bad as naming your character, let's say, Cho Chang, but I'm not sure that worked well. Kagami's father has lost both his parents, it's not that they're as bad as their son and don't care about their granddaughter. Or maybe they're terrible people? I don't know, interpret that lack of message the way you want, I'm not here to tell you how to read my story.

As always, my Tumblr is here if you want to ask me questions, tell me how great a writer I am or if you want to be informed about the other things I do, the other fics I post and very soon the music I make!

I am still very much French, the mistakes I make are not intentional and I'm quite sorry about them…

I'll see you in the next one, in the meantime, take care!
“I’m starting to feel real knackered,” Vincent said once the yellow door closed behind them, “but the good news is, so are most of Mme Legrain’s pupils.”

Louise greeted them, dressed in her workout clothes again. Her reddish hair was slightly wet. “You three could use a shower, but be quick,” she said. Adrien and Vincent did exactly that. In the meantime, Kagami snacked on dried apricots and offered Louise some as well. The locker room felt small, cramped. The neon light was bleak. She shouldn’t have eaten these apricots, her stomach felt terrible. What was she even doing here? What was that break even for? She needed to say something, otherwise the silence would be too uncomfortable.

“Vincent is right,” Kagami said, “we’ve been fencing for a good hour and a half with hundreds of people watching us, it is only normal we start to feel a little tired.”

“What sort of competition is this anyway? It isn’t an official thing as far as I know,” Louise grumbled. “Our scores add up in the end but other than that… It doesn’t actually follow the rules at all, does it?”

“Not completely… I was a little disappointed myself but I understand why they chose to do it that way,” Kagami said. “It is more of a show for the jury; I believe they are trying to recruit some promising fencers from private clubs and see if they could be part of the official national team. Not me, obviously, I am Japanese, but… Chances are, you will receive something in your letter box in a couple of days. It does not mean I won’t give my best, of course, but this competition is more important for all of you.” It wasn’t a complete lie, from a certain point of view.

“You didn’t give your all so far, I’d say…” Louise pointed out. “You’re saving up for this last round. I’m right, aren’t I?”

What Louise didn’t need to hear from Kagami was that she believed that finishing second best in an individual competition didn’t mean anything, and that it meant exactly the same to her as finishing last. Louise didn’t need to hear that she had tried to keep herself in check to make sure she wouldn’t get too anxious about the possible outcome of this competition, and that in this locker room, that self-control was threatening to slip away from her. So Kagami said nothing.

“Kagami, we only have fifteen minutes left, if you want to shower…” Adrien said. The two boys
had returned fully dressed.

Had it been a regular competition, she would have declined the offer. It was more of an exhibition than anything else. And so, Kagami showered, got back in her fencing gear and warmed up just in time for the finals. Yes, this was nothing like an official competition, during which she wouldn’t have had the time to clean up at all. It eased off her anxiety, taking that shower, following that routine that almost made her believe the competition hadn’t started yet.

They were back in the gymnasium, which was even more crowded than before. Kagami spotted Marjane in the terraces, sitting a few feet away from Marinette and Nino. When she told Adrien, he noticeably perked up. Kagami didn’t think much of it, she had more important things to focus on. She felt Mme Legrain’s glance on her and she turned around to meet her eyes.

Sandrine Legrain was slightly taller than Kagami’s mother, a little younger too. Strikingly, she looked less tense than M. D’Argencourt on her left, but being any more tense than the man was would have been a feat in its own right. Rather, she seemed amused and invested, as though she was there to watch a good show. Her dark brown eyes remained on Kagami for a few more seconds before they focused on her own students. Two girls, two boys, all very serious, certainly not in the mood for a chat. They were here to win, and it showed.

All four referees were next to each of the four pistes. Kagami knew exactly what the jury had in store for them. At least it would give her the opportunity to reach the podium and stand out on her own, she told herself. Of course, there would be a team trophy as well. She’d help them win both. Kagami zoned out during the jury’s speech and explanations to the audience. The world around her started to feel blurry.

Her name was called, she walked towards the piste she had been assigned to, followed by one of Mme Legrain’s fencers, one Emma Scuderi with shortish brown hair and a reserved face. The name didn’t mean anything to her. They made sure the scoring box was working properly, shook hands. Kagami didn’t have the time to look around to see who her teammates were up against.

Besides, everything but the piste was slowly vanishing, the world contracting until all that was left was Scuderi, the referee, the scoring box, the piste and herself. It was rather easy to make the world disappear, the audience was rather silent, and would only cry out whenever a touch would be scored. And she wouldn’t let it burst her bubble, no. There’d be nothing to disturb her, her mother was gone, her friends were gone. Oh, she would win this bout, and the next one, and the one after that, she told herself.

“En garde. Prêtes? Allez!”
Kagami lunged a split second before Emma did, scored the hit, stepped back to the en garde line. Fourteen more touches to go. She parried the sabre coming at her right, didn’t let her opponent get the right of way and riposted. Thirteen. Scuderi didn’t let her follow through with her compound attack, and forced her to retreat, the tip of her sabre hitting her lamé in the process. Thirteen still. But Scuderi should have saved that one for later. Kagami let her attack, parried, riposted perfectly. Twelve. Eleven. Ten. Scuderi fell for her opposition parry twice, and could no escape Kagami’s basic lunge after that. Ten still, that reprise was efficient. Nine, though it was really close, Scuderi had almost parried her riposte.

They both agreed on taking the one minute break and Kagami knew she had one. The other girl looked breathless. The bout resumed, with Kagami scoring yet another hit. Eight more touches. And eight again. And eight, for the last time. That was it, Kagami thought, Scuderi shouldn’t have pushed herself so soon. Kagami scored the next touch, and the one after that too, with simple, well-timed lunges. Sounds of applauses almost broke her concentration, someone must have won a bout already. Soon, it’d be her turn.

She feinted, touching Scuderi’s lamé for the tenth time. And the eleventh time, the twelfth and the thirteenth time, with a blend of simple attacks and little footwork. She managed to deflect a dangerous cut and extended her arm just in time, the scoring box blinked. One last touch. She wanted this to end. Kagami’s sabre met Scuderi in a stop thrust. The referee called halt, the two fencers stepped back. He announced the score, but Kagami didn’t truly follow.

Scuderi, no, Emma, took off her mask, Kagami mirrored the gesture, they saluted the referee. Emma looked at the other girl as if to say, “you’ve earned this.” Kagami outstretched her hand, which Emma shook. The two fencers turned to the spectators. They bowed together and parted ways. Kagami looked around the gymnasium. Vincent and Louise had lost against their opponents, if Vincent’s face was anything to go by, though he tried his best to conceal his disappointment. Adrien had won, of course, but she hadn’t expected any less from him.

Kagami found herself face to face with the boy who had defeated Vincent, a tall, wiry young man, “Théo Sonko,” the referee called his name. His hand was sweaty when Kagami shook it. They put on their fencing masks, went to their respective en garde lines. As soon as the bout began, Kagami knew it wouldn’t be as easy as it had been thus far. Not that Emma had been bad, she had been Kagami’s best opponent in the competition this far. Simply, Théo’s style was unnerving.

Théo’s lunges were faster than Kagami’s. His technique was at least as good as hers. He was a formidable attacker, there was no doubting that. Losing to him wouldn’t be so bad, she reflected grimly, an honourable defeat. But she wouldn’t allow this. After four consecutive touches for her opponent, Kagami had to change her strategy. Obviously, she couldn’t rely on her parry, he had outsped her every single time. If she tried to attack him at the same time, the referee would call a
Kagami feinted before she executed her flunge and scored her first touch in the bout, a second one came soon after, her blade gliding down Théo’s to touch his sword arm. The world shrunk down again. She had done it. She dodged his attack and interrupted his forward recovery. She wouldn’t allow him to gain ground on her. And now she had him. Théo was a fast attacker, too fast for Vincent obviously, but he couldn’t keep up with compound attacks. And so, Kagami kept on pressing. That fight was exhausting, and she wanted to be done with it. She almost lost count of her own touches once she got the upper hand.

The one minute break was spent in complete silence, Kagami forced herself to drink slowly from her water flask. She could keep up with him. She could win. Her compound attacks became more complex, her footwork more elaborate. She pressed on. Of course, Théo still scored a few touches, but the bout was hers in the end. She would definitely need to shower. “You’ll have to teach me how you do your volte,” Kagami whispered, “that was impressive.” The two fencers shook hands, bowed to the spectators.

“Someday maybe! And you’ll tell me all about your ripostes” Théo replied as he walked away. She wondered who he’d have to face for the third place. And more importantly, who her own opponent would be. She couldn’t finish second. She wouldn’t finish second. She wouldn’t. She wasn’t worthless. She didn’t want to see disappointment in her mother’s face. She wouldn’t finish second. She wouldn’t be worthless. Kagami breathed in and out, glad that she had kept her fencing mask on.

Marinette couldn’t help but wince as Adrien almost stumbled out of the piste. His bout against Étienne de Grigny would be over in two touches unless Adrien was very lucky. He wasn’t. Marinette looked for M. Agreste in the terraces, the man looked somewhat irritated and not focused on the bout at all. Marjane was visibly upset when Adrien left the piste after he shook his victor’s hand and so was Nino. Adrien himself didn’t seem to mind, and if he did, it didn’t show. He had pushed himself as far as he could, it hadn’t been enough against Étienne, it hadn’t been as brilliant as his bout against Rémi.

Maybe he had his chances against Théo, but it didn’t matter all that much. What did matter however was the outcome of Kagami’s bout against Étienne. And it would be completely uncertain. In the case of a Kagami vs. Adrien, Marinette wouldn’t have been too worried about Kagami’s victory, though she’d never say it out loud. With someone able to win against Adrien, however...
Étienne was the striking image of the perfect little soldier, broad-shoulders, a buzz cut, a firm handshake and a poised look. Marinette stole a glance to her right. Itsuko Tsurugi remained inscrutable. The referee yelled the words, the gymnasium fell silent. Kagami’s en garde stance was flashy, energetic, even. For a brief moment, she looked as though it was her first bout of the day. Marinette knew better, still, it was impressive in its own right. Étienne lunged, Kagami parried, her own riposte was parried as well. Étienne stepped back and Kagami followed him with a lunge of her own. The scoring box blinked and Marinette had to keep herself from screaming. This was not a lacrosse game. No screaming. Especially with Kagami’s mother within earshot.

For the first two minutes, it wasn’t a bout as much as a conversation between fencers, a show of techniques. Étienne was even more academic than Kagami, but it was quite a spectacle to watch. Of course, he had defeated Adrien. None of his moves were fortuitous, it all felt like part of a choreography. Touches were scored on both side, none of the fencers able to outmatch the other. Marinette already knew it, of course, but this was just the confirmation that Kagami was an amazing fencer, who she had thought was unparalleled until now. Her footwork was absurdly accurate, she’d probably be a great dancer.

It felt like an elaborate rhythm game in which timing was the key and tempo changed every other second. Any mistiming would cost them the right of way or even worse, a touch, and so with every lunge came a parry or a tentative dodge. That was everything Kagami had been taught, made into an intricate performance. The one minute break almost destroyed the illusion completely. Étienne was red-faced, Kagami’s facade almost slipped off. Itsuko Tsurugi clenched her fists. Her daughter was barely winning with one point ahead of Étienne. Her daughter still had seven touches to score to win. Nino was the edge of his seat, Marjane looked thoughtful.

The minute was over, the bout resumed. Marinette recognised Kagami’s stance, an anticipation for a compound attack, starting with . It seemed Étienne had understood it as well. And then Kagami feinted, followed through with a cut over which found its target, Étienne’s mask, with ease. It was not a dance, and the piste was no dance floor. Étienne lunged at Kagami, who parried the blow. With a flick of his wrist, Étienne’s sabre connected with Kagami’s lamé. He wouldn’t let her keep this advantage. Sabres clashed, and the boy pressed on Kagami’s blade. He was strong. She was more astute. She jerked her sword arm forward, freeing her sabre and scoring a touch.

This was a different kind of dance, a very codified one still, but much more tense than it had been so far. They were done assessing the other fencer’s worth, done toying with each other. Kagami had almost taunted her opponent, but now was no longer the time for that. Étienne’s movements became brusque, Kagami’s guard more conservative, her footwork less extravagant. No matter how hard she had tried to hide it, her exhaustion was becoming obvious to everyone. Étienne seemed to fare slightly better. He scored two consecutive touches and Marinette started to worry about the outcome of this bout.

At this rate, Kagami would lose. Étienne seemed to be sure of that as well. His en garde pose was more of an invitation than anything else, some fake opportunity for Kagami to regain her advance. It was almost humiliating, in a way. Kagami lunged faster than he had predicted, too quickly for
him to react in time. This was not the resilience he had expected. And she was only four touches away from victory. When he lunged at her, she beat his sabre out of line in a circular parry, perhaps too forcefully, and continued with a thrust. Three more touches.

Kagami’s riposte was unforgiving to those who didn’t understand it, but Étienne was not one to fall for it this easily. What he failed to predict, what Marinette didn’t see coming either, was Kagami pairing her riposte with a remise. Two touches to go. Time was almost up. Kagami lunged at Étienne but it was his turn to beat her sabre out of line, a move Adrien had reacted to clumsily; she was not Adrien. She angled her wrist, caught Étienne’s sabre with hers and tried a moulinet. Of course, it wouldn’t pay off, it was too archaic, too slow, and this was perhaps the reason why M. D’Argencourt liked the move so much. She didn’t finish the movement, however, and hit Étienne’s lamé in a cutting motion instead.

The scoring box blinked for her a split second before it did for Étienne. She had avoided the simultané. Only one touch. She scored it immediately after. She feinted when her opponent attacked. His lunge was hesitant. And hesitation, Kagami had told Marinette during one of their fencing sessions, was never good in fencing. Those who hesitate finish second best and there’s nothing worse than that. Kagami parried, riposted and went back to her en garde position, lowering her sabre. She didn’t need to look at the referee to know that it was done.

Marinette waited for the referee to give the final score. “Mademoiselle Kagami Tsurugi, with a score of fifteen points, has won against Monsieur Étienne de Grigny, with a score of ten points.” When Kagami and Étienne bowed to the public together, she clapped loudly and was joined by the rest of the gymnasium, though some applauses were rather reluctant. Itsuko Tsurugi allowed herself to smile. Kagami removed her helmet and looked tired but glad for a split second. That was a face Marinette had only seen once or twice. She decided she liked it quite a lot.

Two podiums had been set up, one sized for teams, the other for individual fencers. Adrien did make it to the third step of the podium, with a lopsided, cat-like grin on his face. Étienne did not look too disappointed with his silver medal, though he still wouldn’t speak to Kagami. And Kagami herself did get her gold medal and her trophy — though she wouldn’t display it in her room— and gave the crowd the trademark Tsurugi composure: one of a victor for whom winning is the norm, something they were born and raised for. She was regal as always, even when she waved at her mother who stood up to applaud heartily.

The D’Argencourt Team did not receive the trophy for the best team. They came second to Mme Legrain’s student, but before M. Doisnel’s pupils. Nonetheless, Vincent and Louise looked quite satisfied with that, and their fencing instructor was on the verge of tears when he came to shake hands with his protégés. Mme Legrain also shook their hands. The rest of the fencing students who had not taken part in the competition gathered around their teams to congratulate them as well. Oh well, Marinette mused, I’ll congratulate her in person some other day. And Adrien too, she added.
“Hey, Marinette, Nino, I think we can actually get to them if you want,” Marjane’s voice stirred Marinette out of her thoughts. The girl was standing next to her, and she hadn’t even heard her coming, probably because of how noisy the crowd was. Marinette simply nodded, Nino did the same. They followed her. As it turned out, Marjane was not only an endless pit of trivia and a friendly girl, she was also a perfectly good pathfinder.

“You came, you actually came!” a grinning Adrien said to Marjane excitedly when the small group finally made it to the boy and his teammates. Nino clapped Adrien on the back lightly and the two got quite chatty. Adrien smiled at Marinette briefly, a friendly smile, before he resumed his conversation with Nino and Marjane. Marinette took it as a hint that she wasn’t really needed here. Besides, it wasn’t Adrien she wanted to congratulate the most.

Kagami was slightly dishevelled and had a mildly annoyed expression on her face, not many of her fellow fencers at the D’Argencourt academy had congratulated her, they mostly turned to Adrien and to a lesser extent, Louise, Vincent and herself. But that expression melted slightly when she met Marinette’s eyes. Here was not the place for them to hug or share kind words, nor was it the time. It didn’t stop Marinette from finding Kagami absolutely lovely, even with her messy look.

Alright, screw this “not the place, not the time” thing, they both thought at the same time.

“You were amazing,” Marinette simply said.

“I’m happy you’re here,” Kagami replied and closed the distance between them. And for a few seconds, the rest of the world faded away as Marinette hugged Kagami back. This was different from the hug they had shared that day in October, when Kagami had been sick and things had been terrible. It sent a breath of hot hair in their lungs, it made their hearts race faster. They came back to their senses when Nino softly poked at Marinette’s shoulder to indicate that the D’Argencourt team was leaving for the locker room. Kagami stepped back, gave Marinette a small, sad smile and followed the rest of the team.

More and more people started leaving the gymnasium, but Itsuko Tsurugi was still there, watching Marinette with an odd expression on her face. Marinette came back to the terraces with Nino, and felt like Kagami’s mum was about to ask her something life-changing. And she silently prayed for good luck.

“Marinette, Nino, would you care to join us for dinner? It would be around 8PM,” Itsuko Tsurugi spoke, “in a small restaurant, nothing too extravagant. I’d gladly invite the two of you.”
“Oh, I, well, itdbereallygreatandallbutIdontwanttointrudeIcompletelyunderstandifyouwanthistobeafamilymoment —” Marinette mumbled.

“Yes, with pleasure!” Nino came to her rescue. “We just have to pay our Chinese teacher a visit, and I have to check on my girlfriend so we might be late, these sessions are quite time-consuming, you know, but we’ll be there for sure!” he added, winking at Marinette.

“It will be fine, I am sure,” Itsuko Tsurugi said. “I had considered inviting the Agrestes as well but Adrien’s father has proved to be most unpleasant. He cornered me during that thirty minute intermission and I suspect the only reason he came to Gymnase Elizabeth in the first place was to talk to me about a ludicrous agreement, he had even brought some paperwork with him. I had to refuse, of course.

“I suppose he expected to find some sort of blind blademaster using a shinai as a a cane or something in these lines, at least it is what he told me. What a ridiculous idea. And after that, he had the audacity to give me invitations for the gala he organises tonight… Oh but look at me, rambling like that… I am sorry for that outburst,” she said. “Well, never mind the Agrestes. So, 8PM it is, then?”

The drive back to the Tsurugi flat was mostly spent in silence, if not for the cab driver’s horrendous taste in music. Mum still wasn’t one for public displays of affection, of course, but Kagami didn’t mind all that much. Mum was proud of her. It was all that mattered. She didn’t even criticise Kagami’s performance too harshly, for once. Of course, she pointed out some of the mistakes her daughter had made, but it felt like constructive criticism for once, rather than a list of her failures. Even a few months back, it would have been unthinkable. And Kagami liked that change.

The first thing Kagami did as soon as she unlocked the door was go straight to the bathroom to run herself a bath. She finally chose her clothes for the evening. A turtleneck jumper would do fine, she decided, that and assorted trousers. She immediately threw the clothes she’d worn today in the laundry basket. It was a wonder Marinette had hugged her at all. She felt sweaty and smelly and a little gross. For once, Kagami didn’t turn on the radio

Kagami stayed in the bath for much longer than she’d usually do, her mind went completely blank in a good way. Kagami almost fell asleep in the warm water. When she walked out the bathroom wearing her bathrobe, her fingers were all pruney but at least she was squeaky clean. She checked her phone and found out that she had quite a few messages she needed to answer, from various people who wanted to congratulate her for her victory. She spent the next twenty minutes doing
just that. She texted Marinette, but she didn’t answer right away like she usually did. Kagami supposed she’d see her on Monday — they had exceptionally cancelled their Saturday fencing session this week— which was perfectly fine, she supposed. Even though she really wished she could have seen more of her today.

But these thoughts would lead her nowhere. So Kagami got dressed at last, did her makeup, combed her hair to keep herself a little busy, and so that she wouldn’t catch a cold standing around wearing that bathrobe, no matter how fluffy and comfortable it was. Which was to say, very. She stole a glance at her reflection in the bathroom mirror one last time… Not bad, not bad at all, she decided.

Mum was smiling to herself as they walked down the street together. Not in a way that most people would notice, she wasn’t actually outwardly smiling per se but it looked as though she was keeping something from her daughter and was happy with it. Kagami wouldn’t play the guessing game with her, she’d find out what that secret was later and she was fine with it. It didn’t take them long to reach the restaurant Mum and she had chosen for the small celebration.

Le Saïdoune was probably Kagami’s favourite Lebanese restaurant in the entire 17th arrondissement. Back in September, they had come there following one of mum’s colleague’s advice. (Or was it one of her friend? Kagami really didn’t know a lot about mum’s life outside of fencing, when she came to think of it.) There was something charming about the small wooden frontage, and the interior was even better, with its art nouveau mirrors and its small chandelier. Tonight, the restaurant was quite full, but this was nothing Kagami worried about.

Mum had made a reservation, of course she had, otherwise they wouldn’t have been able to find a table at all. But rather than their regular table for two, the waiter lead them to one meant for four persons. That was… Odd, there must have been a misunderstanding there. But mum didn’t try to correct the waiter, and Kagami was too polite to say anything. So she waited until the man was out of earshot before she spoke

“Aren’t there two chairs too many?” Kagami asked in Japanese.

The waiter was back with the menus and a pitcher of water. So perhaps

“Oh no, these should not stay empty for long, they will be there anytime now. Do you want to order from the menu?”

Kagami didn’t bother asking who “they” were supposed to be and browsed through the menu instead. Perhaps she’d begin with a dish of mutabbal, that sounded good. Then again, everything
else was great as well, The restaurant’s front door opened with the sound of chimes, but she didn’t bother looking up from the menu to see who had just come in. Mutabbal it would be, she decided.

“Alya says congratulation for your victory,” a familiar voice said from behind her.

Kagami almost jumped out of her chair. Nino was standing right next to her, with a mischievous grin on his lips and the jade bracelet back on his wrist. He had dressed more elegantly, a V-neck jumper with a shirt underneath, though he had rolled the sleeves so that it wouldn’t look too formal. What was he doing he— Ah. So that was what mum had been hiding from her. She had invited Nino and…

Marinette put her phone back in her handbag and walk through the restaurant’s door. And Kagami felt her mouth go quite dry. She had probably designed the dress she was wearing. It was incredibly… Her. She had done her hair in a bun, and was that champagne eyeshadow? Oh no. Kagami was blushing, she knew that. Marinette kissed Kagami on both cheeks before she greeted her mum and found a seat next to her.

“Oh, she texted me, but thanks for telling me,” Kagami said, switching to Japanese as she turned back to Nino in an attempt to regain her cool.

Marinette would remember that evening for quite some time. Mme Tsurugi was a little intimidating at first, especially in that setting, all dressed up in an impressive burgundy suit, but she soon became very friendly with her. She didn’t seem all that like the strict, controlling woman Kagami had described in their early messages in June. She seemed to get along with Nino and she seemed to like her too. The staff was friendly, the place was nice. The food was to die for, and she nicked some of Kagami’s mutabbal. In retaliation, the other girl tried Marinette’s tabbouleh, and failed miserably, which wasn’t surprising. After all, few people her age could rival with Marinette’s talents as a thief. The meze were absolutely great.

There wasn’t a single awkward moment, which was the the thing Marinette had feared for. Instead, they chatted about everything they could think of and it came out naturally. Nino asked a lot of fencing-related questions and Mme Tsurugi happily answered them, he even took notes and Kagami seemed quite amused by that scene. Marinette caught herself stealing glances at her every now and then, even when it wasn’t absolutely necessary.

There was something about the way Kagami talked, the way she moved her hands that made her absolutely captivating. She tended to keep to herself in class, and even around her friends in school,
she usually wasn’t this lively. Perhaps being tired made her less careful about her mannerism. It made her even more beautiful, if that was possible. Mme Tsurugi seemed to have noticed Marinette looking at her daughter and smiled faintly. Marinette turned beet red and Kagami’s mother laughed to herself.

It was around 10:30PM when they left the Saïdoune and the chilly wind hit Kagami’s face with no warning. Mum decided it was to late for any of them to walk home. And soon enough, a cab was there to pick them up. Kagami sat between Nino and Marinette and had to keep herself from dozing off on Marinette’s shoulder. Their first stop was in front of Nino’s flat and he profusely thanked mum and waved at the cab until his shape disappeared in the distance. Kagami thought she saw him flash green for a second but that was probably a trick of the light. She was getting too tired for that.

After a few more minutes, it was Marinette’s turn to get out of the cab. She too thanked Kagami’s mum before she opened the cab’s door. She turned to Kagami with an odd expression on her face. She looked as though she was struggling to find her words. She opened her mouth, closed it, shook her head. She looked conflicted. Kagami looked at her quizzically.

“Oh, never mind! Well, sweet dreams, Kagami!” And with that, she awkwardly hugged Kagami — it was hard to do it sitting in a car— and hurried out of the cab, shut the door. Kagami let out a small sigh as the cab drove away and mum looked amused once again.

She was stirred awake by a the sound of a far-off booming noise followed by piercing light — it seemed that Hawk Moth was back in business and that Paris’s heroes were here to save the day like they always were — but she felt too sleepy to be excited about it. The cab driver didn’t seem to care either Mum paid him when they reached their destination and had to drag her daughter out of the car. It took every last bit of energy Kagami still had in her body to go up the stair, brush her teeth, remove her make-up and to finally put on her pyjamas. She bade mum goodnight and plopped on her bed. A small smile crept on her face as she slowly drifted to sleep. Today had been a good day. Mum was proud of her. She had won her competition. The girl she liked had hugged her twice. Yes, today had been a good day.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

Many things in that chapter! The next one will be more of a breather (not a filler, they're never fillers) and a little shorter too but I think you'll enjoy it.
About Gabriel Agreste and Itsuko Tsurugi… I could have gone back to my fic and edit it to fit canon! Kagami's mum but… Eh… In a show with good character designs such as ML, I find Tsurugi Tomoe really dull and cliché, and she seems to be basically the gender bent version of Gabriel with fencing instead of fencing. Which does the job for a show aimed at kids, but you don't spend thousands of words writing one-dimensional characters (unless you don't care about these characters and that's not my case). Itsuko is different from Tomoe and I won't try to make her closer to canon! Kagami's mum. And I won't have “Tsurugi-san” either. Because in fanfictions, it's often very painful to read and I'm having bad Naruto pics flashbacks just thinking of it. Really, too many fics are wasted by a poor use of honorifics. (I really didn't like what Animaestro did with… Any of the characters, really, sure Kagami berating Chloé is meant to be fun, but fighting over boys in 2019, seriously…)

All the locations in En garde! (safe for canon locations) are very much real! Le Saïdoune is one of these places but I'm too poor to go there (and I don't live in the 17th arrondissement). According to my friends who have been there, it is really great. Mutabbal is also very real, and delicious, it's mashed cooked aubergine/eggplant (and other stuff) served cold with pita bread.

I really like Nino, I think it shows quite a bit. But c'mon, he's really sweet, a great friend and good boyfriend. My tortoise son deserves more attention!

Well, I think that's it for this chapter!

I wrote a small Lukadrien thing if you're into that sort of thing, which you can read here!

As always, my Tumblr is here, for previews of incoming chapters and the other things I make! I'm experimenting with music and might compose a track or two just for En garde! if I feel like it.

Well, I hope you enjoyed this one, I'll see you in a week or two for the next chapter!

Bis bald, liebe Leserin, lieber Leser!
“And remember, class, bring your book next time, otherwise we won’t be able to do our job,” Mr Ellison said, in English of course.

“We will, Professor Ellison”, the class chorused in a mix of perfectly acceptable accents and very French-sounding voices.

“Good, class dismissed,” the teacher said, switching back to French. “And write me an e-mail if you still have questions!”

Marinette’s phone chimed briefly as she walked out of her English class, and she stopped abruptly. Adrien, who was just behind her, stopped dead in his tracks. He did not berate her, though. In fact, he was in an exceptionally good mood today, even more friendly than he usually was, if it was even possible. Marinette didn’t ask him why, still, it didn’t mean she didn’t wonder about it. Adrien was always polite, but she could rarely call him happy. It had been four days since the fencing competition at Gymnase Elizabeth, so his euphoria rush should have been over by now. But somehow, Adrien looked even happier than he had been on Friday after his victory.

They parted ways, Adrien was off to… She didn’t actually know what class he had next, or what classes he had at all outside of their shared English lessons, he hadn’t shared it with her. Bothering his classmates so that she could have a copy of his timetable would have been… Excessive, a little creepy, probably something she’d have done in troisième but not today. Oh, the things she used to do back in troisième, planning her every move with Adrien’s timetable in the corner of her mind…

And speaking of timetables, she needed to go to her maths class, and the classroom was two floors above this one. She hated that room, too few exits she could use if an akuma showed up, flickering neon tubes and noisy heaters they rarely used. But the good thing about this room was, it’d take her a little time to get there and she could use that time to check her phone and see why it had chimed for in the first place. She had a fairly good idea of the reason why without having to look at it. She’d have to turn off the sound in case it happened in class.

The Ladyblog had become quite active again, though Alya was no longer the only person taking care of it all. Many contributors had joined her to create a small permanent writing and reporting team. The Ladybloggers, as they unoriginally called themselves, would work alongside her and publish their own articles and investigations as well. And Marinette was starting to believe that they were Ladybug enthusiasts who liked shiny costumes but nothing more. How long would they keep on writing about Carapace and Queen Bee’s sudden apparition? She didn’t know, but these
articles just kept coming, and she assumed the reason her phone chimed in the first place was because of yet another of these.

Except this time it wasn’t one of these kinds of articles at all. The headline was a little eye-catching “Injudicious Ladybug: an Irresponsible Speech with Few Consequences”. It had been shared a lot, with even more comments below the article; But Marinette didn’t have the time to read it, she didn’t want to be late for maths. She hastily shoved the phone in her bag, accidentally bumped into that boy Kagami didn’t like (wasn’t his name Gustave?) and his friend, and finally made it in class just in time. As always, she paid close attention to the lesson. The same couldn’t be said about Kagami. The perspective of not following what Mme Chami was writing on the board didn’t seem to move her all that much. The class was moving too slow to her liking, she’d explain a few days later.

Kagami being confident in her abilities wasn’t new —she had aced the last math test— but her doing something completely different during a lesson was. Well, that wasn’t completely true, she still took notes every so often so that she wouldn’t be completely lost. But most of the time, she was reading that Ladyblog article as discretely as she could. It was an interesting read, apparently. Marinette had to keep herself from looking over Kagami’s shoulder, firstly because both of them would get caught and more importantly because Kagami wouldn’t like it.

Fortunately for them, the two hours lesson had a five minutes break splitting it in two. So Marinette took the opportunity to read the article without the risk of getting herself in trouble because of that. Kagami had turned to talk to Alya and the conversation sounded quite friendly, not as lively as it could have been months ago, but Alya didn’t seem out of it as she had often been.

Marinette’s frown remained on her face as she scrolled through the post. It was rare seeing anything overly critical about Ladybug on the Ladyblog itself. And this article wasn’t downright bashing her either. It was weird, reading something that didn’t outright call her a menace like Le Clairon Quotidien always did. It was equally odd to see herself depicted as someone other than a perfect saviour as it was often the case with the Ladyblog. When she was done reading the article, she was very confused.

“I’m not sure I understand the point that post is trying to make… But you two seem to agree with the person who posted it?” Marinette asked Alya and Kagami.

“Well, maybe not on absolutely everything but they make a couple good points,” Alya shrugged. “Y— Ladybug’s speech was nice and all when it came to address some issues with, I dunno, people putting themselves in harm’s way just to see her and her sidekicks in action…”
“No, really, there was nothing wrong with that, or with that bit about not abusing your personal social status,” Kagami added, “They are a little too harsh on Ladybug for the way she phrased that part, I mean, she is meant to represent hope so of course she is going to come off as a bit naive sometimes, no? She can’t be much older than us, even though I wouldn’t be able to tell how old she truly is. What surprises me is that they don’t mention Chat Noir once in the entire article.”

“But the thing with that boycott the merch campaign, I’m sure she meant well but that wasn’t very smart and that didn’t solve anything in the end,” Alya winced. “That’s the part I agree with. I mean, she sorta did like these celebrities who do charity work in poor countries… Sure, it’s a nice gesture and it encourages everyday people to do the same, but…”

“We all followed Ladybug’s advice,” Kagami said, “but your government did not implement new regulations on these kinds of goods, which I find unacceptable. The factories that had produced all that merch were closed for a few days and they did not pay their workers… And then they just reopened the factories with the same working conditions, they just produce different toys now. Without that article, I never would have learned about that…”

“So Ladybug just not wanting her personal “brand” to be associated with that wasn’t enough and it didn’t solve anything in-depth,” Marinette mumbled thoughtfully. “Yeah, that was a clumsy speech, wasn’t it? A nice gesture but it didn’t make things really move…”

“I’m sure she’ll get to talk about it someday,” Alya said.

The comment section was a hellfire, and though not all of the readers found the article bad or alarming, some really weren’t pretty to look at. Marinette guessed, correctly, that some of these comments had been written by people who hadn’t bothered reading the article. Then again, the title was a little misleading and very much clickbait, so she could understand that some dedicated fans had had a knee-jerk reaction like that, although that didn’t really help create a real conversation. Perhaps she could make a new public speech to clear things up, to apologise and more importantly, to do better. Not right away, that would seem suspicious, but someday soon.

Mme Chami came back in the classroom with a mug of black coffee in her hand. The lesson resumed, and Marinette was able to fully focus on trigonometry instead of wondering what that post was all about. Knowing that Kagami was paying attention and wouldn’t risk getting detention for being on her phone also made the hour that followed a little less tense. It didn’t make it any less boring, however, and Marinette spent more time doodling in the margins of her notes than taking actual notes.

Lunchtime was drawing near and today, they’d be having lunch at Alya’s for a change. It was
much closer to their lycée, and although they wouldn’t say it out loud in front of Alya herself, they didn’t want their friend to feel left out. It’d be more difficult for Nino and Marinette to temporarily disappear in case an akuma situation occurred, but Chloé (Queen Bee’s identity had remained a secret but it had to be her) had promised she’d be on patrol during lunchtime, so they tried not to worry too much about that. Marinette wondered who had given her the Bee Miraculous in the first place but she was… Surprisingly quite good at her job, and quite good at helping people.

Whether the same could be said of her alter-ego, Marinette couldn’t tell, they barely saw each other in class and Chloé hardly made a spectacle of herself like she used to. She wasn’t particularly nice, she still had that nerve-grating laugh from time to time, but she had stopped being the reason why so many people had turned into Hawk Moth’s tools. Even without her, their lycée still had a disproportionate rate of akumatised students and professors when compared to every other schools in Paris, just like Françoise Dupont had been an akuma magnet in its own right. Master Fu had failed to explain these coincidences.

Perhaps Hawk Moth had been a student in these two places and wanted to ruin them in his quest to power. Perhaps it was just an awful coincidence. Perhaps he had a child and wanted to make them realise that going to school here was terrible. Or perhaps, Nino had said in a moment of extreme lucidity, perhaps Hawk Moth was a villain straight out of a cartoon aimed at schoolchildren, and as such he only chose villains loosely related to the main protagonists, whoever they were. Everyone had felt terribly uneasy after Nino’s remark and they’d tried to forget all about that. They decided that the reasons that pushed Hawk Moth to target their lycée more than any other were shrouded in mystery.

There was nobody home when Alya unlocked the door to the Césaire family flat, her sisters were at school, both of her parents were at work. It was the first time Kagami had come here, and even though she hid it well, Marinette could feel how curious about the place she was. When Marinette came to think of it, Kagami had only ever been to her house, she hadn’t been invited to parties at some of their classmates’ places, she had yet to visit Nino’s flat… It didn’t help that Kagami was not one to make friends easily, outside of this small group which had formed around Marinette.

But there was no time for a grand tour of the flat, or for lazing around. They only had an hour to fix a meal from scratch and go back to school. It didn’t take them long to decide what to cook. And so, pasta it was. Mme Cheng’s cooking lessons had paid off, and lunch was perfectly edible, certainly not as delicate and subtle as the dishes Alya’s mum was renowned for all around the world, but quite good nonetheless.

They ate their meal a little too quickly, but it didn’t stop them from chatting, though the conversation mostly consisted in Nino and Marinette complaining about the incoming poetry anthology they’d have to create for their French literature class. And then came Marinette’s
question which made things a lot less relaxed for everyone but Marinette herself.

“Wasn’t Adrien supposed to come over too?” she asked, almost too naively.

The temperature dropped, Kagami’s fork hovered above her plate. They had purposefully done everything to avoid talking about that. Nino, Kagami and Alya looked at each other awkwardly, Nino and Alya started whispering at each other angrily but Marinette couldn’t hear what they were saying. Kagami tried to remain completely blank-faced but that didn’t work too well. It wasn’t a trick question, Kagami realised with horror. She genuinely didn’t know. On the bright side, she added to herself, perhaps Marinette didn’t care all that much about Adrien anymore, which meant she might have her chances.

“Oh, he hasn’t told you?” Alya replied in a forced casual tone. “He’s on a lunch date with someone.”

“You’re… Going to have to be a little more specific than that?”

“… With his girlfriend, that’s who,” Nino finally said.

Marinette blinked once, then twice and simply shrugged with a small “oh, OK” before she returned to her dish of linguine. Nino looked shocked, Alya was mildly surprised and Kagami’s expression remained unreadable. They now ate in silence, with only the noise of forks accidentally clanking against porcelain dishes, until Nino opened his mouth.

“You… You really don’t wanna know who his girlfriend is?”

“If Adrien wants me to know, I’m sure he’ll tell me, but I’m going to go with a wild guess and say it’s Marjane,” Marinette said and took a sip of water. “Say, Alya, do we do the dishes or is it OK for me to put my things in the dishwasher?”

“Yeah you can put it in the dishwa— Girl, we’re talking about THE Adrien Agreste here, the boy you’ve been head over heels in love with for over a year,” Alya retorted. “And you’re just fine with him dating someone?”

Marinette didn’t seem too fazed by that, if the way she calmly put her knife and fork in the dishwasher was anything to go by. This was… Unsettling. Disturbing. Worrisome, even, for the friends who had known her for over a year. Was she sick? Was it the fault of an amnesia-inducing akuma? Nino and Alya kept staring at their friend with concern written all over their faces, and
Marinette grew more and more annoyed by the second.

“Yes, we’re talking about Adrien Agreste, a boy I USED to have a crush on, Adrien who only sees me as a friend, and no, I’m not jealous of Marjane,” Marinette said heatedly. “I guessed right, it’s Marjane, isn’t it?” she added in a lighter tone. “I like Marjane, she’s nice.”

“Yup, you guessed right,” Nino said. “But really? You’re not going to do everything you can to take him back? Man, I shouldn’t have put that much money in the Adrienette betting pool…”

“If you’d asked little old me in troisième I guess I would have been jealous and I’d have been a bit mean towards whoever wanted to date him,” Marinette frowned, ignoring the betting pool remark completely. “But hey, we’re not in troisième anymore and we rarely see each other anyway. So no, I no longer have a crush on him, and if he and Marjane are happy together then it’s just fine and I don’t see why I’d have a say in any of that. Besides, there’s no taking Adrien back if we weren’t dating in the first place.”

Kagami didn’t say a word and simply watched the scene in a mixture of amusement and, perhaps, hope. Nino and Alya chose not to talk about it anymore and they resumed complaining about the much-hated poetry anthology. They barely made it to lycée Carnot in time but it was all worth it. It was just a plain old regular day for regular lycée students, it was a little trite, almost boring to some, but quite frankly, Marinette had missed these, and so had Nino.

Being Carapace was great, he and Wayzz enjoyed working together, but it meant being in a state of constant vigilance and that was nerve-wracking. He wondered how Marinette had been able to deal with it for so long without breaking down. Their classmates, and this included Kagami, seemed quite oblivious as to their secret identities, however, and that lifted quite a weight off his shoulders. Perhaps it was a kwami power, maybe a regular human could guess their identities in the right circumstances but not always, even Master Fu had no clues as to how that really worked.

Mme Berthes wasn’t there yet, she had that tendency to be a little late, and so, while her friends were off chatting with other students in the class, Kagami started reading *Toby Alone*. The book had been gift from one of her mother’s friends, and it had felt a little childish at first, and she had been reluctant to read it, but to her surprise, it was quite good, and she’d read the sequel as soon as she could. Sidonie and Lorenzo, the class representatives, made a small announcement concerning an eventual class meal, but Kagami didn’t really follow.

Finally, Mme Berthes arrived and everyone went back to their seats. Today was their introductory
lesson on poetry, and Most of the class was completely focused on the lesson. The professor had that way of speaking clearly yet not too loud that made her students listen to her, cling to her every word. It was no wonder she was so hated by her colleagues, she made a full hour feel like twenty effortless minutes. At last, they discussed the much-hated anthology assignment. It would be a group work and they’d have quite some time to prepare it, which was a relief.

The registration sheet passed from student to students, and groups of two or three formed fairly easily. The classroom was needlessly chatty but Mme Berthes didn’t try to make her students calm down, they could do it perfectly well on their own and the chatter died out quickly. Alya and Nino decided not to work together on that one, and paired with some of their other friends instead. When Kagami got the sheet, she glanced at Marinette hesitantly.

“Do you want to work with Alya? Really, this is fine, I can work on my own, I do well that way too, or if I really have to, I will fine someone else…” she whispered. She expected a “yes” from Marinette, a noncommittal shrug maybe. They did their homework in the school library together every so often, but it had never been truly time-consuming things like this assignment. It would make perfect sense for Marinette to work with her best friend.

Instead, Marinette carefully took the sheet and wrote her name, and pointed to the space right next to it. It was just homework, Kagami berated herself, it didn’t mean anything, just because Marinette smiled at her a lot and kissed her on the cheek a little more than she did with Alya, just because she wasn’t romantically interested in Adrien didn’t mean Marinette saw her as anything more than a good friend. She probably didn’t even like girls.

Still, she could feel her face heat up when she wrote her name next to Marinette’s, and her hand accidentally brushed against the other girl’s. Marinette said nothing about it, her lips sketched a faint smile and handed the registration sheet to the next group.

Mme Berthes dismissed her class as soon as the bell rung and the corridors were instantly overcrowded and noisy as they always were. What was unusual, however, was the sound of a small crowd running towards the school, accompanied with roars and aggressive slogans. It was getting closer and lycée Carnot was shaking. Some light went out. And the unmistakable nasal voice of M. Sautoir, one of lycée Carnot’s infamous PE teachers, came to their ears aggressively through a megaphone.

“The Flanker will not teach weaklings! Clean your room! Eat meat! Stand upright like the lob—” He stopped yelling to berate one of his “soldiers”. He cleared his throat and continued. “I will make you stronger, so join me, children!”
Marinette groaned. Being akumatised seemed to make people prone to a poor sense of theatrics. Well, at least it sounded like a plain old akuma, not some overpowered titan or something like that. She listened carefully. She could hear grunts in the middle of all that stomping, and the voice of a certain feline friend. She glanced at Nino and he nodded back at her. They made sure not to look at Chloé, but they knew she too would try to help. Lycée Carnot’s walls started to shake again and the corridor lights stopped working completely. Mme Berthes, Lorenzo and Sidonie tried to lead all the students she could find somewhere safer.

Alya covered for Marinette, of course, and with the complete chaos that reigned, it was hard to keep one’s head clear. They couldn’t see what was going on outside, and peaking through the windows was soon out of the question when they heard the sound of broken glass followed a series of muffled noises and what was definitely Chat Noir’s pained groan in a classroom next to the one they had taken shelter in. It was a wonder most parents hadn’t tried to pull their children out of school after these repeated attacks.

The sound of broken glass rang out once more, followed by the trample of the Flanker’s troops walking away. They had climbed lycée Carnot’s facade, and they were coming for the students, if Kagami had to make a quick guess. They could still make it to the stairs and get away from this part of the building if they were fast enough, or so Mme Berthes believed. The teacher lead the way and the group of students she had managed to gather tiptoed through the now empty corridors, in near darkness. The tumult stopped. All was silent, if not for the faint sound of breathing.

And then it was complete pandemonium, the screams of frightened students, the growls and grunts of akumatised people leaping towards the small group. But they never got to them. In a flash of green and yellow, their heroes were here. The glow of Carapace illuminated the corridor and for a split second, Kagami could see confusion on the akumatised cronies’s blueish faces. This expression was soon replaced with fear and pain as Queen Bee neutralised the small crowd methodically, taking out the Flanker’s cronies one by one. In the meantime, Carapace escorted them in one of the lycée’s panic rooms, in the basement, promising everything would be back to normal soon.

It was frustrating, having to stay cramped in that bleak little room with other frightened students, and not knowing what was going on outside. And Alya could have used a bathroom break. It didn’t truly feel safe, they still heard the distant echoes of the battle that was playing above their heads. It went on for perhaps ten minutes before the surroundings were completely silent. A wave of light washed over them. Mme Berthes stole a glance outside the door. The corridors were incredibly ordinary, perfectly boring and well lit by the usual halogen lamps. It seemed reasonable to say that Ladybug had de-akumatised M. Sautoir.

As always, there was no trace of the battle, everything had returned to normal and the students who
had been corrupted by the Flanker were coming back to their senses. Nino, Chloé and Marinette had been part of the unlucky ones, it seemed, and so had been many more of their classmate. But everything was alright, now. It hadn’t been the first time such a thing occurred, it certainly wouldn’t be the last, and until Hawk Moth was behind bars, it wouldn’t stop. Paris was getting used to it, so was lycée Carnot’s staff and students.

Unsurprisingly, school resumed, though a little awkwardly; they had missed an entire period after all. Kagami wasn’t in shock, neither were most people, or so it seemed. The hard part would come later, the reminiscences in the middle of the night and all the things that came with it. But even that would go away in the end, like it had for her. And so, they went to their Chemistry lesson with M. Levitt as if nothing had happened. Just because lycée Carnot often turned into a battlefield didn’t meant the quality of its education should become worse, the headteacher had told in a press statement after Administrator’s attack. That felt so far away…

Mum had only sent her one worried text this time; she had always seemed to have faith in Paris’s heroes, the text also asked her if she could buy some bread after fencing practice. That, Kagami thought, was the perfect excuse to pay the Dupain-Cheng bakery a visit, even though it was not on her way home. And perhaps mum knew that she’d enjoy the detour. She decided not to think about it too much.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

I hope you enjoyed this one!

A few things:

As you've noticed, I took some liberties with the canon (but then again, who wouldn't?). So, Style Queen and Queen Wasp never happened, Chloé never disclosed her secret identity and… She grew up? Because she's not in collège anymore and things have changed? Perhaps we'll spend some more time with her in the future, who knows?

Translate “le Clairon Quotidien” in English for a small easter egg!

Toby Alone, or Tobie Lohness in French, is one of my favourite books ever. It is not without its flaws, but you should really read it. I won't tell you anything about it, except that it's great, because discovering it completely is something I'll never experience again and I want y'all to have this pleasure.

And yes, the Flanker almost quoted the infamous Doctor P. One of my lecturers (a young lad) had us work on some of his works and that was one of the most terrible experiences in my entire life.

I'll try to go back to a regular schedule if I can, my finals are almost over and I'll be able to dedicate more time to writing things in general, including this.
I made a post about my thoughts concerning Onichan [here](#) if you stay up at night and think, AlgernonInWonderland sure has some interesting views on stuff, I sure wonder what they thought about Miraculous's last episodes!

And as always, my Tumblr is [here](#) for questions and other stuff! I wrote a few more critical things in the last few days which you might find interesting!

Well, I'll see you in the next one, perhaps next Sunday if I can write enough chapters in advance!

À très vite, et une bonne semaine à vous tou.te.s !
Kagami paced up and down in her room. She crouched to look under her bed for the umpteenth time, just to make sure she hadn’t left a dirty sock there. Which was irrational. She’d never leave her dirty clothes anywhere but in the laundry basket and she knew it perfectly well. Still. Her room had to be perfectly clean, with nothing too compromising on her desk, it had to be suitable for work yet it shouldn’t look like she only came to her room to work and sleep. She had rearranged her bookshelves, she had even bought some extra succulents because she felt her room didn’t have enough green in it. She had made sure Marinette’s drawing was pinned to her wall properly. She was the very definition of restless, and even she knew it.

Should she make some tea? Perhaps baking these biscuits had been too much, Marinette would only be there for the afternoon, they’d never find the time to eat them all. Had she baked too many of them? She had followed the recipe perfectly, and it did say it was meant for three to four persons, and they looked exactly like the description in the recipe book. They should have done this on Saturday and not today, she berated herself, so that Marinette could have enjoyed her Sunday afternoon without having to worry about homework. And mum was here. They should have worked on that anthology without mum being here.

She hoped she looked alright and normal enough. Was her hair OK? Had she overdone it? Were her clothes casual enough? Perhaps she shouldn’t have bothered wearing makeup, she was in her own house, not at a gala after all. On the other hand, she looked tired without it. She had slept rather poorly these last few days, but that was because she had so much to do. That, and she had almost finished the second and final tome of Toby Alone. And perhaps she had pushed herself too far during yesterday’s fencing lesson when she had tried to show Marinette all the subtleties of the flunge and she hadn’t completely recovered (it wasn’t that).

Kagami had faced worthy and sometimes merciless opponents in many competitions, she had performed in front of quite a few people with her cello when she was little, she had endured two months, almost three of métro torture, and she had been the eye-witness to too many akuma attacks in her fifteen years of existence. Yet having a friend, no, having Marinette over at her place, just to do homework, nothing more, and only for a few hours, made her much more nervous and apprehensive than any of these things. And all that stress made her thoughts overly verbose. It was a good thing she didn’t have to talk right now, otherwise she’d have been a bumbling mess.

She tried to calm down, it was no use getting all worked up for nothing. She sat on her bed, took a
deep breath. She got to her desk and re-read the precise wording for the assignment once again. Creating an anthology on the theme of travel. This sounded simple enough. Simple instructions were relaxing. Yes, she was relaxed, now, she could do things calmly if she wanted to. And a relaxing thing she could do was play the cello. Working out again today would be pointless, it’d mean she’d have to take a shower right after and she didn’t know she had the time for that. Yes, cello sounded nice. That would be simple enough, it’d keep her mind off the very near future.

She carefully took her cello out of its case and went to the living room. Her bow didn’t need rosin for once. It was fine the way it was. She could start playing right away. She tuned her instrument, thinking of the things she could possibly plays. But all of this was cut short when her phone, which she had left on her bookshelf, in her room, gave out a faint ring. Kagami froze for a second, making sure her cello wouldn’t fall down and be damaged, before she all but ran to her room and pounced on her phone.

“Kagami, is everything alright? I hear you running around,” Itsuko Tsurugi said loudly from her room.

“Y-yes, everything’s fine, there’s nothing to worry about,” Kagami shouted back.

Kagami walked back to her bed calmly. She hadn’t misheard. She did have a new message. From Marinette. Telling her she’d be there soon. At the beginning of the year, that would have meant “I just locked my door and I swear I’ll do my best to only be twenty minutes late”. Their lycée’s attitude towards lateness wasn’t as lenient as college Françoise Dupont’s had been. It wasn’t to say that Marinette would be there in advance, but she’d be either right in time or a little late but nothing outrageous. Kagami typed a reply and hit the “send” icon before she returned to her cello.

From: Kagami!!!!!!!!!

To: Me

See you soon then :)

I’ll open the door, my surname is above the doorbell, not next to it, and the flat is on the second storey!
It had taken Marinette a little more time getting to rue Troyon than it would have for her to go to school but she was here at last. The building itself was the very picture of beaux arts architecture, with its mascarons — Marinette herself couldn’t say her house’s facade had sculpted lion faces — its corbels and of course impressive balconies with equally elaborate iron balustrade. There were many houses of that kind all around Paris. It felt quite bourgeois, but it didn’t truly stand out in the middle of the other buildings in rue Troyon. After months of imagining that Kagami lived in a palace of some sorts, the normalcy of this was… Odd. There even was a prêt-à-porter boutique on the first floor.

Having to walk all the way from her home to Kagami’s flat didn’t bother her. After all, she was done with most of her homework if she didn’t go too much into details. The weather wasn’t too bad either (it would be pouring quite a lot in the evening according to her mum but they’d be done before that, so she hadn’t brought an umbrella with her). And more importantly, she’d be with Kagami and she would finally get to see what her flat was truly like. And seeing Kagami in her element without her fencing gear would be quite new too. Marinette re-read the text one last time to be sure she was doing it right. And sure enough, she found the Tsurugi name just above one of the many doorbell buttons, small and golden.

Marinette had no idea what the inside looked like, except for one or two pictures the other girl had sent her, but it hadn’t been enough to make a sketch of the place. She didn’t hesitate and pushed the doorbell confidently but not too strongly. The door was opened almost right away. Marinette walked inside the building, careful not to be too noisy as she did so. She climbed up the stairs — the staircase was certainly bigger than the one at home, but nowhere near as imposing as the one at Agreste Manor— and stopped on the second floor.

“On your left!” she heard a familiar voice said. Marinette turned her head to see Kagami standing on the doorstep with a slight smile. Marinette all but ran to meet Kagami and kissed her cheeks like she always did. Kagami had yet to reciprocate the gesture one day, but she had her hopes. Seeing Kagami barefoot, she took it as a sign that she should take off her shoes. She crossed the threshold wearing her socks. Kagami put Marinette’s shoes next to hers and closed the door. She turned and glanced at her guest.

Marinette took a moment to take everything in, the smell of biscuits, the smooth parquet floor beneath her feet, the corridor and its many shelves filled with trinkets, memorabilia, plants and books, a series of framed photographs, one of a younger Kagami doing horseback archery, one of Kagami with her mother and father in front of the Brandenburg Gate, and so many more. She did not miss the welcoming look on Itsuko Tsurugi’s face. So this was what Kagami woke up to every morning. It was… Incredibly “her”. And charming. Marinette greeted Mme Tsurugi and let Kagami show her around.
The living room, with its low table, its ficus tree and its Persian carpets was quite the sight. Some would have praised the Tsurugis for their fine taste in glassware, or looked at their impressive collection of exhibition catalogues with great attention, some would have been surprised by the lack of television, some would have noted the great archery bow proudly displayed, but what caught Marinette’s eye right away was...

“So this is your cello!” Marinette said enthusiastically. “You told me you played but I had never seen it before…”

“I am sure Kagami will be happy to perform a little something for you if you ask her,” Mme Tsurugi said with a hint of humour in her voice.

“Maybe some other time, I am sure,” Kagami said neutrally, not quite replying to the joke. “That is, when there is no important homework to do,” she added, putting her cello back in its case.

“Do you play an instrument too, Mme Tsurugi?” Marinette asked in the meantime.

“I was not a bad pianist back in the old days,” Kagami’s mother replied, “but Kagami has always been a better musician than me. I confess I am out of practice. And you, Marinette?”

“Well… I used to play the flute when I was little… I have planned on finding a teacher before the end of this year, I’ve really missed it all too much!”

It was a surreal experience for Kagami, watching her mother and the girl she liked do small talk as if they were good acquaintances, even though they had only truly met about a week ago. Then again, Marinette was not all that timid. She had been, she had described herself as such during their first conversations, but that wasn’t true anymore. She had only lost to Sidonie by two votes during their election for class representatives, and though she was not as easygoing as, say, Nino, she was no shrinking violet either. Even after all these years, Aiko was still a little intimidated by Itsuko Tsurugi. Perhaps her mother sounded more impressive in Japanese. Or perhaps she chose not to sound too intimidating in French.

Kagami showed Marinette the kitchen, while her mother left them and returned to her room. The green-blue tile floor was a nice touch, the old radio would have been a bizarre addition in most houses, yet it somehow didn’t feel out of place here. Just like in the living room, there were many houseplants there, some even had their own watering system. That was quite impressive. Marinette’s sense of smell had not betrayed her: there were indeed freshly-baked biscuits in a bowl by the worktop. She could feel herself salivating by just looking at them.
“... bathroom is on your right when you exit my room and the toilet is the door next to it,” Kagami said as if she were some sorts of tour guide.

The flat wasn’t all that big, Marinette couldn’t have gotten lost even if she had wanted to, but Kagami seemed to be more comfortable playing that role of guide. Had she rehearsed that little speech? Mme Tsurugi’s room was adjacent to the living room, she supposed, but she never got to see it. Instead, Marinette followed Kagami to the end of the corridor where her room was. And was it just her, or Kagami’s walk was a little more hesitant now? She stopped right in front of the closed door. That, Marinette thought, was odd. Was Kagami’s room really messy? That was unlikely. Seeing her hesitate at all was puzzling. Still, Kagami opened the door.

“Wow,” Marinette whispered to herself as she walked inside the room. This was nothing like the place in her drawings. It was so much more, so many little things she couldn’t have imagined. Even more so than the rest of the apartment, Kagami’s room felt like a miniature garden, filled with the smell of lilies, books and houseplants. Marinette didn’t know where to look, there was just so many things to look at, from Kagami’s impressive mahogany wardrobe to her single bed with its duvet and red sheets. Had she pinned her drawing to her wall? Her imposing full-length mirror wouldn’t have been out of place in an art nouveau museum. Where did they find all that furniture and how could they afford it? But these weren’t questions you could ask your host, so Marinette kept her thoughts to herself.

“Can I?” she asked instead, motioning towards the bookshelves. Kagami seemed less tense already. She nodded and went to her desk, making her best impression of someone going through their things to find a precise document. This didn’t fool Marinette, who knew perfectly well that Kagami was well-ordered and would never lose anything important. But if that made her feel easier, she didn’t mind. It was new, seeing her acting shy rather than just reserved… Had she ever invited someone in her room? Somehow that wording made her blush a little.

She turned her attention to the books and tried to ignore Kagami’s eyes on her. There were, unsurprisingly, quite a few books in Japanese, and Marinette had no idea what they were. What she could read if wanted to, however, was the remainder of Kagami’s personal library: books in French, some in English, most sounding very serious — Kagami seemed to like long novels and sociology — though some others were almost out of place in the middle of these.

“A Series of Unfortunate Events? All thirteen of them?”

“Well I- the first tome was the first book I read in English and I really liked the tone then, so I read the next one and the one after that…” Kagami said, amused. “I still read them from time to time when I need a break from Dostoevsky and Federici.”
“I like them too, they’re really fun awful books” Marinette said, “I read them in French but I’ll give the original version a try, I think! And maybe Dostoevsky too. You had most of your Tokyo library moved here, right?”

“And it only grew bigger since I’ve arrived here,” Kagami said. “You need to keep me away from bookshops, otherwise I’ll go on a shopping spree and I’ll need new shelves.”

“Books and houseplants?” Marinette pointed towards the succulents scattered around the room.

“Books and houseplants,” Kagami repeated, “and it will get even worse after this winter.”

“I managed to keep my cacti alive, so I might get one or two more houseplants, that’d be nice,” Marinette said. “You’d help me choosing some?”

“I…I’d like that,” Kagami said softly. “But maybe we should get to work now, unless you want us to keep talking about plants.”

Like everything else in the room, Kagami’s desk was well-ordered, but not impersonal: there was quite a few things there that would have felt out of place on anyone else’s desk, but not hers. That impressive collection of pens and pencils in a pot and many notebooks, some of which looked quite old already. This storage box with drawers she knew were filled with many things. The pair of old binoculars. And even with all these things, there was quite some room for them put their things on the desk blotter. It was the perfect place to work.

Kagami sat on the kitchen stool she had brought, leaving Marinette no other choice but to sit in the girl’s comfortable office chair. She almost felt bad, being only there for homework and still getting the best chair, but if Kagami wanted her there… At least, Marinette could make good use of the small caster wheels and so she rolled towards Kagami.

“Create an anthology of at least six poems centred around the theme of journeys and travels, and explain this choice of poems…” Marinette read aloud. “Let’s get to it, then!”

“I thought we could discuss what is meant by “travel” and journey, perhaps? I found it quite vague,” Kagami said. Marinette nodded, and so began a long session of dissecting the subject and brainstorming about what travel and journey in poetry truly meant to them. Surprisingly, quite a lot of things. Ideas unfolded and lead to others, and they needed to keep track of that.
About two hours later, when Itsuko Tsurugi came knocking on her daughter’s door to ask if she and Marinette wanted some tea and biscuits, there was no answer. She knocked once more and opened the door this time. She found the two girls in the middle of an intriguing ensemble of post-it notes and sheets of rough paper scattered across the room. Itsuko had apparently interrupted a lively conversation. She asked again, and was met with an enthusiastic nod from Marinette.

“Is there any way I can help?” Marinette said. Kagami had already gotten up to do so.

“It is kind of you to ask,” Kagami’s mum said, “but you two should focus on that anthology, I will be back in a minute.” And she was. The tea was perfect, the biscuits complemented it quite well. It was nice taking a break from all that serious homework stuff, Marinette thought. Her hand brushed against Kagami’s when she tried to reach for a biscuit. The tingling feeling lingered for quite some time after.

A foolish idea bloomed in Kagami’s mind, one she didn’t dare speak out loud, one she’d write in her Paris journal, even though it wasn’t the place for that. She wanted to kiss Marinette. She usually had these thoughts alone, and they didn’t last for long. This time, she could not silence the thought, and the feeling that came with it. And Marinette seemed completely oblivious to that.

It was getting dark outside, so Kagami switched on her desk lamp and they went back to writing ideas on their own. Marinette stole glances at the girl sitting close to her. There was something lovely about the freckles on her nose and the way she bit the inside of her cheek while thinking about things to write. Marinette herself was having a hard time coming up with new ideas. She scribbled one or two things but stopped soon enough. And so did Kagami.

“Maybe we could look for poems now, I had a few in mind but now that we’ve done all that work defining what we’re going for, I don’t know if it’s any good… I printed them if you want to see, I just need to find them” Marinette mumbled.

“I had made a small list too, but let’s look at yours first!” Kagami said. “We can look for other poems later if we are a poem or two too short!” The tea had apparently made her slightly more awake, or perhaps it was the perspective of seeing Marinette’s work. After twenty good minutes of assessing each other’s work, Kagami and Marinette came to the disappointing conclusion that the work they had done on their own didn’t fit with what they had discussed at all.
“I guess we kept following our immediate ideas without trying to go beyond that…” Marinette winced, getting up from her chair to look for poetry books in Kagami’s library. “I mean, it seemed like a good idea then but in retrospect, choosing that much Prévert wasn’t a good idea…”

Kagami joined her and used the stool to reach some of the books she couldn’t reach like that. It had taken Marinette for her to notice that her own selection of poems wasn’t all that good. Self-doubt wasn’t something she felt often, especially when it came to homework. She’d have to thank her for pointing the flaws in that selection, she’d never have thought of it on her own. Sure, she would have gotten a perfectly decent mark no matter what, Mme Berthes tended to be rather kind when it came to correcting copies, but if they had the chance to do something truly good, she’d take it. They had chosen the same poem by Renée Vivien, still, and decided to keep it.

“I think I’m going to start with Apollinaire,” Marinette waved the book she had picked up.

“Then I will take care of Rimbaud,” Kagami said, climbing on the stool to reach her edition of *Illuminations*. “And if this leads us nowhere… Sometimes, Google is our friend..”

It was so easy to lose track of time in Kagami’s room. They read poems aloud, drank tea—even though it was slowly getting lukewarm, it still tasted good— and ate biscuits, and got distracted quite often by the books they were browsing through — and by each other too. Before Marinette knew it, it was almost 7 and they were only halfway done with the anthology. They had done a good job nonetheless, and they’d work on it in the next few days, Kagami decided. For now, however, it was time for Marinette to go home, her parents were probably worried about her not being there yet, and she felt like she had overstayed her welcome here. She’d text mum as soon as she got out of the flat, she made the silent promise to herself.

At least, it was what she would have done, if not for the sudden downpour and hailstones the size of ping pong balls that came with it. She should have seen it coming, she should have set up an alarm… And it would go on for hours, if Kagami’s weather app was to be trusted. Marinette had no umbrella. Still, she insisted she could run to the nearest underground station. But Mme Tsurugi refused to hear anything, she even refused to lend her an umbrella. Instead, she went to the living room where she had left her phone. One phone call later, Mme Tsurugi came back with a bright smile on her face.

“You are staying with us tonight! We have an extra mattress and blankets we will put in Kagami’s room and I am sure she will lend you pyjamas. Your father and I both think that letting you get out in the hailstorm is a terrible idea. They are expecting you for breakfast, however, so you will have to wake up a little early, but I was told you sometimes help at the bakery? But there is no need to worry about any of this now. Oh, and I hope you like sweet potatoes, because this is what is for dinner.”
“I…” Marinette was at loss for words. That wasn’t how she had envisioned her evening at all. And quite frankly, she didn’t mind getting up early if that meant a sleepover at Kagami’s house. Sure, she’d be on patrol duty, and she had been extremely lucky no akuma had shown up yet, but she’d just enjoy the moment for now. “Thank you so much, Mme Tsurugi. Sweet potatoes sound great. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“We will set the table in the kitchen,” Kagami offered, “and we will take care of Marinette’s bed and everything that goes with it.” Itsuko Tsurugi nodded serenely.

And so they did exactly that, quite quickly, carrying the mattress to Kagami’s room didn’t take long and they managed not to knock over anything by accident, even though Kagami gritted her teeth every time they got too close to a houseplant or a fragile trinket. The power of teamwork, Marinette said jokingly once they were all done. She wasn’t completely wrong. That left them with a good half hour with little to do. They weren’t in the mood for more homework. And just looking at each other would be bad for both their hearts. So Marinette had the best of ideas.

“Hey, you’ve ever watched Brooklyn Nine Nine?”

“No,” Kagami tried to be as collected as possible. Marinette’s enthusiasm was highly contagious. “No I have not, but judging by how excited you seem to be about it, perhaps I should?”

“It’s not that you should, we’re definitely watching the first episode right now!”

They put Kagami’s laptop on the stool, or rather top of a pile of books they had put on the stool, and sat on Kagami’s bed. They put Kagami’s duvet away for the time being and used her pillows as some sort of back for their improvised couch. Their shoulders touched quite a lot…But it wouldn’t distract them from the show.

And so, Brooklyn Nine Nine it was. By the end of the pilot, Kagami wondered why she hadn’t given it a chance before. She had forced herself to watch sitcoms when she was younger, just to improve her English accent — it hadn’t really helped— but they hadn’t been all that enjoyable and the experience had left a bitter taste in her mouth. Now, this was something else. Marinette had seen all four seasons that had aired so far, but she didn’t mind watching it with Kagami all over again. They watched the second episode, and were about to watch one more when Itsuko asked them to come in the kitchen.
Dinner was ready and they could smell it. Kagami and her mother sat at their usual seats, while Marinette took a sit next to Kagami. Before they started their meal, Mme Tsurugi apologised for the burnt sweet potatoes, though there was truly no reason for that: yes, the sweet potatoes were a little on the overcooked side but not outright burnt, it wasn’t bad at all, and the honey and vinegar glazing more than made up for it. While she was perhaps not as good a cook as Marinette’s parents were, this meal was really nothing to be ashamed of.

Kagami watched as her mum and Marinette bonded over their mutual admiration of Azzedine Alaïa and his incoming exhibition here in Paris. She was feeling a little left out in her own house, if that was even possible. She seldom had such conversations with her mum. Marinette seemed to have sensed it that and tried to redirect the conversation.

“So,” Marinette said as she poured herself a glass of water, “there’s that very impressive bow in the living room, and I wondered if you did… It’s called kyudo, right?”

“Yes it is, and I did, for a couple of years!” Kagami said with a touch of humour. “But I was much more proficient with a sabre. I almost fell off the horse I was meant to ride the one time I tried horseback archery so that put a stop to my career as a professional archer.”

“My father had trained me in both kyudo and fencing,” Itsuko Tsurugi said. “He tried to repeat what he had done with his granddaughter but it did not quite work. You were right to choose the cello instead, Kagami, it makes me worry a little less about you.”

“You also worried about me losing an eye every time I tried shooting arrows. And about the children around me misfiring their bows in my general direction.”

“Was it truly this dangerous? Even I wasn’t that much of a menace with a bow,” Marinette said. “And I was a pretty clumsy child… I mean I’m still a child but a little less clumsy now.”

That made Kagami laugh and her mother grin. The rest of the meal was peaceful, and when they were done clearing the table, Itsuko Tsurugi bade them a good night and hopped in the shower. The two girls decided, it would be Kagami’s turn and Marinette’s at last. Outside, the hailstorm raged on, but they didn’t worry about it too much. Had Marinette been in her room at home, she could have heard the sound of hailstones hammering against the roof, here, the sound was distant. And, until Mme Tsurugi was out of the bathroom, Brooklyn Nine Nine it was, and Kagami thanked Marinette for making her discover it. Could this evening get better than that?
Kagami’s hair, Marinette found out, tended to curl when wet. Kagami had just come back from the bathroom wearing her flannel pyjamas, and she could feel Marinette looking at her intently. Kagami decided to play it cool act as though she wasn’t aware of that. This was… Awkward, and everything she wanted, all at the same time. And weird, because she didn’t find herself particularly attractive in these pyjamas, they were… Just that, pyjamas, meant for cold weather, that didn’t show much skin at all, they were comfortable but on the lumpy side, they were completely buttoned up, but Marinette still stared at her when she bent down to pick up the book she had left on her night table.

“The bathroom is free, and there is a towel for you,” Kagami simply said, getting into bed and opening her book. Yes, acting casual about Marinette looking at her like that — not checking her out, that seemed excessive, or perhaps she was but Kagami didn’t want to get her hopes too high— was the best course of option possible.

“Well, thanks, I’m… Gonna go there, then. I’ll be back in a couple of minute,” Marinette said, and trotted to the bathroom.

Kagami squirmed a little in her bed and tried to focus on Tobie Alone. Any ordinary night, it wouldn’t have been hard getting absorbed in the book. This, of course, was not one of these nights, she had that feeling though she couldn’t explain why. Kagami found herself reading the same sentences over and over again. Marinette sure was taking her time in the bathroom. Or perhaps Kagami was being a little too impatient. She tried focusing on the book again. Only the sound of Marinette’s footsteps made her raise her nose from the book this time.

Kagami decided that her pyjamas looked good on Marinette. Well, she could make anything look good, in Kagami’s mind, but that was besides the point. The sleeves were perhaps slightly too long for her, yet it didn’t seem to bother her at all. She checked her phone, typed a few texts before she plopped herself down on the mattress they had put next to Kagami’s bed.

“Can I… Can I read a little too?” Marinette asked.

“Choose whatever book you want,” Kagami replied. The warmth in her voice was not lost to Marinette.

If Itsuko Tsurugi had chosen to peer inside her daughter’s room, she would have found two teenagers reading and sharing a comfortable silence. After perhaps twenty minutes of reading Federici — the title of that book had intrigued her, though it wasn’t an easy read— with great attention, Marinette started to show signs of her sleepiness. Kagami glanced at her alarm clock. Yes, they should go to sleep. One of them would have to get up early to get home and prepare her
bag for school, so Kagami didn’t mind switching down her bedside light now.

“Kagami?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks for having me here.”

“No need to thank me, Marinette.”

“Well thank you anyway.”

“You’re welcome. Now go to sleep, you’re tired.”

“You’re mean!”

“No, I just want you to get enough rest tonight.”

“Well thanks, mum.”

“Hmm.”

“Good night, Kagami, sweet dreams.”

“Oh… Well, you too.”
When Tikki tried to wake Marinette up two hours or so later, she made sure Kagami could not see her. Not that she needed to worry about that, the girl was certainly fast asleep, if her slow and steady breathing was anything to go by. Oh, she could picture her and Longg working side by side again, Kagami had still some growing up to do before any of that, but… She would be worthy someday, she was sure. She made Marinette happy, and she was quite sure Marinette’s feelings for her… But now was not the time to think about it. Her young Ladybug had opened her eyes slowly. Tikki would think about Kagami Tsurugi later.

Marinette changed into her regular clothes as silently as she could. She tiptoed through the corridor to retrieve her shoes and froze halfway through her way to the living room. What was that noise? Marinette remained perfectly still for a good ten seconds. Tikki too was on the lookout. But nothing. She must have imagined that, whatever it was. She needed to hurry, Queen Bee was waiting for her and even though she seemed to forgive her every mistake, the thought of leaving her hanging at this time of the night was terrible. Them having to fight an akuma was unlikely, and the rain had stopped, but still.

Parquets floors were nice, but going through the entire living room without making a single noise was a hellish experience. Still, Marinette did her best. She struggled to open the French window to the balcony. She didn’t bother turning around to make sure no one was watching. Tikki closed the French window behind Marinette.

“Tikki, spots on!” And with that, Ladybug was off.

Kagami went back to her room. Her head ached. Her stomach was in knots. She needed to make sense of what she had just seen. And what it meant to her. She hardly slept that night.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

I hope you enjoyed this one! I think Sunday might be the official day when I release new chapters, and I hope to make it a weekly thing again.

So, references, a few of them, architectural ones and literary ones!

The Second Empire style was quite monstrous in the way it recycled every style that
had been invented before — seriously, look at the Opera Garnier, it doesn’t make any sense and there are eagles everywhere, the only truly good thing about it are the ceiling painted by Chagall, but that was a later addition — and the Beaux Arts (school of fine arts) was the continuation of that after Napoleon III abdicated. It’s bourgeois, a little backward-looking, and it’s meant to impress. Yikes.

ASOUE is great, exquisite, even, a word which here means that every page is a pleasure to read. And indeed the first books I read in English without a dictionary. The Netflix Series is a much better adaptation than the Jim Carrey film (even though I like the way that film looks, quite a lot, and I had a crush on both film Klaus and Violet I think).

Jacques Prévert is the poet every single kid in primary school is taught about, with La Fontaine. Which is too bad because Prévert’s poetry is pretty nice, even though its subjects are often a little “childish”.

Renée Vivien! Lesbian poetry written by a lesbian poet! She lived in Paris and wrote in French but she was English! And everything she wrote is worth reading, a little dramatic sometimes but I think it’s part of the charm.

Guillaume Apollinaire! I like him very much too, early 20th century! Read his Calligrammes in which he plays with the form of the poem and the images, and Alcools!

Arthur Rimbaud! Who had this very short, very intense writing career, only seven years, during which he wrote Une Saison en Enfer, Illuminations and many other poems. And then he began an arms dealer. (Also, he had an unhealthy relationship with fellow poet Verlaine)

We talked about Tobie Alone before. I still think it's great.

Why Brooklyn Nine Nine, you ask? Because it’s a great comfort show, and a good show with likeable characters.

And I think that’s it! Your feedback is always very welcome! I’ve got a Tumblr here if you want to see previews of incoming chapters or read other things I only post there, I’m planning on writing a small piece on the episodic nature of Miraculous, how it works and why it sometimes doesn’t! If you want to ask me things, or tell me that my writing is utter shite, you can do it here.

Still a baguette, mistakes are not intentional.

Well… I’ll see you in the next one!
“Dear, do you want some more coffee?” Tom Dupain asked. “Or we can phone your school and say you’re not feeling well if you want to sleep a little more. I know that interview for that internship is stressing you out a little, so…”

It was rare for Marinette to have breakfast with her dad. Usually, he’d be working in the bakehouse—that was what he called it—by now, and Marinette would chat with her mum, which was always nice. Making conversation with her dad in the morning was a little different, especially since she hadn’t slept in her bed the evening before. It was a wonder he hadn’t turned into some sort of akuma very protective of his daughter yet.

“It’s fine, dad, it’s really fine, I didn’t even wake up that early, and I don’t feel tired at all,” Marinette said, readjusting the towel wrapped around her head. It was endearing, seeing her dad worry about her. And mildly annoying too, she wasn’t five anymore, she could handle herself just fine. She stifled a yawn. “On a second thought, more coffee would be good. So, that film you were telling me about, was it any good?”

Truly, Marinette wasn’t all that tired, not more than the usual. Just like she had predicted, there had been no akuma to purify, Chloé’s adoration for her was a little awkward, yet that hadn’t made their patrol completely unbearable, She had gotten back to Kagami’s flat in no time, only to find that the other girl hadn’t moved from the spot where she had left her. Marinette had even left the Tsurugis a small “thank you” note on their kitchen table. No, she didn’t feel tired at all, if anything, she was invigorated by how everything seemed to be going her way today.

Marinette finished her breakfast, thanked her father for doing the washing up, stopped by the bathroom to brush her teeth, get rid of that towel and do her makeup properly this time. She went to her room at last. She had to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything for today’s classes. Biology with M. Dupuis… Chinese… English… Middle-distance running… Geography… Her lunchbox… And of course, a sketchbook just in case she had new ideas for winter clothes… Good. Her backpack was now a lot heavier than it had been the evening before, but there was everything she needed in it. And she was early, too! Her bed looked like a terrible trap threatening to ensnare her. She resisted the temptation of lazing around, and went downstairs instead.

“I’m going to help mum downstairs!” Marinette yelled so that her dad could hear her, and sure enough, he shouted a “have a nice day, I love you!” to which Marinette replied with a “love you too!”
Sabine Cheng was quite busy with her clients: just like every morning, there was an impressive queue in front of the family bakery, busy people, sleepy faces and regulars alike waiting for their turn. Usually, Tom would have been here to help her out a little, but she could manage it on her own. There was no need to hire anyone, not for a couple more years, sure, they had apprentices every now and then, yet they had always come here to learn how to bake and start their own businesses, never to stay here. Yes, Sabine could do it without any help if she absolutely had to.

“Hey, need an extra pair of arms for twenty minutes?”

Sabine could manage it on her own, for sure. But few things made her as happy as having her daughter help her with the clients. They were a great tandem, and though it had taken the entire summer for Marinette to be helpful and not another source of worry in the bakery, she was frighteningly efficient when she worked alongside her parents. When Marinette had to run to school at last — these twenty minutes had turned into half an hour— she had flour all over her clothes and she didn’t care, her mum’s hugs were the best.

Not slipping on the still very wet ground is not an easy task when running, and Marinette almost fell down a flight of stairs because of that. She made it in time for M. Dupuis’s class nevertheless and greeted the rest of her classmates like she always did when she wasn’t late, and as always, most of her them answered. Marinette let her eyes wander around the classroom.

Everyone was here, even Kim who had been sick on Friday. Chloé was as impeccable as always, with a mildly bored expression on her face but no sneer. Whoever had given her the Bee Miraculous had had the right idea. She didn’t have it today, however. Well, perhaps they wouldn’t need it. To her right, Kagami was chatting with Nino and Alya. They seemed to be having a good time, especially Nino. Marinette joined them, but when Kagami turned to greet her, she had a suspiciously neutral if slightly tired expression on her face, and something moved behind her eyes, even when she thanked Marinette for the note she had left her.

M. Dupuis droned briefly about the end of the trimester drawing near and the incoming staff meeting. It had been almost three months and he had remained quite bad at being their form teacher, even he seemed to be aware of that. He switched to his biology course immediately after and that was better already. Marinette decided she’d wonder about Kagami’s problem by the end of this class, in two hours with no interruption. She was successful at that: she didn’t sneak glances at Kagami, after all she truly needed to pay more attention to this class. Marinette wrote down everything she could.

Her marks in biology were mediocre at best, the study sessions with Nino and sometimes Alya were the only thing that kept her from failing completely. And she couldn’t blame it on someone
else. M. Dupuis was a good biology teacher, Marinette liked him, that wasn’t the problem. Simply, what he was teaching didn’t click with her. At least not yet.

Her next period was free. Kagami left for her Greek class and gave Marinette that strange look again and Marinette didn’t know what to think of it, the feeling of strangeness as she and Alya walked to the library together. They went through Alya’s notes as Marinette had promised her they would.

Alya’s sheet was filled with approximations again, she had lost track of a good part of the lesson. Marinette knew she hadn’t done it on purpose. Alya was trying her best to get socially involved again, and it worked, but schoolwork was something else. She’d lose her focus often and find herself zoning out in the middle of important explanations and completely lost after that. And until her treatment worked, there’d be little she could do but ask for her best friend’s help. Marinette did the best she could.

But all of that only took ten minutes or so, and chatting in the library was out of the question. So much time to kill… Marinette’s thoughts drifted towards Kagami’s odd look once more. That was unlike her. Kagami tended to be quite blunt about quite a lot of things. So why couldn’t they just talk about whatever seemed to trouble her, Marinette grumbled to herself as she tried to sketch a nice coat her dad could wear. The key word being “tried.” Did Kagami expect her to understand what was behind that look? Marinette’s sketch of a coat didn’t look like a coat. Or anything at all, really. She sent a text to Kagami to make sure everything was alright.

She tried to keep that negative feeling in check and sketched her frustration away — she couldn’t afford turning into Hawk Moth’s puppet, if such a thing was even possible. She got lost on Instagram and doodled things that inspired her, added her own elements, reshaped and perfected each sketch. By the end of the free period, Marinette had finally created something for everyone in her family. Once she made them real, they would make for great Christmas presents. This small creative outburst almost chased her worries about Kagami away. Almost.

For once, Marinette was in early for her lesson with Mme Michaud. Today, they’d practice their oral skills, the teacher told her. And neither Marinette nor the other students minded that. They pushed the tables and chair to the side and started making conversation — a little awkwardly, they were still absolute beginners— and Karim seemed to have a hard time with his rising tone. Not that Marinette was that any better than him. Practice would make perfect, and it was more enjoyable than answering MCQs and copying characters.

“Try again, Karim, after me,” Mme Michaud said. “Wǒ hěn hǎo.”
“Wǒ hěn ha… No. Wǒ hěn hǎo,” Karim repeated. “Hey, I got it right this time!”

“Don’t tell anyone,” Marinette whispered, “but I practice in front of my mirror whenever I can. It looks silly but it pays off, believe me.”

“I don’t know… Maybe I’ll give it a shot. Thanks for the tip!”

It was a little frustrating, learning standard Mandarin, whatever it even was, when Marinette knew quite well that her mum’s mother tongue was the Kunming dialect. But it didn’t demotivate her. In fact, it only made her more eager to learn. The hour went by quickly, too quickly perhaps, but it was a happy Marinette who walked out of the classroom. She would have liked to chat some more with her friends but there was no time for it.

If she wanted to get a seat in the tram, she’d have to hurry. Stade Max Rousié was fifteen minutes away from their lycée, if she took the tram —walking would take much longer, being late was not an option—and they weren’t the only ones to go there for middle-distance running. Other students from other schools would be on the tram too, this one or the next. Either way, she needed to hurry. Which was nearly impossible because of how crowded the corridors were. Waiting for her friends would mean she’d lose her chance at getting a seat. She couldn’t allow that.

She passed by the classroom in which Kagami had German, and accidentally bumped into Gustave and his friends. What were they doing here? None of them were in her class and as far as she knew. But she didn’t have the time to take care of that, besides the crowd was too dense for him to make his way to Kagami and pester her once she got out of the classroom. For good measure, though, Marinette glared at him.

Marinette wolfed down her lunch on her way to the tram station, and hoped she’d be quick enough to have a seat. She could do it. If she put herself on the right spot, she’d have an easier access to the doors and she’d be lucky enough not to have to stand up all the way to the stadium. Perhaps, if she was truly lucky, perhaps she’d get to talk about what troubled Kagami, if the other girl felt comfortable talking about it.

Marinette plan hadn’t worked at all. There were no seats for anyone. She was squashed between Alya and the window and though she didn’t mind the former all that much, the latter was very uncomfortable. The tram would brake briskly and speed up the next second, it was an unnerving
experience and a workout in itself. When they finally got off the terrible thing, the Seconde 4 students were a little on the edge.

Marinette gave Kagami a worried glance; the girl looked worn out, much more so than the others. Hadn’t she slept soundly? Marinette gave her a small pat on the back on their way to the locker rooms. Kagami would tell her what was on her mind when she felt comfortable, and now clearly wasn’t the time.

If there was a bright side to running laps in November, it was that their PE teacher was not like M. Sautoir (but that was putting the bar quite low). It wasn’t to say that M. Ailier was kind and lax, he was neither of these things, but he didn’t push his students to the point of exhaustion. Still, he was the one eating his sandwich while teenagers ran laps around him, Marinette sighed. Well at least Kagami was focused on running and not looking at her with eyes full of mystery. Well, she was a little unfair there. Kagami had put up with her eccentricities, she could put up with all that sudden secrecy.

Marinette made sure not to run too quickly, she was supposed to maintain her facade in front of her peers and teachers after all: they saw her as a teenager interested in fashion design, not an athlete — though she was almost too athletic for a girl whose main hobby were supposedly to be sketching dresses and knitting scarves. Being Ladybug did make PE easier, she couldn’t deny that.

After… She lost count of how many laps she had run, Marinette and her class gathered around M. Ailier. Today, he explained as he cleaned the mayonnaise around his mouth with a napkin, they would work in teams of two — that was the way he put it— and see how long it took for each student to run three laps in a row. Marinette was paired with Kagami, of course. M. Ailier handed out stopwatches, Kagami took one and rejoined her partner.

“Sorry I was weird this morning,” Kagami said. “I had… A lot on my mind, a lot I needed to process, but I think…I think I’m ready to talk about it.”

“Only if you’re really ready and if you really want to, you don’t…” Marinette said, quite proud of how she was hiding her surprise.

“Well I want to so… Once we are done running aimlessly would be nice. I’ll run first if that’s OK with you.”

Kagami was not in her right mind, Marinette now had the confirmation of that. She had stumbled on her words and used contracted forms. She never talked like that. But Marinette knew she couldn’t make her change her mind. And so, Kagami ran her three laps — Marinette found herself
looking at her more often than she needed to. It was a little weird, working with a stopwatch, but
Marinette noted Kagami’s running time for each lap dutifully. Kagami was about to ask Marinette
how well she had done when the atmosphere began to change.

The sound of drills and rotary saws in the distance disturbed their otherwise calm surroundings. It
wasn’t just that, however. All the students stopped to listen more closely. No, that wasn’t just the
sound of construction work. Birds seemed to be flying away from something. There were screams,
and heavy metallic thuds, getting closer and closer to them. M. Ailier checked his phone and blew
his whistle, and the other PE instructors did the same.

They wouldn’t tell the students what it was, but they calmly asked them to slowly get their things
and exit the stadium. The noises were getting still getting closer, they were almost deafening now.
How was anyone supposed to do things calmly and slowly? The ground quaked beneath
Marinette’s feet. She looked back at the running tracks one last time. And all of a sudden, a wide
concrete pillar shoot out from stade Max Rousié’s roof, with a cloud of rubble. And another one,
and one more. The entire building was starting to shift and change shape completely. Students and
adults alike tried rushing to the exits, but massive chunks of concrete blocked their way, and heavy
steel rods sprouted up.

And the same old refrain rang out. “Ladybug, Chat Noir! Surrender your Miraculouses to me, and
perhaps I, the Brutalist, won’t turn Paris into a concrete jungle!”

More metal bars pierced through the stadium’s floor randomly, each new spear getting closer to the
building itself and everyone started running around disorderly. Sidonie and Lorenzo tried their best
to calm everyone down, but they too had to run from the flying debris. Marinette snapped out of her
daze and understood Kagami was dragging her by the wrist to make sure she wouldn’t get trapped.
The building was filled with debris and more concrete pillars rose from the ground. They found
themselves alone in an empty sick-room. Outside, it was chaos. And Marinette had to go and stop
the akuma. It had turned away from the stadium and was getting closer to the city centre.

But she couldn’t just transform with Kagami around, it would be a dead giveaway. Marinette found
no half-baked excuse, nothing she could say to make the other girl turn around just in time for her
to slip away. Perhaps if she knocked Kagami unconscious, that would do? But she couldn’t do that.
She started panicking; Chloé wouldn’t be able to help them. Chat Noir wasn’t there, Nino still
hadn’t transformed, otherwise he’d be outside fighting whatever it was that wreaked havoc on
Paris.

“Marinette?”
…Yes Kagami?”

“I think what I want to tell you can’t wait much longer.”

Marinette’s heart raced faster, and it wasn’t just because of the akuma outside.

“Marinette, I… You can transform, I know you are her.”

And Marinette’s heart dropped. Her stomach filled with fear. No no no no no no no. How did she know? What had been her mistake? That was bad, that was really bad, Kagami’d be in so much danger now. And she probably believed she had made friends with her just to keep her from returning to Hawk Moth again. She had to deny it, to tell her it was the stress and she was in shock and telling incoherent things because of that.

“I know you’re Ladybug, even if you’re trying to come up with something to persuade me that I’m mistaken or too stressed out to think straight.”

Marinette winced. She stumbled on her words. “W-when? When did you…”

“My flat has a really creaky parquet floor and you need to learn how to get dressed more stealthily. I guess this is why you wear that form fitting thing, so that you can be stealthy and look gorgeous while purifying akumas,” Kagami blurted. “Alright, I am a little stressed out, we almost died crushed under a slab of concrete on our way here and the adrenaline is finally kicking in so I’m talking nonsense.”

This was not the place nor the time for that for that but Marinette let out a small giggle.

“I know you’re Ladybug and I wanted to thank you for being… You,” Kagami said, her voice a little stronger now. “You saved me, Marinette. You have a thing for saving all sorts of people, really. And despite the fact that I had tried to stab you with a sword not even twenty four hours earlier, you gave me your phone number and you became someone I… Someone I really care about. And for that, for being my friend, for saving all of us so many times now, for all of that, I’m grateful.”
She hugged Marinette before she could say anything. Marinette slowly hugged back, wrapping her arms around Kagami’s waist. Her chest felt tight. Their embrace grew stronger. There was no one else she’d rather hug like that. The rumble outside was only getting louder, punctuated by odd sounds…

“Carapace is here, I think. You’d better go now and save the day again,” Kagami whispered.

“Do you want to talk about it again once I’m done with… The Brutalist, I think it’s what Hawk Moth named them?” Marinette said. She slowly loosened her arms around Kagami, who mirrored the gesture, though reluctantly.

“No, I just need to let it think completely and I will be fine with it. Maybe. You know I won’t give your identity away. Though I would not be against a couple of explanations about all of that someday. Can I… Can I watch?”

“Watch? Oh, right. Kagami, you’ll get acquainted with Tikki some other day I’m sure, but I’m in a hurry now,” Marinette said in a faux-casual tone. “I’ll see you soon. Stay safe, Kagami. Tikki, spots on!”

It was only when she got closer to the Brutalist that Ladybug noticed that she still had that stopwatch around her wrist. She didn’t have the time to take it off Carapace was, as always, doing his best protecting the civilians, and he had quite a lot to do, shielding everyone from the debris that rained from above. Ladybug could finally see what she had to face this time and she didn’t like it one bit.

The Brutalist was a behemoth of concrete and steel with cranes for arms, rotary blades for fingers, a giant at least twice the size of her house. With every step they took, concrete and steel sprung from the ground, every building they came in contact with shifted and turned into a greyish, uniform block. The army wouldn’t be able to intervene, this was a heavily populated zone. The police would be useless as always. It was just the two of them against the akuma, then.

“They said my project was not visionary? I’ll show ’em visionary, I’ll show ’em right now!” the Brutalist yelled. They didn’t seem to be targeting Ladybug in particular. It was a powerful foe Hawk Moth had created, a titan who didn’t seem to care about the Miraculouses at all. “Yeah, I like it the old way, and so what?”
They waved their arms and summoned a large pillar out of thin air which crashed dangerously close to Carapace and the people he was trying to keep safe. They needed backup, desperately. Ladybug tried to wrap her yo-yo around the Brutalist’s legs but they were way too massive for that. She couldn’t punch her way out of this, couldn’t trip her opponent either. Hawk Moth was not playing around, this time. They had to drive the Brutalist away from stade Max Rousié, away from any populated zone. They were in the middle of one right now.

Ladybug deflected another pillar that threatened to crash into a tram, the small feat knocked the wind out of her. She was quite sure she had seen Nino’s bracelet blink once. Soon, she’d be on her own. All she could do was save as many people as she could and try not to get squashed by any projectile. It couldn’t go on forever. But the Brutalist didn’t seem to get tired. Ladybug and Carapace couldn’t make a retreat and observe the akuma to find its weakness, it would mean leaving helpless people to the Brutalist’s mercy.

Carapace had to use his shell-ter when the the Brutalist cut through an empty building, making an impressive chunk of wall fall on at a group of civilians who were trying to run away from the field of ruins that stretched before them. No one had died, no one had died, Ladybug told herself over and over. But they couldn’t stop the chaos happening, not just the two of them. She hadn’t even used her lucky charm, yet her earrings had started beeping. Her lungs were filled with smoke and dust. That wasn’t good, not at all.

On the corner of her eye, she caught two blur of yellow and black. Chat Noir and Queen Bee were here to slow the Brutalist down, if only for a little while. Well, they sure had taken their sweet time, Ladybug huffed to herself. She was relieved all the same. She gave Chat Noir a nod, he winked back at her, his grin wider than ever. That didn’t fool her, he looked terrified

“Hey, blockhead!” Ladybug heard him yell as he waved his staff around. The Brutalist turned towards the origin of that sound.

“Oh hello, Kitty Cat,” the Brutalist roared, “Hawk Moth is really interested in your jewellery, maybe I’ll take it from your body if there’s anything left of you once we’re done playing around.”

Carapace and Ladybug fell back on top of a building. Nino de-transformed and hid behind the access stairs. The fight had taken its toll on him, his arms were spasming, his legs were shaking. Marinette wasn’t much better, but she had to be on the lookout for any breach in the akuma’s
defences. Kagami had to be alright, she told herself, they had driven the akuma away from the stadium. There was no smoke coming out of it, it was just like when she had left it.

“I… I sense quite a few active kwamis,” Wayzz said. “Nooroo, Pollen and Plagg… Duusuu too! They’re in pain, I can feel it, Nooroo is barely there, Duusuu is… Wait. There are others, I can sense it, they’re getting closer to our location.”

And so could Ladybug. At least two other kwamis were here; though where, she couldn’t tell. If she was lucky, they were on her side. She’d worry about them later. Saving Paris and taking the Brutalist down were her priorities. The akumatised human was inside that bulk of concrete and steel, there was no doubting it. Marinette de-transformed. She didn’t have any cookie to give her kwami. Chat Noir and Queen Bee were doing a good job slowing down the Brutalist’s advance towards the city centre, each of them taking their turn. There were no civilians left on the battlefield.

“Carapace, are you better?”

“I’ve seen better days, but it’s going to be alright. Don’t think I’ll be able to use my power this time, though. Chat Noir and Queen Bee?”

“Doing the best they can, but I don’t think Bee’s Venom is going to work on this akuma… I can’t see anything from here, too much smoke… Maybe I’ll figure something out! We gotta help them!”

If only things were that easy. Dodging stray projectiles this size was wearing them down, and it seemed that Chat Noir was making the Brutalist even more mad, and more rash than before, which only made their attacks more powerful and less precise. A steel rod grazed Carapace’s shoulder, he barely dodged another one aimed at his head. Carapace’s green suit was stained with red. This wasn’t good. And to make things worse, her Miraculous was blinking again. Ladybug had to end this right now.

“Fancy seeing you there, Bug,” Chat Noir chuckled when she joined him. “That big block of rubble is freaking meowt, think we could dust it a bit?”

“I… I don’t know if I can make a Lucky Charm this time, I’ll do my best but…” Ladybug spoke. “Got enough juice for a Cataclysm?”

“I can try, but I have the feeling my transformation is going to wear off pretty soon after that, and
it’s going to be risky if the akumatised person is somewhere inside this thing…” Chat Noir winced. “Carapace seems to have seen better days, and Bee too… Hey, what was that?”

A pulse coursed through Ladybug and she had the feeling it had went through her comrade in arms too. It was followed by a second wave of energy. This was just like when Alya and Nino had transformed. Even the Brutalist seemed to freeze for a moment. The field of ruins was uncharacteristically silent. Two silhouettes emerged from the clouds of dust, walking calmly.

“Sass,” Chat Noir whispered.

“Roar,” Ladybug said. “Did the Guardian…”

Her sentence was cut short. In a blur of magenta, the Tiger Miraculous’s wielder pounced on the Brutalist and started clawing her way to where the titan’s torso would have been, which left time for Queen Bee to push Carapace away from a sharpened steel rod aimed at his head. Viperion joined to Ladybug and Chat Noir with nonchalance in his steps.

“Hi everyone,” Viperion winked at them and spoke loudly, “we were told you needed some help. I’ll buy you some time while my sis— While Tiger Eye does her thing.”

Oh, the Ladyblog was going to have a stroke when they’d find out about him. He was exactly like Tikki had imagined, towering over both her Ladybug and Chat Noir’s cub, all sleek cyan scales and slightly cocky grin. He was imposing, that was for sure. But he also knew who was in charge here, or at least Sass knew. “Whenever you are ready, Ladybug, Chat Noir,” he added. He whistled. That certainly seemed pointless in all that chaos and constant rumble, they could barely hear each other.

But Tiger Eye stopped ripping the massive rotary saws off the Brutalist’s crane arms as soon as Viperion whistled. She gave the arm one last gash, which made the akuma howl in pain, and leapt towards them. “Carapace, Queen Bee, fall back,” she roared, and the two heroes gladly did so.

“Please, take cover! I know what my power is supposed to be, but I’ve never tried it before so I don’t want to injure you accidentally!” Viperion said. When he was sure the other Miraculous wielders were at a safe distance, he lifted his lyre over his head.
“Nine strings…”

The lyre started to glow, and a golden hue enveloped Viperion. He started strumming on his instrument, and Ladybug understood why he had asked them to make a retreat. All around Viperion, rocks had started moving, chunks of concrete detached from the akuma’s “body”. Even the few trees that hadn’t been uprooted bent in his direction. He stopped playing, and the silence was deafening. Viperion looked tired, but not done yet.

“All right, I figured this out, but we have little time if we want to do this right, and it’s… Dangerous, insanely dangerous,” Ladybug finally said and all the heroes gathered around her. “Every fifty five seconds exactly, the Brutalist needs to look around to know where she's going, and this leaves us a five second window to get inside her cockpit and purify that akuma without risking to kill the human host in the process.

“Carapace, you’re in no condition for a direct confrontation, you’ll be the one to tell us when to strike. Bee, I’m going to ask you to use your Venom at my command. Chat, you’ll know what to do. Viperion, if you can still use your powers, use them to draw attention on us… And Tiger Eye, I
“Oh... I’m going to make your lives a lot easier. Just tell me when the countdown starts and you’ll see,” she said with a smirk. Had Viperion almost called her his sister? Ladybug could see the family likeness here. She whispered something in Carapace’s ear, he simply nodded.

“Let’s go!” Ladybug yelled, and Viperion caused the boulder he was standing on to roll from his position to the Brutalist’s torso. This would be more than enough, and it infuriated the akuma. The ground shook beneath the heroes and they all jumped to higher positions where the steel rods made spears wouldn’t reach them.

It was almost too noisy for them hear each other’s voice, but Ladybug was almost sure Tiger Eye had yelled something. And she panicked when she saw a jet of amber-coloured fluid fly in her direction. With her aching legs, she was too slow to dodge the projectile, and if Tiger Eye’s smirk was anything to go by, that was her power. Shooting... Goo at them? It formed a shining layer around Ladybug’s body, and it seemed that Tiger Eye had used her powers on the other heroes as well. Queen Bee was already trying to climb the Brutalist’s body, and Tiger Eye joined her. Chat Noir had extended his staff and using it as a tightrope to make his way from the roof he was standing on to to the akuma’s head. They looked confident and almost carefree.

Ladybug looked at them with dread. It was as though her lungs were filled with icy water. That wasn’t her plan, not the way she had imagined it. They weren’t quick enough. They’d never get there in time, the enemy was too massive. She had sent them to their death. The akuma must have felt them somehow, because it stopped in its tracks. She yelled Chat Noir’s name and ran to his rescue when she saw the Brutalist swing her arm at him. No matter his cat-like reflexes, he would be too slow to dodge, and if by chance he did, he’d plummet to his certain death. She wouldn’t make it, she wouldn’t be able to save him, she knew it perfectly well, her legs wouldn’t be able to carry her so fast, her yo-yo wouldn’t be able to catch him in time if he were to fall. But she didn’t care about any of that.

She still ran, desperately, to prevent the inevitable.

Chat Noir closed his eyes.

The sickening crunching sound never came. Chat Noir didn’t budge at all, and he looked surprised, too. There was a visible crack in the amber layer that cocooned him, where the Brutalist had hit him, but otherwise he seemed fine. He shrugged and continued his progression towards the akuma.
More steel rods were shot from the ground, aimed blindly. Some of the projectile could have been lethal to them, but thanks to Tiger Eye’s power, they were only mild annoyances. Ladybug and Queen Bee traded a look.

“VENOM!”

Queen Bee’s stinger pierced though the arm that had tried to swat Chat Noir over and the Brutalist stopped moving for a split second, enough time for Tiger Eye to catch the string of Ladybug’s yo-yo. Ladybug used it as a rope swing and landed on the akuma. She started scaling it, following Chat Noir. The Brutalist seemed to be recovering control over its body already, but Tiger Eye clawed at the already-damaged crane-arm and severed it, immobilising it once more. She jumped off the Brutalist, visibly exhausted.

“LADYBUG, NOW!” Carapace yelled.

“Cataclysm!”

Chat Noir leapt, his hand touching the concrete just above the small hole through which the akumatised victim was trying to look. The Brutalist’s “body” was slowly starting to corrode and the hole was only growing wider by the minute. He grabbed Ladybug’s hand and yanked her through the widening gap.

“No more evildoing for you, little akuma,” Ladybug said, a little out of breath. She ripped the blueprints the diminutive woman was clutching and purified the great purple butterfly that flew out of them. A bright light and a swarm of ladybugs poured out of the Brutalist’s carcass, and soon covered almost all of the 17th arrondissement. The new landscape the akuma had tried to create started melting away. The wounds the Miraculous wielders had sustained during the battle healed instantly, Carapace’s forehead and arm stopped bleeding. Everything was back to normal.

“Well,” Chat Noir said matter-of-factly, “that one definitely wasn’t like the others. I only caught a glimpse at the butterfly but it was much bigger than the previous ones, it couldn’t just be the butterfly Miraculous here.”

“The Guardian said he feared Hawk Moth would use another weapon, he didn’t tell us more,” Viperion said. “But hey, we were all here to solve that mess so we’ll speculate about it later, no?”
“Yeah… Thank you, everyone, for coming,” Ladybug said, bending down to check on the de-akumatised woman. She had fallen asleep, it seemed. “Viperion, Tiger Eye, I don’t know if we’ll see you ever again, but if we don’t, it was an honour fighting with you two on our side.”

“I think we’ll show up every now and then, if the old man agrees with it,” Tiger Eye said. “You know, like a B team of some sorts? Well, we’re not sure yet, but you’ll know soon enough!”

“I can’t wait to patrol with you,” Carapace said with a tired grin.

“You were great, all of you,” Queen Bee smiled at them.

“So…”

They all stood there awkwardly, not quite knowing what to do with themselves. At this moment, they were just six teenagers in skintight animal-themed attires standing in the middle of a perfectly intact street, with an old lady sleeping on the ground. The sound of six miraculouses beeping at the same time was the signal for them to part ways. And with that, they all ran in opposite directions.

School was cancelled for the remainder of the day, just this once. The media would talk about the attack for days and days to come. There were worried phone calls, anxious letters from worried parents, Itsuko Tsurugi almost considered going back to Japan, though her daughter managed to convince her that with Ladybug around, there was nothing to fear.

Nino invited Marinette, Kagami, his girlfriend, Adrien and Marjane to his house that afternoon, just to hang out, drink hot chocolate and play video games. None of them declined the invitation. Perhaps Alya kissed her boyfriend a little more often than she usually would have. Perhaps Kagami sat just a little closer to Marinette on Nino’s big couch, and perhaps Marinette didn’t mind that at all.

Perhaps, that night, Marinette found herself pacing up and down in her room trying to find the words to describe what she felt, perhaps she found herself rethinking about her entire life so far, with an obvious answer in her mind by the end of the night.

Chapter End Notes
Bonjour, bonsoir !

I hope you liked this chapter! Some things and others, references and some other things!

Brutalism (and governments and private investors willing to put money in brutalist projects) is the reason why so many suburbs in Europe are basically a bunch of big buildings made of reinforced concrete that were relatively cheap to build and in which you could put a whole lot of people. It's not that they're bad per-se, just poorly maintained because the landlords have done fuck all to renovate them.

Superpowers and new heroes! It’s really cool to write original powers (it feels like JJBA’s stands, in a way) before the show actually chooses one almost completely unrelated to the object the hero uses — come to think of it, none of them safe for Rena Rouge and maybe Carapace truly use their “default” items that way.

Viperion sounds like a Greek name. He has a lyre. Luka is a musician. He’s clearly an Orphic figure, hence the nine strings and the rocks and trees being drawn to his melody. And Ouroboros because, yeah, a snake (Eurydice and all that), and also because t’s a song by French metal band Gojira, and back when I actually enjoyed metal, I liked this song. (I’m surprised there isn’t any JJBA/MLB crossover fic yet, this has potential)

Tiger Eye! Why? Stones. Stones is the reason. In China, amber was originally called “Tiger’s spirit” if I’m not mistaken. Which grants protection. In this universe, Juleka is Kitty Section’s rhythm guitarist while Luka is the lead guitarist (in canon, this doesn’t make any sense, that entire band doesn’t make any sense, but let’s not get me started on canon). So she’s a great fighter — unlike Chat Noir, she’s got actual dangerous, working claws and that’s her prime weapon— but also a protector.

And that’s it for this chapter!

As always, my Tumblr is here, for previews of incoming chapters and the other things I make! If you want to tell me how great you think my writing is (it’s not, it’s getting better but it’s not great and barely good) or if you want to ask me things, or submit art, songs, other things, here’s the place to do so!

À très vite!
**Duel 15: Things Keep Happening**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There were bright sides to spending her Wednesday nights at the fencing salle, she knew it. Yes, the fencing salle was quite nice despite the linoleum floor, and it was right in the middle of her lycée so she didn’t have to take the métro to get there. The heating system worked really well, and with the incoming winter, they’d need it. She really liked Marinette’s scarf, but fencing with it around her neck just wouldn’t do. Fencing here allowed her to avoid Gustave who seemed to pop up everywhere she went. And more importantly than that, she could fence here because she has been given the opportunity to train under the supervision of one of the world’s greatest fencers, who only chose the bests.

Despite all of this, Kagami was quite unhappy to be here tonight.

M. D’Argencourt had paired her with Éloi again, and she couldn’t figure out why. This would stunt her progression if it went on like this, and she couldn’t have that. And as always, Éloi was a disappointing partner who had nothing to teach her. Always the same mistakes he could have avoided easily, always the same openings and nothing new to discover here. With Adrien, Louise, Vincent, and perhaps a few others, this would have been enjoyable. This however…

Marinette’s “en garde” stance was better than Éloi’s, Kagami thought to herself. The boy’s lunges had been adequate at first, he wasn’t part of the D’Argencourt Academy for nothing. But that hadn’t lasted for long, after the first ten touches or so she had scored, he was back to his usual mediocre self. That wasn’t quite right. He was even worse than he had ever been. Nathaniel, who had come to draw them again, wasn’t even looking at them, that was how terrible it must have been.

The truly worst thing about him was indeed how predictable he was. At least, some of the bad fencers Kagami had had the misfortune to meet were unpredictable in how terrible they could be, and that could give the bout a certain sense of danger. There was none of that with Éloi. He wasn’t awful. He wasn’t the worst fencer ever, not the worst fencer his age either. Just… Painfully unremarkable, like most people, Kagami thought. She lunged at him, and as always, his reaction time was as poor as ever.

She was scoring touch after touch and there was nothing her f could do about it. She couldn’t believe she still had an hour to go. Hopefully, M. D’Argencourt would make them switch fencing partners halfway through this lesson. He had to, because she wouldn’t take this much longer. How she could still win while not focusing on Éloi at all wasn’t even funny, at this point. She had no patience for the likes of him.
“Beating you tonight is easier than the last times, are you well, Éloi?” Kagami spoke her mind out loud.

Éloi, of course, didn’t answer that at all. Not that she expected him to, of course. He was quite talkative with his friends and most of the other fencers. She was an exception to the rule, it seemed. She took a sip from her water flask and returned to the piste. He wasn’t willing to cooperate today. How… Surprising and mature of him. Even more mature than the usual. Well, that didn’t matter, they had to train together; She could feel M. D’Argencourt glancing at them.

“On the count of three,” Kagami said neutrally and Éloi nodded.

“One… Two… Three…” they said in unison.

Éloi lunged, Kagami parried and riposted. This was yet another touch for her and still the same mistakes for him. A poorly timed attack, an incomplete extension of the arm, the gesture had looked almost fearful. The fencing master had seen it too, and he joined them to get a closer look at the way the pair worked.

“En garde… Prêts… Allez!” M. D’Argencourt said energetically. Éloi’s attack was slightly less disappointing this time, but still nowhere as good as it should have been for a fencer his age. Kagami caught his lamé with her sabre, a little more vigorously than before. The two fencers stepped back and looked at their instructor. He looked rather thoughtful.

“Well, then… Éloi, Kagami, let us do it again, shall we? En garde… Prêts… Allez!”

Kagami feinted, and Éloi flinched. This was more than enough for her to score the touch once more, without having to worry about her opponent’s defences: his sabre was slightly out of line, leaving most of his lamé at Kagami’s mercy. M. D’Argencourt looked even more perplexed than before. He took Éloi aside and talked with him. In the meantime, Kagami re-tied her shoelaces and tried not to eavesdrop on the conversation.

If Kagami had to be honest with herself, she hadn’t tried the hardest and she could still every other word in the conversation, mostly because M. D’Argencourt never tried, or couldn’t speak in a low voice. She was relieved not to hear her name once during the small chat. The fencing master watched as Éloi showed him his lunge, and corrected everything he could in his pupil’s movements.
Éloi finally came back to train with Kagami, and it seemed that whatever M. D’Argencourt had told him had improved his mood. He did perform a little better during their next couple of bouts, but a little better than barely acceptable, Kagami thought, was still not much. Looking on the bright side of things, that gave her the possibility to save her energy for the second half of today’s lesson: they would be working on their parry techniques and she wished to be as focused as she could on this.

So she did nothing extravagant against Éloi, not that she needed to, and even when holding back, she could still easily beat him. Arguably, it was even easier now that the fencing master had corrected him on a few things; she didn’t have to worry about him spraining his wrist or tripping over anymore. She paid little attention and this was enough.

When M. D’Argencourt called for a five minutes break, Kagami tried to talk to Adrien, but he seemed quite busy with his other friends. And she had the impression not all of them would be happy with her joining the conversation. She would not make any sort of trouble, she’d simply leave them alone and find something else to do.

She had left her phone and books in the locker room and going there so soon would mean everyone would look at her weird. Still, she had to keep herself busy, and not stand around doing nothing. She went to the bathroom instead. Even there, she couldn’t avoid the noises of chatty students and fellow fencers. All that useless chatter was slowly getting one her nerves. It was only five minutes, Kagami repeated to herself, five minutes after which they’d get to the interesting stuff. Five interminable minutes.

The wait was completely worth it. Sure, she had done most of these moves before, she knew all of their names, but seeing M. D’Argencourt himself do them in front of his students, with Louise as an help, was much better than watching videos or looking at descriptions in books. Even better, the fencing master had her practice with Adrien.

Unlike some other students, they didn’t have to learn all these types of parries, they already knew them. The real challenge was to perform them quickly and flawlessly. Though she already knew it, Kagami had the confirmation she mostly relied on her quinte and her tierce parries, which were, after all the most common ones. Still, Adrien was impressed by their consistency: this was not his forte at all, and the reason he had lost to Étienne de Grigny.

They had no doubt their wrists would ache a little once they’d be out of the fencing salle, but they gave their best. And compared with her earlier experience with Éloi, this was paradise. Adrien was a fast learner, a patient fencer, and although he could be funny when he wished to, he also knew when to stay serious and focused. The two of them worked well together. The truth was Adrien worked well with almost everyone.
“Maybe you should turn your wrist a little more upwards,” she suggested when he failed to execute the Septime for the third time in a row. And they made it work well enough. Likewise, his advice didn’t insult her intelligence. After years of having less proficient men fencers explain her what she already knew quite well, this was a nice change of pace.

They tried not to chat about non fencing-related subjects when they trained, Adrien had understood that Kagami disliked the distraction, and even though she could tell he wanted to talk about something, she had no idea what that something was, and did not ask him about it. But they were done with the drills M. D’Argencourt had wanted them to do before most of the other. And Kagami seemed more open to a conversation now.

“I’m really sorry about Father’s behaviour, and I want to apologise for that,” Adrien said. “A friend told me about the way he approached your mother during the competition at the Gymnase Elizabeth, and just the other day… Well, Father was in a terrible mood, he looked quite sick too, and he complained about your family not answering his letters and all his invitations he claimed to have sent you for days and days… His harassing you and your mother, it’s unacceptable, and for that, I’m sorry…”

“Oh… Well, there is nothing you need to apologise for, Adrien, but I appreciate it,” Kagami replied calmly. She hadn’t told anyone about the letters. It had begun the very day after her victory, when she had found an envelope from Agreste Manor in her letter box, with an invitation to some sort of important-sounding party, a gala with all the upper-crust of Paris. They hadn’t sent anything back. And ever since that, there had been something from Gabriel in their letter box every other day. Itsuko Tsurugi hadn’t even bothered reading the last ones, and had put them in the recycling bin immediately.

“I don’t know what he’s trying to accomplish here… This might just be me making wild guesses here, but I think he wanted us to become… Betrothed or something like that? That’s just crazy. Sometimes, I feel like my father are part of completely different worlds,” Adrien vented. “I already have someone, and just because we’re both from prestigious families doesn’t mean we automatically have to… Perpetuate our bloodlines, I guess that’s the way to put it. It feels so… Archaic and weird and gross… I hope your parents aren’t like that.”

Kagami didn’t answer that last statement.

“Seriously, can you imagine that, the two of us as a couple?” Adrien laughed. That was nice of him, trying to change the subject from questionable parenting choices to something lighter.

“Nope, and I think you know why,” Kagami said matter-of-factly, and after all, it was exactly that, a fact. Adrien didn’t react in any way to that, she could have told him that the sky was blue and he’d have kept the same expression on his face. “Could you?”
“I… Never thought of a real relationship with anyone until, I don’t know, a month ago? I used to have celebrity crushes and all of that, I guess,” Adrien said. “But M. D’Argencourt is looking at us, maybe we should go back to parries.”

Kagami put her fencing mask back on, Adrien mirrored her and they resumed the drill. Kagami tried to be as focused as she had been before that little interlude. She shouldn’t have let Adrien initiate that conversation until at least the end of the lesson. She almost felt guilty for continuing the discussion and almost enjoying it. Well, she was glad Adrien didn’t condone his father’s actions, at least. Had her grandfather done that, she was almost sure mum would have tried to make excuses for it.

Kagami enjoyed practising her parries, she really did, and she’d have to ask her mum to train her on this a little harder this Saturday. But as it turned out very quickly, neither she nor Adrien could be as invested as they had previously been, and so they still chatted while training, just like the rest of M. D’Argencourt’s students. They mostly talked about fencing-related things, it was only fitting. Yet, somehow, Adrien always found a way to come back to his love life.

“Isn’t it funny that my girlfriend is at your girlfriend’s house working on these costumes right now while we are fencing together?” Adrien said as he tried to target the middle of Kagami’s lamé. She barely parried in time, and had mum been there, she would have looked at her disapprovingly.

“Marinette… Is not my girlfriend, I hope you know that,” Kagami tried to regain her composure. She was glad she had that fencing mask on.

“Wait, she isn’t? She truly isn’t? I thought that…” Adrien sounded almost disappointed.

“I like her, alright, I really do, but I do not know if the feeling is mutual,” she said in a low voice. “Besides, the thought of us being in a relationship… I… Have no idea how it would work out.”

“Oh well,” Adrien said, “you’ll know soon enough! I’m rooting for—”

“Oh your attention, everyone! I think it is time to put this training into real practice; how about a small game of sudden death?” M. D’Argencourt boomed.

This sent a thrill down Kagami’s spine. That was the perfect exercise. Short, quick, efficient, with high stakes. And the chance for her to shine. She wouldn’t have called it a small game at all, this
was competition at its finest. Yet, if the other students’s attitude was anything to go by, they didn’t share her mind on the matter. They rarely did. It didn’t surprise her, at all. She squared her shoulders some more.

“Your first bout will be against the person on your left! Go on, go on,” M. D’Argencourt said energetically. Kagami’s glance fell on Éloi and she had to keep herself from rolling her eyes. At least, that first bout would be really short, she thought. Hopefully, the next one would be against someone a little more competent, and it would last much longer.

Kagami didn’t even pay attention to Éloi when she scored her touch, because of course she won against him. Her mind was elsewhere. Marinette would be on patrol tonight, but she’d still have some time to text her. She stole a glance at the great clock on the salle’s wall. Still a good ten minutes to go. She’d make this enjoyable, and, if she could, she’d make it even shorter than that.

“Thanks for everything, mum!” Marinette yelled as she climbed up the stairs to her room, trying her best not to stumble with that tray full of pastries and biscuits in her hands. She wouldn’t reenact the coffee incident, especially not with a guest around.

Marjane beamed at her when her head emerged past the trapdoor, and she helped her with the tray. They had been in Marinette’s room for a good two hours, and even though it was past the usual teatime snack, Sabine Cheng had prepared some things for them. Everything in the Dupain-Cheng boulangerie-pâtisserie was at the very least good, and most of the time quite delicious. Marjane hadn’t come for tea and biscuits, however

That tragedy costumes project was definitely going somewhere, and both girls were quite happy about it. Marinette had even been officially commissioned by the small theatre company Marjane was a member of, and she would get paid for her efforts. This alone would have been a good source of motivation, but Marinette had to admit that this was a fun project, and that Marjane was decidedly a nice person to work with.

Marjane’s visit had forced Marinette to take all these posters and pictures of Adrien off her walls so that things wouldn’t be too awkward between them. Somehow, she liked her room better without them. And things between her and Marjane weren’t awkward at all, at least when they were related to Adrien. Why would there be anything like that? Adrien was a good friend whom she saw twice a week in class and sometimes a little more often if he wasn’t busy with photoshoots. No, from that perspective, no awkwardness at all.
There was some awkwardness in that Marjane had that tendency to let herself get a little carried away when she spoke about ancient Greek theatre, and in these moments she talked with words Marinette didn’t even understand, and moved quickly from topic to topic. But these didn’t last too long, and Marjane tried — though not always successfully— to re-explain what she had said in simpler terms when Marinette asked her to. Well, nothing she couldn’t tolerate.

And these costumes were really coming into shape! When Marjane had first talked about Greek theatre, Marinette had imagined people wrapped in bedsheets talking in a language she didn’t understand, and so it was exactly what she had drawn. Now that they had worked together, they had come to a completely different result, and a much more historically accurate one. After dozens of elaborate sketches from Marinette and squiggly doodles from Marjane, they had finally come up with things they were happy with.

Getting the fitted sleeves to look right had been hard, and finding the proper patterns had taken her hours. This was a lot more complicated than white togas, but a lot more rewarding too. They had put prototype number one together, and they’d get to the second one very soon. But for now, cakes it was.

“I’m going to hate myself tomorrow morning… I’m not even that hungry but it’s just too good! I’ll really have to thank your mum and dad,” Marjane said as she attacked her miniature Paris-Brest with her spoon.

“The best thing is, they’ve only improved over the years,” Marinette said, taking a bite from her éclair.

“You live above probably the best bakery in Paris, your parents make pastries that are to die for and despite all of that, you’re still super skinny, I’m starting to be a little jealous right now,” Marjane joked. “Seriously, though, what’s your secret?”

“We… Don’t actually eat that many things from the bakery,” Marinette said, carefully choosing her words. If she could manage to keep the number of people who knew about her double identity to only one person this week… “And I exercise in my room! And fencing sessions on Saturdays.”

“I see I see,” Marjane replied wistfully. She moved a little away from the tray, a strategic manoeuvre so that she wouldn’t be tempted to reach for any more pastries. She stayed perhaps a minute in her new spot, before she moved back to her original place on Marinette’s chaise longue to have one more small cake.
“So your company will perform in… February, is that it?” Marinette asked before taking one of the small cakes too. These were too good to be legal, it was a wonder no one had come to arrest her parents for baking highly-addictive substances like that.

”And it’s going to be a great play! At least I hope it will be,” Marjane corrected herself, ”the rehearsal will start before the end of the year, so perhaps it won’t be great at all, but it’s really fun to work on such old texts and see what we can do with them! We’ll send you tickets! And if you want to see us practice before, you can!”

“I’ll be there, I promise,” Marinette said. “Do you want the last small cake?”

“No, thanks, you can have it, it’s your house! All good things mousse-t come to an end,” the other girl said, trying her best to keep a straight face.

“You did not just say that,” Marinette said, deadpanned.

Marjane looked proud of herself. The girl had a thing for bad puns, that had become painfully obvious. Kagami hadn’t warned her about it. It wasn’t nearly as awful as Chat Noir’s antics, but it was certainly something. Marinette ate the cake, went downstairs with the empty tray. Marjane followed to wash her hands. They went back to Marinette’s room, sitting side by side around the table, back to cutting pieces of fabric for prototype number two, Creon’s costume.

The sound of scissors running through fabric was soon the only one that could be heard in the room, though sometimes Marjane would get up to pick up the offcuts and give Marinette the things she needed when she couldn’t find them right away. Prototype number one had been a bumpier road, it was a prototype, after all; Marinette had a better feeling about this one. And Marjane’s presence was truly a plus, and not only for chatting and eating cake.

They managed to respect the time limit they had set for themselves, and they were both quite happy with the way prototype number two had turned out. They’d sew patterns on the fabric later, now was time for Marjane to go home. She stayed true to her words and thanked Marinette’s parents profusely for the pastries, and Tom blushed visibly at the praise. Even after decades of being a renowned baker, he still cared more about his customers than food critics.

Marjane’s father came to fetch her, and the Khadivis drove away from the Dupain-Cheng bakery after they bought two baguettes and one Paris-Brest. Marinette helped her parents, and once the last clients were gone, they closed the bakery for the night. That had been a nice day’s work, Marinette decided as she headed straight to the bathroom to wash all that flour out of her hair. She’d wing their geography thing, revising for that test wasn’t worth it.
Perhaps it was because she had won the small competition M. D’Argencourt had improvised for them, Kagami didn’t sound too worried about Marinette being on patrol tonight, or at least it was what the messages she had sent her read like. It was both freeing and frightening, having people close to her know about her being a superhero. Marinette spent more time in the bathroom texting Kagami than actually taking a shower. And there was something else, too.

She practiced and practised and practised the sentence again. It seemed so silly, so obvious and yet repeating it made her smile a little. And it scared her. She had a vague idea of how her parents would react, but she wasn’t entirely sure. Well, she’d try it anyway, it’d probably sound awkward but it felt important to her, to tell them about that part of her. She had imagined the best and the worst turn of events possible, and had long decided — well, since Monday, at least— that coming out to them was relatively safe.

And so, Marinette waited for an opening during the conversation they had over dinner. And it never seemed to come. All her dad was interested in, tonight, was the way he could improve the crust of his milk rolls, all her mum wanted to discuss was the new convenience store that had opened a few blocks away from their house. All of these were perfectly good subjects for a conversation, but not the one she wanted to have.

“MumdadIthinkImaybebisexual,” Marinette blurted right before dessert, when the conversation lulled.

Her parents blinked. Her dad looked at her encouragingly, her mum patiently. Alright, then. Worst turn of events scenario it was.

“Mum, dad, I’m bisexual,” Marinette said, slower this time. She hoped she didn’t seem too apprehensive.

“Oh, dear, and as long as you’re happy, we’ll always support your life choices” was the sentence Marinette had wanted to hear the most. Instead of that, however…

“Hi, Bisexual, I’m dad,” Tom said with a wide grin. The kitchen was completely silent, so silent they could hear the people on the street outside. Sabine punched her husband on the arm and
glared at him. Marinette was just stunned.

“What your father wanted to say was, we’re happy you told us, and that we knew it already. Does this mean we’ll see more of Kagami in this house soon?”

Marinette didn’t know if she should be relieved, or happy, or what to think about that last question. She settled for shrugging her shoulders and saying nothing at all, and shrugged noncommittally. It had went… Surprisingly well? She tried to ignore that last question. Tom smiled a bright smile at his daughter and changed the subject. In no time, they were back discussing bread crusts and convenience stores.

Like most evenings, it didn’t take long for Sabine and Tom to fall asleep, but Marinette waited until the very last moment to go on patrol. Texting Kagami with her mother’s question in mind was… Weird. Because she truly had no answer to that question. It was all too muddled in her head for that.

Yes, she was clearly attracted to her, but did that mean she could build a relationship with her? Was the attraction mutual? Kagami was very friendly towards her, perhaps more than that, but even with all these signs, she couldn’t be sure. She felt like a conflicted teenager with many questions and a tendency to make things complicated. Which was exactly what she was. Well, at least writing all of that down in a journal made it easier, Marinette thought as she put the small notebook back in her drawer.

Tonight’s rendezvous spot was on the Grand Palais’s roofs, and Ladybug was there a little early. She didn’t mind waiting here, Tikki made her warm enough for November nights to be bearable, and even after fifteen years of living in Paris, she still didn’t tire of the beautiful nocturnal landscape. When Chat Noir finally arrived, it was with a lopsided smile on his face.

“The regular route, Bug?”

“The regular route, Chat Noir. Unless you want to do things differently?”

“The regular route is fine.”
When she didn’t have to save Paris from its imminent destruction or crime, being Ladybug was just great. Professional parkourers had nothing on them. And running and jumping from rooftop to rooftop with the whole city stretching out before her eyes was exhilarating as always. Paris was alive, and, for this night at least, undisturbed by Hawk Moth’s akumas.

Chat Noir was still doing needless cartwheels and impressive somersaults, acting recklessly as always, but he didn’t seem to hope for any reaction coming from her. And the way he had addressed her for the past few weeks… This was a change she hadn’t expected.

“You don’t call me your Lady, these days,” she said casually.

“No I don’t,” Chat Noir replied cockily. “This cat is monogamous and even though my girlfriend doesn’t know about that side of me, I understand why you feel the need to keep it a secret… Well… Calling you my lady now feels… wrong.”

“Oh, OK,” Ladybug replied, a little surprised. Of all people, she hadn’t expected Chat Noir to have a love life: he was not half the casanova he sometimes acted like, but this turn of events certainly explained his toning it down almost completely.

“Do you have someone, Bug?” he said. Curiosity had never killed this cat, after all.

“It’s… Complicated,” she said. Chat Noir looked surprised but he didn’t press any further than that. “Playing any interesting games lately?”

“Yeah, so, you know about Extreme Racing 4? Let me tell you about…”

And Chat rambled enthusiastically about the massive improvements in Extreme Racing 5.2: Roads of Asphalts, Ladybug listened to him with a slight smile. Paris was decidedly peaceful tonight, and she liked it better that way. Hawk Moth must have pushed himself too hard during Monday’s battle. Wayzz hadn’t fully recovered yet, and she suspected that it was much worse for Nooroo, whose master was certainly not as caring as Nino and Master Fu were. She felt genuinely bad for the little kwami, though she was sure her feelings were mixed with Tikki’s at this moment.

“Race you to the Sacré Cœur?” she asked at last.
“On your marks get set go!” Chat Noir yelled, and started running. His laugh rang out in the night.

The good thing with Chat Noir was that he was not a sore loser. He left her just before the Arc de Triomphe, and they were off in completely different directions. Ladybug had to keep herself from swinging too close to Kagami’s window on her way back, even if she felt like impressing her a little. That would have been a very Chat Noir thing to do anyway. Instead, Marinette de-transformed and landed in her own bedroom without a sound. Kagami had sent her a small “good night, sleep well!”. She’d send her a “good morning” as soon as she’d be up, Marinette decided.

For now, she’d follow Kagami’s wish and get some well-deserved rest. Going to that job interview with Jeanette Manladrineaut, at least one of her associates, did require a lot of sleep. And if she nailed it, that internship could change a lot of things for her. She’d just have to keep her fingers crossed.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

After the intensity of chapter 15, I thought it was time for a somewhat lighter bit!

A few things, perhaps, though there aren’t that many of them!

The Paris-Brest is absolutely delicious, it’s a wheel-shaped choux pastry with praline-flavoured cream, and you find it basically everywhere (though the best Paris-Brest I’ve ever eaten was in a bakery in Rennes). It’s also a calorie bomb.

Coming out to parents who already know you’re not straight is a weird experience (at least it was for me, though when I came out to my dad he had the decency not to make that terrible joke). Also it’s hard for me to make Tom and Sabine anything but supportive parents.

Le Grand Palais… Well you’ve already seen in in quite a few episodes (it’s crazy how few real-life locations Miraculous actually features).

As always, my Tumblr is here if you want to read previews of the incoming chapters, or if you just want to see what I’m up to (I’m trying to make more music so there’s that). If you want to ask me stuff, or tell me what you thought about this chapter, you can do it here!

French is still my first language, so I’m sorry for the mistakes you may find here, I swear it wasn’t on purpose!

À bientôt pour un nouveau chapitre ! Il a été assez difficile à écrire, mais j’espère qu’il vous plaira.
This chapter deals with pretty effed up things, and features a rather vivid depiction of a panic attack and of verbal harassment, if you feel iffy about reading such things, maybe wait until next week's chapter. Not that this is skippable, but… Well, do what makes you feel best.

It was amazing how noisy these old printers at school could be, Kagami thought as she waited patiently for all twelve pages of their poetry anthology to be printed. Well at least they would be the one group to hand back their homework one week early and Mme Berthes would appreciate that. Kagami couldn’t help but count the sheets once again, just to be absolutely sure everything was in order, and unsurprisingly, it was. As if she’d allow anything to go wrong.

They had done some great good work putting that anthology together, Marinette and she. All it had taken was a few hours in the library —Sunday’s work hadn’t been for nothing— and not much more. They really were that efficient when they wanted to. None of their other classmates had even started the assignment. If that wasn’t textbook poor organisation, Kagami didn’t know what was.

Their French literature teacher would be in the staff room, and so Kagami decided she’d knock on the door instead of leaving their anthology in the small letter box labeled “Mme Berthes”, which she knew would be filled to the brim already. And so, she did exactly that, Mme Berthes greeted her warmly and happily took the anthology from Kagami. She seemed quite busy correcting copies from older students, Kagami decided chatting with her wouldn’t be an option, no matter how much she wanted to.

With their German teacher missing for the day and no substitute, Kagami had a free period in the middle of the morning, and she tried to make the most of it: taking care of all the little annoying administrative matters, printing things and eventually doing some more homework if she still had time for that, just so that she wouldn’t have to worry about any of these things later. Kagami Tsurugi, master of planning ahead of things. That sounded ridiculous. She sounded ridiculous. Anything to keep her mind off that feeling of dread.

Kagami handed the Principal Education Adviser all the signed paperwork she needed to bring for their school outing at the Musée d’Orsay. Three months before the actual outing. The headteacher really wanted to kept be out of trouble if his students ever got in harm’s way because of an akuma attack, and had done everything in his power to not be responsible for anything bad that happened to his school.
The Principal Education Adviser took the small stack of documents with a trembling hand. He sipped on what must have been his fifth cup of coffee this morning. It was a miracle he wasn’t constantly akumatised, he seemed close to having a nervous breakdown every time she saw him, and it was the same with everybody else. With all the things that kept happening, he was overworked. He thanked Kagami in his monotonous trembling voice. She had rarely been more glad to exit his office.

With all of this done, Kagami went to the library, where no one had saved a seat for her. None of her friends were here to do so, after all. She found the place uncharacteristically crowded for a Thursday morning; still, the librarians didn’t seem to be surprised by this. Perhaps this was how the library always was during this period and she had simply never noticed. Her observations weren’t great this morning. Oh, the things she told herself to keep her mind busy. She was overthinking things today, and she had a reason for that. Was it a good one? Probably not.

She knew she was being completely irrational, even so, she had a bad feeling about today, the impression that things could go poorly. Yet another akuma sounded like the most plausible option, but she hadn’t had that sort of presentiment before any of these attacks. And so, overthinking everything trivial around her would surely numb that feeling (it wouldn’t, not completely, but it did the job well enough). Overthinking or doing her homework. As if there was anything she still needed to do.

Kagami re-read her geography notes for the umpteenth time. Mme Vidal would test them on coastal France today and though she personally didn’t care for that particular chapter, getting good marks with that teacher wasn’t all that difficult. With Mme Vidal, it was only a matter of regurgitating whatever they had studied, with a slight rewording, and that would be enough. She knew everything well-enough. A quick look at her watch told her that it was time to go.

Most of her classmates were already there, with no Marinette in sight, however. Kim was already busy chatting with his friends, Alya and Nino weren’t there yet, no one she’d want to talk to. And so, Kagami headed straight to her usual seat and waited for Mme Vidal to show up. When the teacher arrived, all the students were in the classroom. Mme Vidal hadn’t forgotten to bring their exam questions this time. Here they were printed on rough paper sheets she waved around proudly. Kagami felt ready.

Next to her, Marinette looked a little more apprehensive. And really pretty. Kagami had already tried to compliment her on her clothes, she had probably made the skirt herself, but now was not the time to distract her. Yes, that had to be the job interview that made her nervous, not that test, Kagami knew that if she wanted to, she could just wing it. Mme Vidal gave them the test sheets and the room grew silent immediately.
Kagami went through the questions quickly. They were almost simplistic, and so, her answers were as concise as she could make them be. There really wasn’t a lot to write anyway; just like the rest of her morning so far, this was incredibly banal, and a little boring too. It didn’t take long for her to be done with the test. Still, she stayed until the very end of the hour: the few students who left early were always the ones with the worst grades. Her leaving would be for completely different reasons, of course, but with Mme Vidal, she had to be careful not to give the wrong impression.

When they walked out of the classroom, they all went in different directions, Marinette off to lunch in whichever restaurant she was going to, Nino and Alya on a small lunch date. Sure, Kagami could have shared a table with Marjane at the school canteen, but Marjane was… She didn’t know where Marjane actually was, and Adrien never ate at school. Kagami guessed she’d be having lunch on her own, then. She didn’t mind. At least… At least she’d have more time to read Hesse today.

The food was a little bland here, as it often was, and Kagami ate it quickly so that she could focus on the book. Oh, she should have brought her own lunchbox, that stuff could barely be called celery. She hadn’t made enough food the day before, and waking up even earlier just to have something ready was not an option. Reading in the canteen wasn’t great, but the schoolyard just as noisy and what’s more, it was getting too cold to her liking. She was in no mood for going to the library either. She put her earphones on and tried to shut herself from the rest of the world, at least until her friends were back.

It worked, the book was simply that good and the music played loud enough to drown the noise. This was tolerable and she could have kept on reading until the end of the hour with no problem or a single care in the world. Well, that wasn’t entirely true. There still was that feeling building up in her stomach, nauseating, that made her palms prickly. It couldn’t be happening, it couldn’t be happening, she told herself as she tried to keep on reading her book. It couldn’t be happening.

“Hey, Kagami, talking to you there!”

It was happening right now. There was Gustave, with a slight smirk on his face, and all of his friends around him, sitting on the other side of her table. She could try to act as though she hadn’t heard him and perhaps he’d just give up and go away. Kagami tried to go back to her book, but that was too late. She had made eye contact and that had been enough.

“See, toldja she could hear you,” one of Gustave’s friend snickered.
“So, uh, how’s it going?” Gustave continued, the smirk growing wider. His friends laughed at that. “I was wondering if…”

He was trying to toy with her and he wanted her to play along. She wouldn’t let him have it. Kagami put her things in her bag hastily and started walking towards the canteen’s exit. If she could get out without making any waves, she’d take the chance. She’d have to be quick. Avoiding him, that was the best thing she could do, all she had to do was act as though he wasn’t there, as though he didn’t exist. She could manage it.

“I haven’t heard from you in quite some time, y’know, and—” Gustave kept on talking and that tone of voice, the fake sweetness, the barely contained spite in it… It made her uneasy. They were in the middle of a crowded room, and students were looking at them without saying anything.

“I am going to the library and you and your friends are getting in my way,” Kagami said. She pushed past them and she was sure she’d heard one of them snicker again. She kept a straight face. She had to. No outburst, she wouldn’t make a scene.

“Wait! Y-you never answered my texts, how come?” Gustave pressed on. Kagami didn’t answer the question and sped up her pace instead. He followed her, but his friends stayed behind. Still, her presentiment hadn’t been foolish after all. Sometimes she hated being right about things. And Gustave wouldn’t give up, wouldn’t take the clue.

“Hey, I was being nice to you, why didn’t you answer me?” Gustave said loudly behind her. It shouldn’t have made her feel distressed, she had had to deal with annoying people for most of her life; but this wasn’t just that. The library was really a long way from the canteen and he just wouldn’t give up and call it a day. This was without a doubt the most words he had ever said to her and every second of it made her uneasy.

“C’mon, Kagami, I know you can hear me! Give me an answer! You’re being shy, is that it? It’s alright, I think it’s kinda cute!”

If she did, he wouldn’t listen to her, and then she didn’t know what would happen. She just had to walk even faster to the library, that was the only thing she could do. No yelling in the corridors, no shouting, just keeping things polite and courteous, at least on her side, just like everyone wanted her to be. It was excruciatingly hard to do.
“I keep thinking of your almond eyes and your raven hair and you never seem to care about me and that’s unfair, you know, if you got to know me I’m—”

They walked past two teachers, M. Levitt and one of his colleagues. And neither of the two men seemed to care about what was happening, they vaguely raised their eyebrows before they continued their conversation, and M. Levitt laughed about a joke the other teacher had made. That was just like in the métro, only worse because this time it was her.

“Hey! C’mon! I’m not good enough to talk to you, is that it? Is Adrien really that much better? I bet he’s—”

He sounded angry now. He had taken his phone out of his pocket and was filming her. That shouldn’t have scared her, but her stomach filled with dread and the prickling in her palms only got stronger. She was going to be sick, she had to get out of here, away from him, the library was only a few metres away now. Just a few more steps, just a few more steps. She had to get out of here.

“I brought you a flower!”

She had to keep walking.

“KAGAMI!”

Only a few metres.

“WHY ARE YOU IGNORING ME!”

She opened the door to the library and walked inside as calmly as she could, trying to keep that perfect composure of hers. Yes, she was completely serene about all of this how that she was here. Her shaky hands belied that thought, however. It was not OK. She was not OK. Nothing about it was OK.

The doors slammed open and Gustave was inside the library too. And he didn’t seem to care about that fact.
"I’VE BEEN REAL NICE TO YOU AND YOU JUST LAUGH IT OFF BEHIND MY BACK, YOU —"

“M. Rabier, this is a library and I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave immediately,” the librarian said in a reproachful tone. “I said, immediately.”

From the corner of her eye, Kagami was almost sure she’d seen a small purple butterfly flap its wings weakly.

Gustave dragged his feet and walked out the door, giving Kagami one dirty look as he did so. She couldn’t stop shaking. She found a seat quickly and tried to breath in and out as slowly as she could. The few people in the library were whispering to themselves, glancing at her with disapproving looks on their faces, but it was the sound of her heartbeat in her ears that was the most deafening.

She could handle it, she told herself, she could handle it, she had seen worse than that, other people had it worse than that, it was just someone talking loudly to her, that was it, she could handle it, it was fine. She’d only be disturbing mum if she phoned her, and Marinette was busy with her job interview, and Nino, and Alya, and everybody else, she just… Her hands still wouldn’t stop shaking, her breathing was shallow again. Weak, a small voice in her head whispered.

Kagami fumbled for her bag, took out her things, any of her things, and tried to read Hesse again. It just didn’t work, and she felt cold just underneath her eyelids. She would not break down in a school library, she would not do that, she would not cry here. She took another deep breath and tried to turn the page of that book. Why wasn’t anything working, what was wrong with her?

And the students just kept chatting to themselves in the library and she was sure they were talking about how it was her fault and how she had brought it to herself, how she had done this to herself and how it would have been just better to talk to Gustave, to have a calm conversation with him. Kagami’s throat felt tight, too tight for her to breathe.

“KAGAMI!!!”

The yelling was distant, the voice altered but she knew exactly what was happening. Students screaming, a panicked crowd. The library’s doors were kicked out of their hinges, the lights flickered and died out. The silhouette that stood up seemed barely taller than a secondary school student, but its broad shoulders and large arms belied that.
“Hawk Moth promised I could have my vengeance as long as I brought him Chat Noir’s Miraculous, and Ladybug’s too,” the voice growled. “And it looks like they’re nowhere to be found, so…”

“G-Gustave, it… It doesn’t have to be that way,” the librarian stuttered.

“Don’t call me that!” he boomed. “It’ll go just the way I want it to, for I am th—”

He never finished the sentence. In the blink of an eye, a yellow and black blur had tackled him to the ground. Queen Bee was here. Gustave jumped to his feet, turned to his new opponent and pushed her away with enough strength to send her crashing against the bookshelves. Gustave didn’t stop to check if he had knocked her unconscious, instead he walked towards Kagami, slowly. There was a glint in his eyes that made her feel sick. He was enjoying this.

“So, as I was saying, I—”

“Hey, dipshit, this is a library here, seep your voice down,” Queen Bee said, poking at his shoulder.

Gustave turned at her only to have Queen Bee’s foot connect with his jaw. Any regular human being would have been knocked out by that, most akumas would have shrugged it off. Gustave groaned in pain and held his reddened cheek. That akuma was truly weak, Hawk Moth hadn’t expected to get Ladybug and Chat Noir’s Miraculouses with that, had he? He was after something else.

Or perhaps Queen Bee had underestimated him. He tried to punch her back and she barely deflected his fist in time. The wall he hit crumbled down. He unstuck his hand and snarled. Queen Bee didn’t react in any way, she barely raised an eyebrow She dodged every single one of his attacks and retaliated with a headbutt. He changed his strategy and started running towards Kagami.

“Venom,” Queen Bee said. She jabbed her stinger at the akumatised Gustave’s neck. His eyes widened for a split second before he collapsed, unable to move even a finger.

“Is everything going to be OK?” Queen Bee whispered, kneeling down to check on Kagami. There was no reply. The girl was sitting on the floor, her back against a shelf and her arms wrapped
around her knees. “Help will be there soon, I promise. I’m going to have to call my… Colleagues but I’ll be back as soon as I’m done, alright?”

Queen Bee got up and spoke into her spinning top. “Chat Noir? We have a situation in lycée Carnot again, I know this is not your sector but… No, everything’s under control, I stung the akumatised kid. Could you call Ladybug for me, I won’t stayed transformed for long and I have no idea how long my venom will last. Alright. Be quick.”

The library was now completely deserted, if not for Kagami, Queen Bee and the unmoving Gustave on the floor. Queen Bee simply sat next to Kagami. They didn’t talk, and even when Chat Noir arrived with a worried look on his face, he had the decency not to make puns. Ladybug finally arrived, and when she saw who Queen Bee was next to, her expression shifted from her usual air of seriousness to worry.

“Kagami… Please, talk to me… Do you want to get out of the library while I de-akumatise him?”

“I… I’d like that,” Kagami whispered, her voice hoarse. Her eyes were red and swollen.

Ladybug… No, Marinette helped her to her feet and carefully lead her to the corridor, before she turned to the shape on the ground. Ladybug found a withered dark narcissus in the akuma’s pocket, and stomped on it. A purple butterfly flew weakly out of the broken flower.

“Time to de-evilise.”

The purified butterfly stayed in the air for a moment before it disintegrated. This had never happened before.

“Miraculous Ladybug.” The words felt bitter in her mouth as she spoke them. The library was returned to its original state, the hole in the wall vanished. Kagami looked a little better, that was the euphoria that came with Ladybug’s power, but this lasted only for a second before her legs started shaking again.

“Chat Noir, if you can take that boy to the headteacher’s office… Queen Bee, I think you’re going to de-transform soon, maybe it’s time for you to take off,” Ladybug said, in a businesslike tone.

“Kagami… Let’s go home, OK?”
Kagami held on to her, and soon, Marinette’s shoulder felt wet. Kagami looked so tired.

“Do you want to talk about it? You don’t have to if you don’t feel comfortable…” Marinette asked Kagami. They were rue Troyon, in Kagami’s room. Marinette had made tea, saying that she had just the right kind of leaves in her bag. Kagami was wrapped in a blanket with her cup in her hands. Her hands no longer prickled and her breathing was more even, but there was still fear in her eyes.

“I just… Did not want to talk to him and he kept following me and telling me all these things I didn’t want to hear and then he just… He just transformed,” Kagami said, her voice uneven. “I ruined your job interview, didn’t I.”

“I think it doesn’t really matter, my interview. Kagami… I’m here for you because I care about you, not out of some moral duty because I’m Ladybug. None of this is your fault, you didn’t trigger any of that, he did, and Hawk Moth just gave him the tools for that. Here, have some tea, I was told it worked well as a medicine of some sorts. I mean, if you want to, that is.”

Kagami took the cup Marinette had held out to her. The heat was not unbearable, and she hesitantly took a small sip. The tea was just warm enough, and there was something about the beverage that made her feel a little better already. She took another sip, and another one after that. She finished her cup quite quickly. It felt… Good in her throat, not too sweet, just right. She didn’t have to ask, Marinette poured her another cup.

“I… I know it is not my fault, I think I understand that now,” Kagami said. “But… Before he was turned, there was nobody to help, M. Levitt, he must have thought this was just a… A heated conversation between students that would just solve itself…”

“I’m sorry…” Marinette said. She scooted closer to the other girl. “I don’t know what to say, except that it sucks and that these teachers shouldn’t have allowed for something like that to happen, and that the other students should have done something. It wasn’t your fault they did nothing to help you.”

“I… Yes,” Kagami said tiredly. “Thanks for saving me. Again. Even though you’d do the same for everybody else.”
“Yeah… You don’t have to thank me for that, or to feel like you owe me anything,” Marinette said earnestly. “I did what was right is all. Do you… Do you want me to book you an appointment with someone if you want to talk about it some more?”

“I do not know if my mum will approve of that,” Kagami said. “Psychologists and psychiatrists and all of that.”

“Ah… I was thinking of… Well, now that you’re in on the secret, the person who gave me my Miraculous. What you’re drinking is a blend of his own … He’s got his way with healing. We had a small yelling match when he learned that you knew, but we’re better now, and he wouldn’t ask for any kind of payment if you told him I sent you here.”

“Oh.” That certainly explained a few things. "I… Will consider this, yes.” Kagami stared into space before she snapped out of it.

“Is there anything you’d like to do that would make you feel better right now?” Marinette asked kindly, but her voice wasn’t full of pity for her, only concern.

“Can we watch something, anything? I mean you are missing school right now so…” Kagami mumbled.

“Yes, yes we can do that.”

And so they did. And they watched another episode after that. And one more, during which Kagami almost fell asleep. They played video games together, though Kagami was not as good as she usually was. They made tea again, and though it seemed to improve Kagami’s state, she still wasn’t back to her usual self, there were moments during which she still zoned out with an expression of discomfort on her face. But it was an improvement, when compared to how Kagami had been at school, right?

When Marinette had to leave Kagami, she felt terrible about it, even though it would only be about two hours before Itsuko Tsurugi would be back from work. Kagami did look better than when they had first gotten to the flat but Marinette asked her to phone her if anything was wrong nevertheless. Tikki popped out of Marinette’s bag —that still made Kagami nervous— just before she and her Ladybug walked out the door, her entire tiny body glowing a vibrant red. The little goddess looked at Kagami with gravity.
“I can’t heal the damage created by other kwamis, but with akumas and humans, I can help, if only a little” she said. With a flash of light, something shot out of her body and wrapped around Kagami’s wrist.

“Is that… Another kwagatama?” Marinette asked, gesturing at the small bracelet that had just appeared out of thin air. On a closer inspection, it did not quite look like one.

“Not exactly. It will vanish in a few days, but this should shield you from bad dreams and bad luck if you wear it, Kagami,” Tikki said weakly. “This is a little draining, but I’ve got the feeling Hawk Moth won’t be a problem for us in quite some time. So do wear it, Kagami, I’m afraid you’ll need it.”

“I— I will wear it, Tikki,” Kagami stumbled on her words. “Thank you so much. Marinette, get home safe? I promise I will text you often to tell you how things are, and, er, if you could send me the number of that person who’s made the tea…”

“Yeah, I’ll do that,” Marinette nodded, and hugged Kagami goodbye. “Be safe, okay? I’ll see you soon.” It was hard to let go.

Marinette didn’t go home right away. Instead, she paid Master Fu an impromptu visit. He was in the middle of a massage session when she got inside his parlour. He did not botch his job, made Marinette wait until he was done with his client, and only then did he greet her.

“Today’s akuma… Hawk Moth actively targeted someone close to me,” Marinette started.

“I too am having a hard time understanding his patterns, he has become quite erratic…” Master Fu said sadly “I am sorry he attacked her, I truly am.”

“His butterfly did not fly away, it… Vanished, it crumbled on itself, sort of. They never vanish,” Marinette said.

“Had I or Nino Lahiffe worn Wayzz today, I could have told you exactly what had happened, but Wayzz is still dormant,” Master Fu pointed to a small bowl filled with a greenish liquid next to his old gramophone. “But I can make guesses. Have you ever lost consciousness while using your
Tikki popped out of Marinette’s bag and shook her head.

“That is what I thought. Kwamis and humans work together, and this has repercussions on both the participants. Act in a way that pleases the kwami, use their powers in a way that suits them, and you too may feel happy. If you are wounded in combat when transformed, both human and kwami will endure the pain. Going against a kwami’s will, twisting their powers… It can have many outcomes. In the case of Trixx and your friend Alya, Trixx had the upper hand and…” Master Fu stopped at that, he looked very uneasy.

“But it is quite different between Nooroo and Hawk Moth,” Marinette said helpfully.

“I suspect things between Nooroo and Hawk Moth were quite different, yes,” he said. “When one of the two is no longer in a state where they can use their powers, things can get dangerous… This must have been what happened. I am not sure who it was, Nooroo or Hawk Moth, but one of them could no longer keep the transformation, and faltered. But I feel this is not the reason you chose to visit me, there is something you want to ask of me.”

“I… Told the girl Hawk Moth has tried to attack, her name is Kagami, that you could help her heal…” Marinette replied, not quite meeting his eyes. “What happened today… It’s not something that’ll make her grow stronger, I don’t think that ever does… She’s just hurt and I’m not sure I am the best suited to help her. Your tea helped, and I thought…”

“Tikki helped her too, did she not? Then so will I,” the old man said. “You should be going home, now, my next client will be there soon.”

“Thank you, Master Fu,” Marinette said, and the old man walked her to the door.

Marinette met the Couffaine siblings, and this was the only noteworthy thing that happened on her way back home.
they were or because they approved of her helping a friend. They didn’t even mention the internship interview. If Marinette had to be honest with herself, it had almost slipped out of her mind too. She sent a few texts asking her classmates if they could give her their notes for the classes she’d missed, and that was it. Exceptionally, Tom turned on the radio for dinner. If he couldn’t watch that rugby match on TV, then hearing about it would be enough, at least for the time being. Not that France Info’s covering of it was the best, it was often interrupted by news reports, but that was better than nothing. And Sabine seemed quite interested in the sport as well.

“What a great scrum, Jean-Claude, what a great scrum, and yet the Irish still have the upper hand,” one of the sports commentators yelled into his microphone.

The radio channel’s news jingle rang out and the presenter repeated exactly what she had just said in the previous broadcast fifteen minutes before. This made Tom vocally annoyed, and Marinette too rolled her eyes, especially she used the exact same words as before. Yes, they knew, “a groundbreaking discovery”, she had said that already. These weren’t even news anymore. But then something Marinette couldn’t have foreseen happened.

“We’ve just learned that world-famous fashion designer Gabriel Agreste has been hospitalised this evening, after he was found unconscious in his Paris manor,” she said. “We do not know whether his life is in danger. More on this as it develops… And now, a heartwarming story!”

Sabine Cheng turned off the radio. To Marinette, it felt as though she had skipped a step when going down a flight of stairs. She may not have idolised the man anymore, now that she knew how rude and unwelcoming he could be, but she still admired his work. And more importantly, it was Adrien’s father they were talking about. She did not stay in the living room to watch the rugby game with her parents, she didn’t feel like it. After a quick shower, Marinette spent the evening on her phone.

Adrien did not answer Marinette’s multiple calls, and so, she left him a few messages. Kagami, she learned when she read her text, had already booked an appointment with Master Fu this very Sunday, so this at least was good. And somehow, that helped her sleep that night, if only a little. Viperion and Tiger Eye were patrolling the streets and doing a great job, and she felt safe knowing that they were here.

Adrien wasn’t there at all this Friday, and both Kagami and Tikki looked tired, but other than that, it felt like a regular day without anything out of the ordinary, unless Chloé being a little more considerate than she usually was counted. Kagami was her usual self, no meeker, no kinder, no stronger but no weaker either. She managed to go to the library with no trace of anxiety on her face, and she did great during the maths test. What it was that the bracelet Tikki had created did,
Marinette didn’t know, and the worn-out kwami wouldn’t tell her, but it certainly helped Kagami. Without it… But Marinette didn’t want to think of that.

Tikki refused to transform her into Ladybug that night, mumbling something incomprehensible about contamination risks and terrible consequences. Marinette had often wondered if kwamis could dream. She learned that not only could they dream, they could have nightmares too. Or perhaps that was part of the bracelet’s power? Either way Tikki was visibly paler, yet she refused to see Master Fu. That didn’t reassure Marinette, but the text she got from Kagami reminded her that things needed to go on?

This Saturday, the two girls fenced together, with even more fervour than the previous times.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir…

I hope this wasn't too much of a downer, but it was an important chapter for me to write and it took me quite a few rewrites to get it right, especially after Onichan aired. It wasn't easy, and Gustave's dialogue made me sick, and the inaction of bystanders was equally hard.

French culture barely takes harassment seriously, even my own mother and grandmother don’t view it the same way as I do (because apparently getting catcalled when you're not even an adult was something “to be expected” back then, yay, victim blaming), school is no exception to that. And teachers often don't know how to recognise what harassment is, let alone stop it.

Gustave has always been that annoying presence, never quite there in Kagami's life but always in the background whenever he could be. Just re-read the chapters in which he appears to see what I mean. You could definitely call him a stalker, a creep, but the point is, other people also let him behave that way and encouraged him to continue what he was doing. He had friends with him, teachers didn't stop him… He's part of a bigger problem.

Some akumatised victims in the show get angry for very good reasons and Hawk Moth abuses them. This akuma isn't even worth a name. Gabriel Agreste has barely recovered from the Brutalist, for which he used both the Peacock and the Butterfly Miraculouses, which left him quite weakened. And he cannot get what he wants from the Tsurugis, at least not for now. So of course he'd do something like that because Gabriel Agreste is an abject character.

Using traumatic events and especially harassment or abuse as a means of facilitating character development because you don't know how to do otherwise is rubbish and I refuse to do that. Kagami won't suddenly become sheltered or super nice to everyone because of that. She has people to help her out of it, and a literal god take most of the
harm for her for as long as she can.

But Marinette can't solve every single thing with her powers, she can only be there for Kagami and help her the best she can. Tikki did her thing, but Master Fu is much more of a healer than she is, on the long run.

I promise things will get better in the next chapters, which won't be as bleak as this one. Arguably, this is the darkest them of all.

My Tumblr is still [here](https://example.com) if you want to talk about the chapter or see what I'm doing otherwise

I'm still a baguette, mistakes are not intentional and I hope there aren't too many of them.

Well, next week's chapter will be much lighter! I'll see you there.
“You smell a bit like Master Fu’s incense” Marinette whispered, and the girl sitting next to her winced. “I don’t mind, I just…” She didn’t know how to phrase it without making it sound weird. And it was weird, in a way. “Well never mind.”

“Is is that bad? I paid him yet another visit after my fencing classes yesterday evening…” Kagami said in a hushed voice. “But I guess even a shower cannot wash that smell away.” Her scarf and coat too smelled of Master Fu’s “humble abode” as he had called it.

M. Levitt was going on about the structure of atoms, and seemed too absorbed to notice his students chatting behind his back. Or it could be that he was too old to care. And with everything he said written word for word in their textbooks, Marinette and Kagami could well afford to talk without taking the risk of dropping out of that class. At least, they were more discreet than Kim and Alix who were sitting in the back of the classroom and openly chatting and playing cards.

“Was it another meditation session?” Marinette asked.

That would make sense. The first phone call she had ever had from Master Fu had been the day after that one battle in August, the one during which the akumatised bus driver had almost ran her over with his vehicle. Tikki had been quite down after that, and not long after the adrenaline buzz, Marinette too was in a sorry state, and not only because of how sore her muscles were. Master Fu had helped them both, and what he had then presented as meditation had been quite efficient.

“I think it is more of a trance than proper meditation, but yes,” Kagami replied, copying what M. Levitt had sketched on the blackboard. “He called it visiting the realm of my own mind safely, and he may not be entirely wrong. I tried doing it on my own at home, it was not a success, I suppose he plays a role in that…”

Marinette nodded. Master Fu had told her it would be impossible to reach that state without him, and he hadn’t lied. She had spent countless hours trying to find a way to do the same, she had even bought incense, but that hadn’t worked. There were certainly some mysterious Guardian techniques behind that. Perhaps it was in that book, but if it was, it was certainly hidden in a chapter she couldn’t read. He had clearly stated that he would only teach his successor about these techniques of his. Which annoyed Marinette mildly, though she could understand the reasoning behind that, or at least pretend she did. He truly used to be vague, though he tried to be more direct and frank these days. Perhaps if she asked him now…
“The bracelet Tikki made me vanished the other night,” Kagami continued, “and I want to be sure there will be no after-effects to... Gustave’s behaviour and his akumatisation, so I will visit him again this week. Do you—”

M. Levitt looked at them, and the two girls stopped talking immediately. Kagami put on her best poker face, the one she showed everywhere she went, while Marinette scribbled what the teacher had written on the board. Had Nino and Alya been in the same group as them, they would have made fun of them for days just for that; M. Levitt, however, bought it completely. That, or he didn’t care, these were the only explanations they could think of. Talking was no longer an option. This didn’t matter, there were other ways they could communicate without getting caught.

“I’m happy you looked for help right away,” Marinette wrote on a small piece of paper she gave Kagami.

“I do not know if I could have managed on my own,” Kagami wrote back. On another piece of paper, she added, “Mum does not know the entire story but she is trying to have Gustave suspended, I think.”

“And around the nucleus, there are...” M. Levitt said

“Electrons, the answer is electrons, m’sieur,” Kim finished the teacher’s sentence enthusiastically in a voice that could be heard in the classroom next to theirs.

Still, this didn’t wake up Tikki. Snuggled inside Marinette’s backpack, sprawled on the small kwami-sized bed Marinette had made for her, she looked peaceful, if covered in cookie crumbs. For once, there was nothing she had to worry about, and this was great. Being on the lookout for an akuma while still looking cheerful, or shielding a human from the most part of a traumatic experience really was exhausting. Today was completely free of either of these things. She was starting to regain her colours, after days of being paler and noticeably weaker than her usual self.

The bell rang and students from all around the lycée rushed out their respective classrooms, in their own miniature, slightly more disciplined version of a rush hour. As always, Kagami tried to be dignified and collected even in the middle of such a noisy crowd. She had no reason to hurry, after all, she wouldn’t be having lunch at the canteen, or in one of the empty classrooms with a lunchbox she would have prepared for the occasion, though she wouldn’t have minded the latter: that would have been a forgettable part of her day, it it would have been fine, not something worth writing about in her journal, but perfectly acceptable.
Except this wasn’t how things would go this Monday. Marinette had insisted they have lunch together at her house, without Nino, who had his private tutoring lessons in Chinese, without Alya who had said she was busy with other things, without anyone else. Kagami hadn’t returned to Marinette’s house since that rainy day in October, though she had come to the family’s bakery as a client fairly often. They finally got out of the lycée and started walking towards, in Marinette’s words, “where the good food is”. The thought of Kagami and her, only the two of them, having lunch in her house, made Marinette’s heart flutter. Next to her, Kagami felt the same, with a hint of apprehension.

This wasn’t like most times, where they had things to focus on, an anthology, fencing, a class, or even a TV show. There were no dead leaves for Alya to step on amusedly, no rain that would require for Nino to hold an umbrella above her head. It was just the two of them, walking side by side. Why was that weird? There was nothing weird about that, Kagami berated herself. It did feel awkward, though not in a completely unpleasant way. Kagami didn’t know it, but Marinette shared the sentiment.

Their attempt at making conversation was not too clumsy, and by the time they arrived to the bakery, Marinette and Kagami had almost overcome that awkwardness. Almost. Just like the last time she had come for lunch, Kagami found M. Dupain behind the counter, serving his clients, while Mme Cheng was probably upstairs. Marinette’s father waved at them, and the two girls waved back. It felt less embarrassing for Kagami to do so now that she knew him a little better. Warming up to Tom Dupain wasn’t a difficult thing to do, even though she liked the man better than his “baker” persona.

Mme Cheng greeted them with a broad smile on her face, and told them right away that everything had been taken care of, the table had been set, the soup was cooking and that there was nothing they could help with. They could just go to Marinette’s room for now, she assured. She gave her daughter a knowing smile, though Kagami didn’t think much of it. She took off her shoes and put them next to Marinette’s and followed the girl through the trapdoor.

The place felt different from when Alya had been there and Nino had been downstairs, though little had changed since the last time she had been there. Some things were hard to miss, like the two taylor’s dummies sitting in the middle of the room, with what Kagami guessed were the commissioned costumes for Marjane’s play. They were quite impressive, and she walked a little closer to get a better look at them. Even though Kagami knew little about fashion, the embroidery was complex, the fabric looked comfortable too. Kagami had to ask.

“May I?” she said, motioning towards the costumes. Just by looking at her, she could tell the answer Marinette would give her.
“Yes! Just be careful with the shoulders and the pins, but otherwise it should be fine!” Marinette said with a bright smile.

Kagami ran her fingertips over the fabric, feeling all the small bumps and crevices in the embroidery. It was impressive work and she couldn't stop the smile that formed on her lips as she explored every small detail. This girl was amazing, and that was the reminder, if she even needed one. Kagami took a step back and sat on the chaise longue while Marinette plopped herself on her chair. The dummies had caught her eyes first. That had made her miss the obvious. There was something missing from the room that had been there the other time...

All these pictures and magazine cutouts of Adrien were gone, and other photographs had taken their place, more group pictures with students Kagami barely knew, a signed autograph of Jagged Stone, sketches of various places and people, of some of her projects… and… Photographs of her? Kagami recognised the one selfie she had sent her during the summer, one Marinette had taken during their night out after her victory. The two girls in the picture looked happy together.

Oh, she had to find something to talk about, anything, otherwise she’d look silly just looking at things like that. Not that job interview, the simple fact that Marinette herself hadn’t talked about it meant that it hadn’t worked out and pointing that out would be just rude. Tikki wouldn’t help her on this one, she was apparently meditating on top of Marinette’s bookshelf. Or sleeping, she couldn’t tell. Kagami raised her eyes to the ceiling and found a conversation starter surprisingly easily, though, in retrospect, it sounded awkward.

“Your balcony is above the… Skylight, isn’t it?” Kagami asked. “How is the view from up there?”

“It’s a bit sad during the winter, and a bit too cold to go there now,” Marinette said. “But when spring is back, I think you’ll like it. We could have tea there! But these days I only use it for superhero things. I must admit it’s very conveniently placed, I can go back from patrol and fall back to my bed and de-transform immediately…”

“Is patrol that tiring?” Kagami was genuinely curious. “You make it look easy.”

“Most of the time, it’s just running across the city to show that we’re here, we rarely have to fight Hawk Moth, I don’t know how he does it but he apparently sleeps at night, most of the time” Marinette said sombrely. “We fought some of his akumas during patrol, once or twice. So it’s not particularly tiring in itself but we do it at night, past your theoretical bedtime, when most people are asleep, so…”

“Yes, I had… Understood as much,” Kagami grinned. “And seen and heard too.”
“I’ll have you know I’m working on my stealth and that it’s much better when I’m transformed!” Marinette said defensively though there was a hint of humour in her voice. “It’s not my fault the parquet at your flat is so creaky!”

“Oh, now it is my parquet’s fault you failed to be sneaky while trying to sneak out of my house in the middle of the night, sneakily?” Kagami played along.

“Well…” Marinette mumbled.

The smile that formed on Kagami’s lips was a little crooked, and at this instant, kissing her was all Marinette could think of. It was a thought she had had one or two times, or maybe a lot more than that in the last week, something she had dreamt of before that, but these were just dreams, just passings thoughts she could chase away before they truly formed in her mind. Besides she had thought of kissing many people. Right? This was a foolish, foolish thought she couldn’t snap out of. Would it be too straightforward to kiss her? Should she ask? What would even happen if Kagami said yes? The thought was not only foolish but frightening, dazing, even. She wanted to kiss her, right on the spot.

“Lunch is ready, you two!” Mme Cheng called from downstairs. Marinette had to muffle a small groan of frustration.

The moment was over, both of them knew it. They went down the trapdoor, a little awkwardly. What waited for them in the kitchen was almost worth it. Even from a distance the soup’s aroma was enough to make both girls feel hungrier than they truly were. Marinette’s mother served them in big bowls, and though Kagami thought she wouldn’t be able to finish it all, she proved herself wrong. The soup was delicious and homemade, so were the croutons. The perks of having talented cooks as parents…

“Have I told you about the time Marinette tried to make soup? It’s one of my favourite stories.” Mme Cheng said with laughter in her voice.

“Muuuuuuum!” Marinette said in faux outrage. Truly, she didn’t mind the anecdote, in retrospect it was quite funny.

“Now I am curious,” Kagami said, “is it worse than the coffee incident?”
Mme Cheng nodded gravely, while Marinette mumbled a “I was six so it doesn’t count…” which only made Kagami’s grin grow wider.

“So, Marinette wanted to make us a surprise one night,” Mme Cheng began, “and so she thought making soup would be a good idea. Hot soup, in the middle of June.”

“I have the feeling it only goes downhill from here,” Kagami said.

“She’d watched Tom and I cook, so I suppose she had her idea of how one made a soup,” Mme Cheng continued. “But she also had her own idea of how to make her soup taste even better.”

“I didn’t like it when you cut carrots into tiny bits, so I decided I’d keep the entire vegetable just the way it was,” Marinette said as though she were confessing a crime.

“So you took an entire leek, tomatoes and strawberries, if I remember correctly, and you just… Left them that way,” Mme Cheng said. “You didn’t wash them, because according to your first year of primary school self, the water in the pressure cooker — how you managed to lift the thing all the way to the stove, I don’t know— well, that water would do just fine.

“And you didn’t remove the leaves from the strawberries either. So what Tom and I found when we closed the bakery for the night was our daughter stirring a weird mush. You called it your “Italian soup”, red white and green because of the ingredients, but it was a brownish gunk. We tried to save it, we filtered the… Thing, but it still tasted like dirt and quite frankly, it was the most terrible soup anyone’s ever cooked here. But you were really proud of it, Marinette, so we didn’t say anything until later.”

“Well, even I found it terrible but you didn’t say anything so I assumed that grownups had completely different tastebuds…” Marinette huffed.

Kagami could picture the scene quite clearly, somewhat younger Tom and Sabine trying to keep straight faces while swallowing a spoonful of the horrible mixture while a small Marinette looked quite happy with it. It was endearing, in a way. She had never done such a thing when she was a child, she’d have gotten scolded for that… She had no funny kitchen anecdotes to tell, but Marinette and her mum didn’t ask her to share a story of her own anyway, so this was fine. The rest of the meal was a little calmer than the soup story, which didn’t mean it was dull at all; surprisingly, the small talk was enjoyable, a nice glimpse at Marinette’s daily life.
It was rare for either of the two girls to feel sleepy after lunch. Then again, the meal had been particularly hearty. Kagami rested on her back, enjoying the comfort of the chaise longue while Marinette cut pieces of fabric following the pattern she had created as precisely as she could. This would be for a coat for her father, she explained. Kagami simply watched her turn on her sewing machine and stitch the pieces together, slowly, carefully. They lost track of time, and when Kagami checked her phone, they had quite the surprise.

“We are… Almost late, class starts in fifteen minutes,” she said, urgency in her voice.

They hurried downstairs with their coats and bags already on their backs. Gone was their drowsiness.

“Are you a fast runner?” Marinette asked as they put on their shoes.

“We’re part of the same group in PE, Marinette, you know the answer,” Kagami replied, almost cockily. She’d run fast enough if she absolutely had to.

They waved Marinette’s parents goodbye through the bakery’s window and ran all the way to the lycée Carnot. It wasn’t fair that Marinette was only slightly out of breath while she was the one with a red-faced and breathing heavily, Kagami thought to herself, it had to be a Ladybug thing, because she hadn’t let herself go, on the contrary she worked out even more here than she’d ever had in Japan. At least, they weren’t really late, many students were still chatting outside, and they weren’t the only ones passing the lycée’s great wooden doors in a rush.

They had Economics, and the teacher was known for his punctuality. Marinette barely had the time to greet everyone — Kagami, as always, stayed silent, which was something Marinette had only noticed now— before M. Granvillet arrived, wearing his usual three-piece suit and a self-satisfied smirk.

“Your representatives have told me that they have something important to tell you. Now, I know that if we do it at the beginning of my class, you won’t be focused on what I’m saying at all,” he said, “so we’ll go through the class, maybe a little faster than the usual, and I’ll let Sidonie and Lorenzo do what they want to do in the last five minutes of the lesson.”
This didn’t pique Kagami’s curiosity at all, but the rest of the class, and this included Marinette and Alya, looked quite interested in that. She felt like she was missing on something. Well, she’d have all the time to discover what it was by the end of the class. Economics with M. Granvillet it was, at least for now. She knew worse ways to spend an hour at school, and the teacher was competent enough, in spite of his arrogance. He did go a little faster than usual, by which he meant a lot, like most of his colleagues, he wanted to gave them as much material as he could and have them pass one last test before the end of the year, or maybe before the end of the trimester if he could.

“Your attention, everyone,” Lorenzo finally said after fifty minutes of wrist torture. He always looked happy to speak in front of the class. “As you may already know, we’re organising a Secret Santa this year! The rules are simple, you don’t tell the person whose name you drew out of the hat that you’re the one who’ll give them a present, and you don’t buy something too terrible or too expensive. We’ll give each other our presents during the last day of school before the Christmas holidays!”

Christmas… That wasn’t something Kagami celebrated at all. Grandfather had always been against that, her mum didn’t care much for it and neither did she. There was no fried chicken on their table on the 24th of December, no cards, no visiting Disneyland like many of her then classmates, or anything like that, and she had never missed it. She saw the appeal of that celebration, of course, but she just… Couldn’t get into it, no matter how hard she had tried, she had no personal memories attached to it. Kagami tried to focus on what was happening in front of her instead of taking a walk down memory lane.

Sidonie joined him with the aforementioned hat, a black top hat that seemed to be a prop rather than the authentic thing, and one by one, the students came to pick up a piece of paper from it. Some had accidentally drawn their own names, some looked unhappy with what was written on their small papers, most seemed happy. When it was Kagami’s turn, she couldn’t help but feel apprehensive. She didn’t know half the students here, and just asking around would be awkward. Perhaps she could be lucky today. She put her hand in the hat, and took one of the few remaining papers at random.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng, it read. Or did it? That had to be a dream. Kagami re-read the name written on the piece of paper, but there was no mistake, no misprint, there was exactly the right number of papers, one for each student, and unless Marinette’s name had been printed two times… She had really drawn Marinette’s name by chance. Kagami had a hard time keeping that poker face as she walked back to her seat, but she didn’t make the mistake of looking at Marinette too intently. That was perfect. And she had many gift ideas for her. In Marinette’s bag, Tikki smiled to herself. The things she’d do for these two…

The embarrassing thing would have been to draw, say, Maelle’s paper. She knew that person
existed somewhere in Seconde 4, that they shared about thirty hours a week in the same buildings and followed roughly the same classes, but she couldn’t associate that name with a face, hobbies, or even a voice, no matter how hard she tried. She’d have discovered the existence of someone she barely knew was there—and she had lived just fine not knowing about Maelle so far.

“Are you happy with the name you drew,” Kagami asked Marinette.

“Yeah, I know her a little so it shouldn’t be too hard,” Marinette said. “You?”

“I will have to ask around, but it is fine, really,” Kagami replied as non-suspiciously as she could. Marinette bought it. Even though the class wasn’t over yet, the students around them had started chatting too, and it was quite tempting to continue talking with Marinette. M. Granville certainly didn’t stop them, in fact, he was packing his things in his briefcase, not paying attention to his pupils in the slightest.

“One more thing, please, everyone!” Sidonie said, and the class went silent. “We know it’s only in three weeks but the staff meeting for the first trimester is quite important, so if you have things you want to tell us in person, we’re here, and we’ve got a letterbox if you want to tell us things anonymously!”

They were a quiet class with relatively fair teachers, so Kagami suspected they wouldn’t have that many complaints to deal with. When the bell rung, most students stayed inside the classroom—they’d still have French literature there. Marinette got up to talk to a student from her English class. In the meantime, Nino had gone to his locker where he had left Les Fleurs du Mal. And so, Kagami chatted with Alya,

“So I’ve been in touch with people from New-York who think they’ve sighted a Miraculous wielder,” Alya said, “the spider, supposedly… They’re not too sure, they’re looking into it but according to them, Spider-Man could be…”

“Spider-Man is real?” Kagami was incredulous.

“That’s what they call him, if that’s not a hoax,” Alya retorted. “I know, not very original, I don’t think they’re even legally allowed to call him that. We’ll wait until we get some more conclusive evidence before posting an article, I want it to be true but chances are it’s bogus.”
“That is a little underwhelming…” Kagami said.

“Well, I made that mistake of publishing anything I could find about Ladybug when I first started,” Alya said, “and by anything I mean anything, so I get where these guys are coming from, but the Ladyblog has… I don’t even know how many hundreds of thousands of visits a day, so we don’t want to mess that up.”

Their conversation was cut short when Mme Berthe arrived. Teaching Seconde students about Baudelaire wasn’t easy, but she managed to make it lively and the most interesting class of the day, if you asked Kagami, and though few people in the class shared her opinion on that matter, mostly because they didn’t care about literature, they all agreed that she was one of their best teachers. When the students exited the classroom at the end of the hour, they didn’t look under the weather like they often were after, say, history and geography.

Kagami’s ancient Greek class didn’t pass as quickly as she would have liked, and though it wasn’t uninteresting, she wasn’t nearly as enthusiastic as Marjane. Instead, she spent a good part of these hour making a list of things she could give Marinette, divided between “Secret Santa” presents and real ones, and while she was at it, she also made small lists for Nino, Alya, Aiko and Taneda. She’d have to be careful with her pocket money, but if she managed things properly, she’d be able to afford everything without having to ask her mum for more, which would have been an uncomfortable thing for her to do.

Once she arrived home, Kagami followed her routine religiously. She was quite happy with it, if she had to be honest with herself, there was something comforting about knowing exactly how things would go, and it allowed her to do everything she had to do while still having time to herself if she wished to. She put the kettle on and went to her room.

And like every Thursday evening, she did whatever homework she hadn’t done yet, then worked out, which was followed by her taking a bath. She practiced the cello, cooked in anticipation of her mum’s return. To this list of usual things she’d always do no matter what, she added one more. She searched the price of shipping a parcel from Japan to France. She’d have to phone her grandmother tomorrow morning and ask her to do some shopping for her, she was sure she wouldn’t mind. It would be a little dear, and a part of the gift would be quite time-consuming, but it would be entirely worth it.

Before she went to bed, Kagami did the breathing exercise Master Fu had taught her, took a sip of the concoction he had given her. She found sleep fairly easily that night.
Bonjour, bonsoir!

Much lighter than the previous chapter, isn't it?

A few things! "m'sieur" is a contraction of “Monsieur” and definitely not how you're meant to address a teacher when you're a lycée student. But it's Kim we're talking about, so well…

Secret Santa! Which is now fairly common in many lycées in France, and which is unoriginally translated as “Père Noël Secret”.

Spider-Man may or may not exist in this universe? Well if Spider-People do exist, don't expect to see them in this fic, it would deserve a crossover of its own. The cool thing would be Miles Morales (and Ganke) in Paris (which won't happen I'm sorry).

Charles Baudelaires! The poète maudit par excellence! Les Fleurs du Mal is a must read, though it is absurdly complex and subtle.

I guess this is it!

As always, my Tumblr is here if you want to ask me stuff, see the other stuff I sometimes do, or anything like that.

Tell your friends/your therapist/your pets about this fic if you enjoy it, like, share and subscribe and don't forget to hit that bell icon! Or something like that. But seriously though, thank you for being 120 to follow this story, I'm really not used to that and… Well, thanks!

I'll see you in the next one! In the meantime, take care!

En espérant que le prochain vous plaira!
Before Marinette knew it, it was December already. Yet, this year even more so than the previous one, getting into the Christmas spirit wasn’t easy for her. She loved Christmas. Simply, there were too many things she needed to take care of, responsibilities, hobbies and obligations alike. Weeks had passed in a blur, and keeping track of everything that had taken place was getting quite hard. Not that anything spectacular had happened anyway, no sudden awkward musical outburst while fighting an akumatised Santa Claus or any of that nonsense.

It could well have happened. Because, and they’d seen it coming, Hawk Moth had made a few reappearances, each time with cryptic threats, yet it was quite obvious that he was only recovering from whatever had struck him down back in November. His akumas had been slightly more powerful with each new attack, but never to the point where they could have been a danger to her and Chat Noir. And with Carapace, Queen Bee, Viperion and Tiger Eye to help them, Hawk Moth was not the thing that kept Marinette busy for most of her days, and he wouldn’t be unless he managed to regain his past strength.

No, what kept Marinette up at night was a lot more ordinary, the sort of things that any normal teenager would have to face. School. She saw herself as a decent student, at least this year, one that did her homework in time and actually bothered learning her lessons sometimes even though she could have managed just fine without that. She didn’t really care about that aspect of things, but she was probably one of the top students in a couple of classes. It wasn’t because she was a good student that she had to like the fact that they had tests almost every other day. And all of that because their teachers didn’t have enough marks for their trimestrial school reports.

At least, after the staff meeting which would be taking place next Tuesday, for the last week before the holidays — they had postponed the date repeatedly— they’d be free of all things stressful related to school. It wasn’t just her being a little on the edge because of that: when the bells rung, the lycée’s corridors weren’t filled with its usual crowd of noisy and boisterous teenagers, and this for a very simple reason: they had been replaced with zombie-like students, and the teachers, whose bloodstream was saturated with caffeine, didn’t look too good either. Well, perhaps she exaggerated it. That situation wasn’t completely unbearable. Not that she liked it.

School was only a small part of what caused Marinette to pull all-nighters. Learning that she hadn’t been chosen to become one of Manladrineaut’s interns for the upcoming season hadn’t lead her to despair. She understood that decision, after all, who would have wanted to work with someone who vanished in the middle of an interview? If anything, that decision only made her want to work harder in case she had another opportunity like that. This meant, more and more sketching, and more and more sewing. If everything went fine, by the end of this Friday, she’d be done with everyone’s gifts plus some of her personal projects.
And things were really coming together! Marinette had posted some of her creations online, and the feedback had been positive, it had attracted many new followers, though they were mainly interesting in the things Ladybug-related that she had created rather than her other projects. She had kept the gifts she had made secret, just in case her friends and family happened to visit her blog. She truly hoped these presents would make them happy, that was her main goal after all, more than to reach the bar of a thousand followers. Things were coming together but it had taken hours and hours of needlework and drawing.

Of course, everything hadn’t been all work and no play, there had been sleepovers at Alya’s — her medicine seemed to work, and though she wasn’t suddenly all smiles, she had an easier time focusing on things and simply getting out of bed in the morning — and a small “let’s cheer Adrien up” party at Nino’s. Nino’s birthday party at Nino’s too, had been great, and he had really liked the new cap Marinette had made him. There had been more fencing practice with Kagami, too. But these felt like exceptions to an impression of being constantly overworked.

And so here she was, on a Friday afternoon waiting outside a classroom, twenty minutes early for yet another maths test, reading the textbook and taking notes one last time — wasn’t repetition a key aspect of memorisation?— just to make sure everything would be fine. Doing so at the library would have been too stressful, almost everyone was there, asking things that made her doubt she had even understood how derived functions were supposed to work.

Besides, funnily enough — or perhaps not so funnily — the heating system worked better in the corridors than in the library, where it had simply stopped working today. She didn’t want to study and catch a cold in the same time. Her spot was fine, even though she could have used a chair. She wasn’t alone there for long, Sidonie joined her. She wasn’t here for talking about the incoming test, however.

“Hey, sorry to bother you,” Sidonie said awkwardly, “but we went over everything the class told us and wrote us, the questionnaire we asked you all to fill, and maybe you could help with one of the problems that has been raised by, well, many of our classmates.”

“I’m all ears,” Marinette replied with a bright smile on her face.

Sidonie tried to be as collected as she could be, and told her everything she had read and heard from their classmates about that one issue, and added her own perception on the matter. She had done her best to be as impartial as she could, she repeated, there had been joke papers in their letterbox which they had ignored, of course. But with that many people saying the exact same thing, and some of these students weren’t even friends, it was hard to dismiss that issue. When Sidonie was done talking, the smile on Marinette had turned into a frown.
“Are you sure? I mean, I don’t doubt your words, but she… No, I suppose you’re right,” Marinette said with resignation. She had seen it herself once or twice but hadn’t done anything about it and hadn’t given it much thought. She had never been personally affected by it either. “I understand why you chose to talk to me instead of trying to approach her directly… Well, what do you suggest I do?”

“She’s far from stupid, she’s probably the top student in the class,” Sidonie said, “and whenever I hear bits and pieces of your conversations, it’s obvious that her intelligence isn’t limited to school things, but I think she’ll only listen to the message if it comes from you. I’m sorry I have to ask you that…”

“No, you’ve made the right call, I’ve ignored that side of her for too long,” Marinette reassured the other girl. “I suppose she tunes it down whenever I’m around and whenever I’m somewhere else, she… So it’s only normal I talk to her about that.”

Sidonie looked grateful. It wasn’t an easy thing the class representative had asked of her, but if she was careful enough with her words, Marinette could manage it. The more she thought of it, the less she agreed with that statement. It could ruin everything if she didn’t choose the right words. Tomorrow, she told herself, she’d do it tomorrow. Here was not the place, and now was not certainly the time. More and more students gathered around the classroom, apprehensively waiting for the teacher to show up.

The test went rather well for Marinette, there was no question on that sheet that she couldn’t answer. It was rather short, the sort of thing a teacher could correct in a minute or two. As much as she would have liked to stay to have a chat with her friends, she knew she had more urgent things to deal with. And it would postpone the uncomfortable thing a little. She headed straight to her room the moment she got home, turned on her sewing machine, selected the threads she wanted to use. She put her headphones on, found exactly the song she needed and got to work.

Sometimes, handmade gifts were a pain to make, but it would have been impossible for her grandmother to find custom patches like these in a regular shop. She would like this, Marinette thought, or at least she’d appreciate the gesture. That skull would go well on one of her leather jackets. Once she was done with that gift, she’d have two more to do and after that, she’d be done, she’d have all the time she needed to think about that inevitable conversation she needed to have. Or, she could rewrite her entire cover letter and maybe sketch some things for a new project. Or she could clean her room. Anything, really, would be better than having to think about Saturday afternoon.
Tom Dupain had to call his daughter’s name twice before she came downstairs to help him cook dinner. She had to admit, there was something relaxing about the repetitive motion of slicing things into smaller bits, and dicing tofu was no exception to the rule. It was a nice and productive way of clearing her head, too. As always, dinner in the Dupain-Cheng household was delicious.

Marinette stayed downstairs a little longer than she usually would have during the week and watched TV with her parents. That series was quite mediocre, if she had to be honest with herself, but she didn’t mind, it wasn’t all that painful to watch. The acting may have been a little over the top, but it wasn’t the thing she was paying attention to: she had to admit she had a soft spot for lavish costume dramas, even if the plot was laughably bad, in fact it was part of what made their charm. And so, she stayed until the end of the first episode before she went back to her room.

She patrolled Paris’s streets with Nino that night. There wasn’t much crime to fight, no akuma to defeat, the night was calm if a little chilly. They stopped a fight in front of a nightclub, and that was the most brutal event in the entire patrol. They stopped by one of the homeless shelters they had become patrons of to help the volunteer workers for a little while, handing out blankets and warm bowls of soup before they headed back to their respective houses.

Marinette tossed and turned in her bed for a good twenty minutes before she found sleep. What Sidonie had asked of her was not unfair, they did need to have that talk, even though Kagami sent her nice texts wishing her a good luck for her patrol. Her dreams were a jumble of mismatched sounds and images which left her quite restless when she woke up. She was about to jump out of her bed when she saw what hour it was, before she remembered today was a Saturday, which meant she could sleep in if she wanted to.

Staying in bed for this long may not have been Marinette’s best idea: when she woke up again, it was almost lunchtime. Well, she had been a little tired, she argued with herself in front of the bathroom’s mirror. She took a quick shower, got dressed and put her workout clothes in a separate bag. She made sure to bring a water flask this time. A glance at the kitchen clock told her that she had plenty of time to think about how to tell Kagami what Sidonie had wanted to tell her. Or, she could make lunch for her parents, she was sure they’d appreciate that.

As she learned when she brought them two dishes of linguine with pesto, Jagged Stone’s assistant had asked for a cake at the last minute, and this was probably the only reason why Sabine and Tom hadn’t dragged her out of bed. Apparently, she couldn’t help them at the moment. Marinette went back upstairs with nothing to do but having to think of a way to address the matter without sounding too moralising and too personal. And that was surprisingly hard to do. Perhaps there was no easy way around it.

There was no running away from this, she wouldn’t make excuses to avoid Kagami completely today. The clouds like particularly heavy today, and the leaden sky did not presage anything good. If they did, she couldn’t read them. She had no third eye, it was not part of Tikki’s power. Perhaps
it was a sign. Chances were, there was no omen to be found in the clouds, just rain, or perhaps snow, considering how cold the weather was today. Marinette almost missed her bus stop because of these considerations that did nothing to help her find a way to approach the issue any other way than head-on. Her thoughts were looping.

Like all the previous times, Marinette arrived a little early, her personal fencing instructor wasn’t here yet. Which left Marinette the time to change into her sports clothes and to do her warm-up routine, followed by her gymnastics routine. She practiced the lunge, though without the proper equipment it was hard to do the movement accurately. Though she progressed quickly, at least according to Kagami, she felt like only one hour of practice a week, even if it was with one of the best fencers of her generation, wasn’t enough for her to be a competent fencer. She could be a competent gymnast if she wanted to

Marinette could hear footsteps getting closer to the room, she recognised the rhythm of each step, their weight — that was her, of course, who else could it have been— and so she opened the door only moments before Kagami could do so. And Kagami smiled at her brightly. That only made things more complicated for Marinette. She missed the occasion to initiate the conversation. Instead, they put on their fencing gears, which Kagami had put in one of the lockers in advance, and started practicing right away.

“So, last time we worked on the lunge once again, and I think there is little I can teach you about it for now, so I thought we could do parries and ripostes today,” Kagami said enthusiastically. “There are three important things about parrying we need to keep in mind: speed, which line the parry protects, and whether it’s sufficient. Could you do a en garde pose, please?”

Marinette did exactly as she was told. Perhaps the could discuss this later, once they were done with this?

“This is already a parry position! If I were to attack you and aim at the side of your head, your sabre could easily block mine, if you were quick enough,” Kagami said. “Do you want to try?”

“I… Yeah, let’s try,” Marinette said. They put their fencing masks on, and Kagami did exactly as she had predicted. Without her transformation, Marinette was still faster than most people her age, but no match against Kagami. She barely parried in time.

“See what I meant? Speed, which lines are protected and whether it’s sufficient or not,” Kagami took off her mask. “Now, if I were to feint, your tierce would have been useless, of course. So what I suggest we do today is review the different parries, and if we still have time, talk about the riposte? This is our last lesson before January, so let’s make the most of it! Alright, so—”
“Wait… There’s something really important I want to talk to you about, and if I keep postponing it, we’re never going to talk about it because I’ll never have the guts to tell you about it. It’s not going to make you happy and it’s about you,” Marinette said, almost wincing as she did so. “I think it’s important we have that conversation, so…”

Kagami looked surprised, rather than apprehensive, but she said nothing to stop Marinette from talking.

“Sidonie came to talk to me yesterday, and apparently, many students have complained about your behaviour,” Marinette started.

“I… I am not sure I understand what she meant by that…” Kagami said slowly. It sounded genuine. “I did not insult anyone, as far as I know I’m not a bully…”

“Of course you didn’t curse at anyone, you were never intentionally mean towards anyone, as far as I know,” Marinette said, “we wouldn’t be friend if it was the case. But that’s not what the complaints were about. You’re really nice to me and to your other friends, you care about us, it’s obvious and you show it. But it also shows that you… No it’s to that you don’t care about everyone who isn’t your friend, it’s that you barely acknowledge their presence at all, and more often than not, it seems that you just… Despise most of our classmates, and most of the people at school, and apparently at fencing practice too, Adrien put it in kinder words, of course he would…”

Kagami couldn’t meet Marinette’s eyes any longer, she looked slightly to the side. There was nothing she could say to defend herself. Because she knew if she did, it would be in bad faith. And she hated liars. She had let her arms fall to her side, and clenched and unclenched her hands, though it was almost too discreet for Marinette to see.

“You never insult them, or talk behind their backs,” Marinette said, and she had a hard time keeping her voice in check. “You never do any of that but it’s all the little things, not saying hello when we walk inside a classroom and there’s already some of our classmates there, it’s staying on your own whenever we’re talking to other people and completely cutting yourself from the rest of the class whenever you can… I mean, yeah, sometimes it feels nice to be in a little bubble, except with you it’s all the time when we’re not around… It’s when you roll your eyes whenever someone gives an answer that isn’t exactly phrased the right way… Things even I had begun to notice, and I can get pretty oblivious when it comes to many things.

“And it just makes you intimidating and hostile towards most people, and I think it’s just… You can just do so much better than this… If I hadn’t come to watch your rematch against Vincent, would we have become friends at all? You’re a great person, Kagami, and I think… I think more
people’d like to get to know you too, but not if you keep treating them like they’re not… Well, people. And it’s not “the way you are deep inside”, or “the way you work”, I’ve never read Dostoyevsky, neither has Nino, or Alya, we’ve all given wrong answers to some questions in class and I still have a lot to learn about fencing, but you treat us with respect anyway.”

Marinette stopped to take a breath. Kagami had tried to look composed, but that just didn’t work. She seemed conflicted. Not hurt, not insulted, not angry.

“I have no idea who told you that people who didn’t manage to pique your interest right away weren’t worth your respect, but I know it’s not something you came up with,” Marinette continued. “That person, these people are wrong, and… And you are wrong for following that kind of advice. But I don’t think you mean to do that all the time, you’re not putting up a show and parading with a crown on your head, calling other people peasants, or I don’t know… That’s probably something you were taught at some point, I’m not a psychoanalyst so I’m just making assumptions here, tell me if I’m wrong. Of course, there are terrible people who aren’t worth a minute of your time, but I don’t think anyone in our class qualifies as that…

“I know it’s weird of me to ask something like that, but please, try to unlearn that part of your education? Just… Saying hello even when it’s not absolutely necessary, considering people, no matter how annoying, like people… I think it’d be better for everyone and that means you too, Kagami. I can’t imagine how tiring it must be to feel like you’re surrounded by goldfishes… Well breaking news, you’re not. And… Quite honestly, it just…

“It just sucks that you were taught to think that way, because when it’s just the two of us, or when you’re with friends, you’re just a great person to be around, and you just waste it by despising most people because you were taught to act that way. That never got you into trouble so far, it’s not like you’re spitting in people’s faces. And I know it’s probably not an easy thing to do, but please try to change that? I’m not asking you to become everyone’s best friend, I know I couldn’t do that, just… Err… That’s it, I guess, that’s all I wanted to say.”

An awkward silence settled in the fencing salle. It had started snowing outside without them even noticing. When Kagami looked at Marinette at last, there was none of the hurt or the betrayal, or even the disdain Marinette had feared she would see in her eyes, instead of that, there was simply confusion. She cleared her throat.

“I… This is… You gave me a lot to think about, I…” Kagami stumbled on her words, “I am not sure how to react to that, I don’t know if I should be mad at you and disagree with everything you just said or thank you for your honesty and your advice… I mean, I just had Ladybug give me a talk about the way I behave around other people and how it should change.”
“To be honest, I hadn’t expected any specific kind of reaction,” Marinette said helpfully. “You didn’t storm out of the room which is already quite nice! And if… When you’ll try to change that, it’ll be you, ”

“I promise I will think about what you said… This is… A lot to process,” Kagami said, more to herself than to Marinette.

“I know it’ll take time, I rambled a bit, but I hope you’ll see the points I’ve made,” Marinette said with a small smile on her lips. “Let’s fence for now, if you’re still up to that? I feel like I’ve talked a lot but there’s still time.”

“Oh, well… We were talking about protecting lines, speed and efficiency, I think,” Kagami said, surprised. “I thought we could go through the most useful parries and try to see how they worked and how to switch from one to another quickly…”

“Sounds good to me!” Marinette said. “Let’s get started, then!”

And so, they did exactly that. Marinette’s tierce was already fine the way it was, and Kagami had little to say about it. They skipped some of the less useful parries, though Kagami promised they’d see them in detail someday. She wasn’t smiling like she had been before, it seemed that going back to her fencing instructor character was not something she could manage. And she hesitated, a lot, her tongue almost slipped more than once. Her mind was not entirely here.

“So this is the qui— no, that’s not right, that is the quarte is what I meant,” Kagami said, a little annoyed with herself. “The point of your blade should be higher… A little higher than that, and on the inside. Yes, just like that. Try going from tierce to quarte as quickly as you can?”

Marinette couldn’t quite mirror Kagami’s moves just yet, she felt quite sloppy, and when they tried to put it in practice, that worked out as well as she had expected, Kagami’s sabre hit Marinette’s lamé with a dull sound. That didn’t deter Kagami. They took things slow and did the exercise all over again, more carefully this time. Palm facing downwards, then upwards. Downwards, upwards again. Practice and proper guidance made perfect, or at least close enough to perfection. And this time, Marinette did parry Kagami’s attack. They repeated the exercise.

They went through most of the other parries that just like the way they had with the quarte: by the end of the lesson, they had seen the quinte, the sixte, the seconde as well. They had stayed quite static when Kagami had taught her these, however, and Marinette knew well that real fencing
wasn’t limited to complex wrist movements. The sheer complexity of it all when combined with footwork and attacks didn’t discourage Marinette, if anything it made her want to get good enough to be able to face Kagami and stand a chance against her one day.

This sounded quite impossible, but then again, Marinette saved Paris from things that defied the laws of logic and physics on a daily basis. No, it wasn’t impossible, only very unlikely. But Kagami did everything so that one day, it could be possible. They spent the time they needed to perfect Marinette’s movements, instead of rushing so that they could see everything in one go. Kagami made sure she didn’t push her student too far, and that she fully understood the subtleties of each parry she taught her.

It wasn’t as spectacular as their previous lesson about lunges, but it was just as important if not more: finding the right balance between an impenetrable defence which forced the opponent to make the first move and initiate the encounter unless it was absolutely safe for the defender, and an over-reliance on attacks which lead to an open guard and the risk of turning into a moving practice dummy.

Taking things slow didn’t allow for them to go through everything Kagami had planned for them to do, and all too soon, it was time for Marinette to leave — and for Kagami’s mother to teach her students in this salle. They had done everything Kagami had wanted to do in terms of parries, but nothing on ripostes. Well, that would be for next year, Marinette supposed. It was weird to think that she wouldn’t do anything fencing-related for three weeks, while Kagami herself would probably fence even more than during regular school weeks.

Kagami too must have thought of that: though she was still pensive, there was a hint of sadness in the small, awkward “goodbye” she gave her friend and student when she left. She sounded a little more withdrawn, too. Months later, she’d tell Marinette about how she had spent the entire evening writing incoherent things in her Paris journal she barely understood the morning after.

Marinette met Itsuko Tsurugi on her way out of the building. She was already wearing her lamé and many of her students were following her. Marinette and Kagami’s mother didn’t have the time to chat for long, they exchanged polite greetings — when she was performing her role as a great fencer with many eyes on her, it was true that Itsuko wasn’t as warm and friendly as she could be at home — and parted ways right after. That was the woman Kagami had described in their early texts.

The snow hadn’t settled outside, to Marinette’s disappointment, it had turned into drizzle. However, her plans for the remainder of the afternoon weren’t ruined by the bad weather, if anything, this was the perfect excuse to finally visit the Azzedine Alaïa exhibition. It would be a
nice way to distract herself from that question that lingered in her mind. She sent her mum a quick text—though with her phone’s cracked screen, that wasn’t easy, it had been a nice mobile phone who had survived many a battle against Hawk Moth’s akumas but not a fall down her stairs.

“Of course,” Sabine Cheng’s reply read. Marinette hopped on a bus, and got lost in her thoughts again. Had this talk with Kagami, or rather that monologue, been useful at all, had it been worth it? Perhaps the exhibition would make her think of other things. And it did. She sketched some of the dresses she liked the most and ignored the weird looks some of the visitors gave her.

In twenty, thirty years, if her dreams came true, her creations would be exhibited in this gallery too. She’d give her friends and family a private tour. There would be old friends, and new ones, her parents with grey hair and bright smiles on their wrinkled faces, and Kagami by her side.

That small scene she had imagined was just another daydream, perhaps she wouldn’t be a successful fashion designer at all, chances were she’d have lost touch with many of her friends by then, Kagami would probably be living in Japan, too. If she had spoken the thought out loud, she was sure most visitors would have laughed at her, In spite of that, it was a thought that made her happy. Yes, if it all worked out, perhaps that could happen one day.

She’d take things slow. Once she freed Paris of Hawk Moth, she’d have fewer things to worry about. If she got the internship for Manladrineaut, or if other opportunities came to her, perhaps she could make a true debut in the world of fashion. And if Kagami had understood what she had told her, if she changed the way she acted, perhaps things could work out between them.

No, Kagami was decidedly not just a friend. If she did the right things… Perhaps they could be more than that.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

Not a lot to add about what this chapter was all about, but…

The scene in the fencing salle was one of the first I had planned, ever, back in April 2018 I already had quite a clear image of how I wanted things to go, my outline for that chapter (I’ve got one for every single one before I actually write them) was very precise too. I wrote “clumsy and sincere” and I hope this was how it read.

That’s the thing about Kagami. She’s a very loving person, the most loyal of friends, a brilliant fencer. And someone who was taught to hate “the norm”, “the ordinary” and never got into trouble because of her position.
Marinette on the other hand always tries to make things good for absolutely everyone, yet she idealises and romanticises the hell out of her crushes. If you re-read chapter 10, there's that little moment during which she almost notices what's so wrong with Kagami and then it goes completely out the window…

There will be no chapter next week, I'm late on my schedule and I want to write good stories even if it takes more time, rather than rushed ones.

As always, my Tumblr is here. If you want to read my many analyses of the show, be informed about the other things I write and read and watch, if you want to ask me stuff about this chapter or the previous ones, feel free to do so!

I'll see you on the 1st of July, then!
Duel 19: In Other Words

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a tired but happy Kagami who unlocked her flat’s front door for the second time this evening. Everything had worked exactly the way she had wanted to, she had been gifted a free baguette, and she wasn’t even lagging behind her schedule. She had given Marinette’s bigger gift to her parents, who swore they’d keep it secret until the 25th of December — it was easier to believe Mme Cheng than her husband when they both made the promise. This had taken a great weight off her shoulders, both figuratively and literally.

Even though she’d had to ride the métro with that cumbersome present, this had been the best solution she had come up with. Bringing it to school was not an option she had ever considered, it would have been risky and, quite frankly, dragging such a heavy thing around would have turned into a nightmare very soon, and her spine would have hated that. She wouldn’t have had the time to go back home after school just to take the present, she couldn’t just miss her flight like that, besides, mum would be there, in a taxi, waiting for her in front of the lycée.

Because tomorrow would be her last day in France for quite some time, and she wouldn’t be back until January. Mum seemed apprehensive, and so Kagami had taken care of everything she could. Her suitcase was already packed, she had asked Jérémie and Aelita — they were on a first name basis now — to water their houseplants in their absence, and now, she was about to cook dinner with every perishable goods in the fridge so that nothing would be wasted. Two weeks away from Paris… That would be a little weird now. Even weirder than last time when she had known so little and the main thing in her mind was that competition.

If she had to be honest with herself, Kagami too was a little apprehensive. Coming back in Japan, as of itself, would have made her quite happy. Though it had been worse, she still missed it. Unfortunately, that wasn’t so simple. She’d see grandmother Kiyo, Taneda and Aiko, of course. But also her grandfather and her father. Ando Tsurugi and his son-in-law had in common that tendency to criticise everything that didn’t meet their expectations, when they were in private. Well, they wouldn’t be able to criticise her because of her marks, she was top of her class in everything but English.

They knew perfectly well she wouldn’t stand up to them, no matter what they reproached her, no matter how unfair that was. And rather than to tell her what it was specifically that she had done “wrong”, they’d stare at her until she presented her apologies and swore she’d never repeat whatever mistake she had made ever again. Which forced her to be silent most of the time. At least, Marinette’s criticism was direct and constructive, not easy to act upon, yet it was something she could work with nonetheless. Because of course, she had been right last Saturday. Kagami had yet to do anything about it, but Marinette had been right.
Mum would want her to look up to her father and to admire her grandfather. They were successful people, weren’t they? A great fencer and a… Scientist working on cells, Kagami had learned from a newspaper article, though he still hadn’t explained her what it was he was truly doing. It was a very lucrative job that allowed his spouse and daughter to live in this flat, she supposed. Even as a private teacher in Japanese and sports teacher at la Sorbonne, mum didn’t earn enough for them to afford their more than comfortable living conditions. He was the reason they could materially live here. Complaining about her father and grandfather simply wouldn’t do.

Kagami snapped out of that spiral of thoughts and stole a glance at the kitchen clock. She’d need to speed things up a little if she wanted dinner to be ready by the time her mum arrived. She turned on the radio, changed the channel to France Musique and started sharpening her knives. With such a mismatch of ingredients, she wasn’t sure what she could cook, but she’d figure something out, she was sure. Just in case, she texted Nino, asking him for tips and ideas. He did not disappoint. Kagami read his very complete answer — Mme Cheng had a very capable student, and unlike Marinette, Nino enjoyed cooking enough to call it a hobby— and got to work.

It was a tired and stone-faced Itsuko Tsurugi who unlocked her flat’s front door, and though that expression softened a little when she smelled her daughter’s cooking, she was not in the mood for friendly conversations, small laughs or warm smiles. She went to thank her daughter for the meal, that small assortment of various dishes was an original idea. After this, however, she had few words for Kagami, kind or not. She changed the radio channel to France Culture, and that set the tone for the evening.

Kagami said nothing, all she could do was observe, as her mum slowly reverted to Itsuko-child-of-Ando, rather than Itsuko Tsurugi. The way she reminded her daughter that everything needed to be taken care of before she went to school was almost an imitation of her father’s tone and mannerisms. It was as if the Itsuko Tsurugi from before Kagami’s victory against Vincent was back. Kagami went straight to her room once she was done doing the dishes. This situation couldn’t be helped, she supposed. She wouldn’t confront her mother tonight, she wouldn’t ruin that last night in Paris by turning it into a shouting match.

Before she went to bed, Kagami made sure she had put everything she needed in her schoolbag — Marinette’s small Secret Santa gift, one for Alya and one for Nino had all been nicely wrapped, she tried to make them fit without ruining the wrapping paper in the process— and in her suitcase. Not that she really needed to check all of that, but she couldn’t be too careful about small details. She wrote the last entry of the year in her Paris journal, chose a book she could read in one go, and only then did she switch down her ceiling lamp and draw the curtains.
Marinette sounded quite excited about this Friday and the Secret Santa thing, and the enthusiasm was all too contagious, though Kagami would certainly not finish her texts with five consecutive exclamation marks. She answered the message with a “I am going to read for a while, good night” of her own. It was almost comical that there were so many books she could read yet couldn’t find the right one. In the end, she chose at random. Short stories it would be, then. If someone had asked her what book she had read, she wouldn’t have been able to answer, she simply didn’t remember.

Kagami dozed off as soon as she put the book back on her night table. She hadn’t even paid attention to it anyway. Which didn’t mean she found sleep. She was in that in-between state in which one isn’t awake enough for very elaborate thinking, but not completely asleep either. She tossed and turned in her bed. Tomorrow would be her last day here and she’d only be back two weeks after that. She wouldn’t get to see her Parisian friends, she’d only be able to text them, and even then, chances were she wouldn’t get a proper answer before long.

She almost didn’t want to go back to Japan. There was so much of her life there, and so many others here in Paris… She didn’t know where home was, things had been much clearer a few months back, and now it was all muddled. There were parts of her old life she’d rather put aside, that was for sure, and most of them were in Japan.

It was no use mulling over this, she told herself. She’d make that last day worth the while. She breathed in and out, slower than ever, the way Master Fu had suggested she do. Were humans actually able to be this slow? She suspected there was something magic about his abilities. She repeated the words he had taught her. Her eyes felt heavier and heavier. She felt her consciousness slip away, not uncomfortably so. “Self-hypnosis” was the last coherent thought she formed. Kagami slept soundly that night, and though her dreams weren’t all that peaceful, they didn’t stir her from her slumber. Her alarm clock did, earlier than most mornings.

Kagami made her bed, splashed water on her face, took her time in the shower, changed into her day clothes which she had prepared the day before. Her toilet bag was ready, and so was the small make-up bag she closed once she was done using her concealer. She would do things methodically, otherwise she’d end up trying to do everything at the same time, which was quite tempting. She would not waste her energy running around and doing very little. She sounded like an old governess, saying that. Well, perhaps they weren’t always wrong.

Her room was even tidier than it usually was. She knew she wouldn’t find a single thing under her bed, which didn’t stop her from checking. If she forgot something important, she’d be about 10,000 kilometres away from it, the time it would take for it to be mailed to her… Was that superstitious of her to be this careful? Just like she had done with her room, she checked her suitcase one last time. And of course, everything was in order there, there wasn’t a single important thing she had forgotten to pack. She had woken up early to have the confirmation that everything was under control. It was barely worth it as of itself, but it did improve her mood.
She put her suitcase in the corridor, making sure not to make the parquet creak, not that it would wake her mum up, she just didn’t like the noise all that much. Kagami went to the kitchen. She had breakfast in silence, no radio for today, the bread was a little hard. It was a very enjoyable breakfast nevertheless. When Kagami was finally ready to leave the flat for the last time this year, she did so serenely, and almost no regret. At least everything was under control, and there would be no bad surprises when she’d be back.

Just this once, she allowed herself not to take the métro, and walked all the way to the lycée Carnot instead. The streetlights were still lit. it felt as though the night wasn’t quite over yet. In a way, Kagami’s observation wasn’t entirely wrong. Sometimes, she wondered why she didn’t simply buy a bicycle. That would certainly allow her to be on time without all the drawbacks of the métro. Mum was entirely against that, probably because she didn’t want her daughter to die. Few things were as dangerous as riding a bicycle during rush hour in Paris.

Kagami barely made it to class in time. As much as she hated to admit it, the métro, even when it was late, was somewhat faster than her. The teacher had already started calling their names in alphabetical order. She was lucky her name was not “Césaire.” Her classmates didn’t seem to notice her near-lateness anyway, she got to her seat next to Marinette. She had brought another bag in addition to her backpack today. Was her present this big? Even though her own presents were carefully wrapped and Marinette couldn’t have guessed what they were, Kagami opened her bag carefully so that the other girl couldn’t see what was inside.

And Kagami zoned out, she barely wrote down anything, and exceptionally, she could afford that. Usually, Mme Vidal’s class was quite demanding in terms of paying attention, and not copying the exact same diagrams with the exact same colour scheme meant a poor mark later on. Today, there were no diagrams, no important definitions either. The teacher didn’t want to do her job, even less so than the day before and it showed. After all, it was the last class before the holiday. Halfway through the class, she gave up on teaching altogether and they played a history-related hangman instead.

Kagami’s German teacher had them sing traditional Christmas carols, he had even brought homemade biscuits for his students. That was… Surprisingly nice and unexpected of him. Herr Schneider had never struck Kagami as the festive type, though he had done a little something for Hanukkah. Perhaps he used Christmas as a pretext to have them learn new vocabulary (Weihnachtsgeschenk, Familientreffen, Heiligabend, Traurigkeit, Heimweh, genau, genau, sehr wichtig). At least there were biscuits to ease her suffering, she thought.

M. Rafroidit wasn’t as extravagantly Christmassy as his colleague, but he had them watch, to no-one’s surprise, yet another adaptation of A Christmas Carol during the two hours they had together. Which, Kagami supposed Dickens was fine, besides, she hadn’t expected much from this teacher. This hardly felt like a day of school, Kagami probably could have come without most of her school things. In fact, many of her classmates had done just that. It was an odd change of pace,
but not an uncomfortable one.

Kagami had lunch with Marinette, Alya, Nino and Adrien in an empty classroom. They had each brought their lunch boxes, Adrien’s being the dietician-approved version of a meal, whereas Alya’s was just plain old pasta with tomato sauce. Kagami wasn’t too unhappy with her own lunch box, they were mostly leftovers from the evening before, but they were perfectly good even when served cold. Nino noticed she had followed his advice, and if that was even possible (he really was a Christmas enthusiast), he was even happier than before.

“You actually listened to my advice! See Alya, I told you you could put ginger in fried rice and it’s perfectly edible even when served cold!” he said proudly. Mme Cheng had probably given him the tip, and Alya’s mother would have agreed with him.

“Whatever you say, Nino, whatever you say,” Alya shook her head.

“Tastes nice!” Marinette said after she sneakily took a forkful of Kagami’s food.

It was a nice meal, away from the noisy and overcrowded cafeteria which served their own interpretation of a Christmas log and other things that were probably flavourless, no matter how nice-looking they were. And they weren’t even that nice to look at, especially when compared with the Dupain Cheng Christmas log Marinette had brought. But it was the company that made this lunch all the more enjoyable. Kagami would miss these moments. Almost two entire weeks, twelve days, exactly. She had a hard time believing this would be so long.

The small group had to move out of the room when the bell rung, Adrien rushed to his maths classroom while his four friends would have an exceptional two hours class with M. Granvillet. And, unlike his colleagues, the man seemed eager to teach. Kagami had started counting down in her head halfway through M. Granvillet’s explanation of the wonders of supply and demand economy. In exactly two hours and thirty six minutes, school would be finally over for this year, in five hours and twenty four, no, twenty three minutes her plane would take off.

But these numbers meant as much to her as the teacher’s exposé. The more he talked, the less she was able to write down, and the less she understood what he was truly trying to tell them behind all that abstruse jargon. Perhaps she had misjudged M. Granvillet. He wasn’t a good teacher, all he wanted to do was finish the curriculum in time. Way to almost ruin a day of doing almost nothing in a perfectly painless way… Even Marinette looked a little under the weather when they finally left the classroom — one hour and three minutes left, Kagami couldn’t help but count—with plenty of homework to keep them busy during the holidays. The Seconde 4 students dragged their feet to the maths classroom.
M. Andurent was a little worried to see his students so demoralised. He may have been a maths teacher, but despite that, he also was a decent human being. He gave up on trying to start a new chapter with them. They should have only spent the last twenty minutes of the class giving each other their Secret Santa presents, in turned into a complete hour instead. Kagami couldn’t say she was unhappy with that change, she wouldn’t have been able to pay attention anyway.

Only fifty three minutes left. The classroom was filled with the noise of students chatting. Fifty two minutes. Almost two whole weeks away from Paris, stuck with her father and her grandfather, . Fifty one and a half. Time was slipping away and there was nothing she could do about it. That overwhelmed her. Marinette seemed to have noticed it too.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” she asked. And for that, Kagami was grateful. It was a much better question than “is everything alright?”, she thought.

“Well, unless you can highjack a plane or hide me in your bag when you leave school,” Kagami joked. “And even then, chances are I would change my mind so, it is kind of you to ask but no.”

“I can steal phones, and I could really use a new one, the screen is all cracked, but I’m not too sure about planes,” Marinette said very seriously. “But maybe—”

“Hey, people, your attention, please, we have an announcement to make about that Secret Santa stuff!” Lorenzo yelled over the chatter.

Marinette didn’t finish her sentence, all conversations died down. Their class representatives were in front of the blackboard, with Lorenzo putting on his usual show of clearing his throat and finding the right foot to stand on. He had prepared a speech, it seemed. Kagami braced herself for the worse. Fortunately, Sidonie spoke before he could open his mouth, saving them from an overwritten monologue about the value of Christmas and unity in the class.

“Everyone!” Sidonie spoke clearly, and there was a smile in her voice. “We thought that calling each name would be a little boring, so perhaps... One of us could give their present to the person whose name they had drawn from the hat, and then this person could... Well you get the idea! If no one wants to start, I’m sure Lorenzo will be happy to be the first one to give his present!”

“Kim, I know it’s not much, but I’m sure you’ll wear these proudly,” Lorenzo said in a faux-
He had offered Kim a flashy pair of boxer shorts. Kim grinned widely and clapped Lorenzo on the back. He put the garment over his trousers and struck a pose. He gave a girl — Maelle, Kagami finally had a face she could associate with the name— a Christmas tree-shaped tea ball. And it went on and on like that. Most of these gifts were little jokes, nothing too serious, and Kagami started to feel a little self conscious about her own gift to Marinette. It would stand out in the middle of socks and other practical items.

“Kagami? I don’t know if you’ve read this one yet, but someone told me you’d like it,” a deep voice called from her left. This was… She knew his name, the had it on the tip of her tongue.

“Thank you, Camille,” she said as she unwrapped the gift. She had been right, it was his name. The present felt like a book. It was a book-shaped and had the weight of a book. Inside was the Japanese edition of… A book. One she hadn’t read yet, though she remembered mentioning its author to Marinette once. Sayaka Murata’s *Convenience Store Woman*. She gave the boy a small smile.

And now was her turn to give her gift. When she called Marinette’s name, the rest of the class grew uncharacteristically quiet. Marinette herself was surprised.

“I… I hope you’ll enjoy it, I really do,” she said, and gave Marinette what she had spent countless nights working on. She watched the girl carefully unwrap the paper, and flip through the pages, reading each post-it note. Her eyes crinkled ever so slightly. Getting the book there wasn’t all that complicated, she had asked her grandmother for advice before ordering it online, finding the right sort of gift hadn’t been the difficult part at all.

“You… You translated it all yourself, didn’t you? Kagami… Thank you so much,” Marinette said, her voice shaking with emotion. She put the small Japanese book about dressmaking on a nearby table and wrapped Kagami in a hug. Kagami hugged back. “I have a present for you, but I’ll give it to you after this,” Marinette whispered in her ear. “Your gift makes me really happy.”

Kagami barely registered her classmates’ reaction. She couldn’t keep her eyes off the girl she lo— Perhaps it was a little too early to call it that, the word was a little scary. Marinette had made Karim a new pencil case to replace his badly battered one, but she didn’t care all that much about Karim’s reaction. Minutes ticked by without Kagami counting them, students made conversation though she stayed out of it. It felt awkward talking to people she had ignored for so long and who she could barely name, for the most of them. At least they seemed to be having fun talking to each other. M. Andurent let his students go a little before it was actually time for them to go, and wished them all a happy holiday.
Though running in the corridors was explicitly forbidden, as it was written in the school’s Code of Behaviour, many students didn’t care about that and, unlike Kagami, they had never bothered reading it. Alix and Kim raced each other to the school’s entrance, even Alya was walking a little faster than she usually would, she was certainly in a hurry to get home, and it seemed that her boyfriend was coming with her. There would be a party at one of their old friends from collège’s tonight, Juleka, if she recalled correctly. Now was perhaps the right time to give her and Nino their gifts, Kagami thought, and she did just that.

She had found old issues of Strange for Alya, and a series of interviews between Hitchcock and Truffaut for Nino. She got her first hug ever from both of them. They certainly felt… Different from Marinette’s but not in an uncomfortable way. Nino and Alya’s hugs didn’t last as long as Marinette’s either. So this what a friend’s hug —Aiko wasn’t a very physical person, neither was Taneda— was meant to be like… It wasn’t bad at all, Kagami decided as she watched them go. She glanced at her wristwatch. Three minutes left. Unless there were traffic jams, mum would be there in two minutes.

“Hey, so, about your present…” Marinette said, and this brought Kagami back to reality. “I hesitated a little, but I think you’ll have a use for it this. If the weather in Japan isn’t too hot, that is, of course, but I checked and apparently it should be fine… Or you could wear it when you’re back here because this winter is going to be really cold… Well anyway! You can open it now or just wait, you decide!”

Marinette’s gift was lumpy, wrapped in a nice red and green paper. Kagami was too curious to wait, and acted impulsively. She unwrapped the present and her breath stopped in her lungs. Marinette knew she loved turtlenecks. And striped jumpers, if the stripes were the right colour with just the right spacing, that was. She didn’t know how much time Marinette had spent, but she knew it would fit her perfectly. The white and blue jumper felt incredibly soft, comfortable, not too heavy. It would be warm without being stifling.

“Wow,” Kagami couldn’t stop that small whisper from leaving her lips. Louder, she said, “I… Am not sure what to say… This is… I am a little speechless here. Thank you so much, too, I guess!” She felt her cheeks turn slightly red, and this wasn’t because of the cold.

Kagami put the jumper in her bag as carefully as she could. One minute and nine seconds left. Kagami felt cold in her winter clothes. Her eyes met Marinette’s and her mouth wouldn’t work. Perhaps, perhaps she could not speak the words after all. Not yet. She didn’t remember speaking them to anyone and meaning them like she did now. But she could try to do something else instead. She closed the small gap between Marinette and her and pulled her close to her, burying her face in the crook of the other girl's neck. Maybe this would suffice. Marinette’s embrace tightened around her. She might have said something in a low voice, but it might as well have been the wind. Kagami wished they could stay like that for just a little longer.
But time was up. True to her words, Itsuko Tsurugi was waiting in a taxi just across the boulevard. Kagami needed to let go, and she did, slowly, awkwardly, painfully. She took a step back, her hands still on Marinette’s shoulders.

“I… I will text you every day, I promise. Be careful with Hawk Moth, I was told the guy wanted to… Take your Miraculous or something like that,” Kagami laughed nervously and she hated the sound of her voice. The forced smirk melted. “I miss you already and I am still here, does it make sense? I… I need to go now but I really want to stay with you… I…”

The taxi wouldn’t wait for her forever, her flight wouldn’t be delayed just because she wanted to stay here. So, Kagami kissed Marinette on both cheeks, whispered a small “goodbye” and ran to the grey car. The door opened and she could feel her mum look at her with an odd expression on her face — guilt for interrupting the moment, sorrow, almost.

“Bon voyage!” Marinette shouted from the other side of the street. And in a clumsy Japanese, she added, “have a safe trip!”

Kagami looked at her one last time. She couldn’t help the small smile that crept on her lips.

“Kagami,” Itsuko Tsurugi said, “we do not want to be late… I am sorry, we need to go.”

“Of course, mum,” Kagami said softly.

Traffic was dreadful, the ride painfully slow. But neither this nor the grey skies let Kagami’s spirits down. She still had that faint smile on her lips that did not leave her. Soon, she’d tell Marinette soon. It was only two weeks, it wouldn’t be easy, even more so with her grandfather and her father around, but she would manage it. She hoped so.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaah!

Bonjour, or bonsoir!

My original draft for this chapter was very different from the one you’ve got here, everything was wonderful and Kagami was instantly nice to everyone and our two
dorks kissed and... And it was just too easy. What can I say... Absence makes the heart grow fonder?

Sayaka Murata's book is very much real and quite good too! And there's a translation in English so...

"Strange" was, for quite some time, the only way French readers could find out about Marvel comics, so it's kind of a cult magazine now!

François Truffaut was a French director, he started with the New Wave and made some of my favourite films. He's also the French guy in Close Encounters of the Third Kind.

Other than that... There's very little I need to say about this chapter!

As always, my Tumblr is here if you want to ask me stuff, tell me that I'm cruel for having these two spend two weeks away from one another, or if you want follow me to see preview of the next chapters and all the other things I do! Well some of them at least.

I'll see you in the next one!

À très vite!
“Five more minutes, please, I swear I’ll be up soon, just five more minutes, alright?” Marinette grumbled automatically as her eyes opened slowly.

Of course, there was no answer. No one had knocked on her trapdoor, there was no school today. Tikki was snoring. Still, it was noisy downstairs, noisier than the usual, and yet it was quite early. Marinette put her head under her pillow, hoping that would drown the din. To no avail. It may have been Christmas day, but, at least for the morning, the bakery was bustling with life, delivery people and clients. She couldn’t go back to sleep, and she didn’t want to go downstairs just yet. She checked her phone. A few messages from a few of her classmates and friends — she’d get more of them later— and one from Kagami which she saved for last.

There were things she wasn’t telling her even though she obviously wanted to, Marinette thought as she reread the text. And she could tell when someone was hiding important things from her, she had done it herself for more than a year, she could call herself an expert at that. As she had expected, Kagami didn’t lie to her, instead, she omitted quite a few details, which was all the more striking because her texts could be quite detailed. Back in October, they had been much longer, they had felt much more personal. Not that these weren’t, for all intents and purposes, they were written exactly the same way.

Perhaps Marinette just missed Kagami and worried about her even though it had only been four days, and read too much into that text, too. Marinette brushed that last thought aside. She wasn’t over-interpreting things. It did sound like things weren’t all that great for Kagami, but if they were unbearable, she would have told her. Maybe. Kagami wasn’t one to complain openly about things. At least her mum was here to make sure things weren’t so bad. Right?

Kagami’s message came with a series of pictures, which Marinette studied in great detail. They were mostly of Moka, her grandmother’s tortoiseshell cat, and this put a smile on Marinette’s face, and that almost chased her worries away. Moka sitting on Kagami’s lap, Moka sleeping with her paws curled, Moka playing with a scrap of paper next to an amused Kagami and her grandmother. It was all very endearing and almost made her wish she had a cat of her own, even though she knew well that wouldn’t be possible with her dad’s allergies. That, and it made her want to join Kagami and have fun with her. She didn’t care how silly that sounded.

There were other pictures taken in a restaurant with Kagami’s mother, he grandmother again, her grandfather as well. She caught a rare glimpse of Kagami’s father, wearing what looked suspiciously like one of Gabriel Agreste’s latest three-piece suits. She knew that M. Agreste and Adrien were part of a fashion show in Japan, was it possible that they had met the Tsurugis? She
wouldn’t ask Kagami. Gabriel Agreste, she knew it, was a sensitive subject. Teppei Tsurugi — a now famous bioengineer thanks to his work on cell regeneration, she had read in that science magazine her parents were subscribed to— and his daughter definitely had the same nose. Other than that, he wouldn’t have struck Marinette as a relative of Kagami’s. He seemed… Aloof, distant.

Marinette put the phone on her mattress and did an excellent impression of a starfish. She had to get up, have breakfast, take a shower and do whatever she could to help mum and dad. She did exactly that, effortlessly, and found that she didn’t have to give her parents a hand at the bakery. Instead, they had written down a list of things that needed to be taken care of before her grandparents arrived. Which was to say, a lot, the note was a small piece of paper but Sabine’s handwriting was even smaller. A lot of things but nothing she couldn’t handle.

At exactly 11:30AM, the bakery closed its doors, Tom and Sabine called it a day and went upstairs. And there was Marinette, who was quite busy making a proper vinaigrette while keeping an eye on the oven, her hair pulled in a tight bun and concentration written all over her face. Tom and Sabine didn’t bother her, she was doing well enough, it seemed. They went to change into their Christmas clothes instead; when they returned to the kitchen, Marinette was poking at the gratin to make sure it was properly cooked. They’d taught her well, Sabine thought.

Roland and Gina Dupain were there right in time, and Marinette opened the door to greet them. They both praised her for her suit, which she had designed herself. Things weren’t tense between the three of it had taken quite a few conversations to convince Rolland to come, he had almost been akumatised the first time she had tried to get in touch with him, but it had worked out in the end, or rather, Marinette had made it work. And Roland seemed to be in a good mood, he was polite with Sabine, friendly with his son and kind to his granddaughter, if such a thing was even possible. He’d have all the time to get angry at something, anything, and be disagreeable later. For now, however, he was quite likeable, and the awkwardness between them lessened.

“Pre-sents, pre-sents, pre-sents!” Tom said enthusiastically, clapping his hand merrily, his cheeks a little red. They had had a small aperitif before the actual meal, Marinette had politely refused the glass of champagne her grandma offered her, the same could not be said of Tom and his father and, to a lesser extent, his mother.

“Presents it is,” Gina Dupain said. “Underneath the tree?”

“We can do that,” Sabine nodded. “Or we can wait for Santa to come but…”

What ensued was a small commotion, by the end of which everyone was back in the living room,
some a little more dishevelled than others. A particularly large parcel stood out in the middle of all the smaller presents, and though Marinette had a fairly good idea of what it was, she didn’t recall asking either her parents or her grandparents for that… It was decidedly a nice surprise, so she wouldn’t complain. It was odd. There was a small “M” on the wrapping paper, but the handwriting did not belong to anyone in the room. She had the feeling she knew who it was, but she couldn’t be too sure. She’d save that present for last, she decided.

And so, they began giving each other gifts, starting with the oldest person in the room — Marinette would be the last to open her presents, and she didn’t mind one bit, though she was quite impatient to unwrap them. Had Hawk Moth been there and used his full power, he wouldn’t have been able to turn anyone in the room into an akuma, Though Sabine didn’t quite know what to do with that weirdly-shaped dough trough she had brought back from one of her journeys, it was nice of Gina to have thought of that. No gift was out of place, and no scandal, no inappropriate remarks from Roland when he discovered that his daughter in law had offered him tea.

They all loved the presents Marinette gave them, and even though that went completely against everything he had been taught, Roland put on the cap his granddaughter had made him and wore it for the rest of the day. The dress Marinette had sewn for her mum was a perfect fit, Gina loved her new patches and promised they’d put them on her jacket right after lunch, and Tom’s bone-crushing hug that lifted his daughter off the ground was a good sign that he liked his new coat. This was one of her best Christmases in her entire life. And she hadn’t even opened her presents yet.

She hadn’t expected her grandparents to give her clothes, no one ever got her clothes at all, and opening the parcel lead to a surprise. Her first biker’s jacket. Gina Dupain did have an eye for that sort of thing —she was probably the one who had come up with the idea, not her husband, Marinette thanked them both nevertheless. Her parents had a more practical gift for her, once she should have seen coming. The way they gave it to her, however was unexpected.

“Marinette, could you take a selfie of us all with your jacket on?” Tom asked, trying his best to hide the excitement in his voice.

Marinette didn’t think much of her father’s voice, he had probably had a glass of champagne too many. She put her hand in her pocket… Her phone felt… Different, not quite the same shape, a little lighter, too, the screen was smooth. Was that even her phone? She didn’t remember stealing anything from anyone while wearing these trousers. Her mum’s eyes had that mischievous glint Marinette would only see when a prank was being played on her. Sabine Cheng’s pickpocketing skills may have been a little rusty, but that had been enough to swap her phone and…

The phone Marinette took out of her pocket was brand new, and did not belong to her parents.
When she tentatively touched the “Home” button, she found that the picture that appeared on the locking screen was the exact same she currently used on her own. The exact same code she used for her old phone worked for this one too, and she found that all her conversations and contacts, all her pictures were here already as well as her apps. She even had new messages from friends wishing her a merry Christmas. And one from her father saying “I hope you enjoy your gift.” Marinette shook her head and smiled to herself before giving her parents one big hug.

She had to make sure she didn’t use too much of her strength hugging Tom and Sabine, trying to explain how she could deadlift two grown adults would have been a little awkward. She did put her new jacket on, and finally took a selfie with her family — that new frontal camera was much better than her old one. Any professional photographer would have called the picture a little mistimed and overexposed. Not that Marinette cared, it was perfect that way, a lot more sincere than, say, the annual Agreste family photograph.

And then, there was that big parcel from someone whose handwriting was decidedly very familiar, someone who was not with her today. Marinette did not want to jump to conclusions this quickly. Even though she already know who this was from. She knelt down, unwrapped the parcel — the wrapping paper too was familiar — and opened the cardboard box carefully. Inside were four fabric rolls with patterns she hadn’t been able to find here in France, each with a slightly different feel from the fabrics she already had. This was… Perfect. A rush of affection coursed through Marinette’s chest. There was a small note taped to the parcel.

“Merry Christmas

I hope you will enjoy these!

K.”

The hot water certainly had helped with Kagami’s sore muscles, Grandfather’s training was even more demanding than what she remembered, and unlike mum, he was a terrible teacher, she reflected as she dried her hair. Unfortunately, the towels here weren’t as soft as the ones back in Paris, the textile had become coarse over the years, this was almost uncomfortable. She switched off the lights and walked out of the bathroom. She could hear her phone ring in her room. Odd. She hurried her pace nonetheless, hoping she’d be fast enough not to miss whatever it was.
… A video call from Marinette? Did her phone even allow for that? Perhaps her finger had accidentally slipped or something like that… If she were to call her back, chances were be, Kagami would get see the inside of Marinette’s pocket for an awkward minute before the girl actually noticed what was going on. On the other hand… She really wouldn’t mind that call at all. Please don’t be an accident, she prayed silently. She ran a hand through her hair and touched the icon to take the call.

“… Hey! New phone, we can talk like that without it costing us a fortune! How are you?” Marinette’s voice rang out. A few seconds later, her image appeared on Kagami’s phone screen. And Kagami for a short moment, felt extremely self-conscious about her looks. Marinette was all dressed up and prettier than ever, while she was here with her hair all tousled and a lumpy jumper on.

“Hey! I am fine, really,” Kagami decided that was the best answer she could give. “You?”

“Someone was very kind to me this Christmas and gave me all that new fabric and I wanted to thank her because she made me the happiest girl in Paris today.”

Kagami hoped her phone’s camera wasn’t good enough for Marinette to see her turn a deep shade of red. Apparently, it was, because Marinette giggled.

“So thank you so much, Kagami. Hum… It feels good to see you and hear you,” Marinette said. “I know, I’m being all sappy even though it hasn’t even been a week but…”

“I understand what you mean,” Kagami smiled. “And… It is nice to talk to you and to see you too. I… I like your suit, did you make it for this year? I always imagined you wearing a dress…”

“You know hearty the food here can get during the winter? Imagine that, but with even more generous portions. It’s delicious but the meal lasts for hours and it’s rude to leave the table while there’s still food on your plate, so a dress would be uncomfortable really quick,” Marinette said, only half-jokingly. “Seriously, though, I wanted to try something new for this year, I’ve made Christmas dresses before, it was time for a change! I’m glad you like it!”

Kagami thought she heard someone yell Marinette’s name, but perhaps the audio feed was faulty. Unfortunately, it wasn’t.

“I think they’re waiting for me downstairs…” Marinette winced. “I’ll talk to you soon! Maybe we
“can have another video call, if you want?”

“I would like that very much,” Kagami said precipitately. “Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas!” Marinette replied with a bright smile. “Wait, how do I turn this off? OK, I think I got it, bye! You take care, alright?”

Kagami fell face first on her bed. That wasn’t fair. How did Marinette want her to have a merry Christmas when she was stuck here in Kyoto, with none of her friends available, mum acting like a completely different person when her father was around, and her grandmother trying — and failing — to make things less awkward between all of them. Kagami was a little jealous of Marinette’s easy family life and happiness. Well, that jealousy wasn’t fair either, besides, they could talk more often and not only via text messages, so she should have found new reasons to be cheerful.

Perhaps wearing that shapeless thing did not improve her temper after all. She changed her clothes to something a little more elegant, and listened to a song or two, hoping she would be in a better mood for dinner. Of course her brain found a way to associate each and every lyrics she heard with Marinette.

She was still quite gloomy when she went to join the rest of her family in Ando Tsurugi’s large living room. Back when she was little, she liked that the family mansion was so impossibly vast, it made her feel like a character in a fantasy story of some sorts. The first few times, she had even gotten lost. She would tell her friends in kindergarten about her grandmother and grandfather and how they had an ancient castle of their own, and that description was surprisingly accurate, even years later. Yes, back then, she had meant it in a good way. Things had changed.

Now, she almost hated the place, and how needlessly big it was, especially in the winter. It was not human-sized at all, the corridors were endless, and with only five people and a cat living here for the moment — four when Father would have to go back to work— it felt… No, empty wasn’t the right word, there were trinkets and antiques everywhere. It felt like a museum with too few visitors and a cold-hearted curator who also played the role of a guardian.

The food was nice, as always, she wasn’t sure she could say the same about dinner in itself, however. That table was suited for meetings and great gatherings, not for small and casual family time. They all sat ridiculously far away from one another. Despite that distance between them, Ando Tsurugi’s inquisitive stare was as sharp as ever. And truly, it didn’t need to be that way, everyone had flawless table manners, they followed every single tradition he had imposed on them without a single hitch. Yet Kagami’s grandfather felt the need to control everything and everyone, whenever he could, and he’d try to shape everything so that he would find it suitable.
They did not talk about Kagami’s fencing training, and she did not know whether that was a good thing or not. Not having to endure Ando Tsurugi’s harsh criticism was a good thing. Unfortunately, the man’s silence was of itself very eloquent. They did not talk about anything at all, in fact, Itsuko was always silent whenever her father was around and kept her head low, her husband was equally mute —though that was his standard behaviour— and Kagami herself did not wish to make a faux pas by speaking up without being invited to do so.

As always, it was grandmother Kiyo who tried to make conversation. More often than not, these attempt were successful, no sensitive subject was approached, nothing that would annoy her husband or bore the other people they shared their meal with. She would usually try to include her daughter and granddaughter as often as she could. Perhaps it was because of how gloomy Kagami looked, or it might have been because Kiyo Tsurugi was genuinely curious, but the question she asked to lighten the mood was… Unfortunate, awkward.

“So, Kagami, do you have any boyfriend in Paris you might want to tell us about?”

Kagami felt her stomach sink. Her father was looking at her intently. No, there was no boyfriend in Paris, and there wouldn’t be any boyfriends, ever, in her entire life, because she didn’t like boys that way. That was what she wanted to say. She could feel her mother tense a little, too. She couldn’t exactly say that. As kind as grandmother Kiyo was… She probably wouldn’t react well, and she didn’t want to think about her father and grandfather’s reactions.

“Not yet,” she forced a smile on her lips. She hoped she did not sound too fake. She had to find a way to phrase it that wasn’t a complete lie. “I know Paris is meant to be the city of love, but I have yet to meet a boy good enough for me.” Yes, that was about right. And, for good measure, she added, “fencing is more important”, which seemed to satisfy Ando Tsurugi. That gave him the opportunity to tell everyone about his victory back in 1987 against yet another American fencer, and he looked very happy to do so. Everyone listened to what they had heard all too many times before.

Father was stiff as always, almost apathetic. That suit looked good on him, she had no idea where he had bought it, but it was a nice change from his regular dull clothes. Come to think of it, this was the only thing that made him stand out that night, other than that, he could have been part of the furniture and no one would have noticed. He was still the same stone-faced, taciturn man, and unless Kagami’s memories were faulty, it had gotten worse over the years. Teppei Tsurugi seemed indifferent to his father-in-law’s story, though he still listened to it until its predictable conclusion.

As soon as she could, Kagami excused herself and went to her room for the remainder of the evening. Her grandparents would certainly play shogi, and her parents would require some alone time. She wouldn’t be missed, no one would note her absence. And so, Kagami sent a few texts to
Taneda and Aiko before she went back to the book by Murata, which was quite good. She should have found this day fulfilling, she had done everything she had to.

It was all very simple and she had nothing to be truly unhappy about, or worried about. There had been no Hawk Moth attacks for the last few days which meant Marinette was not in danger, and things just went on as normally as they could here in Kyoto. All she had to do was follow the same routine. Breakfast, homework, working out — sometimes with her mother, mostly alone— and lunch. Then a little time for reading, fencing training with Grandfather, which could last for fifteen minutes when he was in a foul mood, or hours and hours whenever he felt like it. Then a shower, dinner, some reading in her room and going to bed. If the weather was nice enough, she’d maybe go for a long walk after lunchtime.

She liked her Paris routine better, she would even have taken her Tokyo routine over this. Because she had chosen them, at least partly, and she had followed them for her own sake. Here, she did everything in anticipation of her grandfather’s criticism, and she knew it was the same for her mum. So far, the old man hadn’t raised his voice once, which was a good sign, but being perfect in every way — that was to say, doing everything the way he wanted— did not feel rewarding. It was all painfully slow.

Her phone pinged and saved her from reading the same passage over and over again. She had apparently missed several messages, one from Taneda telling her that he could perhaps take a night bus and pay her a visit in the next few days, others from Nino, Adrien and Aiko, which she answered quickly — they were mostly replies to previous texts of hers anyway, not something that would require her to pay attention. She read the most recent text.

**From: Marinette**

**To: Me**

*hey, you still awake? i know it’s past your theoretical bedtime but hey, we never know!*

*it’s OK if you only see that text tomorrow morning, in which case, good morning!*

Was it actually past her theoretical bedtime? She hadn’t noticed. It seemed that everyone had returned to their rooms, and it was indeed 11PM. Kagami was a little tired, sure. Sleepy enough to be in the arms of Morpheus? Not yet. Her finger hovered above the video call icon next to Marinette’s name. Perhaps she should put her earphones on for this one. Did she look pretty enough? She had changed to her pyjamas, but Marinette had already seen her dressed that way. That was… Fine, it would do, besides, it would have been strange for her to be all dressed up on a regular night when she should have been in bed. She touched the icon. Marinette accepted the call only a few seconds later
“Hello again, long time no see,” Kagami said, a twinkle in her eyes as soon as the other girl appeared on her screen. Wait. A twinkle, really? Her eyes never twinkled. The things that girl did to her…Somehow, it did not annoy her all that much.

“I missed you!” Marinette laughed. “Seriously, I think I missed you a little, that meal kept dragging on and my grandpa almost ruined everything so it’s nice to see you.”

Perhaps she could survive these two weeks without being completely down after all. Kagami added one step to her Kyoto routine that night, one her grandfather wouldn’t approve of. She’d try to have that kind of conversation with Marinette every day. And the Parisian girl seemed quite happy to help with that. It didn’t make everything suddenly brighter in Kagami’s life, her performances when duelling Ando Tsurugi did not dramatically improve, or anything of the sort, but it did leave her in a better mood when she went to bed. And as insignificant as that may have seemed, it meant a lot to her.

Because Ando Tsurugi was not one to encourage her, she often left the training room in a grim mood, never angry at him but disappointed in herself. He had that talent for making her feel like a second-class fencer and an idiot simply by being silent. When he opened his mouth, it wasn’t any better, he had outright stated that she owed him to be the best fencer in her generation just like his daughter before her. He was… Ambitious, and apparently keen on perpetuating the family’s prestige. Kagami knew that, and wouldn’t settle for second best. The more she thought of it, however, the less she associated it with defending her family’s honour.

His teachings — though the word was not the right one — certainly showed some results, but it was more strenuous than anything. He made her repeat every single drill without explaining what she had done wrong, and when she’d finally get a hang of the move, he’d only nod and have her do the drill again. Whenever he needed to push her sabre away during their bouts, he would do so with impressive and excessive strength. His parries were merciless, his lunges were forceful. Was he even aware that she was only fifteen and his student? Her mother was a competent teacher, and so was M. D’Argencourt when he bothered teaching at all. Ando Tsurugi, however…

Days and days passed by. Talking about what was going here with someone that would hear her out without taking offense — in other words, no one in this house — was not something Kagami had had the possibility to do before, she’d usually write in a journal and that would be it. She was glad Marinette was here to listen to her and give some advice. How she found the time to spend hours with her even with Hawk Moth’s return, all that homework to do and more and more fashion design projects was beyond Kagami. Not that she was unhappy about it.

She checked the Ladyblog every now and then — they didn’t talk about those matters on the phone, that would be too risky — and was quite stunned when she read the headline one morning. Ladybug’s suit had changed, gone was the skin-tight suit with its polka dots everywhere. Instead of that… Kagami was sure Marinette was quite happy to be rid of the simple bodysuit. The petticoats
were definitely a great addition, the black shoulder pads and turtleneck too. And the thigh high boots (with flat soles, fortunately) looked incredibly good on her. Well, everything looked good on Marinette if you asked Kagami.

Days and days passed by, too slowly, still. Nevertheless, Taneda — whose hair was now a vibrant pink — stayed true to his words and spent an afternoon with her. He had never visited Kyoto before, and showing him the city was the perfect excuse for Kagami to go outside, not for a walk but for a small trip across the city. And she enjoyed going sightseeing. Mum could have tagged along, she could have used a breath of fresh air too. When Kagami suggested she come too, Itsuko Tsurugi’s impassive mask, the perfect image of Ando Tsurugi’s heir, slipped for a second.

Still, she declined the offer and asked her daughter to be there in time for dinner. She barely saw any of her own friends, or anyone at all. When she wasn’t training with her father, she was either helping her mother with the chores, or secluded in her room. Kagami didn’t know what to do about it. Marinette was quite worried to hear that too. Days and days…

The Tsurugis’ New Year celebration was quite a display of money, power and of how many of their old and prestigious friends Kiyo and Ando could cram in their mansion, which was to say a lot. Kagami tried to get along with the few people her age who had been invited. “Tried” being the key word. A few months back, she would have been exactly the same as them, an overworked overachiever with one single goal in mind, being the best at what she did and nothing more than that. She was glad she had avoided going to a cram school here, that was exactly the sort of place her father had come from and it still showed.

It wasn’t that the other kids were mean, simply that they were the type to stay on their own if they could help it, and only socialise when that was absolutely needed. They probably looked down on their classmates and saw everyone as potential competitors. That description was oddly familiar, and by oddly she meant uncomfortably. Marinette seemed to be having a lot of fun at the the party she had been invited too, based on the pictures she sent, but Kagami didn’t like the way that boy — Luka Couffaine? — looked at her. Hawk Moth must have had a busy social life, because there was no akuma attack that night. Adrien informed her that the Agreste New Year Gala had been a success.

All things needed to have an end, even painfully long stays at her grandparents’. As always, grandmother Kiyo was sad to see her daughter and granddaughter leave, while Ando grumbled about how futile going back to France was, when they had everything they needed here. That perpetual frown of his did not leave his face when he drove them to the nearest bus stop — driving all the way to the airport would be too much for him, he had argued. Had he always been this
terrible? Perhaps Kagami had just grown up to notice it at last.

As soon as his car vanished from Itsuko’s field of vision, she visibly loosened her shoulders. It was as though she had ran a marathon while keeping a straight face, until the finish line. She looked exhausted, but also relieved. These holidays had been quite tiring for the two of them. When their plane took off, she was almost smiling, and though Kagami didn’t comment on that, she was glad to see that change. The flight was, as always, long and uneventful. Despite the jet lag, they walked out of the Charles de Gaulle airport feeling more rested than after almost two weeks of sleeping in luxurious beds.

Which didn’t mean Kagami wasn’t sleepy, but she was a little giddy at the idea of being back. It was a fight between the urge to doze off and doing everything that needed to be done while dancing with joy. As soon as they unlocked the door to their flat, Kagami went straight to her room, not caring one bit about the parquet creaking beneath her feet. She unpacked her suitcase, took a shower after a slice of the cake Jérémie and Aelita had left for them, and went straight to bed. She clumsily texted Marinette to tell her she was back. Reading the message the next morning would leave her completely mortified finding out all these typos she had typed, but for now, she didn’t care.

It was good to be home again.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

Christmas! Which is not a big thing for the Tsurugis, probably because of Ando's anti-Americanism. And I thought a good Christmas miracle was Roland not being a terrible person for once. Which doesn't make him good in my books, but he's… Somewhat less awful here, I suppose.

The Tsurugis are really something, uh? The idea of a dynasty of fencers was already introduced in Riposte and I decided to keep it and see what I could do with it. So yeah, Kiyo and Ando Tsurugi and their manor. I mean, there are three captives in this chapter, when you think of it, of course there's Kagami, but also Itsuko and Kiyo. Is there something shady going on between Kagami's father and Gabriel? I guess we'll find out soon!

And I guess that's it for this chapter, not too many references!

If you think of songs Kagami could listen that make her think about Marinette, please submit them to me via my Tumblr, it's right here if you give it a click. I'll answer all the questions you might have as long as they don't spoil what happens in future chapters of En garde and as long as they're not too personal (because I'm not an interesting person).
I'll see you in the next one!

À la semaine prochaine !
It wasn’t often that Kagami felt like lip-syncing to a song outside of her bedroom, and even there, she rarely sang along. Sometimes, she walked to the beat, she may have drummed her fingers against a table once or twice at school. To her, listening to music, no matter how catchy it was, has something she did in silence. So even she surprised herself when she started humming the tune of that catchy Shonen Knife song under her breath. No one around her seemed to mind, and if they did, they didn’t tell her. Nothing could have burst her little bubble. Incredibly enough, she was still in a very good mood when she got out of the métro.

Even she found that being in such high spirits in such a place was odd. Were normal teenagers happy to go back to school? By the looks of it, not nearly as happy as she was. It wasn’t to say that she was beaming at everything and everyone, but for the few hours she had been awake in the last two days — the jet-lag had taken its toll on her— nothing had managed to spoil the joy of the return, and it had been the same for her mum. When she had woken up this morning, she had had the feeling that this day would be a great day for her. The universe had yet to prove her wrong. Today, she’d see her again. The thought alone was enough to make her smile.

There was a small crowd gathered around the lycée Carnot, students happily chatting about their holidays and complaining about their return to school. The doors had been opened. Kagami was right in time as always, which meant that she could probably wait there a little while, and Marinette would show up. That sounded good in theory. The icy wind made her change her mind. Even with her scarf, she’d certainly catch a cold, and with tonight’s fencing class, this wouldn’t do. That would have been the perfect excuse to ask Marinette if she could knit her a new scarf, perhaps a grey one this time, but if she could get a scarf without sneezing in her fencing mask…

The lycée’s corridors were, as always, quite crowded, though there was no rush here, no need to hurry to the next classroom. This peace wouldn’t last for long, but she pushed that last thought away. She met Mme Berthes on her way to M. Dupuis’s classroom, and they had the time for a short chat, before they parted way, Kagami in an even better mood than before. She stopped in front of her classroom’s door. She could hear the sound of conversations inside. There must have been quite a few students there, none of the voices belonged to her friends.

She could do as usual, go straight to her seat, open a book and greet Marinette whenever she arrived. That was the most tempting option, if she had to be honest with herself. Or… Perhaps she could try something a little different this time. It didn’t matter whether Marinette was here to see that, and it wouldn’t take away her pride to change things for once. There was no risk-taking in doing that. Probably. Hopefully. It couldn’t be complicated. She had never done it before, or rather, not since middle school when it was mandatory… But she could do it. That was it, she had made
up her mind, she’d give it a go. If that didn’t work, she’d have at least tried.

“H—” She cleared her throat. “Hey!” she said as she stepped inside the classroom. She hoped she didn’t sound overly cheerful, or overly apprehensive, and also that she had been loud enough. Some of her classmates seemed shocked for a split second, but they soon replied with heys of their own and went back to what they were doing before. Just like when any other student greeted the rest of their classmates when they entered the room.

Was that it? Was that really it? She hadn’t suddenly made friends with anyone, but it hadn’t turned her into a filthy commoner or anything of the sort either, it hadn’t made her forget her pride. She hadn’t even wasted her time. Oh, grandfather would hate to see her do what she had just done. Which meant, that was probably the right thing to do, and one she’d do again. It did feel nice to acknowledge the people with whom she spent about thirty hours a week as such, and not as a boring uniform backdrop.

It felt nice. It wasn’t perfect, she still couldn’t name any of the classmates that were here, and most of them were quite busy chatting with one another, but it felt nice nonetheless. She wouldn’t bother them, she’d try having a real conversation with new people some other day, when it would be more appropriate. She had no idea what she could ask them, they all seemed to have had good holidays, and if they hit her with the same question, she would have to make up an answer. For now, she took her school things out of her bag. She had never been able to focus on her books all that well anyway.

Soon enough, the relatively calm classroom became very noisy. Kagami resisted the temptation of taking her earphones out of her bag too, and so she heard everything, all the very mundane conversations and gossips. She still couldn’t force herself to find it interesting coming from them. Well, she guessed what was important wasn’t the content of these conversations, it must have been that they occurred at all. She hadn’t considered that before. For instance, Maelle and the girl next to her were saying about the exact same thing, that didn’t seem enriching at all. And yet they were quite happy together.

Camille arrived, and Kagami saw it as an opportunity to thank him again for the book he had given her. She had enjoyed it quite a lot, in the end. It had been a nice way to kill time — she didn’t phrase it that way, however. He seemed quite surprised to see her willing talk to him, and the exchange between them was short-lived and a little awkward. She tried using her contracted forms a little more to make it less formal. She wouldn’t be able to make friends with everyone, she knew that, and Camille was a little too dull to her liking. Despite that, it had been a polite discussion, and not that much of a waste of her precious time.
She was about to go back to her seat when Marinette finally arrived, with Alya, Nino, and oddly enough, Chloé Bourgeois who was only mildly annoyed. Or perhaps it was just the perpetual frown on her face that gave that impression. They all looked well, especially Alya who was laughing at Nino’s joke. Kagami’s attention, however, turned to Marinette almost immediately. Marinette whose gaze met hers. And there was her heart pounding faster than it had in weeks. Marinette’s smile made her stomach do a somersault. She ignored the part of her that muttered that all of this was ridiculous.

Kagami joined the small group and greeted everyone, and while Chloé answered with a stiff “hello”, the others were much more cheerful. Everyone had had great holidays, and though Alya complained that she could have used an extra month away from school and M. Ailier, she didn’t seem too serious about that. Chloé left the small group, trying her best to conceal her joy, when Alya started talking about Queen Bee’s latest feats with great passion. A small glance at her wristwatch told Kagami that it was almost time for the beginning of the class. She was about to go back in her seat when she felt Marinette tug on her sleeve.

“What is it?” Kagami said quizzically as she turned around.

She got her answer in a matter of seconds, but not a verbal one. Marinette wrapped her arms around Kagami’s shoulders and pulled her in a hug. She smelled of biscuits, fabric and lilies today. That was intoxicating. Kagami put her arms around Marinette’s waist and tightened the embrace. She could feel herself turn into a puddle with every passing second. Marinette voiced her thoughts almost immediately.

“I missed you…” Marinette mumbled. “Talking to you, even the video calls… It’s not the same as this. I missed you and I missed this too.”

Kagami hummed. She didn’t mind that public demonstration of affection, for once. They could have stayed like that for hours, and when M. Dupuis arrived, they only let go of one another reluctantly. Kagami did her best to ignore the whispers of her classmates and focused on the biology lesson instead. Marinette seemed to pay a lot more attention to the teacher’s explanations than she did, probably because she wasn’t looking at her every other second or so.

She didn’t care about the powerhouse of the cell, she had read all about it before, what she wanted was to walk out of the classroom with Marinette and go somewhere, anywhere, a café, a museum, or perhaps she could take her home. But Marinette was all too absorbed in the lesson, and if the faint smile on her lips was anything to go by, she enjoyed it. Or so Kagami believed. The truth was, Ladybug had become a better at stealthier, an ability Marinette had kept. She could easily tiptoe without making parquet floors crack, or steal glances at the girl sitting next to her without her noticing, while still taking notes.
Right when the bell rung, the lycée became like a boiling sea. Corridors were filled to the brim with students hurrying to their next classes. For Kagami, it would be ancient Greek, but she barely made it in time. Staying a little longer just to chat with Marinette may not have been the best idea. Mme Baillit too was late, and not in a mood for teaching, though she did anyway, halfheartedly. Marjane was more enthusiastic than ever, probably because they were studying Sophocles and her play would be soon, and she made the lesson a little livelier. Her theatre company had organised open rehearsals which had been quite successful. She definitely knew her stuff.

That was a stark contrast with German. That class was barely tolerable. Sure, Kagami could say hello to her classmates, but asking her to not roll her eyes whenever a student butchered the grammar and pronunciation would have been torture. Seriously, was saying “Gesamtkunstwerk” this difficult? As she found out when she tried to say it herself, yes. Still, it didn’t excuse the rest of these mistakes. Herr Schneider was patient with them, perhaps a little too patient. Nevertheless, that hour passed quickly too.

And then it was time for that rush to the tram. Kagami swallowed her sandwiches on the way to the station, and was lucky to not find herself pressed against the window. The ride was tolerable, if a little uneventful. If she had to guess why she didn’t see Marinette, there was a simple explanation behind that. She had probably missed this tram, either because she was late or for Ladybug-related reasons, she supposed. The latter seemed the most likely. Whatever it was, she hoped it wasn’t too dangerous. Ladybug and non-dangerous situations? Who was she kidding? But she’d stay optimistic about today.

Alya was quite worried, and Nino nowhere to be found. In fact, he missed PE altogether. They changed to their sports clothes with still no news from Marinette’s whereabouts, even the most active Ladybug forums were completely silent. There were no noises from a terrible battle raging outside either. Perhaps she had just missed that tram after all. But when Marinette arrived at last, she was out of breath and concern was written all over her face. She didn’t seem hurt — Ladybug was never hurt, after all — and that reassured Kagami. Marinette took a moment to talk to Alya and Kagami just before M. Ailier blew his whistle, alongside every other PE teachers.

“The Fox Miraculous is missing,” she whispered. “Wherever that akumatised burglar hid it, he wouldn’t tell, but it’s gone… The other ones are safe and so is the Guardian, Carapace is staying with him to be sure everything is alright but…”

Arsène de la Cambriole hadn’t been all that hard to defeat, definitely not a spectacular opponent. In fact Marinette suspected Hawk Moth hadn’t intended for him to face her and the other heroes at all. He could only detect specific objects, in fact it was the only thing he could see through his enchanted blindfold. Whatever his mission was, he had fulfilled it by the time she had arrived. No harm had been done to the Guardian, and Kagami was relieved to hear that. Still, when she’d pay
him a visit a few days later, she would find the old man a little less serene than the usual. The theft of such a dangerous artefact worried him, and rightfully so. The disappearance of the Fox meant a potential ally for Hawk Moth. Alya looked uneasy.

“Alright, kiddos, let’s warm up, it’s pretty chilly outside so you’ll need it. Let’s stretch, c’mon, move it, move it, there’s no need to look down, Kubdel, cheer up!” M. Ailier said energetically. “And once we’re done, let’s stick to what we usually do, new year resolutions and all. By which I mean, you’ll run a lap or two!”

It seemed the other PE teachers had had the same idea, and soon the stadium was bustling with sweaty teenagers exercising. This wasn’t all that different from Kagami’s workout routine, in terms of efforts. And unlike some, she hadn’t stopped doing sport during the holidays. She ran next to Marinette, who seemed to be holding back a little. Kagami didn’t know whether she should have felt flattered that the other girl wanted to run with her, or a little frustrated with the fact that Marinette could out-speed her at any time if she so wished.

And then it was time for them to work in teams. M. Ailier wanted them to try relay race even though that wouldn’t play a significant role in their final mark. Kagami supposed that was part of the warm-up too, perhaps a way to make it more enjoyable, if one could call running in the cold “enjoyable” at all. Alix and Kim joined Marinette and Kagami, though they were mostly trying to outrun each other rather than work together. Well, at least, they were fun to watch. From the corner of her eye, Kagami could see a red-haired girl chatting with her coach. Marinette groaned a little as she eyed her disapprovingly.

“Am I supposed to know her?” Kagami asked.

“That’s Lila Rossi,” Marinette told her, wrinkling her nose. “If she ever tells you that she’s with us in school, don’t trust her, that’s a lie. In fact, almost everything she says is a lie. She really should get some help but I guess her parents have given up at this point, or they just don’t care… And I think she’s coming our way…”

Of course Marinette had been right, Lila joined them with a bright smile on her lips. She walked a little funny. There was a certain something to her, she had an aura that would make anyone want to believe her no matter what she said. She was great at playing whatever role suited her most, and given the opportunity, she would make a terrific actress. But even without Marinette’s warning, Kagami would have been able to see through Lila’s act. She had seen many fencers limp out of the fencing piste. Lila would have been able to fool most people, including her PE teacher. Not Kagami. That girl put too much weight on her supposedly wounded foot.
“Why hello, Marinette, and… You must be Kagami! Adrien told me everything about you,” Lila smiled. “You know, we talk a lot…” She seemed to genuinely believe in what she said.

“Hello, Lila,” Marinette replied stiffly. “Aren’t the rest of your classmates over here? I think you should join them.”

“Well, my ankle hurts so I thought Mme Ramier allowed me to sit on a bench for a little while,” Lila said, wincing a little for good measure. “It’s a shame, I really enjoy middle-distance running, I have that competition soon.” She sighed, and added in Italian, “what a tragedy, really”.

“Very tragic I am sure,” Kagami replied. Her Italian was a little rusty, but it had worked as she had expected, Lila was unsettled.

“So, Marinette, could you please give me some water? My ankle really hurts and my throat is dry,” Lila said simply.

Even though Kagami knew nothing about that girl, she knew that she had just sprouted one big obvious lie. It wasn’t that Lila was out of shape, in fact an untrained eye would have believed her. Simply, she was definitely not built like a middle-distance runner, no matter what she said. Her running shoes were brand new, and the few times Kagami had seen her run, she always seemed out of breath. Then again, Lila seemed to believe every word she said. Kagami could see how she had convinced her PE teacher to allow her to rest her legs, still. Calling her out wouldn’t work. Still Kagami wanted her gone. So, she handed that lying liar her flask of water, let her take a sip and took the flask right back.

“We need to go now, do take care of yourself,” Kagami said. “It certainly looks like you have pushed yourself a little too far. I hope you get better!” Lila must have seen that glint in her eyes, because her perpetual smile slipped off her face. As they got away from Lila, Marinette thanked Kagami for saving her from a lengthy and unpleasant conversation. It seemed that she didn’t mean it as a joke. If she had met Lila earlier, Kagami was almost sure things would have gone terribly between them. That encounter didn’t ruin Kagami’s mood, but she silently wished Lila would catch a cold staying like this doing absolutely nothing but fake pain every so often.

M. Ailier seemed keen on making them suffer today, or as he called it, “making them work on their stamina”. Alya, who usually wasn’t one to take PE very seriously, spared no effort this time. Whatever newfound energy she had, it didn’t falter. She didn’t look tired when they walked out of the locker rooms an hour and a half later, a far cry from the girl who would complain loudly as soon as the teacher was away. What had sparked the flame that danced in her eyes, Kagami didn’t know. Judging from her past articles on Rena Rouge, she guessed Alya must have known her
Hawk Moth had been kind enough to schedule his akuma attack of the day this morning, but with the Fox Miraculous gone, Marinette remained on her guard, and Kagami found herself paying a lot more attention to her surroundings than before. They found free seats in the tram, and kept on the lookout for anything looking like a butterfly. Until Marinette checked her phone and muffled a small scream. Kagami almost jumped in her seat. Where was the thing? Did Ladybug usually scream like that when she spotted an akuma? That hadn’t been a cry of fear, however.

“They want to have an interview with me again!” Marinette said excitedly. “Manladrineaut, that is! Apparently they saw my costumes for Marjane’s play, and their former trainee has just resigned… So they want to know if I’m free for lunch the day after tomorrow!”

“Congratulations, girl!” Alya squealed and got up from her seat to give her best friend a bear hug. “I’m so happy for you! Seriously, you deserved it!”

“I know they will hire you,” Kagami said frankly when Alya finally let go of Marinette. “You’re too great a talent for them to ignore. And if they can’t see what I see in your work, they are idiots.”

Marinette visibly blushed at that. “I don’t want to jinx it, but yeah, I think I can nail it. It’s a bit sudden but I’ll take the chance!”

Their history class was uneventful, unless Mme Vidal already picking a date for their next test counted (it didn’t, she did that sort of thing all the time). The syllabus didn’t do the subject of today’s class justice. How could anyone possibly expect a teacher to cover the Middle Ages in so little time, while only focusing on France was beyond Kagami, but Mme Vidal tried her best anyway. It was a shame that they had so little time, because for once, she didn’t stick all too closely to the textbook, and sounded passionate about this topic. It forced her students to concentrate a little more. Not that they seemed to mind.

Nino was late, which was unusual for him. Though he hadn’t ran for about two hours in the cold, he looked even more tired than Marinette, Alya and Kagami, and not nearly as happy as he had been this morning. That expression of gravity on his face didn’t suit him, or any person their age. He whispered something in Marinette’s ear, and she nodded. Whatever it was they were talking about, Kagami wasn’t supposed to know, and so she didn’t try to eavesdrop. That would have been pointless. Marinette would tell her later, if she wished to.
Kagami genuinely wondered if she was the only constantly cheerful person in her circle of friends today. Alya was grim, Nino too, and though Marinette did her best not to show it, she was worried. Adrien didn’t look any better when he greeted her, and even M. D’Argencourt’s overenthusiastic speech for the new year did little to cheer him up. Not that his unease was obvious, to the least-observant people he was still very much his regular model self with his model smile and his model mannerisms. Which was exactly what was wrong. Did they somehow all know Master Fu? The thought made her head ache, and she stopped thinking about it immediately.

Perhaps she wouldn’t be so constantly cheerful today after all. The fencing master had decided she’d train with Éloi again. Did she have the patience to teach him in great detail? No, of course no. Would she just have him do things repeatedly until he got them right, like her grandfather had done with her, like she had done with him before? Also no. She wouldn’t be as dedicated to helping him as she’d be with Marinette, but she could try to make the next hours more profitable for the both of them.

“Your sword arm, I would not make it this stiff if I were you,” Kagami suggested carefully. “You will end up with a tendinitis if you keep it that way, so perhaps…”

He listened. He actually listened. Not that he followed her advice perfectly, Éloi was one of M. D’Argencourt’s least proficient fencers after all, and even with Kagami telling him what he could do to improve, it would require quite some work for them to duel with a single chance of victory for Éloi. At least, he didn’t get on Kagami’s nerves nearly as often as he usually did. Telling him what to do instead of playing a guessing game he lost every time was quite challenging in itself: she had to watch her tone and make sure she didn’t sound too bored, and she didn’t want to do all the work for him, he needed to work on his own too. But he also needed guidance.

She supposed Éloi viewed the sport as a hobby before anything else, which meant he wouldn’t push himself too hard if he didn’t wish to. Perhaps she could understand the fencing master’s choice. She disliked it, but it made sense. It was some sorts of teaching experience with a reluctant and less capable fencer, it was meant to force her to put herself in Éloi’s shoes, to observe his mistakes more closely. She could use that for other bouts against worthier opponents too. By the end of the first half-hour of training, Éloi didn’t look as upset as he’d often be and Kagami didn’t feel like dragging him out of the gymnasium.

She was much happier when M. D’Argencourt announced it was time for a small tournament between his students right here and now. Well, a rather short tournament, with only five touches required to win the bout. It was all she could have hoped for: he never pushed his students too hard on Mondays, so replacing some more theoretical learning — which would have consisted in things she had already seen with her grandfather — with something more practical was always good, and a nice way to start the year. The world grew darker and smaller around her. Time for her to shine.
The first bouts weren’t all that difficult, or perhaps Ando Tsurugi had been too merciless an opponent who made about everyone but his daughter look harmless in comparison. Not difficult, but not boringly easy either. She avoided having to duel Éloi, who lost his first match anyway, and went to face other fencers instead. It was a good new year’s present. Though she could tell all of her opponents shared the same instructor, she was surprised to find small things that set them apart. Which did not help them win against her, but it was nice to face someone who didn’t fence like her grandfather.

Vincent put up a good performance against her, his lunges were getting very precise, and though his footwork could still be a little sloppy, it was far less noticeable than before. He had accepted the French Federation of Fencing’s invitation, he had trained with other young talents, and it showed. Kagami was sure she’d see him in international competitions in a few years. If she was lucky, she’d be one of his contenders. That was a far cry from the prat she had completely crushed back in June, and she meant that it a good way. He was no sore loser too.

Of course, her final bout was against Adrien. All these duels had him cheered up, and when they shook hands, she could tell he was here to have fun and challenge himself. She’d make the encounter enjoyable, then. Which meant, not using the techniques her grandfather had taught her. They were devilishly efficient but not meant to make the bout pleasant. As soon as M. D’Argencourt spoke the words, Kagami feinted and attacked, Adrien parried. Kagami sidestepped his riposte and scored the first touch.

Kagami let Adrien attack. She had to admit, she had forgotten how fast he could be. Instinctively, she parried, and it was a good call. She flicked her wrist just in time for her blade to press against his forearm. He was the one to score the touch after this one. Had his timing been a little off, he would have failed to dodge Kagami’s cut over aimed at his head. The tip of his sabre connected with her lamé. Despite that, Kagami won the bout fair and square, scoring three touches in a row without making use of her grandfather’s techniques once. Adrien’s risk taking would have paid off if he were some sort of superhuman being. He look quite happy nevertheless. But he also looked like he had something he wanted to tell her.

“Hey, I know it’s a silly thing to ask of you but could you translate a thing or two for me? In Japanese,” he explained. “I’ll send you the picture but there was this huge wooden box that was delivered to my… Well, manor, and I don’t think I was supposed to see it.”

“Of course!” Kagami replied. That sounded quite a bit like a cloak and dagger story and she liked it. No, she wouldn’t consider a darker option, even though it was Gabriel Agreste they were talking about. “I’ll see you tomorrow? Library with Marjane, if that hasn’t changed? See you then, then!”
Mum had already fixed dinner, Kagami would only need to reheat what was in the pan. That let her plenty of time to play the cello. She had missed it, two weeks without touching her instruments were two weeks too many, it took her some time to not butcher Purcell. She glanced at her phone. Dinnertime at the Dupain-Chengs should be over by now. Perhaps she could show Marinette her talents as a cellist? Talent was a big word… But she might like it?

“Hey! I’m sort of rehearsing for that interview, but we can talk if you want! How was fencing?” Marinette said enthusiastically. She was in her pyjamas when she answered Kagami’s video call, with a notebook in her hand.

“Fencing was fine, we had that small competition,” Kagami began.

“And you won,” Marinette finished her sentence for her. “Were you planning on serenading me with your cello tonight?”

“Perhaps,” Kagami answered, her tone a mix of boldness and embarrassment. “I hope you like baroque music!”

“I’m all ears!” Marinette said. “I’ll be happy to hear your music while I’m working!”

And so, Kagami took her cello and started her impromptu concert with Purcell’s Rondeau, continued with sonatas she knew well enough. This was fun, if a little Though Marinette was mostly focused on whatever she was writing in that notebook, she sometimes turned to her phone to watch Kagami play, each time with admiration in her eyes. This went on for some time, how long, they couldn’t tell. Kagami only stopped when her fingers started feeling too painful, and Marinette immediately clapped. And someone else too. She hadn’t heard her mum unlock the door and come inside, yet here she was, looking very proud of her.

“I’ve known you for a little more than six months and you manage to amaze me almost every single day,” Marinette said lovingly. “You’re a great musician… Oh hi Mme Tsurugi!”

Itsuko Tsurugi was behind her daughter, and replied to Marinette’s salutation with a small wave of her own. “I am sorry to cut this conversation short, but dinner is ready! Oh, and you are still very much welcome to come here whenever you wish to, Marinette!”

“Thank you! Well, I guess that’s a goodbye for now… Bon appétit! Kagami, I’ll talk to you later,” Marinette said, and with a last smile, she ended the call.
Kagami wasn’t even mad at her mother. Dinner was, as always, delicious, and both women were in a very good mood. Her entry in her Paris journal was concise. It had been a great day for her, but a tiring one too, though not in a disagreeable way. She didn’t find the energy to read. That night, she fell asleep even happier than when she had gotten out of bed.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

Not very many references in this chapter but still! Shonen Knife is a very real Japanese garage rock band, and a good one! Think the Ramones, but Japanese. And all women.

Arsène de la Cambriole is a mix of Edgar de la Cambriole (the French name of Lupin the Third) and Arsène Lupin (Lupin’s ancestor). The Castle of Cagliostro is probably the best entry point into the franchise, plus it was Hayao Miyazaki’s debut as a film director!

Some character development! Some old characters are reintroduced! And what is that mysterious box for, who sent it? Will these two idiots finally get together? (yes they will, I promise) Perhaps you’ll find out in the next chapter, next week!

In the meantime, you can follow me on Tumblr (it's here) if you want to follow what I do/watch/write and see previews of the incoming chapters! Ask me stuff too, that’s what my Tumblr is for!

Je vous reverrai pour le prochain chapitre, à très vite tout le monde ! Je suis impatiente de vous dévoiler la suite.
“We will give you an official call in a few days,” the portly man said with a twinkle in his eyes, “or perhaps an email, just the time to talk with Mme Manladrineaut and the rest of the board, but I think it’s safe to say you’ll be our new trainee, I am confident of that! If you ever meet your predecessor, don’t tell her I told you that, but she was our second choice, you were originally our first, until… Well, I am glad this interview has gone well!”

“Thank you very much for your time, M. Tamarre,” Marinette tried not too sound overly excited, even though all she wanted to do was to stand up and do a victory dance in the middle of the restaurant. “It will be an honour for me to work for your fashion house. I promise I won’t disappoint!”

“It will be our pleasure,” M. Tamarre laughed. The conversation lulled, until he looked at her with a serious expression on his face. Was he about to ask her a terribly hard question to make up his mind about her? Marinette readied herself.

“Do you want me to order a coffee for you?” M. Tamarre said. “I am not a fan myself, but…”

“No thank you,” Marinette replied. “Are you more of a tea person?”

M. Tamarre nodded and they chatted aimlessly for a little while. Marinette had been quite surprised to find that he was here in person. Manladrineaut wasn’t the biggest company there was, but Corentin Tamarre was a well-known creative director in the milieu. He had seen the rehearsal for Marjane’s play — his nephew was part of the company and had gushed about the costumes — which had piqued his curiosity. And so here they were. He wasn’t all that intimidating or aggressive like some other fashion designers she knew, instead, he wanted to make this lunch enjoyable for the both of them.

The restaurant he had chosen for this interview was absurdly chic, she was quite sure she had spotted that one famous actress, she had her name on the tip of her tongue. Marinette was happy she had worn one of her more elegant set of clothes today. She had done well rehearsing her table manners too, using the right spoons at the right time so that she wouldn’t look ridiculous and out of place. The waitress came with the bill, which M. Tamarre footed unblinkingly, with a small tip for the waitress. He was a regular there, the way he asked the waitress to sent his compliments to Fabien — the chef’s name, they were apparently good friends — told her that much.
They finally parted ways. Marinette waited until M. Tamarre’s silhouette disappeared in the crowd to pump her fist in the air. She had made it, she’d be the youngest trainee at Jeanette Manladrineaut’s since its creation. She had no idea what they’d have her do, but for now she didn’t think about that. She was going to celebrate tonight. She sent a million texts with too many exclamation marks to everyone she knew, and she all but danced her way to school. Never mind the cold weather or that exhibition her class had to go to even though she wasn’t interested in at all, she was one step closer to her dream. She felt like singing and like hugging everyone.

Yes, it was almost like a dream, except she knew that pinching herself or asking Tikki to bite her wouldn’t wake her up. This was real, it had really happened, she’d make her first real step in the professional world of fashion design next week. She couldn’t believe it. Despite her being in the mood to dance, she was a little stunned too. And everyone was here to congratulate her, her mum phoned her and Marinette was almost sure she had cried tears of joy, later that day it would be her dad’s turn to do the same. Marinette was surprised she hadn’t cried herself. She was happier than when M. Agreste had noticed her hat all that time ago.

Nino had a triumphant “I knew it” expression written all over his face, Kim whooped and gave her five. Most of her classmates hadn’t known about that interview, but they all congratulated her nevertheless. Alya’s hug was almost rib-cracking but not uncomfortable, far from it. She was kind enough to let go of Marinette when their economics (and sometimes sociology) teacher, M. Granvillet called her name while M. Rafroidit nodded absentmindedly. They’d be going to the Grand Palais to see the press drawings of one of her least favourite illustrators, Plonthu, and their presence would count as a mark. Perhaps they’d have a small test, or something similar to it. Well, any excuse to not sit in a chair for hours was a good one, she’d give them that.

“Tsurugi, Kagami?” M. Granvillet called. There was no answer. Kagami wasn’t there yet. She’d had lunch with Nino and Alya at Nino’s house, Chris hadn’t been to much of a bother for once, and everything had went quite well according to Alya. But she had left Nino’s flat shortly before them and hadn’t told him where she was going. He had assumed she wanted to be there in advance, yet she wasn’t there. Which was odd, if there was one person in the class unlikely to be late, ever, it was Kagami.

“Tsurugi, Kagami?” M. Granvillet repeated. “Has anyone seen her?” Even he looked surprised. And still no answer, until…

“Here! Sorry I am late,” a very out of breath Kagami said. She joined Alya, Marinette and Nino with a satisfied smile on her lips.

“Is everything alright?” Marinette asked worriedly. Kagami nodded and added nothing to that.
M. Granvillet was done calling their names, and so, the class started moving down Boulevard de Wagram. It would take quite some time to get there, and it was all the headteacher’s fault. He had deemed the métro “too big a risk for everyone’s safety” (which probably meant he’d get in even more trouble if anything happened to his students while underground) which forced everyone to walk all the way to the Grand Palais. And so they’d taken the most touristic route possible. When they turned to avenue des Champs Élysées, Marinette glanced at Kagami, who looked still look quite satisfied with herself.

“What kept you so busy that you almost came late?” she couldn’t help but ask.

“This is a secret. You will see tonight,” Kagami said enigmatically. And she added in a softer tone, “I did not congratulate you for your internship yet, did I? Well, congratulations! Knowing that you will finally get the recognition you’ve worked for… It makes me happy.”

“It makes me happy that you think that,” Marinette said in a low voice. They slowed down their pace until they got dangerously close to the English teacher who accompanied them for the visit.

“We might want to walk a little faster if you do not want to be stuck with M. Raffroidit,” Kagami shuddered, and they joined Nino and Alya as quickly as they could. It wasn’t that M. Raffroidit was a terrible person per se. Simply, he insisted on speaking English — or rather, his French-sounding version of the language — outside of the classroom even though he was very much French. Which made even the smallest things awkward with everyone. And if they could avoid having to listen to his rambling about Plonthu’s artistry in broken English, they’d gladly take the chance.

They finally arrived in front of the Grand Palais, which didn’t seem very busy. M. Granvillet had them stop in front of every single drawing to explain what made it so great and provocative in its time. In other words, there wasn’t a lot to say, the cartoonist had certainly been interesting during the first few years of his career. He should have stopped drawing then, because everything that had followed was the most consensual and cliché collection of drawings Marinette had ever seen. The provocativeness was exactly the kind of jokes Roland Dupain would have made had he wished to hurt everyone around the table at Christmas. M. Granvillet called it all very astute, though even he looked uneasy when saying that. Some drawings… Had not aged well. At all.

Some of their classmates apparently liked Plonthu’s work very much, and Marinette could see why, even though she didn’t share their mind. After all it was fairly accessible and presented things in an eye-catching way. M. Raffroidit laughed at almost every single cartoon, and tried to tell every single student too close to him what he thought of it. “Eet iz not beecauz you are not in school zat you don’t have to speek Inglish!” he’d add almost every time. Kagami wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that he had only travelled abroad and visited English-speaking countries once or
Marinette had taken out her sketchbook. She wasn’t drawing anything related to the exhibition, there was nothing she wanted to copy here. Instead, she was drawing the building. The Grand Palais had been her battlefield more than once, paradoxically it made her like the place even more. The complex iron structure was hard to sketch accurately, her sense of perspective was good but she was a fashion designer, not a background artist. And soon enough, she gave up on drawing the building and went back to imagining new clothes. Something in the spirit of Manladrineaut’s designs. She quickly became engrossed in her sketch.

Kagami was kind enough to leave her be, having people look over her shoulder made her nervous and it would be something she’d have to learn how to get over during the internship. from the corner of her eye, Marinette could see her look at each cartoon with an impression that went from puzzled to bored to annoyed very quickly. Alya was just annoyed, and Nino was mostly bored. Perhaps they weren’t the right generation to enjoy this, they hadn’t grown up with Plonthu’s drawings.

“Now, students, I’m going to give you a sheet which you’ll hand me back at the end of the visit,” M. Granvillet said. “I want you to choose a cartoon, explain its context of creation and Plonthu’s stance on the matter. No working in groups, no copying from Wikipedia, I want you to do it on your own!”

That didn’t sound unbearable, a little annoying perhaps but perfectly doable. Marinette made sure to not pick the same drawing as her friends, and found an easy one about the 2005 riots. She filled the sheet in no time. Truly, all she needed to get a decent mark was to know how to read and copy some information, and it would be a child’s play. She didn’t have to state what she thought of Plonthu’s work, otherwise it would have taken a lot more than a single sheet. And her opinion was not something a teacher could mark. She didn’t enjoy the exercise, and Kagami didn’t seem to find it interesting either. Perhaps they could complain about it together once they’d be completely done with it.

They never got to do that. Because the noise in the distance, that all too familiar noise of heavy thuds that screamed “giant akuma” was growing louder. This was not good. She and Kagami exchanged a look. She’d let the teachers handle the panic, they’d been trained to take the students into safety in this kind of situation… Right? M. Rafroidit started shaking and motioning at what was going on outside. M. Granvillet was still picking up the exercise sheets. Oh, she could suddenly understand all too well why the headteacher wanted to avoid as much trouble as he possibly could. Well, they couldn’t possibly notice some of their students going missing, now, could they? That would be giving them more credit than they deserved.
Kagami too seemed quite worried. She covered for Marinette as she discretely snuck out of the Grand Palais, soon joined by Nino. They hid just in time so that Chloé wouldn’t spot them when she’d use the same exit they had. Ladybug waited for a little while until she showed up. She had guessed right, giant akuma it was, and one she had faced before. The Brutalist was back, but this time she wasn’t trying to destroy Paris. Why was she there at all? It didn’t matter, defeating her would be easy, they knew her weaknesses all too well. So of course, things became more complicated in a matter of seconds.

There were two smaller shapes walking next to the Brutalist, casually, seemingly unfazed by the chaos around them. Ladybug had the feeling that whoever they were, they were enjoying themselves. Or perhaps it wasn’t the case, the way the lanky man with the glasses walked was… Off, too mechanical. And the shorter one with the muddy overalls and the welder looked more frightened than happy. He had every reason to feel that way with the giant just above his head. Neither of them seemed to have been transformed, so why were they here at all? Were they Hawk Moth’s hostages? Carapace looked intrigued.

“I can sense Nooroo and… I don’t know,” he frowned. “Their signatures are blurred… I don’t know, I really don’t know… Two others? We’re going to need Plagg’s help, everyone’s help. I’m going to call them right now.”

The Brutalist came to a halt right in front of the Grand Palais and stayed there, completely still. The taller man looked like he was being tortured, though there was no one to inflict such pain on him. The shorter one seemed to be in a trance, the outlines of a butterfly shining in front of his face. Wait… Could Hawk Moth produce two akumas at the same time? Ladybug had the feeling she was being watched from above, and indeed there was a silhouette standing on a rooftop, looming above them in the distance. The taller man opened his mouth and the voice that came out of it was unsettling.

“Heroes,” a woman’s voice said, and the word sounded like an insult, “you will surrender your Miraculouses to me immediately and I promise no one will get hurt.”

“Oh, and who are you to make threats?” Queen Bee yelled back.

The tall man had gone limp, and it was a wonder he was still standing. The shape above them jumped from the roof she was standing on, and landed right in front of Ladybug without a sound. She was one of them, yet there was something deeply unsettling about the way her skin had turned blueish… And her eyes… She was an adult, much taller than them, not playing around in skintight bodysuits like they had in the beginning. An odd piece of armour was wrapped around her chest, shielding what was without a doubt the Peafowl Brooch. She oozed with power. She walked nonchalantly, the click of her heels were the only sound they could hear. She stopped right in front
of Queen Bee and the smile that formed on her face was chilling.

“Who am I?” the woman scoffed. “Why, I am Mayura. And this is my Amok,” she motioned at the lanky man writhing in pain. “I wonder what we will call it… Let’s say, Obscuro! Well, I’ll leave you be for a little while and pick up your Miraculouses when you’ll be kind enough to give them to me! In the meantime, have fun! Oh, and look, Obscuro even brought a friend! I will be watching on the sidelines!”

With that, she leapt away from Queen Bee before Ladybug or Carapace could block her way, back to where she had been standing before. A shape shone briefly in front of her face, perhaps the shape of glasses? But they couldn’t see clearly. The man Mayura had dubbed Obscuro was curled on himself and with a wail, his form started to shift. That… Certainly wasn’t pretty to watch. And the other man was transforming before their eyes, while the Brutalist remained decidedly immobile. Somehow, it made her even more intimidating than all these months ago. Had their teachers managed to gather the rest of the class and find shelter somewhere else? They couldn’t tell. Ladybug fell back with Queen Bee and Carapace on her heel.

“Alright, I’ll take care of the Brutalist,” Ladybug said. “In the meantime, you two hold back these other guys, if I’m quick enough we won’t even have to deal with them!”

“I beg to disagree,” Mayura’s voice carried to them.

And all hell broke loose.

It all happened so fast Ladybug could barely make sense of it. In the blink of an eye, a gust of wind sent her, Carapace and Queen Bee flying through the door of the Grand Palais. She got up again and looked around her frantically. Of course everyone was still there. This wasn’t good at all, this was going to be a lot harder than she had suspected. And if the Brutalist smashed the structure with all of them trapped here… A deep growl and the sound of flames made her snap out of it. The growl had to be Obscuro, and she could make out his shape outside. He looked barely human.

“You’re not getting out of here!” A new voice called, harsh and grating. “I, Hephaestus, will make sure of that! Hawk Moth will reward me handsomely if I give him your Miraculous, Ladybug. You’re stuck here with me!”

And he was right. They simply couldn’t get out, all the exits had been welded shut. The self-fashioned Hephaestus still had his overalls, but what caught Ladybug’s eyes immediately was the now statuesque man’s hands, burning bright. Right, they’d have to fight him to get out of here, of course. With bystanders stuck with them. All of that with the threat that was the Brutalist’s shadow
looming over them… Wait, she couldn’t see the Brutalist’s shadow. Or anything. Was it just her or it was getting dark in here? In the middle of the afternoon? Right. Obscuro. How fitting.

As the Grand Palais grew darker and darker, Hephaestus sunk his hands in the ground, forming a crucible of some sorts. What was he doing? Queen Bee didn’t ask herself the question and ran towards him with a war cry, her stinger out. She didn’t make it to him, something struck her in the stomach, stopping her dead in her tracks. Queen Bee yelled. Carapace ran to check on her immediately. Ladybug’s mind raced. The Peacock wasn’t meant to be useable, back in November, Duusuu had been in great pain. What had changed?

“Whoever it was, they tried to steal my Miraculous,” Queen Bee said.

Ladybug shuddered. There was someone else here, someone powerful enough to hurt them. She sensed it, there was someone else like them in the dark. And Hephaestus kept on digging, effectively hiding his hands from their sight. Choosing to seclude them here was smart, a lot smarter than anything Hawk Moth had ever come up with in more than a year of trying to take her Miraculous. The exhibition’s white walls formed a maze around them

Carapace took out his shield, but its glow was weaker than it usually was. A student tried to use their telephone as a flashlight, but to no avail. Great. Almost no visibility at all, Mayura’s monster and the Brutalist outside, and the three of them stuck inside the Grand Palais in near obscurity with only an akuma as a source of light, and an invisible enemy. None of them had night vision, of course. It had been perfectly calculated. Ladybug’s eyes slowly got used to the darkness, and she listened closely. Students were scared, though none of the frightened voices belonged to Alya or Kagami. And there was the sound of footsteps getting closer to her. She readied herself for a kick. Not yet… Just one more second… She could vaguely see the shape… Now!

But her foot didn’t hit anything, that silhouette that had been in front of her had disappeared, and someone shoved her to the ground. Queen Bee tried to attack Hephaestus again, but if her grunts were anything to go by, it hadn’t worked at all. Carapace stayed motionless and sat cross-legged on the floor. The Grand Palais was dead silent if not for the faint sound of flames and the akuma humming to himself. And the faint growling of Obscuro outside. A bone-chilling silence. Until Ladybug’s yo-yo rang. Her partner had a poor sense of timing when it came to calling her in the middle of that.

“Chat Noir?” Ladybug said. “Yes, we’re stuck inside. What do you mean you mean, there’s just the peafowl lady and her monster? You can’t see the Brutalist? I… I don’t know, Chat. Bring Viperion and Tiger Eye with… Oh, they’re on their way? Perf— Ah! Sorry, just have to… Dodge a couple of blows here… I’ll see you soon!”

Her roundabout kick didn’t meet its intended target, she could feel that presence getting away from
her. Queen Bee was up again and she was now trying to shatter the Grand Palais’s glass windows but to no avail. Hephaestus threw what looked like a spear at her, the metal burning white. Queen Bee dodged, the spear fell to the ground unceremoniously. That unlikely source of light wasn’t bright enough, and the sound of footsteps was getting closer to Carapace, who didn’t seem to notice. If she tried to catch that unknown enemy with her yo-yo, Ladybug would certainly hit someone else instead. They were just toying with her and her friends, trying to exhaust her so that they could take her Miraculous. They were doing a fine job at it.

Carapace rose to his feet at blinding speed, and caught his assailant’s wrist a mere second before a first connected with his face. The weak glow of his shield barely produced enough light for Ladybug to see the attacker, but she didn’t have to, she knew who it was. The woman tried to get her hand out of Carapace’s grip. He visibly struggled. Superhuman strength, right, that came with the suit. Carapace barely had the upper hand, he took a few hits before he managed to wrestle her against one of the iron pillars.

“I’d like to say I’m happy to see you’re well, Trixx, but I’m not,” he said bitterly, and this wasn’t just Nino speaking. “We said you weren’t to transform with anyone until we decided what to make of you, have you forgotten your promise? Or was that one of your lies again?”

“The name,” the woman — or was it a girl? — roared, “is Volpina!” and with that, she swept Carapace’s right leg with her foot in a motion that made him fall to the ground immediately. Carapace threw his shield but it didn’t hit her, instead it toppled several of the exhibition’s whitewalls.

Ladybug’s mind was racing, and she couldn’t help but see the irony in Lila Rossi finally getting the Fox Miraculous from Hawk Moth, she was no longer an imitation empowered by him but the original. She stayed completely still, waiting for her new opponent to strike. This was the first time she fought another Miraculous wielder in a face-to-face encounter, and Volpina seemed to master her powers with ease. She barely dodged the hand that tried to snatch her earrings, and this time, she finally managed to land a hit on the other girl’s face that sent her rolling to the ground. Hawk Moth couldn’t possibly create two akumas at the same time, not like that. Did that mean…

“I suppose the Brutalist was an illusion to trap us in here?” Ladybug said. “Impressive, you must be proud of your little trick, I know I fell for it!”

How did she even see in the dark? Did foxes have night vision? She patiently waited for Voplina’s next attack but it didn’t come. She was toying with them again. This strategy of trying to tire them was getting old and it was working. Ladybug listened closely. There were new noises outside, the unmistakable sound of Viperion’s lyre, Chat Noir’s voice and the tumult of the battle. Students were chatting to themselves. Great, everything she needed to fully focus on was that enemy she couldn’t see and barely hear. Volpina attacked by small spurts, nagging at them. Chat Noir and his team had better find a way inside. Handling Hawk Moth was already hard enough as it was,
fighting Mayura and Voplina on top of that…

“Alya, everything alright?” Kagami asked in a low voice.

“They’re up against three different villains,” Alya said. “Four or maybe five, if you count their creatures… And Voplina is a master of illusions, so there’s nothing we can do… I mean we could throw rocks at her and if they go through her it means you hit an illusion and not the real deal, but doing that in the dark…”

“You… Really know a lot about that kwami’s power,” Kagami whispered.

“I do,” Alya said as neutrally as she could. “Well, I—” The loud noise of shattered glass interrupted her sentence.

Ladybug couldn’t help but wince as she heard Chat Noir yelp as he plummeted to the ground. Mayura must have slammed him through the glass roof, though she couldn’t see a thing. That had been a mistake, giving him the opportunity to reunite with Ladybug. Cats always fell on their feet. He found her immediately — night vision, of course— and whispered something in her ear. She nodded and let him position her shoulders and her arm as he kept talking to her, too softly for anyone around them to listen. Volpina wasn’t paying attention to them at all, Carapace and Queen Bee had teamed up against and were making her life a little more difficult.

“Now!” Chat Noir said. “And tell Tiger Eye I’m sorry for stepping on her tail!”

Ladybug threw her yo-yo in the air and felt it go through that hole in the roof and wrap around an iron girder. She took a few steps back, feeling the yo-yo string stretch, and launcher herself, landing on top of the Grand Palais. Light pulsed out of Mayura’s body, which made her the ideal target, the only one she could truly see too. Even she wasn’t immune to Obscuro’s power, it seemed, and she had to produce her own light. Ladybug didn’t pay attention to the Amok’s gaping mouth sucking in every source of light but his mistress’s. She had to take him down, but if Chat Noir and the others hadn’t managed to do so… She’d have to target Mayura directly, make her snap out of her connection with her puppet.
The sound of claws scraping against metal told Ladybug that Tiger Eye was probably trying to rip open the exits Hephaestus had welded, and that she was struggling to do so. What was he forging in his hole? She couldn’t tell, but it certainly didn’t bode well. Viperion… Viperion had Mayura’s hand wrapped around his throat as she lifted him off the ground effortlessly. She was a lot more experienced than any of them, in fact she seemed amused by the fight. It was a good thing she was shining bright, that made her the perfect target. She was all too focused on the young man at her mercy to look around.

Ladybug’s yo-yo wrapped around Mayura’s wrist, and she yanked the string with as much strength as she could. Mayura let go of Viperion immediately and was dragged next to Ladybug. Viperion rubbed his throat and wheezed while Mayura stared at Ladybug. She didn’t seem panicked or angered, in fact she fanned herself as if nothing had happened. Mayura only looked mildly annoyed and that scared Ladybug.

“Don’t you know it’s rude to interrupt adults when they’re doing important things?” Mayura smiled affably. “Now hand these earrings to me, don’t make me take them from you, young lady.”

Perhaps she shouldn’t have wasted her time playing with her. Ladybug felt newfound energy coursing through her veins for a brief second, instinctively, she kicked the hand fan out of Mayura’s hand. That small triumph was short-lived, Mayura’s heel almost connected with her front teeth. She barely dodged the fist aimed at her throat. So her enemy was taller, absurdly strong and a trained fighter, and on top of that, she could glow in the dark? That was ridiculous. Mayura leapt for her hand fan, Ladybug kicked it away and Viperion caught it. The glint in these pinkish eyes was one of pure hatred.

“Chat Noir says he’s sorry for stepping on your tail,” Ladybug yelled hopelessly. Even if her soles allowed her to effortlessly walk on any solid surface, it would only one shove from Mayura for her to…

Tiger Eye pounced on the Peafowl wielder just a second before the woman tried to rip the hand fan out of Viperion’s grasp, and though the older woman outmatched her by far, it gave Ladybug the window she needed. A hand-to-hand fight wouldn’t do, and she had no idea how to defeat Obscuro. Oh, this wouldn’t be pretty to look at, and definitely not an honourable victory, but it didn’t matter… She wrapped her yo-yo around the Mayura’s ankles as she tried to get Tiger Eye off her shoulders. Ladybug pushed Mayura with all her strength. Fighting on a rooftop was dangerous in many ways.

No matter how resistant a suit made by kwamis can be, tumbling down a 60 metres building with no way of slowing down one’s fall is never a good idea. Ladybug couldn’t help but wince as she heard the loud thump followed by a groan. Obscuro’s shape faltered, light pouring out of his body, until the monster vanished completely, leaving in its place a lanky and shivering man. A white feather flew out of the man’s chest and Ladybug had to shield her eyes as it blew up in a flash of
blue light. Mayura must have fled, because she was nowhere to be found, Ladybug’s yo-yo wasn’t wrapped around anything.

“I don’t think I can do anything against metal,” Viperion said. “Trees, stones and living things, can do, but…”

“You’ve done enough,” Tiger Eye shot back. “You were a great punching bag for Mayura, I mean, nice job getting hit in the face.” That definitely sounded like sibling banter, because Viperion audibly snorted. “Well, Roarr is gonna hate me if I try a Tiger’s Soul on you, already did on Chat Noir and, well, it didn’t last for long, so I’ll just rip these walls apart, help you if I can and go away, if that sounds good to you.”

“Yeah, sounds great,” Ladybug said weakly.

Only Hawk Moth’s akuma and Volpina to take care of. She wasn’t tired at all. She could totally make it. Well, at least she made a spectacular entrance, kicking the metal door away. What they were met with almost made her lose her confidence. Hephaestus’s entire body was aflame, and he had created a gigantic chain mace he was swinging around as though it was nothing. There was a gaping Carapace’s shell-ter shielded all the civilians who had gathered behind him while Queen Bee and Chat Noir were trying to defeat Volpina and failing spectacularly. Saving the civilians from the akuma first, the fox would come later.

“Ladybug, your Miraculous, give it to me!” the akumatised man yelled. He stopped aiming at the civilians and swung his mace in their direction.

“Viperion, you go with Chat, Tiger Eye you come with me,” Ladybug said. “Bee, I’ll need your help!” Tiger Eye picked up the metal plate and used it as a shield, while Viperion ran towards Volpina, or rather one of the Volpinas, and failed to land a single hit as she moved away. Ladybug summoned her Lucky Charm and understood immediately what she was to do with it. Queen Bee joined them

“A fire extinguisher? What are you going to do, bash that guy’s skull with it?” Tiger Eye raised her elbow as she dodged a particularly nasty blow.

“Can’t get to the akumatised object if touching him turns my fingers to crisp!” Ladybug shot back. “We’re going to run for it, if you can ruin that mace of his that’d be pretty nice!”
“Huh, I liked the plan where you bashed his skull better,” Tiger Eye said. And when Queen Bee glared at her, she added, “Let’s do it quickly, I’m going to de-transform soon!”

Truly, getting to Hephaestus wasn’t nearly as hard as facing Mayura. Where she had been a formidable enemy, he was sluggish and predictable. In a matter of seconds, the heavy chains that linked the spiky ball with the mass’s handle were severed by Tiger Eye’s claws, and she threw the metal plate in the akuma’s face. The fire extinguisher did its work in a matter of seconds, and this was enough for Queen Bee to use her Venom, effectively paralysing Hephaestus. Ladybug found a blackened welder in the man’s pocket. She wouldn’t be able to crush it herself, but Tiger Eye could and it took her a mere second to create a hole big enough for a small butterfly to escape. Ladybug caught in in her yo-yo, but before she could purify it, Viperion was thrown at her, literally.

Alright then, defeating Volpina then purifying that akuma it would be. The question was, which Volpina? It was impossible to distinguish the original from her illusory copies, which dodged blows like the real one. They couldn’t exactly smudge paint on all of these fake doubles, for the simple reason that there was no paint to smudge them with. Waving her yo-yo around when there was an akuma inside it was out of the question. Perhaps Queen Bee could? But her comb blinked dangerously. In fact, so did Tiger Eye’s and Viperion’s. Hers would do so soon, and Carapace’s, as well as Chat Noir’s.

Volpina’s power was much greater than Rena Rouge’s. She didn’t have to play the flute to create illusions, she simply needed to wish them to life for them to occur. And apparently, she could teleport from copy to copy, that seemed to be her ability. Plonthu’s exhibition was completely ruined, the white walls were torn to pieces and a hundred Volpinas were grinning at her. Tiger Eye pounced at one of them, which dodged the attack with ease without breaking a sweat.

“They’re incredible,” Alya whispered. She had taken a small camera out of her bag and was filming the fight. She couldn’t help but admire Volpina’s doubles. “They even move whenever someone’s next to them, that must be the kwami’s work. It’s perfect, and—”

One of the hundred Volpinas walked through them, literally.

“No, there is something off… Her shadow,” Kagami mumbled. “I get it. The copies can sense other Miraculous users but not regular humans… And they have no shadows. I’ve got to tell Lady — Is that just me or it smells like something is burning?”
And the fire alarms started blaring. Marinette wouldn’t be able to hear her over all that noise, and
the other heroes, as powerful as they were, flailed around aimlessly as Volpina warped from place
to place, dodging every blow thrown in her way. Viperion was slammed against an iron pillar so
forcefully that it left a dent there. There was still the spear Hephaestus had thrown at Queen Bee
earlier laying on the ground. Kagami was about to do something ridiculously dangerous and
incredibly courageous. She was afraid, of course she was, but there was no time for that. She got up
and looked Alya in the eyes.

“If you write about me tonight, please refrain from using my real name,” she said.

Kagami didn’t wait for Alya’s answer. She made a run for the spear — she would have liked a
sword better— and started swinging it at every Volpina that was in her way, making them vanish
in a cloud of smoke. She had to dodge Chat Noir as he was sent flying her way and didn’t listen to
him when he yelled a “go back to safety, we can handle it!” The girl she loved was getting beaten
up by some unorthodox thug, there was no way she’d stay there and watch. And there was that
shadow, right next to Marinette, aiming for a kick. Kagami didn’t think twice and threw the spear
with as much strength as she could.

Volpina barely caught the projectile in time, and Kagami was triumphant for a second. She had
given Marinette a few seconds of respite, and she had been right, the copies couldn’t detect
anything that wasn’t at least partly kwami. Marinette looked at her with a mixture of adoration and
worry. And Volpina… Kagami’s triumph became dread almost immediately as rage flashed across
Volpina’s face. The girl’s nostrils flared as she breathed in and out slowly. Her face was marred
with angry red blotches.

“Oh, that was a weak throw there,” she said as calmly as she could. She glanced at Kagami without
away turning from Ladybug. A sneer formed on her lips. “I could do much better. Here, let me
show you how it’s done, first you—”

Ladybug’s foot finally connected with Volpina’s cheekbone before she could finish the sentence,
the shock of it made the wielder of the Fox Miraculous drop the spear to the ground. All around
her, her clones vanished. Her entire shape blinked. And now, Paris’s heroes were circling her.
There was no way she could get out of here, Kagami thought, she would be captured and the stolen
Miraculous would be returned to Master Fu. Kagami was wrong. Volpina rose to her feet and
picked up the flute she still hadn’t used once during the entire fight. It vibrated, and she used it like
a phone.

“Yes? I’m in the middle of something important here…” Volpina spoke in the instrument. “You
want me to— I understand.” She turned to Ladybug and yelled, “This isn’t over yet. I will return
and you’ll be sorry you ever let me go.”
No one was quick enough to stop her, let alone go after her as she leapt through the hole in the Grand Palais’s glass roof, leaving a trail of smoke behind her, but at this point, the heroes were too exhausted to even try. Marinette —no, Ladybug, Kagami corrected herself— purified the akuma at last. Everything that had been damaged by Hephaestus was fixed instantly. And the heroes vanished before she could say anything to them. Not that they were far away, really, they were perched on top of the Grand Palais, huffing and panting, their miraculouses beeping, with expression going from utter exhaustion to great concern, with hints of relief — the fight was over at last— and very little time to talk about what had just happened.

“I will discuss today’s events with the Guardian,” Ladybug said, “but this is worrisome to say the least.”

“I mean, on the bright side we need to defend our loved ones from thrice as many villains as before,” Chat Noir laughed, “which means we get to love them at least thrice as much.”

“Not the moment,” Queen Bee glared at him. “But yes, the Guardian needs to be made aware of the situation.”

“We definitely need some new faces, and to become become fighters,” Carapace added, and though he didn’t mean it as a backhanded insult, Tiger Eye’s ears drooped.

“Gotta go,” she said, and she threw Viperion over her shoulder and vanished. Carapace’s Miraculous beeped loudly, so did Queen Bee’s and they too vanished. It was only Ladybug and Chat Noir.

“Say, Bug, you fought with a different kind of energy today… Have a special someone now?”

“Yes, and she’s wonderful,” Ladybug said earnestly. Chat Noir looked genuinely happy to hear that. They parted ways at last.

Back inside the Grand Palais, things were getting a little better. Sure, there still was that big hole in the glass roof but other than that, the civilians were coming back to their spirits. M. Raffroidit, who had hidden in the bathroom, came back while M. Granvillet called the name of every single student just to make sure no one had gone missing.
And sure enough, Marinette was here to say “here!” when her name was called shakily. She couldn’t take her eyes off Kagami the entire way back to school, and though they didn’t talk, perhaps holding her hand had been enough. The teachers seemed more worried about all the trouble they were about to get into and their lateness than the fact that they had just witnessed the appearance of two new enemies for Paris’s defenders. And so they were indeed late for their maths class, though M. Andurent didn’t seem to care about this as much as he did about his pupils’ safety. His lesson was lighter than it usually was, and it was for the best. Kagami got a small note from Marinette. It read:

*What you did was the most foolish and bravest thing anyone’s ever done for me*

*And I was really scared for you, and really touched too*

*Please don’t do it again, at least not until you get the proper equipment for that*

*How stealthy are you? Also, are you an early riser?*

Keeping a straight face while reading it was hard for Kagami, she felt like laughing, smiling, she wanted to ask Marinette what “the proper equipment for that” meant. She did frown at Marinette’s question. She wrote her answer on the back of the piece of paper, making sure not to get caught by M. Andurent though frankly he wouldn’t have cared. She kept it short and concise. There was so much more she would have wanted to write but it would have taken a much bigger sheet and passing it around discretely like she did with the small scrap would have been nearly impossible.

Marinette took the small scrap and read Kagami’s answer. Oh that girl… And she had said there was something waiting for her tonight… She’d get home immediately, then. Kagami was an early riser if she had to. Despite all that had happened in the last two hours, or perhaps because of that, Marinette felt just as happy as after her interview with M. Tamarre, if not more. No, it wasn’t quite right, it was a different kind of joy. Kagami hurried to fencing practice as soon as the bell rang, not even letting Marinette the time to wish her good luck. Well then, she’d stop by Master Fu’s massage parlour to discuss what had just happened.

When she finally got home, Marinette smelled of incense. She had manage to convince the old man, who had looked quite worried, to change his plans. He would supervise Viperion and Tiger Eye’s training so that they wouldn’t be dead weight in battle, and he’d take two new miraculouses out of his box very soon. Tikki had looked at the Dragon necklace longingly, Marinette knew exactly what she had in mind and though she’d need to think about it in more detail, it didn’t seem half bad.
Flowers. Kagami had almost been late because she had bought her flowers, a bouquet of red carnations and roses her mum had put in a vase. They were beautiful, their scent was intoxicating. Marinette resisted the temptation to phone Kagami immediately, it would have been useless, after all she was still busy with fencing practice. She’d save it for tomorrow. She went to her room with the vase in her hands and put it on her desk instead, and spent quite some time staring at her ceiling, sprawled on her chaise longue.

A smile formed on her lips, she took a sketchpad and she started writing down every single idea that came through her mind. She’d have to make sure everything would be perfect for tomorrow morning, with the most perfect plan. She went to bed early and set her alarm earlier than the usual. She texted Kagami a small “I’m tired, you should go to sleep too, sweet dreams”. It wasn’t even 10PM when she started snoring. She’d need the rest.

Tomorrow would be great.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

That certainly was eventful, wasn’t it?

Two new foes have approached! And they're terribly enjoyable to write, a lot more than Hawk “I'm staying in my lair looking out the window“ Moth (though his plot is fun to write too)! Mayura's got a very baroque vibe to her character here, at least I hope I managed to convey it (otherwise drop this comment completely, you're the one to make sense of what I write, not me). She makes me think of this song. What about you?

Any resemblance to real and actual names is purely non-coincidental, and there is one cartoonist whose name is really close to the one in this chapter and well… See it for yourself. It has become very boomer-esque.

I snuck too many literary puns in this chapter, now that I'm re-reading it to make sure everything's in order.

As always, my Tumblr is here, and open for your questions! Seriously, feel free to ask me stuff, I'm always happy to answer. Even if you feel like your question is dumb. You should follow me there if you want to see previews of the incoming chapters, or see what else I'm interested in/write about!

Anyway, next chapter is what these 23 chapters inevitably lead to!

I'm still very much French, so my mistakes are probably numerous… And I didn't make them on purpose!

I'll see you in the next one, next Monday!
Going back to sleep was nearly impossible with all that noise outside. Kagami had believed buying a small feeding tray for the robins could be a good idea, she had been a little naive. She had no choice but to get up if she wished to chase these birds away. And doing so would be enough to wake her up. These pigeons were really noisy…I checked her phone. Almost 6AM, not outrageously early. She felt well-rested enough, she had gotten her seven hours of sleep. Everything yesterday had made her exhausted. Trying to face someone wielding the power of a small god may not have been the best idea, and M. D’Argencourt’s training had been strenuous.

Kagami got up, scared the pigeons away and looked outside the window. She was probably the only person awake in the entire street. She couldn’t help but feel a little excited about it. She peered outside. It was still quite dark outside, the lamppost were still lit. Traffic definitely wasn’t dense as it’d usually be a mere thirty minutes later. Was it silly to feel like this early morning belonged to her and her alone? Perhaps it was. It didn’t keep her from feeling that way. She wouldn’t mind being able to fly above the city at dawn. She stifled a yawn, scratched her legs and drew the curtains again.

She was about to go to the bathroom when she stopped in her tracks. She could splash some water over her face and get dressed. That, or she could stay in bed and read for a little while. Yes, that sounded about right. What should she read? Something with simple drawings, perhaps not overly wordy, unlike Lacan, who had helped her fall asleep yesterday… Perhaps Charlie Brown? Charlie Brown it was, then, the perfect early morning read for a January day. She felt too lazy to look for her earphones and listen to whatever music would work best with the book. She hummed to herself as she went back to bed. It was cozy here, just her, her bed, her books and her plants and nothing to disturb her.

Well, that wasn’t true. The pigeons were back outside, they had to be, the incessant knocking on her window was getting on her nerves. She couldn’t even doze off in peace. She clapped her hands hoping it would be enough to make them fly away, but the noise persisted. Kagami groaned. She’d read all about Peppermint Patty’s sandals later, then. Reluctantly, she got out of bed and stomped to the windowsill. She’d have to remove that feeding tray someday soon. She was certain she’d find a flock of these disgusting flying rats as soon as she’d open the curtains. What she found there was… Definitely not what she had expected. Instead of birds, there was…

“Marinette? What on earth are you doing here?” Kagami tried to keep her voice low. Had anyone been looking at the facade of 22 rue Troyon, which fortunately for them wasn’t the case, they would have seen Ladybug chatting with a girl with a noticeable bedhead, as though the two knew each other quite well.
“Want to have breakfast on top of Notre Dame and watch the sunrise with me?” Marinette asked. “You can totally say no if you want, I don’t mind, perhaps I was too early and…”

“Yes, yes, I would like that very much,” Kagami said. “Just… Let me get dressed… I’ll meet you outside my flat in about ten minutes? Or you can come in if you want…”

“No! I can wait outside just fine, I promise! I’ll see you in ten minutes,” Marinette said. And with that, she hopped away from Kagami’s window and disappeared in the night.

That girl was incorrigible, and the smile on Kagami’s lips only disappeared when she closed the window. She glanced at her reflection in the glass and felt extremely self-conscious. She probably looked absolutely terrible with her mussed-up hair and slightly bleary eyes… Marinette had already had a glimpse of her wearing pyjamas, but she had never gotten to see her just after she woke up, which was probably for the best. Marinette hadn’t said anything about it, she hadn’t laughed at her, even in a kind-spirited way like Aiko had done the few times she had been allowed to stay at her place for a sleepover… That was nice.

Kagami supposed Marinette was sitting on some rooftop nearby. She wouldn’t have her wait too long. And so, she ran to the bathroom, took what was probably the fastest shower in her entire life and brushed her teeth even more thoroughly than she’d usually do. She had the feeling that morning breath wouldn’t do, especially this morning. She’d wear the jumper Marinette had knitted for her and her best winter skirt and some warm tights; Notre Dame would certainly be freezing cold this early in the morning. She did her makeup as quickly as possible. Was that shade of red a little too much for a lipstick? But she didn’t have to think about it twice. She had said ten minutes, after all. She stole a glance at her reflection in the mirror. She looked… Even she was surprised to find herself look good.

She scribbled a note in which she told her mother that she had gone for an early morning run and was planning on having breakfast at the Dupain-Cheng bakery on the way (technically not a complete lie), and put it on the kitchen table. She picked up her school things, put on her shoes and her coat, double-checked her pockets to make sure she had her keys. She felt a thrill of excitement as she closed the door behind her and went down the stairs as silently as she could. As soon as she opened the great front door, the frisky January air hit her face. She barely flinched then, but she almost jumped when Marinette lightly tapped her on the shoulder. She let out an undignified squeak.

“I did tell you I was working on my stealth skills,” Marinette said, amused, as Kagami glared at her good-humouredly. “So… I thought, either we could walk all the way to the cathedral, or… Are you afraid of heights?”

“No really,” Kagami answered. “What are you going to do, sweep me off my feet and jump from
rooftop to rooftop carrying me bridal style?” Please say yes, please say yes, please say yes. Even though she wouldn’t know what to do if the other girl actually said yes.

“That… Was my idea, yeah,” Marinette said sheepishly. “I swear I’m not clumsy when I’m wearing the suit, I’m not going to accidentally drop you or anything like that. But it’s only one option!”

“I’m a lot more curious about that second option,” Kagami said, trying her best to not sound as excited as she was while not giving the impression that she didn’t care. “So… Hypothetically, if we were to do that… Would I have to put my arms around your neck, or…” she added awkwardly.

“Yes, that would be the safest option,” Marinette said. “Does this sound good to you?” Please say yes, please say yes, please say yes.

“You know I can’t refuse that,” Kagami chuckled. “So, er…”

“Go ahead, I don’t bite,” Marinette laughed. Kagami linked her hands behind Marinette’s neck. Was now the right moment for— No, it had to be somewhere special, not in the middle of that street. Was that why Marinette had chosen to take her on a date to watch the sun rise? Yes, she could still wait for a And as soon as Kagami did so, Marinette lifted her off the ground effortlessly. Kagami felt her cheeks turn very pink, and she knew well that it wasn’t because of the cold. And with that, Marinette crouched.

Her jump made them go way above the tallest building in the street. Instinctively, Kagami closed her eyes. When she hesitantly opened them, Marinette was smiling at her brightly. The landscape that stretched before their eyes was familiar, yet Kagami had never seen it from this viewpoint. Marinette was giving her a grand tour of the city, making sure, Kagami was certain of that, to make it as comfortable as possible for her. It was breathtaking, the cityscape, and she knew it would be even better from the top of Notre Dame. Kagami let herself enjoy the view.

Each of Marinette’s leaps was perfectly calculated, they didn’t touch the actual ground once. They went from building to building effortlessly, and surprisingly noiselessly. Ladybug really had learned to work on her stealth. It made the experience all the more magical. Every now and then, Kagami would take her eyes off the scenery to steal a glance at Marinette, and though she was entirely focused on the route and on not accidentally dropping her, she still had a faint smile on her lips. So that was Ladybug’s daily life when she didn’t have anything to worry about. Not too bad. The shape of the cathedral was growing closer and closer by the minute.
With one final jump they landed on left tower of Notre Dame de Paris. Kagami hesitantly unhooked her arms from around Marinette’s shoulders and took a step on the stone tiles. This… This was amazing. She took a moment to simply look around. How many people had had the chance of being here this early? She took her bag off her shoulder and simply wandered around the platform. Marinette de-transformed but Kagami barely noticed. It didn’t feel real, being here around these statues with the city beneath her feet. If not for the cold, she would have thought this was a figment of her imagination. The Seine was flowing serenely like it always did, and Kagami was captivated. She almost forgot why they had come here in the first place.

“Say, Kagami?” Marinette called. Was she ever not beautiful and impeccably dressed? She had probably made her corduroy trousers and her jumper herself and of course, they fitted perfectly.

“Yes?” Kagami said. She turned her back to the landscape.

“Is Earl Grey alright?” Marinette asked. “I also brought a Darjeeling if you like it better.”

Oh, right, breakfast. Kagami had almost forgotten she was hungry, though now that she thought of it, she really was. Marinette had hidden a hiking backpack with everything they would need in it. She took out a picnic blanket, a selection of viennoiseries from the family bakery, pots of jam and honey and two thermos flasks of tea with their assorted cups. They had arrived just in time, the sun was slowly rising and Paris was only waking up. The clouds had that pinkish hue she’d rarely seen. This was perfect.

“Earl Grey is good,” Kagami said. She sat next to Marinette and gladly took the cup she gave her. It warmed her fingertips almost immediately. “Is that the one you usually have for breakfast?”

“Hmm,” Marinette nodded. “Coffee is good too but most mornings, I’d rather stay awake by my own means.”

“Well then you need to invite me for breakfast more often because this is delicious,” Kagami said after she took a small sip. She silently wished Marinette would do that.

“The first croissants of the day are always the best,” Marinette nodded. “And… Yes, I’ll invite you over whenever you want.”

“Your parents would be fine with that?” Kagami couldn’t help but ask. She knew they were probably quite busy, and being a dead weight was the last thing she wanted to be.
“My parents would be happy to have you there,” Marinette smiled. “And so would I.”

It wasn’t just the tea, everything else was just as good. Marinette was the connoisseur when it came to picking the right jam for her croissants. And her homemade strawberry jam was the best, followed closely by the apricot one. Despite the January wind, Kagami didn’t feel cold at all, in fact she was even warmer than she had been in her room. It was hard to eat without getting crumbs everywhere, and are it not for the tea, Kagami’s teeth would have been purple with blueberry jam.

They chatted about anything and everything, how apple turnovers were actually baked — with passion and patience— and how weird these gargoyles around them were, until the conversation lulled comfortably. The bells of Notre Dame rung seven times, and they had to put their fingers in their ears. They hadn’t noticed they had been there for so long. Not that they minded at all, they could have had lunch and dinner here too and still not get tired of each other’s company.

Kagami stretched and got up. She swept the croissant crumbs off her skirt and went to look at the landscape again. She would never tire of this. She tried to spot places she knew, not the obvious ones — though she had never visited it personally, le Grand Paris was hard to miss, and so was Agreste Manor— but rather her house, their lycée, the best bakery in the world… Of course she couldn’t find any of them, she would have needed a pair of binoculars for that, but trying to find them was just fun. Perhaps next time… Marinette too rose to her feet and joined her.

“Trying to spot your house?” she asked. “We see it better from the other tower but it’s a little windy, so… There’s that restaurant, le troquet d’Ange, where I’d like to eat someday, but I can’t spot it yet, so I know how you feel… My parents’ bakery is just over there,” she pointed.

“I wouldn’t have been able to find it even if I tried,” Kagami said, squinting her eyes towards the general location Marinette had pointed. “How long did it take you? To be able to find your house in the middle of all that?”

“Months… It’s easier when you’re on the Eiffel Tower but the security is way higher and it’s just too cold for a date in January,” Marinette smiled.

“So this is a date,” Kagami said. “It… It makes me happy that we’re calling it that.”

The beautiful pinkish hue that coloured the clouds in the morning sky was now tinged with pale yellow hints as the sun rose slowly. Below them, Paris was bustling with life, people going to work, cars, buses, all moving their ways in a sometimes chaotic choreography. Marinette rested her
head on Kagami’s shoulder. Yes, it was beautiful, there was no other word for such a spectacle. They didn’t speak for a while and just watched. Marinette finally took a step back.

“I don’t think I’ve thanked you enough for the flowers,” she said in a low voice. “Or for what you did yesterday, even though that was one of the most insane things anyone has ever done for me.”

Kagami stopped herself from saying her automatic “There is nothing you need to thank me for, I just had to do it” and turned to Marinette instead. Her heart skipped a beat.

“I… I’m not sure how to say this,” Marinette laughed. “But… No one has ever given me flowers the way you have.”

“Oh…” Kagami said. Great, very eloquent, she berated herself. Her chest felt tight, her heart too big for her.

She didn’t trust herself to speak, but perhaps… Perhaps she could… Her left hand found Marinette’s, hesitantly. She couldn’t believe she was doing this. Slowly, their fingers intertwined. The tingling feeling of her skin against Marinette’s… “You liked them that much?” she said softly, and there was a shy smile in her voice. “I wasn’t sure you would like the colour…” Her heart was hammering in her chest now, and if she had to be honest with herself, the sensation wasn’t unpleasant at all.

“They are beautiful,” Marinette said. She squeezed the other girl’s hand a little tighter. Her thumb grazed Kagami’s knuckles gently.

Kagami only found acceptance and affection in Marinette’s gaze as it met her questioning one. She didn’t have to ask the question. She let go of Marinette’s hand and cupped her cheeks, delicately, lovingly, and felt herself blush as she did so. She leaned in, slowly tilting her head, and Marinette mirrored the gesture. Her eyes closed before she was even aware of it. If that was a dream, she didn’t want to wake up. And she knew well that she wasn’t dreaming.

Because she couldn’t have invented what she felt when they kissed.

It was a little clumsy but sincere, Kagami’s first kiss after all, intense despite of how short it was, sweet and no longer uncertain, with a hint of blueberry jam. Her stomach was doing somersaults again and Marinette’s grip on her waist tightened. The entire world shrunk, and it was just the two of them if only for a second. When Marinette pulled back and looked at her, Kagami felt herself
melt a little. Her hands were in Marinette’s and she wanted to laugh, to dance, to sing and to kiss her.

“So, um…” she mumbled instead.

“So,” Marinette repeated.

“So thank you for taking me here,” Kagami said more clearly. “And for everything else, too.”

"Thank you for being here and for being you,” Marinette answered, and her eyes crinkled. “You know, I imagined a hundred ways to make this happen, I made… Don’t laugh! I made sketches and everything because I wanted it to be perfect and…”

“Marinette, you are rambling,” Kagami stifled a giggle. “It is kind of cute but you are rambling.” She sobered up. “Being here with you makes me very happy… So it is the perfect date, at least I think it is.”

“Well I’m glad, then,” Marinette smiled. She gave Kagami’s hands a small squeeze.

“It feels a little silly to ask,” Kagami said, not quite looking the other girl in the eyes, “but…”


“Will you be my girlfriend?” Kagami’s voice was small.

Instead of answering Kagami’s question right away, Marinette gave her a kiss. Kagami flushed and couldn’t help but notice that the other girl’s lips were slightly redder now. Perhaps that choice of lipstick hadn’t been bad after all. And these blue eyes were inviting her. No, they didn’t need words for that. Kagami’s lips brushed against Marinette’s, tenderly. She almost gasped when Marinette’s hands nested in her hair, Marinette who was grinning, she could tell even with her eyes closed. This answer was crystal clear, and she liked it very much.

And her lips were on Marinette’s again. Could each new kiss be better than the previous one? Or perhaps Kagami was a fast learner. And she had thought that her first kiss would be the best feeling
in the world… Not that she trusted herself to deepen this kiss, not yet at least, but… This made her head spin and this was a sensation she couldn’t get enough of. She pulled back before she was out of breath. They stayed like that for a moment. Marinette’s arms went around her neck as she pressed her forehead against the other girl’s.

“I don’t think I’d have survived if you had kissed me that last day of December,” Marinette said in a low voice. “I mean, I really wanted you to kiss me, that is, but two weeks away from you right after that… So yes, I’d like us to be… A thing. Dating. Girlfriends, that is.”

“I had guessed that much,” Kagami’s smile was a little crooked.

Slowly, she took a step back. The bells of Notre Dame hadn’t rung yet, they still had quite some time, almost a full hour, but even though her girlfriend —oh, she couldn’t believe she was finally calling her that— could get them to school in no time if she so wished, Kagami decided she wanted to do things differently. She started putting the breakfast things back in the hiking backpack. Not that there was a lot to put in there, the croissants were gone, the thermos flasks were almost empty. It hadn’t looked like it, but it had been a hearty breakfast. Marinette looked at her quizzically.

“I thought we could enjoy a morning stroll instead of…” Kagami tried to find the right words; “Instead of superhero parkour. If that’s fine by you, that is.”

Marinette nodded and they got to work. In no time, they deserted Notre Dame, and it was as though they had never been there in the first place. The birds were here to eat any remaining evidence. Marinette transformed, Kagami put her arms around her neck and they were off. And Marinette respected Kagami’s choice. Instead of leaping from rooftop to rooftop, she reverted to her civilian self as soon as they touched the ground. They still had a some time to get to school. The streets were now bustling with life, no longer the perfect backdrop, the picturesque diorama, but a very real experience of smells and noises and people.

They managed to avoid it for a little while, of course, and the Saint Jacques Tower Park was silent, almost empty and crisp with frost. When the weather would be warmer, this wouldn’t be a bad place for a date, Kagami thought. Well, it would be quite crowded, but the thought had been nice. It almost melted away as they went out of the park.

Kagami found it hard to hold Marinette’s hand like that, in the middle of that crowd, she could feel the looks they got as they walked down the rue du boulevard Saint Honoré, curious or disapproving glances, and she couldn’t imagine what kissing somewhere unsafe would be like. She would bow to none of them, she wouldn’t listen to what they had to say and yet letting go of her girlfriend’s hand, just so that there wouldn’t be the weight of all these stares, letting go of this loving hand was very tempting. And Marinette felt it too, heard it too, the pressure, the unkind words whispered by collège students years younger than them, the remarks shared by businessmen.
But Marinette gave Kagami’s hand a small squeeze, and Kagami squeezed back. They could do it.

At least, and they were quite glad for that, the side glances almost stopped when they got inside the lycée Carnot — unsurprisingly, they had made it in time— though almost was the key word. Because of course, they heard snide remarks, and of course there were sneers and glares. Kagami had better things to do than pay attention to any of that. She listened to Marinette as she told her more about her internship at Manlardineaut, and didn’t miss a single word of it. They finally let go of each other’s hand as they walked inside the classroom, for one simple reason: if they walked side by side, they wouldn’t be able to go through the door.

“Hello,” they said in unison and most of their classmates greeted them back as it was their custom.

They weren’t late, but neither were they exceptionally early, not that Kagami minded that all too much. Nino and Alya were already there, and most of their classmates too. And judging by how bright Alya’s eyes were and how hard Nino was keeping himself from squealing with joy, how everyone else was giving them odd looks, they all knew, or at least they had a vague idea of what had happened earlier this morning. Was that Alya’s sleuthing skills? Well, the lipstick was a dead giveaway, when Kagami came to think of it. It really had been a good choice of colour, it looked good on Marinette too.

“Finally!” Alya said, and she had to keep her voice in check, otherwise she would have yelled. “I was afraid this would never happen and that you’d stay there stealing glances at each other awkwardly, forever!”

“Congratulations!” Nino added. “But yeah. I mean, that’s why we didn’t risk creating a betting pool for you two.”

“You should have,” Kagami said, “you should have and I would have given you money for that.”

“Kagami?” Marinette looked at her girlfriend with a faux-indignant expression written all over her face; which was soon replaced by a small smile. “Well, I would have put some money on that too. Let’s say that yesterday’s events sped things up a little but I think I would have asked you out before the end of the month anyway. I even had a love letter ready…”

Kagami’s blush reached her freckles and she hid her face in her hands.
“They look happier now that they’ve cut the just friends rubbish” Alya said in a loud whisper. “But they’re too cute, I don’t think I can handle this.”

“Yeah, the universe is probably going to collapse on itself or something like that,” Nino replied. “It’s really a shame, I was supposed to audition my actors tonight but I guess the power of love is stronger than filmmaking…”

“You know we can hear you, right?” grumbled Marinette.

“Oh no, they’re a we now!” Alya said, and even Kagami laughed at that.

When class finally started, it was hard for either of the two girls to really pay attention to what the teacher rambled about. Not exceedingly so, of course, they still wrote down everything that sounded important. But Marinette did everything she could to accidentally brush her hand against Kagami’s as often as she could, she even wrote with her left hand just to do so. Kagami didn’t mind these accidents at all, and though she didn’t riposte with more accidents of her own, she was quite happy to let Marinette’s touch linger on the back of her hand. That night, she would have quite a lot to write in her Paris journal.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

I'm very happy to post this chapter at last!

Some of my ideas when I started writing the scenario and the basic outline for “En garde” back in April 2018 were not very clear, but I absolutely wanted Kagami and Marinette to have a date somewhere in Paris where they couldn't be found, early in the morning, and that would be where the first kiss would take place!

I hope you enjoyed this as much as I had fun writing it.

This story is far from over, there are still things that need answers, a whole relationship to explore, and I hope you'll stick with it until the end!

As always, my Tumblr is [here](http://example.com)! Want to ask me things, see previews for the incoming chapters and the other things I sometimes write, read my takes on the latest Miraculous episodes? That’s where it's at.

Well, I'll see you in the next one! À lundi prochain!
“Touche!” M. D’Argencourt bellowed. And what a touch indeed, a properly-timed flick of the wrist, just the right weight on her sword arm just to be sure to apply proper pressure. Louise was positively surprising from time to time, and even though the fencing master tried not to compliment his students too much during their bouts, there was obvious pride in his voice. Facing her, Vincent was still winning, but the way he scored his touches was more practical than spectacular. Kagami decided she’d introduce Marinette to tempo in fencing this Saturday. She would get it quickly, like she did everything else. What could she say, her girlfriend as a fast learner.

She tried to focus on the bout, rather than to think about Marinette. She couldn’t believe it had been three weeks since that morning at Notre Dame, it still felt like yesterday to her, and so far everything had gone even better than she could have hoped. Not a lot had changed between them, they weren’t the most terrible couple with steamy public displays of affection after all, and they had busy lives, Marinette even more so now that her internship at Manladrineaut had started. Nevertheless, they had managed to see each other a little more than before the holidays. Kagami’s mum had seemed genuinely happy for her when she had told her the news. And the way Marinette kissed her…

But back to the bout! She had won hers fairly easily. The competition hadn’t been all that hard, especially since Adrien had been forced to leave in the middle of the lesson because of a last-minute photoshoot. One did not try to argue with Gabriel Agreste, in fact as soon as Adrien had dropped his name, the fencing master’s face had turned a little paler. And so he had allowed his student to go. It was a shame, really, Kagami had wanted to find out whether there had been a follow-up to the “mysterious box” story. It had come from the firm her father worked for. She could hardly see why M. Agreste would have any use for something sent to him by a bioengineering firm.

Well, she had more urgent things to focus on right now. Winning all of her bouts was one of them. Perhaps she was having a hard time focusing on fencing because that match was taking so long and she already knew the outcome. Though none of her opponents could quite match Adrien’s abilities, Kagami had not held back. She still viewed this as a competition. Her aura, and she was well aware of this, was not simply one of a very good student at a fencing school, but one of the sport’s queens. And, for the more observing people, a mildly bored noblewoman.

Despite the faint cracking noises that sometimes disturbed the otherwise relaxed atmosphere of the gymnasium — they came from outside, and if Kagami had to make a guess, Marinette was involved in this, a way or another— the bouts went on. M. D’Argencourt had never seemed all too worried about the supernatural events in the city, and he certainly wouldn’t interrupt a fencing lesson unless it was absolutely necessary. And Kagami had to give it to him, the noise was fairly distant, perhaps she had a very good hearing. The truth was, M. D’Argencourt put a lot of trust in
Paris’s heroes. And his hearing was getting worse.

“Louise could win this one,” excited murmurs came from behind her, she recognised Maxime Dadet’s voice, followed by Éloi’s. Though there were reasons to be enthusiastic about Louise’s latest touch, Kagami couldn’t understand why they’d believe anyone but Vincent would be the one she’d be fencing against today. Idiots, the lot of them… No, that wasn’t right, they were only temporarily mistaken, that could happen to everyone, she corrected herself. She wouldn’t mind that, fencing against Louise. Wishing for it, however, would have been unrealistic, there was only so much Vincent’s opponent could do.

Just as Kagami had predicted, he won fair and square; though Louise was the one to have sudden moments of genius, his strenuous training surpassed that. He ran a hand through his slightly messy hair — he had finally understood that all that gel didn’t make him look good— and turned to Kagami, determination in his eyes. Getting the opportunity of finishing first— or even second— was rare for him. Still, she wouldn’t let him have that victory easily, if at all. The two fencers sized each other up, shook hands, and waited for the fencing master to say the words.

“En garde! Prêts? Allez!”

Vincent and Kagami lunged at the same time, she parried his sabre, beating it away. Her thrust was dodged and Kagami smiled to herself. Of course in a regular bout, they wouldn’t have allowed each other to get away with dodging or parrying this easily. This was about enjoying fencing before anything else. Enjoying fencing and winning in the end, of course. Kagami made sure she followed Vincent’s rhythm, only to speed things up whenever she saw an opening. Some were obvious traps, after almost five months of training alongside him, he had some tells she could see right through. Some others were her key to defeating him.

When she got out of the locker room a good twenty minutes later, with her hair dry — she had taken a shower, but keeping her hair a little damp would mean catching a cold— Kagami was still happy with the outcome of this match. Not that she danced or pumped her fist in the air, she had a sense of decency after all, and she respected Vincent — he had had to earn it— who had put up a good fight. But it had been an interesting bout, and one she had won. It had given her many more ideas of things she could teach her girlfriend. Kagami checked her phone — mum would be home late today, some extra translation work at a conference, her text read— and did not wait a second heading outside.

The biting wind did not bother her. Marinette had knitted her a much thicker scarf and it did wonders to shield her from the cold January weather. Well now, what should she do? It wasn’t because her mum was late that Kagami would loiter near the lycée. The cracking noises outside had stopped not so long ago, which meant whatever superhero business had been going on was
now over… Perhaps she’d stop by the Dupain-Cheng bakery tonight? But she didn’t want to spend all of her free time there. Yes, she’d perhaps watch something instead, or take an extra long bath. And so, she headed towards her métro station. She could enjoy a somewhat uneventful evening from time to time.

Or perhaps she could stop by a bookshop now that mum had bought her an extra shelf? Kagami couldn’t make up her mind. She stopped in the middle of Boulevard Malesherbes and was quite tempted to let out a whole slew of curses in French. And she had learned quite a few of them since the beginning of the school year. Why couldn’t she make up her mind? She’d choose at random, then. Heads, she’d go home, tails, she’d get herself a new book or two. Yes, a coin toss would be perfect. Kagami’s phone rang and she answered the call immediately.

“On your left…” the all too familiar voice said.

“You know you could just wave at me?” Kagami laughed.

“Yes but it makes you embarrassed to have people waving at you so I thought…” Marinette continued.

“Oh, well, it’s… Thoughtful of you,” Kagami mumbled. “Wait, I see you!” And with that, she hung up.

Marinette was beaming at her on the other sidewalk, and the smile only grew wider as Kagami joined her. Had she been on her way to the lycée just to meet her, despite that akuma — or was it an amok this time— she’d had to fight? She knew really didn’t have to be there at all, they could simply have had a small chat on the phone, a video call, or anything like that, it was how things would usually go. And yet she had come. It would still take some time before they would feel safe kissing each other in public, so Kagami settled for a quick, loving hug instead. She rarely initiated that kind of gesture, this was still very new for her Marinette, however, did not let go of her.

“That bad?” Kagami said in a low voice. She could feel Marinette nod, and so, she wrapped her arms around her girlfriend’s shoulders again, tightening the embrace. “I’m sorry…” This was all she could to do help her for now, she couldn’t exactly go against Paris’s villains but she could be there for her. They would talk about it if Marinette wished to, but she would not pressure her into telling her everything if she did not want to. Kagami decided she would not be going home straight away. Perhaps she could find a way to cheer her girlfriend up in a way or another.

“Where were you heading?” Marinette asked after she took a step back. Kagami stole a glance at the métro station’s entrance, which was really close.
“I was thinking a bookstore, perhaps? I wanted to buy new music sheets for my cello. If that sound good to you, otherwise we can go somewhere else,” Kagami replied.

“A bookstore sounds good to me!” Marinette said. They started walking down the crowded boulevard Malesherbes together. “So, fencing class.”

“Adrien was missing for most of it, so for once I had a different opponent,” Kagami replied. “Other than that, it wasn’t a very tiring lesson.”

“I hope I will think the same next year,” Marinette said wistfully. “I mean, if I manage to find the time for fencing and fashion design, but it shouldn’t be a problem. It’s only a small internship, after all, and well…”

“Is it that disappointing?” Kagami couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow.

“No, no, it’s fine, really,” Marinette shook her head. “I mean we interns do a lot of stitching and sewing, not a great deal of designing but that’s only temporary, I’ll move with the creative team by the end of the month if things go well, besides, it’s making me work on my technique and…”

“You had hoped you would get tips on the designing part earlier than this,” Kagami simply stated.

“At least my personal projects come to life a lot faster now!” Marinette said with a genuine smile. That was the signal for them to change the topic of this conversation. “I don’t think I’ve told you yet, but Jagged Stone might get involved in Nino’s film! I mentioned it while we were going over his new CD booklet, so I gave him Nino’s phone number! There will have to be some adjustments to the script and the storyboards, apparently, but…”

Truly, the bookstore Kagami had thought of was only a few minutes away, which would have made their conversation very short. She found convenient detours, and if Marinette had noticed — which she probably had— she did not say a thing about it. At last they reached their destination. Kagami seemed familiar with the place already, and she went straight for the section of the store where the cello scores were. In the meantime, Marinette browsed through the shelves. There were so many things, so many authors she hadn’t even heard of, though she didn’t dare ask the booksellers — neither did Kagami.
When they got out of the shop a good twenty minutes, the two girl’s wallets were a dozen euros lighter and their bags slightly heavier. Kagami knew she couldn’t afford going to a café… If her mum wasn’t there, perhaps she could invite Marinette over? It is exactly what she did, and Marinette planted a kiss on her lips as an answer to the question. Perhaps they could do their homework together, Kagami thought, even though she knew perfectly well that there was nothing school-related they’d need to do. Perhaps they could even walk to her flat instead of taking the métro.

This was the exact moment Kagami’s phone decided to chime, and Marinette’s did exactly the same a few seconds later. Though the messages were worded slightly differently, they were from the same sender. Master Fu wanted them at his massage parlour as soon as they could, was what his text to Kagami said. The one to Marinette was more cryptic, and simply stated “it is time”. Kagami couldn’t help but notice that her girlfriend had paled visibly. They did go to Master Fu’s, in near-silence. Kagami could only guess what it meant. She needed to be sure.

“He is going to ask you if you want to become a Miraculous wielder,” Marinette finally said. “We talked about it once or twice and I told him that the decision should be yours to make and yours alone… With Mayura and Volpina he must have sped things up, I…”

She fell silent and looked in the distance. Kagami herself was at loss for words. They slowly walked to the old man’s parlour as slowly as they could. It was almost night-time and they had barely noticed it. The street lights would be on very soon. Kagami tried to find the right way to say what she meant, and to mean what she’d say instead of giving some sort of noncommittal yet polite answer, the kind she knew Marinette hated. It wasn’t about being polite, it was about being honest.

“I had guessed it was something Miraculous-related, but…” Kagami started. “But this… I will have things to ask Master Fu and Tikki before I make up my mind. I mean I think I know what I want but I need to be completely sure.” Well, that hadn’t quite been what she had wanted it to sound like. Still, it was an answer Marinette didn’t seem unhappy with.

“You know I won’t think less of you if you refuse, you shouldn’t feel obliged just because we’re dating and I’m… Well, her.” Marinette reminded her girlfriend as she gave her hand a small squeeze. Kagami simply nodded.

“I know, and for that I’m grateful,” Kagami smiled.

“I will try to stay out of it until you make up your mind,” Marinette said.

It was darker still when Master Fu answered the door and let the two girls in. The parlour had just
closed for the day, the kettle whistled in the kitchen and the old man himself was more solemn
than the usual. Perhaps it was the importance of the situation, perhaps he wanted to make it sound
important, which it was. If Kagami remembered well, he had started handing out Miraculouses by
throwing himself in front of cars to see if some teenagers would be kind enough to not let him die,
so perhaps he was trying to change his ways too. And it worked quite well, she had to say.

Perhaps the tea was meant to make it all less tense, to make that entire situation slightly more
more casual. Yet he did not try to initiate any kind of conversation, he was obviously waiting for them to
fire away all sorts of questions. Kagami stole a glance at Master Fu. He was wearing a jade-
 coloured bracelet strikingly similar to the one Nino sometimes wore, yet there was some things she
could not piece together. Perhaps it was some kind of trend, and the old man was trying to become
some kind of fashion icon, hence his impressive collection of Hawaiian shirts.

“So, I suppose Marinette told you why I wanted you two here,” Master Fu said. “I had not expected
the Fox to be lost to us, nor the Peafowl to reappear, and though I am trying my best to train the
Tortoise, the Snake and the Tiger, I am afraid victory may no longer be taken for granted. I had
thought that Hawk Moth would vary his champions, perhaps we could have used kwami
transformations, but here we are. We need new blood.”

“You are not on speaking terms with other Guardians,” Kagami said, “so you cannot ask for their
help.”

Master Fu blinked. Marinette stared at her cup of tea.

“It is not that we are not on speaking terms,” he said, and he didn’t sound annoyed, rather a little
sheepish, “no, it is not that. Rather, they try to stay hidden until things calm down with Hawk
Moth. The Butterfly is in powerful hands. And I suppose, some simply don’t want to take the
plane to go to Paris. But this is besides the point.

“I know you are slowly unlocking your powers, Marinette, and I am sure A— Chat Noir too is
making constant progress. Yet it is not enough. I’ve always thought of a few candidates for the
Dragon, but you were the first, Kagami. The final decision is yours, and if you refuse, someone
else will come to wield the Dragon pendant. Should you choose to become its wearer, however, I
will tell you everything you need to know.”

At that, Tikki popped out of Marinette’s bag to sit on the table. She gave the old man an inquisitive
look.

“Or perhaps I could tell you some things now already,” Master Fu said. “Some Miraculouses do
not quite match their users yet, some could even be dangerous, again, the Fox debacle, and once I saw who wielded the Bee comb, I knew that the change could be too sudden, potentially noxious, even. Being in constant contact with a kwami is not something we humans are made for, even I had some trouble with Wayzz in the beginning.”

Said kwami popped out of Master Fu’s breast pocket and nodded. He flew away from the table and came back with a small straw, with which he took a sip of the old man’s tea. It didn’t take long for Kagami to put two and two together. So Nino too was Carapace, and Chloé was Queen Bee, which meant that Rena Rouge had probably been… But Wayzz interrupted her train of by touching her foreheads with his flappers. The kwami turned to his wielder, who nodded. Images flashed inside Kagami’s head, visions of a much younger Master Fu, as a teenager failing to transform, surrounded by faceless monks, as a young adult with scales starting to grow on his forearms. Kagami snapped out of the trance at the exact moment Marinette did.

“Some kwamis are easier to work with than others,” Master Fu said. “Tikki and Plagg are used to humans, and though there has been a few times over the last few millennia where things weren’t so good… I would say their bonds with their users is great. For others… Longg, the Dragon, is a tricky one, and few have managed to even wield them and—”

“What he tries to say is, Longg is picky,” Tikki cut the old man. “They favour those who are on my good side, however, and you aren’t some reckless and selfish person like many those who failed to establish a bond with them. It would take some time, I really advise against wearing their pendant too often, at least for the first few weeks, but… I think you are quite similar, the two of you! She may have a knack for theatrics, but…”

Kagami smiled to herself. Tikki really did want to see her friend this badly. And more importantly, Tikki did not lie. She really wondered what it could be like, transforming, having incredible strength and supernatural gifts. What if it didn’t work? What if she accepted the Miraculous only to see Longg reject her? She almost wanted someone else to make the choice instead of her. People would kill to be in her shoes, she knew it all too well.

The decision was entirely hers to make. If she was to be the wielder of such power, she would do so not for her sake, her girlfriend or for fame. She would have a city to protect, deadly enemies to face, and she would have to live a double-life and hide things from her mother and friends. Her nights would probably be sleepless, she would spend her days constantly on the lookout. She ignored Master Fu and Marinette looking at her intently. That was it, she had made up her mind. She emptied her cup of tea and breathed in. She only needed to say a few words and…

She had her answer, it was on the tip of her tongue, all she had to do was to open her mouth and say it. She felt her hands shake a little. It was as though a precipice had formed in front of her, and she didn’t know whether she’d be able to make the jump. Well that last part wasn’t true. She had already made her choice before Marinette even mentioned it. She could say it, and there would be
people to help her if she didn’t land back on her feet. No, she knew there was no use being afraid.

“I want to help,” Kagami said, looking Master Fu in the eye. “If I can help make a difference, if I can protect the city from destruction, then I am willing to take the risk.”

Next no her, Marinette’s expression was an odd mixture of pride, joy and worry. The old man smiled and rose to his feet and tapped his jade bracelet lightly. Wayzz was sucked inside. A bright flash illuminated the room and when Kagami, who had turned away from all that light, looked at where Master Fu had been, in his place stood… Carapace? So he wasn’t that into fashion after all. The old man mumbled to himself, slapped his palm against his shield and the entire room glowed a faint green. So that was what an experimented Miraculous wielder could do.

Kagami had pictured that scene in her head one or two times, and so far this was nothing like she had imagined it. She expected him to do something with his gramophone, perhaps the Miraculouses were inside? It stood out like a sore thumb in the room, no wonder it had been so easy to steal the Fox if it had been there. Instead, Master Fu closed his eyes and beads of sweat immediately started to form on his brow. A small box appeared out of thin air and he let out a sigh of relief. So that was what being a Guardian was truly like. He handed the box to Kagami without a word, while Marinette squeezed her shoulder.

Kagami opened the box as calmly as she could. Her hands weren’t shaking, that was good, everything was alright. What she found inside was surprising. The pendant was discreet enough, elegant in its design, and the jewel itself was just the right size for the chain, a single dark red pearl. Should she… Touch it? What would happen if she did? But she never got to find the answer to that. The pearl started glowing, the entire box, in fact. Was that supposed to happen? Neither Master Fu nor Marinette had rushed to her side. That was normal, then? Kagami held on to the small box and watched as the ball of light floated out of the box and burst like a soap bubble.

“Who dares disturb my slumber?” a deep, poised voice murmured. Yellow eyes opened and there was curiosity in them. “Oh, it looks like we’ve got someone very interesting here.” Longg was floating, crosslegged, with an unreadable expression on their small face. There was no doubting that they were a deity.

“My name is Kagami Tsurugi and I need you to lend me your strength,” Kagami said, looking at the small god with determination. “Paris is threatened by malevolent wielders, and I want to help tip the balance. I was told that I could help by becoming a wielder myself.”

“If this is not a lie, then yours is a noble goal. If what you spoke was untrue, you trying to put on this pendant will be your last action,” Longg said, a tremor in their voice. “If you have summoned
me in this realm to use me for your sake and your sake only, then close this box immediately, this is the only chance I will give you.”

But Kagami did not move an inch. At that, Longg’s impassible face split into a slight smile which grew wider when Marinette came to join Kagami, with Tikki on her shoulder. The two kwamis locked eyes for a few seconds and started chirping at each other, or was it a song of some kind? Wayzz joined them ad the small living room was filled with these odd noises Whatever it was, it lasted for some time. While Master Fu took it as an opportunity to sit back, Kagami let Marinette put her head on her shoulder. The chirping died down, Marinette stepped back. Longg studied Kagami appraisingly now.

“So you are the one Tikki told me about, the Guardian himself saw fit to have you and I meet each other,” the dragon kwami observed serenely. “Oh, and you are Ladybug’s chosen, too.”

That last remark brought a blush to Kagami’s cheeks but she nodded nonetheless, proudly, and she could feel Marinette looking at her with pride. “Yes, yes I am,” she said.

“While this is all well and good, why should I agree to let you wear my pendant?” Longg stated impassively. “Prove me that you are worthy.”

“I… I am a fast learner,” Kagami said, “and one of the best fencers in my generation. I have tried to stand up against the rogue Fox wielder. And… Well, I love this city. It’s flawed, I don’t like every single person that lives there, but it’s a place worth protecting. I have read that dragons are not only destructive forces, they can protect and bring luck too, don’t they? Well, if you are a protector, then you know that my goal is righteous.”

Longg blinked slowly, and at this moment, Kagami had the feeling she was about to get eaten alive, mauled to death or something even worse. She had answered too frankly, and she had made a fool of herself by believing that the Longg could see her true heart. Instead of all that she had expected, however… The dragon kwami laughed, a genuine, loud laugh, too loud for a being their size. Master Fu and Tikki were the only ones not looking concerned as the furniture started flying around the room. Kagami stole a worried glance at Marinette who seemed just as lost as she was. Finally, the pieces furniture came back to their original places.

“Oh, you are quite daring!” Longg said, their smile still wide. “But I respect that and I like your answer. Let’s get this transformation a try, then! Or perhaps you want me to explain how it all works?”

“When I put the necklace on and say your magic words, I will transform, is that it?” Kagami asked.
“For now, yes. If we stay together for a few more years, who knows, perhaps you’ll be able to do it wordlessly!” Longg said. “Very studious, aren’t you? We’ve got that in common! Yes, the words. And then, there is my power. You said you were a fencer… I am sure I will be able to work something out that will suit you. Foil, épée?”

“Sabre,” Kagami said, and judging by the expression on Longg’s face, it was an answer they liked a lot.

“And to release your most special power…” the dragon kwami stopped and looked thoughtful for a moment. “We’ll keep it a secret for now, but I’ll tell you the words when it will be time. Would you want us to transform now? The words are…” And with that, they zapped and whispered in Kagami’s ear.

“I… Yes, I will give it a try now,” Kagami said. “Would it be alright if we did it here?” Longg nodded.

So that was it, then. She looked at the pendant. She could hardly believe it was here. Hesitantly, she touched it. Yes, it was no ordinary piece of jewellery, she could feel it pulsating as though it was a heart of some sorts. Or perhaps she was imagining that, was it her own heart? The pearl was glassy and warm, smooth and as soon as she touched it, it glowed a bright red. Longg was still looking at her, expectantly, their tail slowly wagging. Kagami turned to Marinette who hadn’t opened her mouth once this far.

“Can you… Can you help be put it on?” Kagami whispered. “I am not sure if the clasps…”

“Yes, don’t worry about it,” Marinette smiled. “Just a little higher, your hands, I’m going to push your hair to the side so that I can… Alright, done!”

The pendant looked nice on her, Kagami thought as she glanced at her reflection in the small mirror Master Fu handed her. But before she had the time to turn around to face her girlfriend, Marinette wrapped her arms around Kagami’s waist from behind. They stayed like that in silence for a little while, their eyes closed, Marinette enjoying the warmth of the girl she liked. Kagami had put her hands on Marinette and leaned into the embrace. They could have stayed like this for hours. It was only when Master Fu cleared his throat that the moment was over. Kagami took a step back. Longg gave her an encouraging smile.

“You’re going to do great,” Marinette told her. “I know it.”
“Well, if Ladybug says so,” Kagami almost laughed. She breathed in and out, slowly. The world started to fade and shrink around her, turning entirely black. All the presences around her vanished, Master Fu, Marinette, Tikki, until she was the only person in this dark void. She and the dragon. “Longg, crown me!” she said, loud and clear.

She could feel power coursing through her veins, her entire being deconstructed and rebuilt in the blink of an eye, something spreading from her chest and covering her entire body in an instant. Her feet lifted off the ground. There was someone else with her, she didn’t feel alone in her own body. So this was what transforming felt like. She opened her eyes and the yellowish eyes that looked back at her startled her. She had some kind of dark red domino mask, of course, that was to be expected, it went as low as her cheekbones. Her hair had mostly stayed the same, if now a dark copper colour.

What she hadn’t seen coming, however… Hesitantly, she touched the two deep red horns that had grown above her ears. They were… Surprisingly big, going past the top of her head, yet they were quite light too. She hesitantly poked them… That did feel like real horn too. Well at least she had avoided the tail. And she wouldn’t be be rocking a terrible skintight bodysuit with an animal print either. She only understood now what Tikki meant when she said that she and the dragon kwami would get along. This suit oozed with power and style, and yes, nobility.

Saying that she was dressed to impress would have been the understatement of the year. If the horns weren’t enough, the rest of her appearance would have done the job. Of course, some parts of the suit were skintight, her arms needed to move freely. The cuirass, unlike the scale-shaped shoulder pads, was not here for the show, its material looked quite solid yet flexible, the pearl was embedded in it. Its ornamentation was scarce. its design sleek, intimidating. She had tabi boots of some kind, she noticed. And she was hovering a few centimetres above the floor.

As soon as she became aware of it, she was back on the ground. She turned around to look at Master Fu and Marinette. Marinette who all but jumped on her and kissed her soundly, which Kagami didn’t mind in the slightest. Her girlfriend was proud of her. Somehow, the thought made her want to smile even more, if she even could. And she was floating again. Oh, she’d have to learn how to control it someday. But for now it didn’t matter, she was just happy. Finally, Marinette took a step back, a little out of breath.

“I think I’m going to draw you right here and now,” Marinette tried her best not to gush. “Wait, don’t you have an artefact of some sorts?”

“Well, Longg did ask me what sword I used, so I suppose this will be my power,” Kagami said. Master Fu shook his head, his eyes twinkling. Was a sort of great prank meant to happen now?
“Picture the idea of a sword, any sword really,” he said as he de-transformed. “Oh, I haven’t seen this in quite some time! Fret not!” he added, laughter in his voice as Kagami palmed. Next to him, Tikki and Wayzz too seemed to be waiting for something spectacular to happen.

With no warning, the dark pearl glowed and something seemed to float out of the ball of light. A hilt. The hilt of a sword was stuck in her chest. Kagami’s first instinct was to panic, it was exactly what Marinette did. Yet neither Tikki not Wayzz were worried, Master Fu was openly amused. Was she meant to… Hesitantly, Kagami put her hand on the hilt and drew the sword. The light only grew brighter and brighter. It disappeared when Kagami finally pulled the sword out of her chest completely. That… Hadn’t hurt at all. The sabre was only slightly heavier than the one she used, its hilt an ensemble of intricate ornaments. The sheath was made of cherry tree.

“It would be best if you fought like that, only use the blade when it is absolutely necessary,” Longg spoke in perfect Japanese, though Kagami couldn’t tell where their voice had come from. “This sword’s power… You will discover it soon enough, and the words to activate it as well. I just thought that taking it all at once would be overwhelming.”

And Kagami had to agree with Longg, though she did so silently — they had to be speaking inside her mind, she was the only person in the room to hear them. This was a nice start already. She slid the sword inside the buckle. It fitted perfectly. She stole a glance at the clock in Master Fu’s living room. Oh, they still had quite some time before her mum would return. Would it be too daring to… No, this was the perfect opportunity to discover the powers of the Dragon kwami. But would the Guardian approve of that? He seemed to have guessed her question before she could open her mouth.

“There is an inner courtyard in this building, and the other tenants are never home this early,” the old man said. “There is little I can tell you now, but if you’ve got any more questions, I am here to answer them. I believe Tikki told you everything you needed to know about when to wear the pendant, but just in case, don’t hesitate to pay me a visit!”

Kagami nodded. She de-transformed and went to take her coat, her shoes and her schoolbag, Longg hovering next to her. It would take some time for them to have the close relationship Tikki and Marinette. The dragon didn’t feel like perching themselves on Kagami’s shoulder, and it was fine. She ended up not refusing the box of tea the old man tried to give her as a celebratory gift of some sorts. Marinette did not walk as much as she danced in anticipation next to her. If she had to be honest with herself, she could barely contain herself. Master Fu lead them to the courtyard, humming to himself. Marinette mouthed a small “ready?” and Kagami nodded.

“Tikki, Spots on!”

“Lon—”
“Wait!” Master Fu called loudly. “I need to know… What do you want me to call you in front of the others?”

Kagami frowned. She hadn’t thought of that detail. Or rather, she had filled entire pages with her eventual superhero name if she one day became one of them. Royalty was out of the window, they already had a queen and a lady, doing something animal-themed or power-themed was risky as well. She couldn’t exactly give herself away by choosing a Japanese name, there were only so many brilliant fencers from that country here in Paris. Yes, as much as she had liked the sound of Ryuuko, this was too risky. Not something as unimaginative as Marinette’s choice… Perhaps she could go with nobility after all.

“The Crimson Empress,” she finally said. “That is what they will call me. Longg, crown me!”

Ladybug jumped and effortlessly landed on the roof nearest roof. Kagami, no, the Empress, that was who she was, she reminded herself, crouched and tried to do the same. Something within her told her to avoid putting too much strength into the jump. She had no illusions, the first try would not be entirely successful. She had no reason to be afraid, Marinette would be there to catch her if things went wrong. She soared into the air. And though her own landing was not very elegant — she’d really have to learn how to calculate her jumps more accurately, it felt like a vertical lunge of some sorts— she considered this first leap a success. Or had she landed at all? Her feet were on something solid, yet she was metres apart from Marinette, floating above the streets, stepping on… Air?

“I think that’s part of your powers, you know, with you being a dragon and all!” Ladybug yelled. “Wind and water powers? I’m sure you can also form clouds and step on them. I bet you could even step on water if you tried! Nice first jump, by the way!”

“Was yours that bad?” the Crimson Empress asked loudly. It was windy up here. “Mine felt quite clumsy…”

“Almost broke my front teeth!” Ladybug laughed. “Hey, try to get closer to me? Screaming gets tiring really quickly!”

Kagami breathed in and out slowly. She was standing on literally nothing, without her even thinking about it. Maybe it was an emotional thing? Perhaps she could make these gushes of wind form wherever she wanted them to? And maybe clouds too? Hesitantly, she took a step forward. And to her surprise, she did not plummet to her death. She had guessed right! Which meant… She
took one new step forward and another one, faster this time. Perhaps she could… A stronger gust of wind propelled her forward and this time, she landed right next to Ladybug. Still not a perfect landing, but at least she had landed on her feet.

“You did great! Say, how about I give you a slightly livelier tour of Paris’s rooftops today? It’ll be quick enough and you’ll be at home long before your mum returns. If that sounds alright with you? I understand if it’s too much for today,” Ladybug said.

“I… I’m not sure this is the right time for a grand debut,” the Crimson Empress looked to the side. “But I really want to explore Paris with you, like… Look, here is what I suggest. I can’t exactly parade in broad daylight— I know, I know, it looks like it is nighttime already, but most people are still awake. I need to be kept a secret until the time is right so… Tonight? When most people are fast asleep, past my theoretical bedtime. You could teach me the ropes? I won’t be useful if all I know is how not to kill myself when I jump really high.”

“I… You’re really taking this seriously,” Ladybug said, her voice full admiration. “Let’s do it like that. I’ll take you home but we need to go somewhere first. Follow me, I know a more discreet route!”

It was a very energetic Kagami who greeted her mother when she unlocked the door. That conference had gone well, and Itsuko Tsurugi was happy to find bread from the Dupain Cheng bakery on the kitchen table that evening. The meal was quiet though not uncomfortably so. After hours of talking and translating, Kagami’s mum was more worn out than she was after her fencing classes. The two women soon went to their respective rooms, Kagami to read and her mother to get some well-deserved rest. Minutes ticked by and Kagami found herself looking at her alarm clock more and more often. At 11:30PM exactly, she got out of bed.

She made sure not to make the parquet floor creak as she walked to the living room. She opened the window to her balcony. The moon was hidden by the cloudy sky. The night was still young… She would make the most of it. Ladybug was near, she could feel it. Kagami put on the pendant and Longg appeared next to her. She said the words and vanished in the night.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

The thing about getting a Miraculous from Master Fu in the show is that your family/significant other/friend needs to be in great danger, and you get no explanation whatsoever. That’s a very responsible thing to do right there, thank you, Muten Roshi
So I wanted to do things a little differently. And to introduce Lore™! And a couple of explanations. Yes, Longg uses they/them because I always found that kwamis following a gender binary was weird.

And Kagami is the Crimson Empress! Why not follow her canon hero name? Because I had already written a few more chapters after this one and was too lazy to change. That and the reasons Kagami gives. And this way, we can have a Lady, a Queen and an Empress.

I've watched Ikari Gozen, I posted my thoughts about it on Tumblr (you can read the post [here](http://example.com)). Itsuko Tsurugi would never treat her daughter the way Tomoe Tsurugi does, not after all that character development.

Oh, and speaking of Tumblr… My Tumblr! It's [here](http://example.com).

That Utena reference is pretty obvious! But it was necessary, and it made sense, so hey!

À lundi prochain !
All the books she needed for the day were in her bag, and the rest of her school things were there too. The chocolates? Had she— There they were! She wasn’t too fond of the tradition herself, she had never given chocolates to anyone, she had managed to scare all the boys back in Tokyo into not giving her any. Truly, the date meant nothing to her, she would call Valentine’s Day a terrible tradition, and she had told Marinette so right away when she had brought it up during fencing practice. Marinette hadn’t looked too disappointed. Well perhaps a little, even though she was very understanding.

And so for the first time in years, Kagami had made her own chocolates. It had taken some time to get them to not only taste good but look good, most of her Sunday afternoon in fact. She hadn’t been entirely unhappy to eat the unsuccessful first tries. She really hated all that marketing around the 14th of February, that certainly was the sort of thing that could turn someone into an akuma, she was sure of this. But perhaps they could do it differently, the two of them. Making chocolates would be well worth the effort if this could bring a smile to her girlfriend’s face. She put the small box in her bag and looked around her room again. Yes, everything was under control.

She went over her plan one final time. It couldn’t possibly fail, she had thought of at least seven different scenarii and each of them, even the least optimistic ones, ended with her giving her girlfriend the small box no matter what. She was sure Marinette would enjoy it greatly, probably a lot more than her but this did not matter. The chocolates would be phase four. And she would have plenty of time for the first three phases, most of the day in fact. Longg was sleeping in the small bed Marinette had made for them. Kagami put it in her bag. All was right with the world.

She stole a glance at her reflection in the mirror. All things considered, she looked… Incredibly ordinary today. It really didn’t show that she spent every other night patrolling the streets of Paris, or that she was eating a lot more as a consequence of how demanding and exhausting it was. She had yet to fight an akuma, an amok or any villain at all, she had kept a low profile and it seemed that no website had posted a single article related to her, for the time being. Yes, she had done a great job of hiding herself from the public eye, while still managing to get acquainted with Longg — it had taken her some time to figure it out, but lychees were their favourite food— and her fellow heroes — Carapace was a great partner, second only to Ladybug, and Queen Bee was a close third. Chat Noir… Chat Noir was Chat Noir, and great in his own way.

Kagami switched off the lights and made sure to lock the door when she left. If she was collected when she got out of the flat, it soon changed. Outside, everything was hellish, a sea of people dressed in pink handing out flyers for restaurants with special menus for couples, coupons, all sorts of things and some other tasteless advertising. It almost made her want to use her power to go to school without having to face the crowd. Not that she did, it would have been irresponsible, and her legs were still stiff from all the fencing and cloud-walking of the day before. Oh, this was
exactly the type of climate that could make someone the ideal tool for Hawk Moth. It had been Kim last year, and Kagami sincerely hoped she could avoid such chaos today.

Saying that the sidewalks around lycée Carnot were littered with all these useless handbills wouldn’t have been that much of an overstatement. Kagami almost felt sorry for the people handing them out, these jackets looked neither comfortable nor warm enough for today’s weather, sunny yet one of the coldest days of the year. She wouldn’t be seeing Marinette before her last period this morning, Kagami reminded herself. She sent her a quick “good morning” text. It wasn’t a long way to her German classroom. Herr Schneider had prepared a list of useful Valentistag-themed vocabulary. She decided that rolling her eyes was not disrespectful in this context.

Marjane was dressed exceptionally well today, Kagami noted as she greeted the other students in her ancient Greek class. Very well-dressed and very stressed out, too. She was an actress, she knew how to hide these kind of things well enough, her hands did not twitch, she did not tap her feet repeatedly. However, she spoke slightly faster than she usually would. Kagami didn’t have to guess what was the cause of it, Marjane told her right away. Adrien had wanted to introduce her to his father, who had consequently booked a restaurant for lunch. Yes, that was a perfectly good reason to be stressed out.

Kagami knew that cheering other people up, even the ones she was close to, was not something she was good at, she was no Marinette. Fencing advice? She was great at giving these. More practical things, not so much. Truly, she had never met Gabriel Agreste in person, and she was glad for that, though she wouldn’t tell Adrien that. Oh, he had better not let his father get away with his detestable behaviour if he was to act the way he had around her mother not so long ago. In other words, she simply hoped that things would go well for Marjane and her boyfriend.

She was relieved to find that Mme Vidal did not try to make a lesson centred around romance; after two classes almost entirely dedicated to learning love-related vocabulary, this was a nice change of pace. Marinette too was kind enough not to mention the date. Her body language however, told Kagami otherwise. Her suspicion had been correct. Her girlfriend looked like someone who had a plan, something she was trying to hide from her. Not the ominous kind of smirk, rather an amused and smug one. Well, two could play the game, and besides, she too had a plan of her own, and her secret weapon would be chocolates.

She let her mind wander for a little while, she knew everything she needed to know about the Renaissance, at least enough to get a great mark for their next test. How she would be able to balance her love life, her school life, her hero life while preparing for the the regional fencing competition in April, she didn’t know. She would do everything right, of course, she wouldn’t allow things to go any other way, but still. Trying to anticipate things this much with so many grey areas was no good, Kagami knew it all too well by now. Today, she would try to only think about the next couple of hours for a change.
The bell rung and Marinette’s stomach growled. Now, Kagami thought, was time for phase one. She sounded so machiavellian when she put it that way… Exceptionally, they would have three free periods before their next class, and though Kagami didn’t like that Mme Berthes was missing, that left her with plenty of time. She had told Marinette that she would probably be going home for lunch. Oh, her girlfriend would never see this coming. Yet that smile was back on her face when she and Kagami finally got outside the school. What it was for, she had no idea. She’d find out sooner or later. Now came the more difficult part of phase one.

“Hey, I was thinking—”

“Marinette, would you—”

The two girl blinked. Oh, this was too good. Or a terrible twist of fate. Kagami had noticed that her wearing the Dragon Miraculous had made her luckier, which made sense. Was this luck too? Marinette had to keep herself from grinning too widely. They had had the exact same idea, Kagami was sure of it. But perhaps not entirely the same. Perhaps Marinette had thought of a different place, perhaps she had made a reservation using a different name. She had to ask, and so she gestured a small “you go first.”

“So, I wanted to surprise you with a restaurant date,” Marinette said, “at le troquet d’Ange. I made a reservation, under the name Dupain-Cheng-Tsurugi.”

That was it. That was too good. Having two meddlesome luck-powered kwamis had certainly made things even worse. Because, of course Kagami had done exactly the same thing. Oh, that was the kind of situation only they could get into, and it would be the sort of story she’d tell years and years after. They were such idiots, the two of them. Marinette gave her a confused and mildly distressed look. That made Kagami want to laugh and to give her girlfriend a kiss. Instead, she said, “I’ve had the exact same idea and I’ve made the exact same reservation with both our names too. So… I want to ask you on a date… You know where, and under what name I’ve made the reservation.”

She tried her best to keep a straight face, and did a poor job at that. Her eyes were too bright with mirth to fool anyone. Marinette’s expression of incredulity soon turned into laughter. She was still teary-eyed when they reached their destination. Being carefree felt refreshing, and with Viperion and Queen Bee on the lookout for anything suspicious, there was nothing to worry about. Nino and Alya would be able to enjoy their super secret date, and unless things went poorly between
Marjane and M. Agreste… Today could be a great day. Perhaps not as romantic as a younger Marinette would have hoped, but a great Valentine’s Day nonetheless.

It was no wonder why Marinette had developed an interest in the small restaurant, and why Kagami had decided to give it a try herself. It was well-hidden, yet its reputation preceded it. In a few years, perhaps it would turn into an expensive and very chic place. The chefs were just that good, according to Alya’s mum. And as someone who rarely had nice things to say about other cooks, let alone compliment them, her words of praise truly meant something. The waiters opened the door for them with happy faces — happy waiters? In this city? The sight was a rare but a welcome one.

“You must be Misses Dupain Cheng and Tsurugi!” the stocky woman said. “Welcome!”

“That is us,” Kagami confirmed and Marinette nodded.

“We merged your two reservations into one! It’s the first time something like this has happened to us!” the gangly man next to her laughed. “Here! And feel free to put the flowers wherever you want!” he added, motioning towards a table in the middle of which stood a bouquet of red and pink roses.

That was… Unexpectedly nice of them, Kagami thought. The waiters hadn’t mistaken them for good friends. And for their first public date not hidden from the rest of the world, it was a nice surprise. Nobody was staring at them, or looking at them disapprovingly. The mismatch of formica tables and chairs paired with the discreet jazz music made the troquet feel like a laid back, homely place. This lunch date could be enjoyable. The thought emboldened her. She took Marinette by the hand and lead her to their table. The menu looked nothing short of mouth-watering and they spent a good five minutes trying to find the sort of food they’d enjoy the most. Everything sounded delicious. They nearly ended up choosing the same dish.

“I will have the lentil cakes with mint yogurt ,” Kagami said. “And for you, the cauliflower gnocchis, is that right?”

Marinette nodded and the waiter went to the kitchen right away, taking the menus with him. Phase one was over, and now was only the beginning of the second part of her foolproof plan. She wouldn’t overthink this too much, still. Kagami stole a glance at her bag before she turned back to her girlfriend and rested her palm on hers. And she had only seen Marinette like that once or twice. She was happy, of course, Kagami could tell when she wasn’t fairly easily now. It was not the kind of joy that would have Marinette want to throw her arms in the air and dance and jump, she was very tranquil after all.
Marinette’s eyes were bright and the slight smile on her lips sent a breath of warmth in Kagami’s chest. She looked serene and content. The sight made Kagami want to kiss her girlfriend in the middle of the crowded restaurant. She found herself smiling back at Marinette, who gave her hand a slight squeeze again. It felt safe here, safe and homely and good. And for a first date out… It was everything she had hoped for. She didn’t mind the roses at all, they were a nice addition and made it all the more romantic… That was a lot more enjoyable than she had planned.

“I’m glad we’ve both thought of the same place in the end,” Marinette said. “I knew you would try to surprise me, and asking me out was definitely something I knew you would do, but…”

“Wait, you knew?” Kagami hoped she didn’t sound too surprised. “I guess I’m no longer so good at being mysterious, cool and aloof…”

“I mean, you’re still a little secretive and your poker face is as good as ever if not better, and I still think you’re really cool” Marinette remarked. “And not being aloof is a good thing! But I think I’m starting to know you really well, so guessing what you had planned…”

“I guess you’re right,” Kagami nodded sheepishly. “It doesn’t mean I’ll quit trying to surprise you, though.”

“Well I sure hope so,” Marinette laughed. “Had you planned on going somewhere else at first? I’m a little curious now.”

“I would be lying to you if I said I hadn’t thought of a few other places,” Kagami confirmed. “But I can’t give all my secrets away now, can I? You had mentioned this place more than once and I thought… Well perhaps you’d enjoy a date here more? I don’t know if you’ve noticed but swordsmanship and literature are my forte but romance is not.”

“You know I’d enjoy almost any place if you were there with me, right?” Marinette smiled. “And I disagree with you there, you’re a romantic at heart too, you just need to allow yourself to be one. It doesn’t have to be beds of roses or anything like that, it could be… Just us is enough, don’t you think? You’re not bad at romance at all! And swordsmanship and literature… That’s pretty romantic, I’d say!”

Kagami had no idea what to answer to that, and she felt her cheeks heat up and the blush reach her freckles. The waiters arrived with their lunch, which prevented her from arguing with Marinette’s last remark. Not that she minded the interruption, these lentil cakes were divine, and she wasn’t
exaggerating. And from the look on Marinette’s face, her dish was equally delicious. They took their time, enjoying every single forkful and making conversation. Minutes flew by with them even noticing. Yes, Kagami admitted to herself, she didn’t like most of these codes and traditions, but it didn’t make her less of a romantic. She was surprised to find that the thought didn’t bother her.

This was with no doubt the best restaurant in the entire world, or at least the best they had been to so far. Kagami was sure that everything she’d eat after this would seem bland, heavy and poorly cooked. That was, until the waitress came with the menus asking them if everything had went well — “it was amazing,” Marinette said— and what kind of dessert they would have. It didn’t take them long to decide this time; they followed Mme Césaire’s advice.

And so, they chatted about Marinette’s internship while waiting for their French toasts, and when the waitress returned with their dessert — they would share— Kagami was a lot more knowledgeable about the organisation of the Paris Fashion Week than she had ever been. She could have listened to her girlfriend talk passionately about nearly anything, her internship was no exception. Each question Kagami had, it had elicited an enthusiastic explanation. And Marinette would have the opportunity to put her skills to the test very soon. The shooting of Nino’s short film was drawing near, very near, and she’d be the official wardrobe supervisor and fashion designer for the film.

“He really is going for a B-movie look,” Marinette said. “I mean, it’s fun and it forces me to consider other aesthetics, and to work with a tight budget. I’m almost done with the caps!”

“Do you want us to go to a secondhand shop after school tomorrow, if you still need some things?” Kagami offered. This was definitely not the kind of place she’d usually go to, but if that could help her girlfriend… “Or maybe the day after tomorrow, because…”

“Because of fencing practice and that despite all the extra training you get,” Marinette motioned towards Kagami’s pendant, “you don’t want to make half-baked excuses and miss all the extra lessons your mother has decided you should take, I get it.”

“I think mum helped choreograph all the fights for the film so that it’ll be flashy but still somewhat realistic,” Kagami said. “That will still count as practice, with Adrien. But with that competition in April I want to be as ready as can be.”

“I’m sure you will b— Oh, dessert!”

It took exactly one bite for Marinette to decide that even her parents couldn’t do French toasts as well as the cooks at Le troquet d’Ange. Kagami, who had trusted her with choosing the dessert,
was not disappointed. It only took them a minute or two to wolf down the entire thing. The slight hint of nutmeg, the perfect amount of sugar, the blueberries on the side made it impossible to resist. And thus ended the most delicious meal Marinette and Kagami had ever had together, at least so far. There would be many more to come, she silently decided. Marinette thought the same.

They split the bill — it hadn’t been terribly expensive but still quite dear — and left the restaurant sated and happy. And now was time for phase three. Kagami hesitated for a moment. Should she really take her girlfriend to the Jardin des Plantes in the middle of winter? Or perhaps somewhere else? She had never been there herself, it could make for a good discovery and they still had a lot of time before their maths class, but… Marinette walked away from her for a moment, mouthing “have to make a call”. Kagami hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, she truly hadn’t. Still, she heard almost everything.

“We’ll be there in… fifteen minutes, sounds good to you? In front of the Porte des Arts? Alright then, thanks Jalil,” Marinette said and with that, she put her phone back in her bag. She turned to Kagami and beamed. “We’re going to the Louvre!”

This alone would have made Kagami want to kiss her girlfriend soundly, and she did. She had only visit the museum twice in her life. But this wasn’t just it. When Jalil Kubdel greeted them and asked them to follow him, she realised that this wouldn’t be an ordinary guided tour. They dodged most visitors and Kagami put the pieces together a few seconds before the young conservator unlocked a back door, making sure that nobody would see them. Was what they were doing even legal? She chased the thought away. It didn’t even matter. Marinette had managed to find a way for them to visit the Louvre’s storerooms.

There was so many works of art here that the visitors would rarely see. They didn’t stop to unveil all of the canvases and sculptures covered in cloth, otherwise they would have been there for days. Not that it would have been a terrible thing, on the contrary, but it wouldn’t have worked with Marinette’s plan. Such an odd atmosphere reigned here, one of mystery and prestige, and it made the experience all the more thrilling. Kagami gave Marinette’s hand a small squeeze. Jalil knew perfectly where they were going.

They stopped in front of a massive cupboard labeled “16th century armoury” and Kagami’s grin widened and she had to stop herself from squirming with excitement. Jalil put on his latex gloves and gave each of the girls a pair too before he asked them to take a step back. He was making this a lot more dramatic than it needed to be, they would probably have no use for the gloves, and Kagami knew there was nothing dangerous here. At least she hoped so. And yet somehow, Jalil made it work. The metallic creak of the cupboard being forced open made Marinette clench her teeth.
The label hadn’t been deceptive. Ornate spears and muskets with butts made out of precious woods were carefully stored, each more beautiful than the other. These were ceremonial objects, not meant for fighting but designed to impress. And after centuries, it still worked. Kagami’s pendant felt warm, and she had to hide the pearl so that Jalil wouldn’t notice its glow. Her eyes caught the glimpse of a rectangular case with a very interesting name on it. The conservator looked at Marinette quizzically, and the girl nodded. Carefully, he took the box and put it on a nearby table. He opened it slowly, as though doing it any faster would damage the object inside.

“La Vouivre,” Jalil whispered as he motioned for the two girls to come closer. “We don’t show it often. The sheath is made out of cherry tree, which as you know is quite unusual in itself… We have yet to find out who the sabre belonged to, but judging from the lavish materials and the craftsmanship, it was certainly an aristocrat’s weapon. It’s surprisingly light for a sword of this era. The dragon ornaments on the hilt and guard in particular… Well, I had hoped Julie would be there to tell you more about it… As it turns out, she’s on her coffee break so…”

But Kagami was no longer listening to him. This sabre looked so familiar, and for a rather simple reason. It was the perfect copy of the one she could summon as the Crimson Empress. A myriad of emotions coursed through her veins. She knew that not all of them were hers. It was an odd mixture of nostalgia, surprise and admiration for the beauty of the object. Had Jalil not been around, Longg would have flown out of her bag to see the sword with their own eyes. Kagami knew she wouldn’t really be able to touch it, there was a reason why such a fragile object wouldn’t be displayed often. It didn’t mean she didn’t want to.

“Thank you,” Kagami whispered to Marinette as Jalil closed the case and put it back in the cupboard, “thank you for taking me here…”

“You’ll thank me once our visit is over,” Marinette smiled.

They followed their guide through a labyrinth of shelves, ancient artefacts and paintings, a maze Jalil seemed to be quite familiar with. He took the time to show them a few other works of art, and Kagami suspected Marinette had done her research ahead of time. She wondered how many people had been aware of the existence of kwamis and miraculous wielders over the course of history, considereing how many hints of that there were in so many works of arts, though she suspected that Jalil over-interpreted some paintings to make them fit with his theory, seeing them as clues in an investigation when they were art before anything else.

It was a rather panicked young man who showed them the wait out — so it had been illegal after all— but the two girls were happy to ditch him. They found themselves in the Petite Galerie with still a good hour and a half to visit the museum. They wouldn’t be able to see everything today… It would be the perfect excuse to come back here. Marinette was an excellent guide, and Kagami decided that she’d learn everything she could about the Musée d’Orsay and its collections when they’d visit it — it didn’t matter that the school outing had been cancelled after the Grand Palais
fiasco, if anything it would allow them to go on a date there.

They dodged the Mona Lisa and the mob gathered around it, they almost lost track of time looking at the Egyptian sarcophagi and Flemish paintings. Kagami only let go of Marinette’s hand to make sure that the fourth and final phase of her plan was complete. They were in the Tuileries Garden, with still a couple of minutes left before they’d have to worry about being late, when Kagami remembered about the chocolates. She did not hesitate a second and opened her bag.

“I know you had told me you didn’t want anything for Valentine’s Day but… I mean look at us, we’re here,” Kagami laughed. “So I made chocolates for you and you’d better not tell me you’ve made some for me too!”

“I haven’t,” Marinette shook her head. “And you really shouldn’t have,” she added as she took the small box Kagami gave her, “but it’s very sweet…” She put the chocolates in her backpack. “So thank you, for today and for everything and for being you.”

Kagami kissed her on the spot, not giving a single care in the world about the passers-by and smiled into the kiss as Marinette put her arms around her neck. This was perfect.

They had to run to the nearest metro station to not be late for school, and barely made it in time. Alya and Nino grinned at them knowingly. Their date seemed to have gone quite well, she sported a black, antique-looking torque with golden beads. It suited her, Kagami decided. Viperion and Queen Bee truly had done their job well, Hawk Moth hadn’t shown up, Mayura too had kept a low profile, and Volpina, who rarely made an appearance these days, hadn’t been troublesome either. M. Granvillet dissertated on… Whatever it was he was supposed to teach them. Not that Kagami cared. Marinette gave her hand a squeeze under the table and a small smile and it was all she needed to be content.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

I tagged “En garde” as fluff, and I think it has more than earned it with this chapter!

A few things, but not too many!

本命チョコ, honmei choco! You don't give them to anyone, only the person you really like!

Le troquet d'Ange doesn't exist, unlike le Saïdoune, it's a mashup of other existing
restaurants!

I can't say I know what the Louvre's storerooms are like, I've never been allowed to visit them, only a happy few get to do so, and most of them work at the museum, so I am probably dead wrong!

La Vouivre is French for “the Wyvern”!

As always, my Tumblr is here! Got questions for me? Want to see previews of the incoming chapters? It's where you can do it.

I'm still very much French, the mistakes are not intended…

I'll see you next Monday!
The world shrunk around Kagami, and grew completely dark. None of this agitation would get to her. She knew exactly what she had to do, she had done it all before and she’d do it as many times as she needed to. Next to her, Adrien readied himself. These fencing masks were slightly bigger than the one she’d usually use, the overall clothes were a little baggier too but it was what she had to wear. She warmed up again, waiting for the signal. Everything was dead silent, she was right where she needed to be, her en garde pose was on point. Time was suspended. Until the words rang out. It was like a spark that sent everything into motion.

She lunged and Adrien sidestepped her sabre. She extended her arm, only to find her attack parried. She tried one final time, forcing Adrien to step back; and was rewarded with a touch. They walked back to their original places and chatted for a little while. The bout resumed and Adrien was the one who tried to attack her this time, aiming at her shoulder. She moved her sabre against his an a sweeping movement, beating it out of line. This left her with an opportunity to score another point, she took it, giving a twirling motion to her riposte thrust that would have made Ando Tsurugi scoff and M. D’Argencourt clap loudly. In fact, the fencing master had to stop himself from doing so.

Adrien’s fencing was sluggish compared to her own, this was confirmed once again in a matter of seconds. He feinted, but when he tried to truly attack her, her riposte came lightning-fast and effortless. He dodged again and again, with little chance to fight back. Why wouldn’t he parry? He could only last for so long. He kept on retreating. Futile. At last, the touch was hers. They headed back to their marks again, Kagami with perfect composure. The same could not be said about Adrien, there was annoyance in his steps and his shoulders looked very tense.

He fiddled with his sabre and shook his head. Once again, it was he who initiated the contact, trying to slash at her fencing mask once again. She parried, but Adrien kept on pressing his sabre against her. She pressed back, her arm trembling as she did so. Adrien did not give up and pushed her back. He was forcing her to yield ground now, each of his attacks more and more brutal. She parried and dodged blow after blow, not able to step forwards and change the odds one bit. They were dangerously close to the guardrail now, and Adrien’s sabre finally hit her arm. Hard.

But he did not stop and soon enough, Kagami’s back was against the guardrail and she could no longer take another step back. And Adrien’s sabre was once again pressed against hers. Her sword arm was getting sore… She tried to get the sabres away from her fencing mask, pushing with all her might; and this did it. Adrien stumbled backwards, almost drunkenly so, and turned his back to her. His legs wobbled under him now. He threw his sabre away and took his fencing mask in his hands, shaking.
 “… Aaaaand cut!” Nino spoke through his megaphone. “Great job once again, dudes! Maybe one last take, only one, I promise. I just want to make sure everything is alright for the closeups and we should be good!”

Kagami let out a shaky breath and Adrien finally took off the bulky helmet, smiling. They had shot this scene fifteen times, or maybe sixteen, Kagami had lost count of how many times. Not that it was painful or annoying to do, the “combat helms” were a little bulky and the “combat suits” decidedly a little too large for them, but it was all for a good reason. And she had to admit, her mum’s choreography was really good and worked well with Nino’s story. She took off her own fencing helmet and sat on the gymnasium’s floor. Or rather what had been Lycée Carnot’s gymnasium until this Saturday morning.

The entire school had turned into a series of sets for Nino’s short film. Had Jagged Stone’s name not been attached to it, it would have been a different story, the headteacher wouldn’t have allowed for any of this, really. But some names could open doors. Jagged Stone had fallen in love with the project back when Marinette had told him about it, and though Nino had declined the eccentric rock star’s proposal to “lend” him a team of camerapersons, he had gladly accepted the rest of his offer, namely a bit of help with every other aspect of his film.

Some of the set pieces would use had come straight from the man’s older music videos from the 90s. And while the young director was busy shooting his film, Jagged Stone too was busy with his own video for “Lovers of the Stars”, his latest song. Nathaniel and Nino had storyboarded it, with some help from professionals and the benediction of Mr Stone himself. It was ambitious, shooting the entirety of the short in two days, and doing so without so many people willing to help Nino for free would have been impossible. While Kagami and Adrien had nothing to do for the next five minutes, the same wasn’t true for everyone around them.

“Has anyone seen Marc?” Nino shouted over the tumult.

“They’re helping on set eleven,” someone — Mireille Caquet?— answered.

“Tell them that we’ll need their help with the smoke machine on set five soon,” Nino spoke in his megaphone, before turning back to the camerapersons to see the footage they had just shot on the three cameras with stars in his eyes.

Nino’s friends and his girlfriend were here to help, of course, but then again they had been there for almost all of his previous short films. The Première and Terminal students who studied cinema hadn’t been that interested in the project at first. They had had a sudden change of heart, and had agreed to lend Nino everything he needed, many of them had volunteered to help with the lights
and the cameras. The students in plastic arts had also helped Nathaniel with the set pieces and the props they hadn’t been able to find at the flea market, one of them was checking on Adrien’s modified sabre to make sure the fake switch, the “pain intensifier”, was still working. They would help with the spaceship models too.

Some of the drama students had managed to become extras, though Nino still sticked with the actors he had thought of for the main roles. He was aware that most hadn’t come because they were interested in his project, but that didn’t matter to him as much as the fact that he was directing something much bigger than anything he had done so far. Besides, it seemed that everyone involved was having a good time. Was he a little tense? Of course. Not everything had worked well, there were still the minor annoyances every now and then, it was far from perfect. Despite all of that, he was enjoying this immensely.

Left and right, people were busying themselves. Marinette was giving the actual actors — Kagami and Adrien were only here for the stunts— their accessories and outfits, while Alix and a boy looking like a store brand version of Adrien were making sure that the tape that served as marks for the scene weren’t unstuck. The lighting team was making sure to place the reflectors to their original places. Luka Couffaine, who had made a better impression on Kagami now that they had finally met in person was checking on his microphones while Alya was scribbling on the clapboard. M. D’Argencourt made his way to the two fencers, bringing them their bottles of water. He had this child-like excitement in his eyes as he chatted with his students.

“I wish I could have come earlier to watch the two of you! I must say I am very impressed!” the master said proudly. “How long have you trained for this?”

While Adrien answered the question, Kagami couldn’t help but feel a spark of jealousy as she watched Marinette laugh with Samuel Mons before giving him his combat suit for the second time today. The young man was in his early twenties, and a student at the Conservatoire national supérieur d’art dramatique, and Kagami supposed he was somewhat attractive and charming, though she didn’t see it. He’d be one of the leading actors for the film, and someone Marinette would spend quite some time around until Sunday evening. But the spark died out when her girlfriend looked at her fondly and scribbled “Just doing what I must and I’m yours” in capital letters on a piece of cardboard she held above her head. The wording made Kagami blush.

“Just doing what I must” took more time than Kagami had wanted it to. As Marinette explained Aïssatou Mandi — Samuel’s partner for this scene and a member of Marjane’s theatre company— how to put on the suit, Kagami stretched her legs, took a sip from her bottle and tried not to get frustrated. She was getting tired and hungry, which tended to happen after fencing following a complex choreography for hours shooting two duel scenes, almost back to back, with more than fifteen takes each time. Normally, she wouldn’t have been so easily annoyed. Marinette had done nothing wrong here, she was just taking her job as a wardrobe supervisor seriously.
“Kagami, dude, are you alright? You zoned out,” Nino said, sounding concerned. “Do you want to take a longer break? We can wait a little more…” He had come to talk to Adrien and her, and she hadn’t even noticed.

“No, it’s fine, really, thanks Nino,” Kagami smiled reassuringly. “You were saying?”

“Since Mr Director here wants to shoot the scene one last time to make sure the close-ups are alright, he was telling us to go all out when our sabres meet,” Adrien summed up.

“Yeah, raw energy and trembling, you’re fighting for your lives during Adrien’s crazed assault,” Nino said. “Don’t hesitate to tremble a little more!”

Kagami and Adrien nodded in unison. They chatted for some more time with M. D’Argencourt adding his grain of salt every now and then (he probably meant to do well, though it came out as awkward and out of place. Not that they absolutely needed to, but it was better than having to wait in silence for the technical aspect of the film to be taken care of. Marinette sent Samuel and Aïssatou to the changing room, checked on Adrien and Kagami — and took the opportunity to kiss her. At last, Nino came back to his director’s chair. He took his megaphone and cleared his throat.

“Everyone, please, we’re doing that last take now so please come back to where you’re needed!” he said. And, noticing that his words had barely been heard, he repeated, “quiet on the set! Don’t make me ask my girlfriend to tell you all to shut it this time!”

This last remark made everyone laugh, and quiet progressively settled on the set. In a few seconds, everyone was right where they needed to be, and dead silent. Kagami and Adrien put on their combat helms, someone made sure there was nothing on the set that didn’t need to be there. Like before each take, Nino tensed up a little. He breathed in and out slowly.

“Picture is up!” he spoke into the megaphone, confidently. “Roll sound!”

“Sound is speeding,” Luka Couffaine said, making sure that his boom microphone was not in the shot.

“Roll camera!”

“Camera’s speeding,” the three camerapersons said.
“Slate!”

“Starkross, scene twelve, part one, take eighteen,” Alya yelled, holding said slate in front of the camera before clapping the clapperboard. She ran out of the shot right after that.

“Aaaaand… Action!”

Marinette had seen this play out eighteen times now, but it was still a fascinating spectacle. While her girlfriend and Adrien performed their choreography flawlessly, somehow still respecting the marks on the floor without it seeming too unnatural, despite the complexity of it all, they were followed by two steadicams while the third camera rested on a tripod which had been put on a trolley, to make for better wide tracking shots. The lighting team had managed to create the perfect light for the interior of a spaceship, and the fake guardrail and old computers didn’t feel out of place at all.

As always, Marinette couldn’t help but wince and bite the inside of her cheek when Adrien slashed at Kagami’s arm. She knew that it wasn’t that painful, now that she was actually duelling against her girlfriend almost every Saturday afternoon, or rather learning how to win a bout with her help, she knew that the lamé was a good protection and that the blow probably didn’t hurt at all. Adrien was careful and though the attack looked viscious, it wasn’t all that dangerous. But still. She watched in silence as the scene unfolded and let out a relieved sigh when it was over.

“Aaaand cut!” Nino said. “That’s a wrap for scene twelve part one! I just need the camera crew, the lighting crew, the sound crew, Commodore Sela and Ro Jax— I mean Aïssatou and Samuel for the next fifteen minutes, everyone else, you can go out and relax if you want, or stay, but keep it low if you do!”

There was a lot of movement, Aïssatou came to shake hands with Kagami and Adrien and congratulate them, and Samuel, now sporting a light purple complexion, thanks to the makeup crew, did the same. Now that she was seeing the older boy stand to her fencing partner, Kagami understood why Nino had chosen to give him the role. Samuel was certainly a talented actor, at least she hoped he was, but also about the same size as Adrien. With his face hidden behind the combat helm and the bulky combat suit, it would be hard for the viewers to tell him and the supermodel apart. It was the same with Aïssatou and her.

Kagami recognised the rhythm of Marinette’s footsteps before she actually turned around to watch her girlfriend all but jump on her, pulling her in a tight hug. Or at least it is what Marinette, had Kagami’s protestations (“I’m all sweaty and gross, wait until I’m out of the shower”) not worked this time, as they rarely did. Marinette made up for this by giving her a kiss that left Kagami out of
breath when she returned her “combat suit” a good ten minutes later — how had she believed she was anything but a lesbian seemed ridiculous now—. She wouldn’t need the bulky anymore, the last scene which involved fencing wasn’t all that complicated and she had coached Aïssatou so that she would look believable with a sabre.

The two girls left the wardrobe room and went to set five again, where Marinette had to make sure there were no continuity errors with the costumes when they’d shoot the scene. It wouldn’t take nearly as long, the camerawork was not as complex as it had been for the duel bits. Adrien had left, dejected, for yet another photoshoot. The actors knew their script well. Kagami rested her head on her girlfriend’s shoulder, dozing off a little as Marinette absentmindedly stroked her hair, and only woke up reluctantly to watch the scene play. Aïssatou did a good job playing the stern commodore, And, though she didn’t like to admit it, Samuel was a convincing frenzied cadet.

“How long have you been exposed to the Cavorite, Jax?” Aïssatou yelled, a mixture of concern and anger in her voice. She had removed her helmet as well. “You know well only the general staff knows what this is for. How long?”

“I… I don’t know, I lost track of time… It’s not my fault, the lights in this ship, they…” Samuel squealed. “I thought… I can handle it, I swear, this was an accident!”

“That’s enough,” Aïssatou said more calmly. “I’m taking you to the med bay. They’ll take a look at my arm, and they’ll take care of you there too.”

Marc activated the smoke machine as Aïssatou pulled a still shaking Samuel to his feet. The blueish lights flickered — that was always the most impressive part of the scene— only to be replaced with a sinister orange glow. Aïssatou took a step forward and—

“Cut!” Nino said, interrupting everything. “The timing for the lights is off again! I mean, you’ve done everything else right, everyone, but please, if we could just… Don’t follow Marc’s lead, they do their own stuff and you do yours. The flickers start when Sela talks about her arm, and the lights go red before she finishes the sentence! Alright, let’s do it again! From Samuel’s ‘I don’t know’ onwards. And then we’ll have lunch! We’re right on time, cheer up!”

It took three more takes for Nino to be happy with the scene, and he seemed relieved when he announced that now was time for their lunch break. The small crew went to the cafeteria, where a meal prepared by Jagged Stone’s personal chefs awaited them. Nino had stayed back to visit the sets that had been under construction while he was busy filming. When he joined his friends at last,
he looked worn dow. He plopped down next to Alya and rested his head in her lap. He truly needed to unwind. Being a director for a project that had gotten so big was exciting and tiring all at once, especially for a fifteen year old with many amateur projects under his belt but little professional training.

“Seriously, thanks for being here,” he mumbled as he got up to munch on a French fry. “I mean, I’m happy to be here and to do what I do, but…”

“You’re doing great, babe,” Alya said, squeezing his arm. Marinette and Kagami nodded approvingly, and had Adrien not been busy with yet another photoshoot, he’d have given his best friend an encouraging smile.

“I know you were afraid that everyone would only get involved because of you know who…” Marinette started.

“… But I think most of the crew fell in love with Starkross,” Kagami finished.

And it was true. Kagami could see the people from the lighting crew mimicking her duel against Adrien, Marjane chatting with Samuel and Aïssatou, Mme Berthes — she’d have to talk to her later — talking with some of the older students. One of the set construction teams had had lunch earlier just to prepare the next set in the gymnasium without wasting some much-needed time. Kagami didn’t know most of the people in the cafeteria, many were older students, some had initially come to get a look at Jagged Stone’s music video and to get his autograph. They had all ended up staying, out of curiosity for the short film. A few of them came to find Nino and ask him questions about his film, he happily answered them.

Chloé had shown up, unexpectedly. Sure, she had asked Nino to save her a spot during some of the crowd scenes, though she knew all the positions were already taken— he had made arrangements since then, so that she’d be satisfied — but otherwise, she hadn’t bothered anyone. Kagami’s pasta salad was excellent, Marinette stole a few of her cherry tomatoes. Kagami tried to retaliate by taking a spoonful of her girlfriend’s tiramisu but ultimately failed to find the right opening. Yes, it seemed that everyone was having a good time here. Marinette scooted closer to her and lazily put her arms around her waist. This was a great day so far and it would stay that wa—

Or perhaps it wasn’t. She was almost sure she had spotted a mop of dark red hair in the crowd. Or perhaps she hadn’t, it must have been a trick of the light, she was imagining things. She hadn’t seen Lila Rossi in weeks, Volpina’s alter ego — Marinette had told her all about her— had skipped middle-distance running many times. Kagami decided she was imagining things. Besides, Lila wasn’t the only person on earth with auburn hair. Still, she had to investigate to be sure. She kissed
Marinette on the cheek and excused herself. Her search was short and not very fruitful. She did spot a red-haired girl but it wasn’t Lila at all. She was glad she had been wrong.

The rest of the meal went calmly, and Kagami ended up dozing off on Marinette’s shoulder again and Alya gathered some quality blackmail material. Jagged Stone paid Nino a quick visit — all the noise woke Kagami up — and gave him a bone-crushing hug, thanking him again for his hard work. This made the young director blush. It emboldened him too, and gave him a surge of positive energy. Still, he waited until the end of the lunch break to ask everyone to return to their battle stations. The shooting of Starkross resumed half an hour after that.

Kagami no longer had a role to play here. She could have decided to go back home and straight to her bed. She could have tried to go to her mum’s Saturday afternoon fencing class if she had enough energy for that. Instead, she decided to stay with her favourite wardrobe supervisor and handed out helmets and jackets to the extras. Marinette had made them specifically for the film, and since they were meant for the extras, they weren’t nearly as refined and detailed as the costumes for the main actors. Still, Kagami was sure they would work well in wide shots.

She’d send too many pictures of the sets to Aiko, who would enjoy it all even more than Taneda once this was all over. She found out that she could somewhat help each team in a way or another. She gave the camera team a hand with their tripods, the lighting team needed an extra pair of arms to set up their equipment… Her name would appear in the credits all too many times, she was sure of that. At least, she wasn’t just here wasting everyone’s time and being a deadweight.

Not that Kagami was overworked. Though she did her best to be useful, she found herself spending most of her time chatting with Marinette and enjoying her hugs in-between takes. The truth be told, there wasn’t a lot she was needed for, most things were under control and she had to admit, she was impressed with the level of craft in some of the props that had been made specifically for the film. The Cavorite ingots were particularly well done, and their glow was the right amount of mysterious and ominous. It was amusing to see Chloé enjoying herself in her space trainee getup, too. It wasn’t to say that it was all fun and games, or that there were no technical difficulties whatsoever. A lightbulb burst in the middle of a take, an extra almost tripped over a cable. Despite that…

“Starkross, scene six, take nine!”

“Action!”

Despite all of these incidents, Nino stayed relatively calm and composed. Slightly annoyed? Sometimes. But Master Fu had trained him well, it would have taken a lot more than this to have him akumatised. He was a promising director and probably the one the old man had picked as his
successor. He had a team to handle most of these complications anyway, especially Alya who anticipated many of these bad situations before they actually emerged, and solved them before they could actually become issues. But nothing could have prepared them to the arrival of Lila Rossi.

Kagami had definitely spotted the wrong redhead. Lila’s hair was unkempt and it was safe to say that the girl had seen much better days in her life. Her makeup could only conceal the dark bags under her eyes that much, she was visibly paler, and though she couldn’t have explained why, Kagami found her hollow, like an almost-empty shell. She was wearing the Fox necklace, though she was trying to hide it under her clothes, it was painfully obvious. Marinette wasn’t annoyed as much as she was concerned for the girl, even when she opened her mouth to sprout one enormous and painfully lie like she always did. This time, nobody bought it.

“Hello everyone? Have any of you seen Adrien? He had told me I’d find him here, but…”

Lila had probably seen the selfie Jagged Stone had posted on his social media feeds, that was the only plausible way she had found out about Adrien’s whereabouts. There was an unsettling glint in her eyes, almost grotesque. She truly looked like she believed in what she said. Or did she? There was something off. Bile rose in Kagami’s throat. No, it was a caricature of a human expression. There was no way it was only Lila talking to them and looking at them, the Fox kwami was there too. Alya clenched her fist so hard her knuckles started to whiten. She got up and the torque around her neck dangled for a second. Marinette unconsciously adopted an en garde pose.

“He isn’t here for now but perhaps he’ll be back later! You can stay with us in the meantime, if you want” Alya said in a surprisingly kind voice. “You can take my seat if you want!”

That was unexpected, especially coming from Alya. Kagami knew that even though her girlfriend was no longer romantically interested in Adrien, she would have asked Lila to go away and to leave the boy alone. And with Alya almost always siding with her best friend… Lila was puzzled too, and something was shifting behind her eyes. For a split second, Kagami saw the shadow of a burned-out, worried girl who needed shelter. No one, not even Chloé, said anything. They simply wanted for Lila’s answer. The girl blinked and the moment was over. Had Kagami worn the Dragon Miraculous, it would have felt warm, the pearl would have glowed and Longg would have asked her to transform right away. Lila simply nodded.

Most of the film crew was oblivious to the tension as Lila sat on the chair Alya had offered her. Kagami adopted her usual poker face, Marinette suddenly remembered that she had forgotten to put some things back in their original boxes back in a room far away from the set. Nino had to focus on shooting that crowd scene while not ignoring the walking potential threat a few meters away from him. He did a fairly good job at that, and was quite happy with the way this scene was coming together, at least he said so repeatedly, to the camerapersons and the extras. Perhaps it was to avoid having to look at Lila as she compulsively touched the Fox Miraculous, perhaps he didn’t want to come to the conclusion that Trixx had turned the girl into a washed-out caricature of
herself, perhaps he was too absorbed in his job as a director.

When Lila finally left after what felt like an eternity, Alya followed her and Kagami became the one in charge for the clapperboard. Nino tried to focus on Starkross again, and asked one of the cameramen if he could take his place. That seemed to ease his nerves a little. They didn’t have to deal with more technical difficulties, Luka A couple of takes later, Marinette returned on the set, not looking stressed out or worried in the slightest. This lightened up the mood immediately. Nino called it a wrap and went out. He had a few calls to make, of course, but the first person he phoned was his girlfriend. He motioned for Kagami and Marinette to come closer, and Chloé snuck up to eavesdrop on to what Alya had to say and so did Luka.

“Are you OK?” Nino asked. He didn’t try to hide how concerned he was. “I was worried about you…”

“Yeah, dogging her wasn’t easy, but I think she wanted someone to come after her,” Alya answered.

“She was going anywhere?” Nino pressed.

“Taking the métro. We chatted for a while, she sprouted her rubbish, the usual stuff,” Alya said, and this made Marinette and Nino chuckle. “But there was something she said that rubbed me the wrong way.”

“You mean…” Nino started.

“She said… ‘Do not take the train next Friday evening.’” Alya sounded somber. “She— She looked afraid, Nino. I’ll be back soon, continue shooting your film. I don’t think we can do much for now. Love you!”

“Love you too,” Nino answered, and ended the call. He took a deep breath and turned to his friends. “Well… The show must go on, as they say,” he smiled nervously. “I need to call the folks in charge of the med bay scene, and it’s going to be real boring for you all, so you should just… Go there and make sure everything is alright, OK?”

They all left, but not before giving him a hug each (except for Chloé of course, though she really looked like she wanted to). Marinette got closer to Kagami and they walked hand in hand to the
next set. The day looked less bright, and it had only taken a few ominous words for that.

“Please, wear the pendant whenever you can in the next few days,” Marinette whispered in Kagami’s ear.

“Do you think…?” Kagami whispered back.

“I hope not, but just in case… I just want you to be safe,” Marinette said. Kagami had heard these words too many time to keep count of them, but they always made her blush when they came from her girlfriend. She squeezed her Marinette, and the sensation of dread in her stomach eased a little, if only for a moment. But they’d worry about it later. They had a film to shoot. Soon, Nino was running to catch up with them, a determined look on his face. They hadn’t come here all day for nothing after all. They had a film to make, and it wound’t get made without them here to make it.

“Picture is up! Roll sound!”

“Sound is speeding.”

“Roll camera!”

“Camera’s speeding.”

“Slate!”

“Starkross, scene eight, take one.”

“Aaaaaand… Action!”

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

I really like cinema. Who doesn't? Watching films is relatively easy (unless it's Béla
Tarr in which case it's long, or Uwe Boll in which case it's painful). Making them, on the other hand… Nino is really lucky to have a competent team, my lycée films were really shoddy and I simply cannot watch them without cringing intensely. He sure improved since Horrificator! Which is an episode we all remember and love, right?

Starkross! A triple reference! Star Trek, the Philip Reeves novels and a certain Japanese show with giant robots and remembering love.

The Cavorite, borrowed from H. G. Wells!

And I think that's it for the references.

Also, have you paid attention to Alya since last chapter? Perhaps you should… But I can't tell you what to do.

As always, my Tumblr is here, for previews of incoming chapters and the other things feel like writing/talking about, so follow me there if you want to see all of that! If you want to ask me things, please do, I'll be happy to answer!

I'll see you next Monday!
It was hard not to eavesdrop on Kim when he was making so little effort keeping his voice low during M. Andurent’s maths class. Then again, if she had to be honest with herself, Kagami had nothing better to do than that. Marinette wanted to follow the lesson more closely and so they had sat directly next to the teacher. It was their last class before the winter holidays, which meant M. Andurent was kind enough not to give them too much homework, that meant a relatively relaxed hour. Kagami didn’t have to worry about getting out of school in time to get on a plane, and for a very simple reason: her mother had decided they’d stay here.

“I’m telling you,” Kim said to Alix, “Max really wanted me to be there tonight for that big inauguration tonight, so for the last time, I can’t play lacrosse with you guys tonight!”

Perhaps he had spoken too loudly. M. Andurent raised his eyebrows at that. He didn’t look upset, however, rather, he seemed interested in what his student had to say. Kagami silently wished that he would start an informal chat with Kim like he often did when he didn’t feel like teaching, and Marinette seemed to share her mind on the matter, if the doodle she made on Kagami’s sheet was anything to go by. The depiction of the bespectacled teacher, sitting on a table with his arms crossed and his sleeves rolled, saying “talking about anything interesting?” had Kagami try her best not to chuckle.

Because M. Andurent sat on his desk, rolled the sleeves of his shirt and crossed his arms with an amused look on his face. That ought to be more interesting than second degree functions, it was always fun to see Kim try to interact with their teachers, and M. Andurent was surprisingly fun, nice and patient for a maths teacher. That, and she too was curious about what that inauguration was all about. She could only make wild guesses She didn’t read the newspaper, neither did her mum, she didn’t watch TV, and the few news apps she had on her phone were in Japanese and, more recently, in English. She had subscribed to a magazine on literature but that was it. Still, she had a hunch.

“Are you talking about the Startrain, Kim,” M. Andurent inquired. The boy’s eyes got brighter and Kagami knew she had guessed right.

“Yeah,” Kim smiled widely. “Max, he’s, well he’s my… Friend, he’s in Seconde 3, and he… Well anyway, his mum was one of the main engineers on the project, and he’s been pestering me about it for years now, so…”

“I can see why you’d be excited about that,” the maths teacher laughed.
“I mean, can you believe it?” Kim’s excitement was contagious. “Seven hundred kilometres per hour, while being cheaper than a maglev train or a Hyperloop! It’ll make the trip from Paris to Berlin so much faster! It’s amazing! And it even has airbags and armoured glass for its windows!”

And for a few seconds, Kagami found herself sharing Kim’s enthusiasm about a train she hadn’t even known or cared about before today. Yes, thinking about trains was a lot more enjoyable than ruminating about all the akumas and amoks that had plagued Paris for the last few days. Not that they had been impossibly hard to defeat, these were no coordinated attacks, unlike that time back in January. Kagami had yet to have a real use as a hero, the city still knew nothing about her existence — she truly had done a great job only going out at night and staying in the dark. So, simply being happy because a high speed train would be launched later on today was refreshing.

“But we’re digressing here, back to our functions,” M. Andurent said. “How about you solve this exercise, Kim?”

The class went on, with most of the students in a lighter mood, and it only took a couple of seconds for Kim to find the answer to f(x)=x^2+3x+2. Kagami stole a glance on her wristwatch. In about a quarter of an hour, it’d be over and she’d have two entire weeks to do whatever she wanted to here in Paris. Of course, she’d have to train for her competition, but otherwise, she was already done with her homework and she had no obligations whatsoever. The bell rung a minute early — it seemed that even the person charged with programming it wanted them to enjoy the holidays.

M. D’Argencourt would be busy refereeing a competition in Marseilles tonight, while her mum was out for the evening — Toshiko Kirino, an old time friend of hers and a writer, had decided to fly all the way from Japan to pay her a visit, Itsuko Tsurugi had seen this as the perfect opportunity to introduce her to a potential French publisher. Which meant that Kagami would have plenty of time to spend with her friends, and her girlfriend. Perhaps they could go somewhere together. Were there any good films in the cinema lately? She’d simply ask Marinette, she decided.

But Marinette didn’t seem happy to finally be free of school. She was deep in her thoughts. Kagami knew better than to interrupt her, and they walked side by side to the lycée’s entrance, not speaking a word to each other. And then Marinette’s eyes widened and she paled visibly. She instinctively took her girlfriend’s hand and dragged her away from the crowd of students. Kagami had never seen her this… Afraid. Once they were at a safe distance, Marinette looked around them to make sure no one was listening on them, and said three simple words, four syllables.

“It’s the Startrain.”
And Kagami understood immediately what she meant, and she almost wished she hadn’t. It felt like her veins had been filled with ice. *Merde merde merde merde.* She breathed out slowly trying to prevent the feeling of dread to settle in. Lila Rossi hadn’t lied to them after all, despite all the previous attacks this week, her words hadn’t been ominous for the sake of messing with them. “Do not take the train next Friday evening.”

“We were so stupid, we thought we’d have to keep an eye out in every single railway and métro station in Paris, and the answer was so obvious, she handed it to us on a silver platter,” Marinette whispered weakly. She looked lost. “And there will be so people there, at the inauguration, I think there’ll be a buffet, and some important celebrities, and so many bystanders…”

“You need to tell the others about it,” Kagami said. She put on the Dragon pendant and Longg appeared on her shoulder, looking determined. “And I’ll come with you this time.”

Marinette knew she wouldn’t be able to change the other girl’s mind on that, no matter what she’d say. They had no time to bicker about that anyway. She nodded and texted Nino and Master Fu immediately. In the meantime, Kagami checked on the time and place for the event. They had a good hour before the beginning of the ceremony, which would take place Gare de l’Est. They were in for a thirty minutes métro ride, if they were being optimistic. During the rush hour. There wasn’t a second to waste. Marinette phoned her parents on their way to the Monceau station, telling them that she and Kagami would be spending some time together and that she wouldn’t be home right away. She wasn’t lying, at least not completely.

Of course their métro was late, and it had to stop for five minutes due to an on the line. They found out that Adrien had been riding on the car next to theirs when the three of them finally got out at Gare de l’Est. Not that they stayed there for a long chat, Adrien excused himself rather quickly, telling the two girls that some other friends of his were waiting for him. That was weird, him being here. Knowing Gabriel Agreste, he would have wanted his son to go home right after his fencing class, and since there were none today… But they’d think about it later.

If someone had asked Marinette and Kagami what chaos was, their answer would have been one and the same: “Gare de l’Est at 5:41PM”. It wasn’t to say that the event in itself was poorly organised, there were security personnel everywhere, and the police were also here. They were searched and were asked to open their bags twice. It wasn’t because all these people were on the lookout for anything suspect that Marinette relaxed. Anxiety was making Kagami’s stomach ache, something that hadn’t happened to her in years. This would be nothing like a fencing match.

Kagami got on the tip of her toes and caught a glimpse of the Startrain. She had seen a few pictures on the sites she had browsed, but even from a distance, it truly was a marvel of technology, and a beautiful object to behold, elegantly streamlined, with a steel-grey paint job. It would certainly be a ridiculously expensive ride, but the fastest one in the world too, at least the brochure she was given said so. No surprise that Hawk Moth would capitalise on such a big event to strike. More hostages,
more people he and Mayura could potentially use as weapons. She felt herself shiver, her stomach churned.

“It’s OK to be afraid,” Marinette answered her question softly before Kagami even asked it. “My first fight against an akuma was really messy. And there were some moments when I was really scared. You don’t ever get rid of the fear, never entirely. But you learn how to not let it take it over your body. And don’t you ever forget that I’m here to protect you.”

And with that, Marinette hugged Kagami, not caring the slightest if they were getting in the way of other people. Kagami buried her face in the crook of her girlfriend’s neck, and slowly relaxed. She could feel her heart rate slow down a little, her vision getting wider again. She could control her arms, and the sensation of pinpricks disappeared. Kagami breathed in, deeply, and finally let go of Marinette. She could do this. She had faced Volpina without a Miraculous, she could handle worse than that. For Paris’s sake, for Marinette’s sake, for her own sake.

She gave Marinette a kiss on the cheek, “for good luck”, before they split. They blended in with the rest of the crowd, and waited for the inauguration ceremony to begin. The forces of evil could strike at any moment now, and knowing Hawk Moth’s sense of theatrics, it would be right at the start, before someone important would make a speech. And there were many important someones here tonight, Mayor Bourgeois, the Ministers for Transport and Science, and many others. Chloé was sitting next to her father. There were other familiar faces in the crowd, Nino, and Alya too. And the Couffaine siblings? What would they be here for? But she didn’t think too much about it when she spotted Kim talking animatedly with Max. These two were more than good friends, she could tell.

Someone tested the microphone on the small platform. The Minister for Transport — Kagami couldn’t remember her name— was about to talk. Nothing happened to interrupt it. The speech was self-congratulatory and frankly a little dull, praising the merits of the first French AI-operated train, and then it was Mayor Bourgeois’s turn to bore them for another five minutes during which he prattled about this beautiful new train he had been so interested in since the first prototypes — though he somehow couldn’t pronounce the name properly. None of the people who had actually worked on the Startrain got to talk about it. Kagami’s patient was starting to run short, but at the same time, she was relieved. Perhaps they had been paranoid, perhaps nothing would happen tonight.

A ribbon was cut, hands were shaken, an awkward song was performed and it was finally time for the the railway workers and the engineers to board the train. And finally, Kagami spotted it. A living, breathing ticking bomb, the trainman who would certainly turn into a toy if Hawk Moth’s akuma got to him. The grizzled man kept on glaring at Mme Kanté as Mayor Bourgeois kept on praising her. But there was nothing Kagami, or anyone else, for that matter, could do about it. It wasn’t like they could suddenly jump on him and take him away, the security would stop them before they could get a chance. And so they waited. Minutes ticked by, and still nothing.
Mayor Bourgeois forgot to shake the man’s hand as the Startrain opened its doors to a human tide of journalists and officials. This was the moment an odd rustling sound coming from behind Kagami filled the railway station. It was like a thousand wings flapping together. A swarm of minuscule butterflies. After this much time, she still couldn’t stand the sight of them. A child let out a frightened shriek and it was all that was missing for mayhem. In a mere few seconds, it was complete pandemonium, with people running in every direction, the chief of police asking his men to guard the doors and to keep everyone inside, and his calls of “order, order” were repeated in vain. A small, purplish feather landed on his walkie-talkie and then he knew no more.

The flight of butterflies morphed into one gigantic moth. The Startrain’s doors were still wide open, with the grizzled trainman standing in front of the one closest to the locomotive. He didn’t even looked surprised or in pain when the enormous insect melted away, to reveal one single purple butterfly. The train sped away from the station as soon as the door closed, automatically. The train zoomed away from the station and Kagami had the feeling she’d see it again very soon. But she couldn’t afford the time to give it more thought. The police was forming a net, and had blocked every exit.

Or could she still call them the police? They didn’t have faces anymore, instead, globe-shaped helmets the colour of their uniforms hid their heads completely. ?aga:j had to escape. Was everyone safe? She didn’t know, and she knew now was not the time to look for her girlfriend, to yell her name even though she wanted to, Mayor Bourgeois was protesting loudly and that was leading him nowhere. She wouldn’t let herself be captured. She had to help prevent anything worse from happening. She pushed through the crowd and ran as fast as she could. She ducked behind a news stand, turned down her phone completely and tried to get a clearer view of the situation. Not that she could see a lot from where she was, it was a poor vantage point. No, she couldn’t see a lot. But she could hear very clearly.

“Gather the civilians in the great hall!” a harsh voice yelled. “No one is getting out of here…”

“Until I say so,” Mayura said.

Kagami breathed in and out, slowly. Good, she wasn’t panicking, her hands weren’t shaking. She clutched the little red pearl in her hand.

“Do not open fire unless you encounter Ladybug, Chat Noir or any of the other wielders, we do not want to harm our bargaining chip for now,” her voice rang out in the railway station’s deserted halls. “Volpina, you go and wait for the train to return. If you bump into a hero or two on your way… You know what to do. And do not interfere with my sentimonsters, they can manage it just fine without you. You will stay there until the train’s arrival, and if I find out that you’ve
disobeyed my order…”

Kagami was sure she had heard Volpina scowl. Mayura was oblivious to that. She turned to one of these transformed policemen, and something shone in front of her eyes, thought what it was Kagami couldn’t see clearly. “Pawnheads,” she said, “I want you to—”

Something was up, otherwise Mayura wouldn’t have stopped in the middle of her sentence. Kagami listened more closely. Yes, she could hear it too, the sound of muffled grunts, men’s voices, and broken ceramics, a metallic object falling to the ground, followed by three heavy thuds. And Kagami could have recognised the rhythm of these footsteps anywhere. She couldn’t help the smile that came to her lips. And Ladybug wasn’t alone, Queen Bee had come with her. The others… She had no idea where they were. She wasn’t focused enough to sense them.

“My, it looks like we’ve got interlopers here!” Mayura said in a faux-reproachful tone. Darkly, she added, “Volpina, stick to your part of the plan, Pawnheads, go where you’ll be needed most. The civilians stay here. This shouldn’t take too long.”

Kagami gritted her teeth as she watched Volpina, or rather an army of Volpinas, run towards the platforms with blank faces. She couldn’t just stay like that, doing absolutely nothing. No, she had been wrong earlier when she had thought that this was nothing like fencing. All she needed was a sign, an invitation to combat. She whispered the words and transformed in silence. She summoned her courage.

“The Bug and the Bee against poor little me? That’s hardly entertaining,” Mayura laughed, “I want a proper fight! Viperion, Chat Noir and Tiger Eye could hardly challenge me, and though I must say your feats against my Amoks were unexpected, you’d be naive to believe you stand a single chance. Two of you against me? Oh, you’ll be sorry you’ve ever crossed my path.”

That was it, the Crimson Empress wouldn’t hear another word from this conceited fool. What was it that Marinette had told her about pickpocketing again? Yes, it was like a magic trick, all you needed to do was draw the attention to something else to make sure to impress. Now was time to test her theory about her water powers. She spotted a drinking fountain… It would be perfect. She closed her eyes and clenched her fist. She could feel beads of sweat forming on her brow. The loud noise and the gasps of surprise told her that it had been a success, the fountain had blown up and they were all looking at what could have caused it. And now, the prestige. She rose to her feet and let herself soar through the air.

“How about three on one, then?” she asked, her tone regal. And it had worked, Mayura seemed genuinely intimidated, if only for a few seconds. The Crimson Empress landed next to Ladybug without a sound and had to keep herself from smiling too widely when she saw how surprised her girlfriend looked.
“I don’t think we’ve met before,” Mayura tried to regain her composure. “You must be the wielder of the Dragon.”

“It is the Crimson Empress for you, Fowl,” the words rang out.

“A Lady, a Queen and now and Empress?” Mayura’s face contorted into a smirk. “I hadn’t planned on having so many noble guests! I wonder if what they say about blue blood is true. Well, only one way to find ou—”

Queen Bee’s feet met her face before Mayura could finish her sentence and the sound of the hit echoed. Ladybug’s eyes widened comically. For a brief moment, the blonde girl looked proud of herself, and she let her guard down. The Peafowl brought a shaking hand to the side of her face. She slowly turned to give Queen Bee a fiery glare. In the blink of an eye and with no warning, she swept the girl’s left leg and hit her in hard the stomach with the palm of her hand. The effect was devastating and immediate. On a normal human being, it would have been lethal.

Queen Bee was sent flying backwards, and she would have crashed through a shop window had Ladybug not been there to catch her midair. Mayura straightened up and her smile was placid. She summoned her hand fan. The Crimson Empress did the same with her sabre. Ladybug was a protector, a defender and a strategist before anything else, and though she fought well, she rarely won her fights against Hawk Moth’s akumas or Mayura’s amoks with brute force alone. Facing another Miraculous wielder, especially an adult, on the other hand…

“Step aside, my Lady,” the Crimson Empress said. “I can take care of the inconvenience myself.”

“Like hell I’ll step aside!” Ladybug shot back. “I said I’d protect you, didn’t I? We need to defeat her and there’s no way I’ll let you risk your life alone! Bee, you go help clean up this mess, we won’t be long.”

Queen Bee did as she was told and limped away from Mayura. The woman looked mildly amused by all this, and the amusement turned into a snigger as she watched the scene play. She didn’t try to stop the wielder of the Bee, and examined her hand fan instead, playing with it. She glanced at one of the railway station’s great clocks and made a face of annoyance.

“Can we get started now?” she yawned. “I know the train is late, but we ought to keep busy before it arrives, wouldn’t you agree? Well, let’s get on with it, then!”
The world grew dim around the Crimson Empress, and she could feel the small burst of wind building up beneath her feet. She closed her eyes and focused. She had done this before, untransformed. Her opponent for this bout was right in front of her, and her guard was dreadful and full of holes. She had none of her discipline. The Crimson Empress lunged at Mayura with her sheathed sabre, catching the woman in her shoulder. The blow was sharp and disorienting, and the perfect opening, leaving room for Ladybug’s fists to hit the odd armour that covered the Peafowl wielder’s upper body. Mayura growled and tried to hit back with her hand fan.

To no avail. She was met with a perfectly timed parry from the Crimson Empress. Before this could lead to a riposte, however, Mayura cuffed her opponent in the chin as though she were scolding a child. The Empress wasn’t terribly hurt — though it had been a painful strike— as much as she was infuriated. So, her opponent was one to fight dirty, then. She should have guessed so. But she wouldn’t sink to that level herself. Ladybug was using her yo-yo as a whip to keep Mayura at bay. Not that it was truly successful, the Peafowl dodged, or rather danced around each of the attacks. She grabbed the yo-yo by its string and yanked it. But Ladybug did not yelp. She smirked.

She let herself be carried by the momentum instead of resisting it, slid between Mayura’s legs, jumped just in time for her opponent to turn her head, just in time for Ladybug to replicate the exact same kick Queen Bee had landed on Mayura earlier. The woman stumbled to the side, and the Crimson Empress didn’t give her the chance to recover. Her lunge was rewarding with a satisfying grunt, and Ladybug followed through with another kick of her own, using the Empress’s shoulder as a support. And now, Mayura was the one sent flying to the ground. Ladybug landed in a flawless en garde pose, mirroring her partner perfectly.

“Hey, we’re a pretty great team, wouldn’t you say?” she quipped, and the Crimson Empress had to stop herself from laughing at that.

“I would say so, my Lady” she said, trying her best to keep in character. Which wasn’t easy when she wanted to hug her girlfriend. But now wasn’t time for that.

Mayura had gotten to her feet again, shakily, and was glaring at them. She crouched, readying herself for an attack, but stopped when the noise of shots being fired disturbed the tense atmosphere of the railway station. The Crimson Empress couldn’t help but be startled by that, while Ladybug and Mayura seemed unfazed. An odd whirring sound escaped from the Peafowl wielder’s cuirass. This didn’t serve only as a means of protection against eventual attackers, the Empress guessed. And whatever it was doing to Mayura seemed to fill her with a morbid joy. She crouched again, only to be interrupted once again when her hand fan vibrated.

“Hawk Moth?” she spoke into the hand fan as though it were a phone, pressing it to her ear. “I see, I see… No, I still need more time, five minutes, there’s a minor annoyance I still need to take care
of… Yes, of course I will… What? No, I’m not pushing myself too hard for this, stop being ridiculous!… You’ve got the worse sense of timing, you know that?… Yes, I’ll see you when we gather the Miraculouses, then.” She turned to Ladybug and the Crimson Empress, her face dark. “Five minutes… It’ll take me less than that to dispose of you.”

She lunged at them, much faster than she had previously been. Had they not known better, they would have The two heroines did not flinch. The Crimson Empress raised her sword arm at the last moment. It was all it took to stop Mayura dead in her tracks. Was this the best the Peafowl wielder could do? That lunge would have been frightening, at least to an untrained eye. The disciple of Itsuko Tsurugi, however, was not impressed in the slightest. Oh, she’d show Mayura what a proper lunge looked like, this time without help from her wind powers. Ladybug’s uppercut made the villainess stumble backwards. She was exactly where the Empress needed her to be. Yes, this was exactly like fencing.

The Crimson Empress’s lunge should have caught Mayura in the stomach. It had been flawless in its execution, M. D’Argencourt would have been proud of it. Not using her special abilities to strengthen it up, however, had been reckless. Mayura caught the sabre by its sheathed blade and smirked at the Crimson Empress as she tried to get her weapon out of the villainess’s grip. Perhaps now was time to use her ultimate power. Ladybug had a different idea, however. Her yo-yo wrapped around Mayura’s foot. She tugged, with enough strength to make the woman lose her balance. The Crimson Empress slammed the pummel of her sabre against the Peafowl’s mechanical cuirass just as Ladybug’s yo-yo came back to her hand.

“You idiots! Do you have any idea how long it will take the Japanese to fix this?” Mayura seethed. She took a step back and she tried to regain her footing. Her breathing was laboured now, and angry red blotches covered her skin. A ferocious glint shone in her eyes as the roar of gunfire rang out in the distance. A shining shape, not unlike a pair of glasses, formed before her closed eyes. Instead of a triumphant smirk, however, there was confusion written all over Mayura’s face, confusion and the growing awareness that she had been played like a fiddle. Because Ladybug’s plan had worked perfectly.

There was the sound of glass being smashed, automatic doors being jammed opened, and the din of many people running, some familiar voices, Chat Noir yelling “go!”, Mayor Bourgeois calling his daughter’s name — had he not figured who Queen Bee was?— and children crying. Ladybug smiled smugly at Mayura, and the Crimson Empress understood why it had only been Queen Bee and her facing the dangerous villain, why no one had seemed to go after Volpina either. Ensuring that the civilians could leave this battlefield mattered more than defeating her right away. The wielder of the Peafowl had fallen into a honey-trap.

“It… looks like my Pawnheads are too busy toying around with your little friends to come to my help,” Mayura said, in the kind of tone one would use to talk about the weather. “I suppose you
found it amusing to be the bait, Ladybug, this is exactly like you. I hadn’t planned on using so much of my power tonight… Well, this should be…” She coughed a murky liquid and wiped the corner of her mouth on her sleeve, seemingly unbothered. “This should be amusing!”

Mayura shuddered and a bright purple light erupted from her chest, too bright to be hidden by her odd cuirass. So that was where the Peafowl Miraculous was… But the Crimson Empress couldn’t make more observations than this, as Mayura’s entire body started to glow, and the many feather-shaped coat-tails of her mantle started to grow longer. Ladybug took the Empress’s hand in hers, using the other to shield her eyes from the blaze. Absolute silence reigned for a few seconds that felt like an eternity. And then the sound of something whistling through the air.

The Crimson Empress barely dodged in time. Her wind-enhanced jump to the side — though she had yet to touch the ground — saved her life. She watched in horror as the thing that had almost pierced through her unstuck itself from the ground. Mayura hadn’t just had a suit upgrade. Her coat-tails were moving like tentacles. And it seemed that the villain savoured the fear she inspired in her foes, despite the sparks and smoke coming out of the machine wrapped around her torso. Had Ladybug been hurt? It didn’t look like it. The two heroines shared a glance. This was going to be much harder than before.

They couldn’t get closer to their enemy, no matter how hard they tried. Ladybug’s yo-yo was useless as a shield, and with something as mobile as these feathers, there would be no time for parrying them. One of them would have to break, Mayura couldn’t go on like this, spitting dark gunk out of her mouth, and they wouldn’t be able to escape each of her attacks indefinitely. Someone was bound to make a mistake at some point. Ladybug moved like a gymnast with unparalleled agility, used to facing enemies of all kinds on all sorts of terrains. The Empress, on the other hand, was just a fencer. She could feel a disturbance in the gust of air that allowed her right foot to hover above the ground.

She wavered for a split second, lost her balance.

One of the spikes was hurled at her.

Something — someone? — pushed her out of the deadly feather’s way before it had a chance to strike her down. Mayura froze and the Empress got a glimpse of the woman who had saved her. She was one of them, of course, and yet the Empress had never seen her before. Still, there was something familiar about her, maybe the the dark brown hair, and the dark outlines of her mask where the rim of her spectacles would have been, and though the Empress couldn’t put her finger on it, she had seen that torque before, she just knew it. The new heroine winked at her, and though she didn’t know how it was possible, the Crimson Empress knew who she was. The girl’s canine ears twitched as the seemingly living fabric of Mayura’s coat-tails tried to squirm away from her grasp.
“Hey! Everything alright, girl?” the newcomer said. She turned to Mayura, in a kickboxing guard stance. “The name’s Laelaps, sorry we’ve taken so long!”

The Crimson Empress took a step back. So this was the Dog Miraculous’s wielder, then. Her suit would have been a lighter shade of brown, had it not been covered with a strange amber-like layer. This was how she was able to hold the deadly spire without sustaining any damage… And that meant that Tiger Eye was somewhere near. Mayura did not waste a second trying to mock the newcomer. She sent another of her coat-tails in Ladybug’s direction. Laelaps was there to stop it, a split second before it met its intended target. Before Mayura could strike a third time, someone behind her sneezed loudly.

“I’m sorry if asking you this ruffles your feathers, but does this belong to you?” Chat Noir — because of course it was him — asked, dropping the unconscious Pawnhead he had been carrying in his arms to the ground, unceremoniously. He was not alone, in fact, Mayura was surrounded by all the other heroes. Laelaps wasn’t the only one to sport that thin layer of amber on her suit. And judging by the state of that protective armour, he, Carapace and the others had faced ruthless foes. “He and his friends were being troublemakers so we confiscated their toys,” Chat Noir said, before he sneezed again. “Man, my allergies are killing me tonight…”

“They were quite annoying,” Viperion’s voice was laced with irony.

“Keeping people in here against their will and threatening them at gunpoint pretty much qualifies as hostage taking, don’t you know?” Tiger Eye raised an eyebrow. “You’re not exactly going to convince very many of them to become your allies by acting that way.”

“But now everyone is saved and your Amok is done for, Mayura,” Carapace said.

“And so are you,” Queen Bee smirked. “Surrender your Miraculous now! Gods, it feels good to be the one saying that!”

An odd melodic sound echoed through the Gare de l’Est. Someone was playing… The flute? Fear left Mayura’s face, and was replaced by a growing grin, it wasn’t long before she cackled, uncontrollably, holding her ribs. The ground beneath their feet started to vibrate and brought a sinking feeling to Ladybug’s stomach. They had forgotten what had made them come here in the first place. The Startrain. They had to stop it. And Volpina would be in their way. Mayura, on the other hand, seemed to have other plans.
“Well, it has been a pleasure to see you all tonight, and I would love to watch your last moments but I must get going now, this has been a tiresome and bothersome evening,” she said affably. “If I were you, I’d worry about stopping that train. There must be an awful lot of people gathered around the Gare de l’Est, it would be a shame if something happened to them!”

In a move of her hand, her dark feather flew out of the Pawnhead’s walkie-talkie. She snapped her fingers and a flash of light illuminated the railway station’s hall. When the light dimmed, the policeman on the ground looked unharmed, but Mayura was nowhere to be found. It didn’t matter where she was. They had a train to catch. And they could already see its shape in the distance. Except it no longer looked like the Startrain. Reddish fumes spewed out of the windows, and the matte black paint job only made it appear more aggressive.

They ran as quickly as their legs could carry them, not slowing down as they got closer to the platforms where multiple Volpinas were awaiting them. Seven hundred kilometres per hour, right? They couldn’t let it crash through the railway station’s door and wreak havoc outside. To stop it… The power line! It seemed that the Crimson Empress and Chat Noir had the same idea. Viperion, Queen Bee and Laelaps were in front of him, shielding him from the Fox Miraculous’s wielder. He extended his staff, carrying it like a pole-vaulting athlete would have done.

Chat Noir stuck the end of his staff in the ground. It curbed, and the boy was thrown in the air. The Startrain’s fracas was ear-splitting and made it impossible for them to hear anything, yet the Crimson Empress was sure she had heard him yell “Cataclysm!” A literal column of Volpinas formed next to him, the original zooming from copy to copy to catch up with him before he could touch the electric cable. Had it not been for Volpina, Chat Noir wouldn’t have been able to reach it, his jump hadn’t been calculated properly, he wouldn’t have reached his target. With Volpina as a fulcrum, however, it was a different story.

His clawed hand touched the power line which melted away immediately. But the Startrain didn’t slow down, if anything, it seemed to do the opposite of this. Of course it wasn’t going to stop or activate its brakes or anything like that. The Crimson Empress didn’t have the time to look back to see if Chat Noir had landed on his feet. Ladybug and Queen Bee wouldn’t be able to slow it down with their yo-yos, Carapace’s power, they’d need it in case they didn’t manage to stop it in time.

It had to be the her, only she could do it, the very reason why she had become the Crimson Empress. She had reached the end of the platform, but she had to continue. She no longer ran as much as she leapt, her feet no longer touching the platform’s ground as she was propelled by the wind. The others hadn’t been able to stop Volpina and she was tailing her, she could feel her jump from copy to copy, catching up with her at a frightening speed. But this was the home stretch, she couldn’t, wouldn’t fail. She had made a promise to keep Paris safe, and breaking it during her grand debut just wouldn’t do.

“Red, watch out!” Carapace’s voice carried to her.
She heard an object whizz through the air. Carapace’s shield. Volpina ducked to avoid being hit, fell back to target the one who had hurled the object at her. The world shrunk, growing dark around the Crimson Empress. She focused, her eyes wide open. Just one more second… Now! Both her feet touched the shield. She crouched and lunged forwards. Time stretched. The Startrain’s headlights shone brightly in her face. It didn’t matter. She knew exactly where to land. Her right hand came to rest on the hilt of her sabre, as the left one closed around the sheath.

“Yawarakai-Te!”

The blade shone brightly, freed from its wooden case. Still in the air, the Crimson Empress reversed the grip on the sabre, and her other hand came to rest on the sword’s pummel. Her feet touched the ground mere centimetres away from the rails. The Startrain zoomed past her. The sword cut through the train’s wheels as though they were made of paper, and the deafening noise of metal scraping against metal and stone resounded through the Gare de l’Est as the train leaned to the left, leaving a trail of sparks in it tracks as it derailed. It collided against the platform, obliterating it in a cloud of dust and rubble. The sound of a lyre rang out, and the metalling screeching noise died out.

It took a few seconds for the Crimson Empress to understand what had just happened. Viperion had somehow managed to use the debris generated by the collision to create a mound that had stopped the Startrain’s advance. The Crimson Empress tried to get up from her crouching position but her legs gave way. Her sabre almost fell out of her trembling grip. Was… Was Marinette alright? The others? Was everyone inside the train… She thought she remembered something about airbags and armoured glass windows. She hoped it had been true. Someone was walking to her, she could hear the footsteps on the gravel, and she could have recognised them anywhere.

“Hey, need a hand? Here, let me just…” Ladybug said. She knelt down and helped the Crimson Empress to her feet. She wrapped her arms around the Dragon wielder’s shoulder and rubbed soothing circles on her back. “I am so proud of you…”

“Bug, we found the guy!” Carapace yelled, holding the grizzled trainman with purplish skin by the collar of his shirt. The other heroes had forced the train’s doors open, it seemed. A voice came from inside one of the cars and Carapace peered inside. “Say what, Chat? Everyone else inside is alright?” His eyes welled at that. “Thank the gods,” he said, his voice shaky.

Ladybug and the Crimson Empress made their way to the Startrain, the Empress’s arm around Ladybug’s shoulder. She let go when they arrived next to Chat Noir, who was helping the civilians out of the wreck. He nodded at them and gave them a watery smile. It seemed that the shock of the impact had knocked the trainman unconscious. They’d never learn his name… But it didn’t matter.
Now was time for Ladybug to use her power. Carapace found a blackened work card in the man’s trousers. Ladybug snapped it in two and a dark butterfly flew out of it. Neither she nor the Crimson Empress noticed the figure getting back to its feet behind them, brandishing a shard of glass in its hand.

“Time to de-evil—” But Ladybug couldn’t finish her sentence as a light-brown blur pushed her aside.

“Oh no you don’t!” Laelaps screamed, catching Voplina’s arm, forcing her to drop her makeshift dagger. It clattered on the rubble.

“Why!” Volpina, no, Trixx sounded desperate as his host tried to resist. “I’m just doing what’s best for you all. Don’t you wish for better powers, Barkk? All you can do is…”

“I can’t summon illusions, or destroy everything I touch,” Laelaps said. “I know my power is a passive one. But protecting my friends is enough for me. Look at you, all you do is bring harm to those who wear you.”

“Shut up!” Trixx roared. Many shapes formed Voplina, the worst enemies they had faced, the Brutalist, Mayura, the Administrator, and so many more, each one more terrifying than the other. But no one flinched, if anything, ’s grip on Volpina’s wrist only tightened and Trixx’s screams grew weaker and hoarser. The illusions became more incoherent. A tiger, Master Fu, a giant teacup, an automobile, a suit and a tie, a gigantic metronome, Adrien Agreste, an outstretched hand, a closed door, Hawk Moth, a beating human heart, a skull.

“Stop it! you’re hurting the girl,” Laelaps said. “Let go of her now! Bee, please…”

“Venom,” Queen Bee spoke the word emotionlessly.

She jabbed the stinger at Volpina’s shoulder. The effect was immediate, the illusions faded away. the red-haired girl’s eye closed and she lost consciousness. Queen Bee carefully laid her down on the ground. crouched next to her. Ladybug and Carapace joined them. The Crimson Empress could only watch as Laelaps grabbed on the Fox Miraculous and started to pull it out of Volpina’s chest.

“What are you doing! No, she’s mine!” Trixx’s voice was muffled, but still audible.
Laelaps did not stop. The outlines of the Fox Miraculous glowed and the jewel started to detach itself from Volpina’s body. Laelaps winced audibly, her face scrunching up in pain, her hand trembling. This necklace was hot, painfully hot. Ladybug and Queen Bee put their hands around the Fox Miraculous too, and Carapace formed a Shell-ter around them. Which was far from useless. Sparks and fiery tendrils started to pour out of the necklace.

“Is she really worth all that trouble?” Trixx pleaded. “She’s lied to you, hurt you, I’ve seen it in her heart! I promise, this was all a misunderstanding, I never meant to—”

“And so what if she’s done all of those things?” Laelaps spat back. “We’re still going to save her from you!”

With one last tug, the chain that kept the Fox necklace attached to Lila Rossi’s neck broke and Volpina’s shape faded away to be replaced with that of the sleeping girl. Carapace’s Shell-ter shrunk to form a small globe around the Fox Miraculous. The Gare de l’Est was completely silent again. Ladybug turned to look at the field of ruins around them, the ground covered with debris, the Startrain’s carcass. There was the distant sound of fire sirens. The Crimson Empress let out a relieved sigh. Their mission here was over.

“Time to de-evilise! Miraculous Ladybug!”

The entire railway station was engulfed in a bright light, and when it dimmed, the Crimson Empress hesitantly got up. Her legs and arms didn’t hurt at all. The Startrain had regained its original place and was completely undamaged. Its door opened and all the people who had been stuck inside got out, a little confused. She couldn’t blame them for that, she still felt a little stunned herself. Queen Bee hid behind a pillar. With Mayor Bourgeois looking for his lost daughter… And he wouldn’t be the only one. There would be ambulances waiting for them outside, they’d put Lila Rossi on a stretcher and leave her care to professionals. And perhaps there would be journalists too, and questions to answer. Carapace would let them take care of that, he had a Miraculous to bring to the Guardian.

And it was exactly what happened, civilians trying to hug the heroes and thank them, Mayor Bourgeois crying, Nadja Chammack and many others trying to squeeze all they could out of them. The Crimson Empress and Laelaps were asked who they were behind their masks many times, each journalist — and they were only doing their job here — trying to make them give away as much as possible. Not that the improvised press conference lasted for long. Very soon, Tiger Eye’s Miraculous beeped, followed by Chat Noir’s a few minutes later. Ladybug and the Empress were the last ones to leave, and the crowd oh-ed as the Dragon’s wielder soared through the air.
“Tikki, spots off!”

“Longg, uncrown me!”

As always, they had been careful not to choose an alley too close to the Tsurugis’ flat, where they were headed. Marinette wouldn’t let go of her girlfriend’s left arm, not that the girlfriend in question minded, far from it. Kagami unlocked the door, the two took off their shoes and Marinette went to collapse on the living room’s sofa, letting out an undignified groan. Kagami put her things in her room, checked on her phone — a new message from Aiko, needing out about the appearance of these two new heroes— before going to the living room too. Marinette had made some room on the couch for her to join her. Kagami kissed her before sitting next to her. She rested her head on Marinette’s lap with an content smile.

Marinette’s telephone rang, and the girl had to get up in a hurry to answer the call.“Yes, mum! What… At the Gare de l’Est?… No, I’m still with Kagami, in her kitchen, we’re about to have dinner together! Yes, spaghetti with pesto and some courgettes on the side!… Yes, I’ll be home soon, promise. Love you!” She put her phone back in her bag and turned to her girlfriend. “I mean, it can be spaghetti but it can be something else, if you want. We could order some food, if you want?”

“No, spaghetti sounds fine,” Kagami said as she reluctantly left the couch. “Help me a little?”

“You bet I am!” Marinette pumped her fist into the air, “You take care of the pasta and I do the courgettes? Or we can order some takeout food instead if that’s what you want!”

“No, pasta is perfect!” Kagami replied. “Hey, I just remembered… It’s the holidays! I mean, you’ve still got your internship, but maybe…”

“Yeah, plenty of time for ourselves, I’m sure we’ll find a way to keep ourselves busy” Marinette said. She laughed when Kagami’s face turned a light shade of pink. “C’mon, let’s get to it, I’m hungry!”

Chapter End Notes
Bonjour, bonsoir!

So this was fun! But tiresome to write. But fun!

Laelaps! I'm a mythology nerd, plus there's that nifty hound/fox symbolism. I'll let you look it up yourself! I'm happy some of you caught my not subtle foreshadowing over the two chapters that preceded this one!

Queen Bee is such a fun character to write, and Mayura… Well among the many things I wish the show would do, giving her a more prominent role, with physical fights is one of these things.

I view the Crimson Empress moving like the characters in *House of Flying Daggers*, or in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*!

Yawarakai-Te, a sword which does not cut that which is innocent.

Next chapter won't have such a grand scale!

And if you want to see a preview of it, if you want to ask me things, if you are curious about the other things I read/watch/write, why don't you follow me on Tumblr? Just click [here](#)!

I'll see you next Monday!

À très vite!
If she had to make a list of the thing she hated, being in front of closed doors would be very high, perhaps number four. It was just… Life threatening situations and nefarious plots to use Paris’s population as a leverage so that one man could acquire two pieces of jewellery? Why, she could handle just fine, in fact, she did that kind of thing on a regular basis now. Fencing competitions against experienced opponents, with hundreds of people watching her every move? She had done it all before, she’d do it again in April and she had been trained for this, it was almost her natural element. Ringing at the door of a place she didn’t know, on the other hand… That still made her nervous. It was ridiculous, she knew it, they wouldn’t eat her alive, but…

No, no “but”. She had put on some of her best clothes, Marinette had assured her that she had told her colleagues about her coming here tonight, and it was just a doorbell button to push, after which she’d only have to wave at the camera and state her name. That was simple enough and perfectly manageable, she was just imagining things because of how draining today’s training had been. That was it, no more standing in the cold, in front of that door looking like an idiot. She stole a glance at the letters above the portal one last time. “Manladrineaut”, it simply read, in an elegant cursive script. She cleared her throat, made sure that her hair wasn’t getting in her face and pressed the small gilded button.

“Hello?” she said, facing the camera. “This is Kagami Tsuru—”

“Oh yes,” a monotonous voice answered. “We had been expecting you. Come in, then.”

The portal opened automatically. How they had managed to instal such a mechanism on a beautiful old building like this one without damaging it, Kagami had no idea. Would it make for a good conversation starter? She wouldn’t test it, not today at least. She got inside the edifice — it felt like one— and headed immediately to the left, just like Marinette had explained her in her text. Kagami knew what to expect, she had seen pictures of the place, dozens of them. Knowing that she’d actually be there in person, in a few seconds, felt weird. There was nothing about the place and its history that she hadn’t learned by heart yet today would be the first time she’d set foot here.

The door to the conveniently-named drawing room was ajar. Kagami took it as an invitation to come in. Before that, however, she checked her wristwatch to make sure she wasn’t there too early. The sound of conversation carried to her ears, and though she couldn’t tell what was being discussed, she recognised Marinette’s voice right away. It wouldn’t do to knock on the door and interrupt that talk. She’d simply open the door as noiselessly as she could and sit in silence on one of the designer chairs she knew would be on her right, next to the desks. Or perhaps the highchair could be fun? She’d wait until Marinette noticed her presence.
Before Kagami could do any of that, a short, portly man arrived. His absent smile turned into a Cheshire cat grin when he spotted her. So this was the M. Tamarre she had heard so much about. There was undeniably something about him that screamed “fashion industry”, a je ne sais quoi that made it impossible to doubt that he was one of Jeanette Manladrineaut’s star creators. And he knew who she was. M. Tamarre stopped in front Kagami and shook her hand enthusiastically. He peered inside the drawing room, and his grin widened comically.

“Sofia is the one working with Marinette this evening,” he whispered. “Everyone else has come home already. I believe we may come in. Oh, and may I offer you a cup of tea?”

“Thank you, M. Tamarre,” Kagami answered, keeping her voice low, “but we will be leaving as soon as they are done, so I will pass.”

“Next time, then,” the man said. He pulled the door open silently, motioning for her to come in.

Marinette truly had photographed the drawing room from every possible angle. Kagami had tried to share her girlfriend’s enthusiasm when she had talked about it, but all she had managed to feel was a mild interest, and she had felt guilty for that. She wouldn’t have to try anymore, in fact she had to keep herself from oohing. The great tables, the designer chairs and the recliner, the drawing boards and the expensive-looking computers with their assorted graphics tablets; the whiteboards, the relaxation area… It was spacious, well lit, furnished with impeccable taste.

Marinette was sitting at a table with a pencil in her hand, listening closely to an elegantly-dressed older woman — so that was the Sofia Maalouf—pointing at something on her drawing sheet. She hadn’t noticed the two people that had just come in the room, and Kagami decided that now was not the time to clear her throat and interrupt the moment. Marinette would stop drawing every so often to speak to Mme Maalouf, who would offer some advice and steer her in the direction she deemed the most interesting. After three good minutes of this routine, according to Kagami’s phone, though it felt like mere seconds to her, Marinette finished her sketch. It was only then that she noticed that there were new people in the room.

“Kagami!” she yelled happily and threw herself in her girlfriend’s arm. She never had this kind of energy at 6PM when they had school. But it seemed that Hawk Moth too had decided to go on holiday, and the internship wasn’t all that exhausting.

“Hey Mari,” Kagami said once Marinette took a step back. Oh, could that girl’s smile stop being so contagious? “Hello, Mme Maalouf, it’s a pleasure to meet you!”
“Hello, Mlle Tsurugi, I’ve heard a lot about you,” Sofia Maalouf said warmly. “I think we are done for today, Marinette! Enjoy your evening! Oh, Corentin, I had something to ask of you! Could you…”

But Kagami was no longer listening to her. Marinette had went to retrieve her bag and jacket, and so she took it as an opportunity to look at the sketch Manladrineaut’s youngest intern had worked on. A dress, a lavender flounced cocktail dress, to be even more precise, and its assorted bracelets and earrings, with the label “For A. Bourgeois” scribbled. Kagami had seen many of Marinette’s sketches over time, and she had to say, this was her best one yet. It was what she thought of each new drawing she had gotten to see. So far, she hadn’t been wrong. Marinette called her name. Now was time to go, it seemed. M. Tamarre and Mme Maalouf had already left the drawing room. They didn’t forget to turn off the lights on their way out.

Having to walk in the muddy snow was one of the things Marinette hated the most, and she wasn’t trying to hide it. It would have been tempting to transform and run from rooftop to rooftop until they made it home. The snow was still white, up there, and what’s more, there would have been the satisfying feeling of her feet sinking slightly. Transformed, she could stick to almost all solid surfaces but would it work here? Kim, for instance, would be enjoying a good week and a half in Courchevel, eating raclette and skiing all day long. And though Marinette was not a ski enthusiast herself, she was almost jealous of the boy. Not that she could have asked her parents to go there, it would have been expensive, and she had her duties.

How Kagami could stand the wet noise was beyond her. Or perhaps she loathed it as much as as she did but knew how to hide it very well. On the bright side of things, it wouldn’t take them long to get from the convenience shop to home, only a few blocks. And it was a much-needed detour, one they’d have to make if they wished to have soup for dinner. Her dad had given Kagami a list alongside the money to pay for the groceries. They followed it religiously. When Marinette unlocked the door a good twenty minutes later, mum was here to help them with the heavy sacks.

“Pumpkin soup?” Kagami asked once they were in Marinette’s room. She had her back turned to her girlfriend and was searching for something in her bag.

“Yup,” Marinette answered. “With roasted walnuts kernels and maybe some grated cheese too!”

“I forgot to give him earlier…” Kagami mumbled as her search continued. “Do you think now would be a good time to bring your dad…” She stopped and turned around, lifting the jar of dried horns of plenty above her head for Marinette to see… “These?”
“This is a gift from your mum, for the kitchen,” Marinette stated the obvious.

“As a thank-you gift for last Sunday,” Kagami nodded, getting up from her crouched position.

Itsuko Tsurugi had been invited for lunch and though Kagami — who had been the one to organise this — had been a little anxious about her mother meeting Marinette’s parents, it had gone very well. It wouldn’t have been an exaggeration to say that they were friends now, actual friends. Marinette hadn’t been apprehensive at all, she had warned her father, asking him to refrain from making too many of his terrible jokes around her girlfriend’s mother. The result had been that he had mostly talked about cooking, something that must have made a lasting impression on Kagami’s mother.

“Maybe wait until tomorrow morning, otherwise he’ll try to make a mushroom omelet with the soup,” Marinette said.

“Why does this sound threatening?” Kagami laughed. She brushed a strand of hair that had gotten in her face and went to sit next to Marinette on the chaise longue with a happy sigh. Marinette intertwined their fingers and was happy to find that Kagami wasn’t blushing nearly as much as she used to a few weeks back.

These holidays had been great so far, she thought. Sure, she had her internship to keep her busy most days, if only for a few hours, and Kagami had to train for that sabre competition in April, but it only took so much of their free time. With Hawk Moth missing and Mayura showing no sign of her existence since the Gare de l’Est incident, they were left with all the time they needed to do all they wanted. And they had used these first five days rather well, if you asked Marinette. Marjane and Kagami had went to a lesson at the Collège de France out of curiosity, Marinette had come to see Kim and Alix win their game of lacrosse.

They also spent a lot more time together, just the two of us, without school or superhero shenanigans getting in in their way. Not that they had done a great many things so far, they had fenced together and that was about it. Unless “staying at each other’s place, watching a series and kissing a lot” counted as “a great many things”. But it would change soon. They’d go to the Musée d’Orsay, Kagami had learned everything she needed to be a good museum guide, they’d probably go to the cinema too, though they hadn’t decided on what to watch just yet. And on the 7th of March would be Kagami’s birthday. Marinette was quite happy with the gifts she had found and made.

For now, Marinette was simply happy they were together in her room, with absolutely nothing they needed to do, and the promise of a delicious dinner waiting for them downstairs in half an hour. She didn’t want to get up from the chaise longue, at least not for now. It may not have been as comfortable as Kagami’s couch, but it came close. Here was warm and safe and not too noisy, and
with the girl sh— She must have dozed off, because she didn’t remember having put a plaid blanket on her shoulders, or Kagami stroking her hair like that. Perhaps she could pretend she was still asleep and enjoy this for a few more minutes? Kagami must have noticed that she was awake, but said nothing. Her caresses only stopped when Marinette stretched lazily

“That was nice,” Marinette yawned. She felt much less tired already. “How long was I out?”

“A good twenty minutes, I’d say,” Kagami said. Her cheeks were flushed when she added, “you looked really peaceful and happy so I didn’t want to wake you up…”

“Well it was sweet of you to bring me the blanket,” Marinette smiled. “So thank you for that.”

She was about to kiss her girlfriend when a sonorous “dinner’s ready” carried from downstairs. She gave her a small peck on the lips instead, and the two hurried to the living room. When dad meant that dinner was ready, he meant that the soup was just the right temperature, still hot but not to the point where it would burn their throats if they tried to swallow it. The smell was mouth-watering, too, though Marinette made sure to close the trapdoor so that it wouldn’t float to her room. Mum was already sprinkling roasted walnut kernels in everyone’s bowls while dad sat next to her. Marinette was the last to take a seat.

It seemed that Kagami was enjoying the soup at least as much as she did. And though Marinette would have enjoyed the soup even more had there been marrow seeds instead of walnuts, she decided not to voice this aloud. The meal went on calmly, and though they didn’t talk about anything too fascinating, it wasn’t an annoying, boring conversation either. Or at least, it hadn’t been so far. But Marinette’s sixth sense, which she had honed over the years, told her that dad was about to make this meal a lot more awkward, with a joke or a well-meaning but poorly-phrased comment. She couldn’t have that. She stole a glance at her mum who understood immediately.

“So Kagami,” Sabine said, “I’ve heard that you would involved in a competition this April?”

“Oh yes, Mme Che— Sorry, Sabine,” Kagami corrected herself, “it will be the first time the Challenge International de Paris will be opened to people other than foil fencers, and men too, for that matter. And so I’m coming back to the world of competitive fencing! I mean, my mother has managed to find a way for me to compete under the Japanese flag despite my training here!”

“You used to be in many more competitions when you were younger, then?” Tom inquired.
“Until my mother decided that it was too easy for me and that I needed some new people to train me,” Kagami nodded. “This April will be my great return, in a way, and it will only be the beginning! If everything goes well, I’ll probably be moving a lot because of these competitions…”

Marinette blanched and her stomach lurched a little. That last sentence had been all it had taken for her to jump to the worst kind of conclusion possible. Her mind was racing in all directions at once. No, that couldn’t be right, she must have misinterpreted it. “I’ll probably be moving a lot because of these competitions…” Kagami would have told her, she wouldn’t have kept something so important from her. Marinette wanted to be wrong. She had to be wrong. It seemed that Kagami had noticed her reaction, and something — shock? Confusion? — flashed in her eyes. She reached out for Marinette’s hand, giving it a squeeze.

“I’ll still be living here,” Kagami clarified. “Simply, I may go abroad every now and then for fencing events I am allowed to take a part in. I won’t be able to compete in European competitions because… Well, I’m still very much Japanese.”

“I’ll be there to cheer for you as much as I can,” Marinette promised. “But for now, you should eat your soup, it’s getting cold!” And perhaps in a few years, she would have the [...] nationality; all it would take was for them to marry each other.

Kagami laughed at that and followed Marinette’s advice. Dessert was the regular Dupain apple pie, a satisfactory way to end the meal, if you asked Marinette. For once, mum and dad didn’t ask her to give them a hand with the dishes. Instead, they asked her to show Kagami her towel and to explain her how the shower worked, which Marinette was happy to do. They weren’t just having dinner together. This was a sleepover. And so, Kagami went to pick up her pyjamas from her bag and all but locked herself in the bathroom for the next twenty minutes.

Which was just the time Marinette needed to hide Kagami’s presents a little better — not that they were big and flashy, but she didn’t want to accidentally ruin the surprise by leaving them in places where Kagami might find them — and to finish one of her side project, for instance, the corduroy trousers. She put on her headphones, got her scissors and pencils ready, and got to work. Kagami had to call her name four times before she noticed that she was no longer alone in the room, and that the bathroom was no longer occupied. Kagami’s hair was still a little wet from the shower. Well, she could finish that pattern later.

The hot water helped her muscles relax a little. Though she couldn’t compare being Ladybug with drawing for hours and hours, the two had an effect on her body and her shoulders did tend to feel a little stiff these days. Marinette allowed herself the pleasure of singing in the shower, there would be no one to point out if she were out of tune — which was more often the case than not— as her parents were in the living room watching whatever it was they were watching, and Kagami was
upstairs. She glanced at her reflection in the misted-up mirror. She felt beautiful.

It took her some time to untangle her hair. If Ladybug had kept her iconic coiffure, Marinette on the other hand, had decided that she was getting too old for pigtails. And after three days of that change, she could see the perks of the hairstyle — she felt less like a child, and Kagami would play with her hair and stroke it more often— which outweighed its downsides — it would get in her mouth a lot more often, and the knots were a pain to untangle. When Marinette left the bathroom at last, she stopped by the living room to say goodnight to her parents. She got upstairs, where she was sure she’d find Kagami sitting on the chaise longue, reading… Was it Duras?

Instead of that, however, she found that the chaise longue had been moved to face her computer screen. Had Kagami moved it on her own? It was so heavy… But then again, Kagami was strong, and this… This would be so much better than watching something on two chairs, apart from each other. Marinette didn’t need to look at her girlfriend to guess what she wanted to watch. They weren’t finished with season four just yet. Marinette started the episode and scooted closer to Kagami, who wrapped a blanket around the two of them. This was even better than she had imagined it would be.

“You know, I hadn’t organised a sleepover here since primary school,” she whispered by the end of their third episode.

“Really?” Kagami sounded genuinely surprised.

“Well, my first three years in collège were basically hell because of Chloé, but you already knew that,” Marinette said. “And then Alya was this cool new girl at school, who immediately became my friend. The exact same day I got these,” she pointed at her earrings.

“So trying to sneak out without Alya noticing when your only possible exit was the skylight would have been nearly impossible,” Kagami guessed.

“I was told that knocking out your friends was rude,” Marinette laughed. “So I’d go to the sleepovers my friends had organised, if I knew a few exit routes. So, congratulations for being the first in… Wow, five years. Yay!”

Marinette threw her arms in the air in fake celebration, and used that as an excuse to wrap them around Kagami’s waist. Snow was falling outside, again, and they stopped the episode to watch outside the window, the blanket still around them. Kagami was getting tired, Marinette could feel it. By the middle of their fifth episode, she was yawning. It would soon be her hypothetical bedtime. She felt herself turn pink at that. Would she… Should she… Perhaps it’d be better if she
just asked Kagami. Because she wanted this very much, but if her girlfriend didn’t, it was alright, she’d just have to go downstairs and…

“Doyouwanttosleepwithmetonight?” Marinette blurted out.

So this must have been what Kagami had felt when she had blabbered nonsense about chest protections and bruises back in September, before running away from the locker room the moment Marinette had tried to take off her shirt to change to her sports clothes.

“I’m sorry, what?” Kagami looked lost.

“Well… I was wondering if you’d like to share my bed for the night,” Marinette said, slower this time, looking at her feet. “I mean, I understand if you don’t want to, there’s a futon I can—”

“Yes,” Kagami said. “I’d like that… Sleeping in your bed, that is.”

“Oh, err, good, then,” Marinette gave a tentative smile. “So…”

“So we put back the chaise longue where it was and we go to bed?” Kagami offered.

It was comforting for Marinette to see that she wasn’t the only one blushing. They switched off the light once they were done, and Marinette was the first to go up the stairs that lead to her bed. She gave her girlfriend an encouraging smile. Kagami joined her. What followed was an awkward silence as they got under the bedsheets, at a very safe distance for one another, purposefully staring at the ceiling. They spent a good thirty seconds stealing glances at each other and not saying anything. Marinette hesitantly reached out for Kagami’s hand, and gave it a small squeeze. Kagami squeezed back.

“I… Thank you for tonight,” Kagami’s voice was faint. She turned to the side so that they could talk face to face. “And for everything, too.”

“There’s nothing you need to thank me for,” Marinette whispered, snuggling closer to Kagami. Their legs were almost touching now. “Being here with you… You always find a way to make me happier. So thank you for being you.”
Kagami caressed her cheek, tracing her freckles with her fingertips, and there was this look in her eyes that made her want to get even closer to her, that made her want to say… But that would be for another time. Kagami yawned once again, bringing the hand that had stroked Marinette’s cheek in front of her mouth. That yawn was contagious, and it only took a few seconds for Marinette to imitate her girlfriend. Her eyes felt heavy with sleep, and they would close in any second now. It had been a busy day for Kagami too, so it seemed. Perhaps the training with her mum was just that tiresome.

Marinette was almost sure she had heard Kagami mumble “good night,” but that may have been her imagination. She couldn’t have asked her to repeat anyway. Kagami was already fast asleep, it seemed. Marinette whispered a small “sweet dreams”. She felt herself sink in the mattress. Her mind was slowly getting blurrier, pleasantly so. She didn’t fight it, she let herself be engulfed in the comfortable obscurity. Her last conscious thought was that she was still holding Kagami’s hand.

She was not an early riser, far from it. Back when she was in collège, her parents had often been forced to rouse her from her sleep so that she wouldn’t miss lunch. Still, Marinette was the first to wake up this morning. She opened her eyes for a brief moment and closed them again. She could feel a weight pressing against her back, something slightly soft and pleasantly warm. No, not something. Someone. Kagami. She opened her eyes once more. Kagami who had somehow wrapped her arms around her middle in her sleep, and pulled her much closer to her. The realisation made her heart flutter. No, she could definitely not move an inch to reach for her phone and see what time it was.

Not that she wanted to move. This was something she had never knew she needed this much until now, and she savoured every second of it. The feeling of being held by her girlfriend, the warmth of her underneath the fabric of her pyjamas… She let out a small, content sigh, and put her hands on Kagami’s. She closed her eyes again and tried to get closer still. She could not go back to sleep however. She really needed to use the bathroom and doing so with someone clinging to her waist without accidentally waking that someone up would be tricky. But Marinette managed it anyway. Stealth was something she had become good at, after all.

The clock in the kitchen read 8:21AM, not too early but still early enough so that they could do something with their morning. She tried her best not to make noise as she opened the trapdoor. She watered the ivy and the small ficus Kagami had gifted her, chose a random book from her shelf and went back to bed. Not that she could really concentrate on her reading with Kagami a mere centimetres from her. She would always find herself drawn to the sleeping girl. Did she even know how— but it seemed that she would be able to tell her that in a minute. Kagami had just opened her eyes. She looked hazy for a split second, and it made Marinette want to hug her even more.

“Good morning, you,” she said instead, her voice brimming with affection. “Have you slept well?”
“‘Morning,” Kagami yawned. She still looked a little sleepy. “Your bed is very comfortable…”

“And you seemed to find me comfortable too,” Marinette laughed. Kagami stretched her arms and rubbed her eyes.

“Did I—” Kagami didn’t want to put a word on it.

“Yes you did! And I liked it! a lot and it feels great to wake up in the arms of a beautiful girl, even more so when the beautiful girl is you” Marinette said with a bright smile.

“Oh…” Kagami said. “I…” She was beet red, and had Marinette been in her shoes, she would have tried to hide her face under a pillow. “Thank you, I guess,” she mumbled, the small smile that crept on her lips betrayed how happy she was.

“So, do you want us to cuddle in bed a little longer?” Marinette asked. “Or would you like to have breakfast?”

They ended up having breakfast much later than what they had usually planned, and if you asked Marinette, it was all worth it. Sure, Kagami would need to wear a scarf, but she hadn’t seemed to mind earlier. The bread was delicious, the Earl Grey was just right. Her girlfriend was next to her, nibbling on her slice of bread with blueberry jam. These holidays truly were everything Marinette had hoped they would be. And they still had many days before them, before Kagami’s fencing competition, before the small fashion show at Manadrineaut where all the people she worked with, and Jeanette Manadrineaut herself, would judge her creation. All that could still wait for a little while.

They did everything they had hoped to do, and more.

Their date at the Musée d’Orsay… Kagami hadn’t lied when she had said she wanted to make it perfect. She came very close to that. She had thought out a route that would have them stop by her favourite works. Kagami would later confess that she had rehearsed her little speeches in front of her mirror to get them right without having to look at the sheet she had brought with her just in case. It had paid off, she talked about the paintings with passion, she had an eye for the smallest detail that made Marinette full of admiration for her. The tour involved a stop at the museum’s cafeteria, to have a mug of hot cocoa. Marinette had expected to enjoy the visit. Kagami had given her more than that.
Nino stayed true to his words and invited them to watch the “almost final” version of Starkross, in his own words. By which, as Alya pointed out, he meant that he would probably spend hours re-editing the film, making tweaks here and there to make it as good as he could. And it was already quite impressive, had she not been working on the project too, Marinette would have assumed an experienced director was behind the film. He had every reason to be proud of his work, and soon, the small private screening turned into a pizza night, though Kagami’s mother insisted on picking her daughter and Marinette up before midnight. It was too bad Adrien couldn’t have come, but with his father.

But not everything they did together was planned in advance like that, however. During one of their video calls, Marinette decided on an impulse that the two of them would go ice-skating the next morning, even though she had never been to an ice rink in her entire life. Perhaps it was because of that animated series with the white-haired figure skater and his husband, at least it was Kagami’s guess, Aiko wouldn’t stop texting her about it. It could be that Marinette wanted to emulate the exploits of these athletes. Or perhaps was just curious about ice-skating. Either way, they met at the ice-rink at 10AM.

The first half-hour was chaotic to say the least, with Marinette doing a lot of flailing, screaming and falling — though luckily, the only thing she wounded was her pride — and losing her balance and Kagami trying to save the other ice-skaters from her girlfriend. The first half-hour was chaotic, but the rest of the date much less so. Marinette found her tempo, and stopped panicking whenever she would go a little faster than she had wanted to, and though it would take some time for her to be as good as Kagami, she ended up having a lot of fun. And for Kagami who hadn’t skated in years, it was nice to find the sensations again.

It hadn’t taken long for Marinette and Itsuko Tsurugi to plan Kagami’s birthday, in fact they had started texting each other about it back in February. They had come to the same conclusion: it would be nice for Kagami to spend some time with her mother — since Teppei Tsurugi hadn’t been kind enough to take a few days off, fly to Paris to be there for his daughter’s birthday, even though he could have afforded doing all of these things — but the girl would also to see her friends and Marinette. They had also found a way to make both these things possible and rather uncomplicated.

“Alright everyone,” Marinette spoke in a hushed voice, “Kagami and her mum will be back from the Saïdoune in about ten minutes. So you get the presents ready in the living room, next to the parcels; we don’t want to be stressful so we’ll be in the corridor when they open the door.”

“And don’t forget to take off your shoes,” Marjane added in the same low tone. “And to hide them
too, it’d be silly to give ourselves that way!”

“Why are we talking like that, again?” Alya raised her eyebrow. “I mean, it’s not like they could
hear us…”

“Shhh, we’re trying to get in the mood, babe,” Nino murmured. “Operation Birthday is go, Gold
Leader?”

“Yup,” Marinette nodded.

They took off their shoes before Marinette opened the door, and they got to work, or rather,
Marjane and she got to work and lined up the carefully-wrapped presents next to the other parcels.
Nino and Alya were too busy oohing at everything they saw — it was their first time here, and she
couldn’t blame them for reacting that way, she had been that way too, all these months ago — to
truly be helpful. It was alright, they were in no hurry, all they’d have to do, the four of them, would
be to keep in low when the time had come.

Marinette had to mute her phone after it chimed — a text from Kagami telling her about her lunch
with her mum, how great it had been even though she wished she had been there to enjoy the
moment with her. Reading the message brought a smile to her face and Marjane looked at her
enviously. Was everything between she and Adrien… But that would’t be the kind of topic for a
light conversation. And so waited. And waited. And waited some more. It was hard for Marinette
not to run left and right to make sure everything was alright. What was taking them so long?

She went in the corridor, Marjane, Nino and Alya behind her. The muffled sound of Itsuko
Tsurugi’s voice carried through the door, accompanied with the regular sound of footsteps.
Kagami’s voice rang out next, her words clear. Not that Marinette could have understood what her
girlfriend was saying, her Japanese was getting better but still nowhere good enough to to follow a
conversation, all she could tell was that Kagami sounded happy. She turned to Nino, Alya and
Marjane. Now, they were getting to the fun part. There was the metallic noise of a key being turned
inside the keyhole. Three… Two… One…

Kagami hadn’t suspected a thing. She loved of all her gifts, the original edition of that Stefan Wul
book Marjane had somehow managed to find would be a valuable addition to her personal library,
alongside the tome of Billy Bat the author himself had signed for her, courtesy of Aiko. Not that all
her presents were books. The Polaroid camera Nino, Alya Kim and Adrien had gotten her, for
instance, was a welcome surprise. The new laptop her father had sent her had Alya’s eyes widen
comically. Her mother gave her the picture of a queen-size bed, promising the real thing would be
there within the week.
Marinette couldn’t help but smile as she watched Kagami carefully unwrap the rather large lumpy parcel she had given her, and the smile widened when she glanced at her with incredulity before she excused herself, saying she had to go to her room and that she wouldn’t be long. When she came back to the living room, she was wearing a pitch black suit with its assorted black tie and white shirt. Marinette’s mouth felt dry for a second. Oh, she’d have to thank her colleagues for helping her make it so… Perfect. Kagami didn’t just wear the suit, she was born for that. It gave her a magnetic aura, an air of nobility. She felt herself blush a little. Had it only been the two of them…

“I… I don’t know what to say,” Kagami mumbled. “It’s… Thank you, so much. Do you want me to try on the other thing too?”

“Only if you want to,” Marinette laughed as she took one step closer to hug her girlfriend.

Kagami reappeared a few minutes later, and Marinette had to admit, she had imagined her wearing the dress once or twice, but reality surpassed her imagination. Kagami had put on the Dragon pendant, and the pearl matched with the colour of the fabric perfectly. Most of her back was exposed, but the hint of self-consciousness disappeared and her cheeks burned up when she saw the way Marinette looked at her. The birthday party continued, and by the end of the day, when Marinette kissed her girlfriend goodbye and left for patrol, she was sure of one thing. She had never been so happy in her entire life.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

This was sweet and nice and absolutely not heterosexual in any way, and I am very, very glad for it, and I think this chapter is as important as the previous one in this story. Because hey, En garde is a love story first and foremost!

… And there's not much to say about it, except that writing happy things makes me happy! My Tumblr is still here, ask me things, tell me what you thought about this chapter, or follow me if you want to see previews of the incoming chapters and the other things I write!

Thank you for being so many to read this silly little (though it's quite long now!) fic, thank you for your kind and valuable comments, thank you for your kudos!

À lundi prochain!
The classroom was a prison, and Mme Michaud, the jailer, was making things more difficult than they needed to be. Or perhaps Marinette was being a little dramatic. That class not a very interesting one for her, at least today’s class. She had asked her mum to help her learn how negations worked in Chinese, and had been quick to master that notion. So all that the teacher was doing was repeat something Marinette already knew, and though Karim seemed very intent on following Mme Michaud’s lesson, she had other things to think about than the HSK 2 test. She would pass with no trouble whatsoever, she was sure. All they had done in the last three weeks, she had already learned months ahead. At least when Kagami taught her Japanese, though really casually, there was an impression of newness, of progression… Marinette’s eyes were riveted on the clock, and each second ticking by made her heart beat a little faster.

It seemed to her that looking at the clock made time flow slower. Or perhaps it was the sheer urgency of what would await her as soon as the class was over. At least she wasn’t stomping her feet erratically, she hadn’t drummed on the table with the tip of her fingers yet, as she knew it annoyed the boy sitting next to her to no end. Only a few more minutes to go, and the teacher was busy breathing down some other student’s neck. No negative emotion, no negative emotion, she wouldn’t be fodder for Hawk Moth, who had made an habit of akumatising people every now and then — too often, if you asked Marinette— to remind Paris that he wasn’t gone.

Not that it was Hawk Moth she was worried about. Her still being stressed out because of civilian matters in which lives were never at stakes felt almost ridiculous. At least, this was the kind of thing the cold, less compassionate part of her mind would have said. That wasn’t quite right, or fair, however. She had the right to be stressed out about something that was this important to her, with a deadline that was only looming closer by the minute. She discretely started putting her school things in her bag, to be sure not to waste a few precious seconds when the bell would ring, freeing her from this place. The teacher did not notice. Then again, she wasn’t known for her detection skills.

Just one minute and twenty eight seconds left. She wasn’t the only one getting ready to leave, it seemed. There would be no homework for their next class, Mme Michaud said. Still, she made them wait until the very end. Now that was torture. Sure, it was because the headteacher had decided that allowing the students to leave early could put them in danger, as they were still under the school’s responsibility, or so he said. Which meant that he’d get in trouble if anything happened to one of them if they left even a minute earlier than they were supposed to. Marinette stole a glance out the window… If she ran fast enough, perhaps she wouldn’t get caught in the rain.

She was out of the classroom as soon as the bell rang, and completely disregarded the “no phones in the corridors” and “no running in the corridors” part of the school’s rules. She texted Kagami to
tell that she wouldn’t be able to walk her home today because of how busy she was — she’d understand, she had busy with things of her own too, lately— and was the first student to cross the entrance of the lycée Carnot that evening. She sprinted, almost got turned into a crêpe by a bus, dodged some of her old classmates from collège Ivan, Mylène and Sabrinazm— she’d chat with them some other day, she swore, she had lost touch with too many of those who were in different lycées from hers — and finally arrived home.

Marinette felt a little guilty not stopping to say hello to her parents, but this was urgent. She went straight to her room, closed the trapdoor, kicked off her shoes, did her hair into a tight bun and played music, loud. She had made sure she’d have everything she needed before she had left for school this morning, her sewing machine, the preparatory sketches, the scissors and pencils, her sketchbook and a sketchpad, all the muslin she could possibly use, the needles. She had even put her game consoles downstairs in case she were to think about playing. It was high time she got started. The small designing contest between the interns would take place on Saturday morning. Which left her two nights to finish the prototypes. And between taking care of it at Manlardineaut, as the others had done, which meant being alone working on her own thing and missing on all the advice she could get, and doing it at home during her free time… The choice hadn’t been hard to make.

“Let’s get started!” she said to herself.

She got to work. Creating the pattern for the trench coat, the only one she hadn’t taken care of yet, wouldn’t take too long. Two months of internship had paid off. She avoided all the little mistakes she’d have made a few months ago, barely visible for most people but glaring flaws for the trained eye. The sleeves would be just right this time, and she wouldn’t mess the pockets up this time, now that she knew everything about how to make them properly. She did not want something decent. If she wanted to make a lasting impression on Madame Manlardineaut, she would have to do more than simply that. She was the youngest intern, yes, but it would have been naive to believe that they would go easy on her because of that.

And… That was done. It hadn’t taken more than… Maybe ten minutes, if she had to guess? She wasn’t sure. Now came the much harder part, the one that had her worry that she would have to go through a nuit blanche or two just to make sure that everything was as close to perfection as could be, even though they were only muslin prototypes. If one of her projects were to be chosen… But she was getting ahead of herself imagining that she could stand a chance without having anything concrete to bring. The other interns were good, too, or at least she supposed they were, they rarely saw each other and they rarely talked to each other. M. Tamarre had told her that she was the most promising among the bunch. With him, she had no idea whereas it was true or just flattery.

It seemed that the “loud music means do not disturb until I turn it off” rule she had established with
her parents was working pretty well so far. No dad suddenly opening her trapdoor to bring her biscuits, making her jump and ruin her dress, no mum telling her that dinner was ready for the umpteenth time… It was a rather nice rule, she had to say, though it meant no surprise biscuits. She got her scissors, her chalk and her pencils ready. She’d start with something simple, the tunic, for instance, would be a good warm-up. Soon, the floor around her was covered in muslin offcuts.

Marinette was getting somewhere, she knew it, just not as quickly as she would have wanted to. She bit the inside of her cheek and scrunched her nose slightly as she plugged her sewing machine. She’d do the more detailed parts by hand, she decided. Not that there would be a great many details to take care of. Here again, it showed how much she had learned. Her sewing had become as good as her knitting: good enough for Mme Maaloul to ask her for help on more complex dresses, while all the other interns mostly did some preparatory work, which was certainly necessary, she had done this too at first, but did not require as much skill as the tasks Mme Maalouf had assigned her.

Even for something as supposedly simple as the tunic, it still took a good deal of focus to get things entirely right. M. Tamarre and Mme Maalouf, and all the others thought she was one of the most skilled, most promising aspiring fashion designer of her age? They had said so because she had worked to earn the title, and because they had given her the opportunity to hone these skills. Their expectations could have been a crushing weight on Marinette’s shoulders, a pressure she couldn’t have handled. Instead of that, however, it made her want to push herself even more than was already the case.

At last, Marinette put the tunic on its hanger, just as her phone decided to buzz. Could she allow herself to check her messages for two minutes? Perhaps there were some important texts from the people at Manladrineaut that she had missed. Probably not, but she needed an excuse to answer her girlfriend’s messages. She had worked for one hour straight, and she had missed a lot. She had said two minutes, she reminded herself, resisting the temptation of clicking on the link Alya had sent her. The most recent message was from Kagami, unsurprisingly. What was odd, however, was its content.

From: Kagami, light of my day

To: Me

Hey, is OK if I come upstairs? Your parents tell me there’s that rule about music, so, I don’t know…

Was she— Of course she was, this definitely sounded like the sort of thing she would do. Her mum would let her do it. Kagami’s marks hadn’t suffered due to her being in a relationship, she was
taking fencing and the incoming competition — April, this was getting dangerously close— very seriously, so Itsuko Tsurugi would certainly allow her daughter to spend some time with her girlfriend. Marinette opened the trapdoor. And sure enough, when she peered outside, Kagami was there, doing her homework on the kitchen table with a teapot and an empty cup right next to her. She must have heard her, because she immediately turned to wave at her with a sheepish smile.

“Yes, you can come in, in fact you should come in!” Marinette said, grinning, almost forgetting what she needed to do for a second.

Kagami was happy to follow her girlfriend’s suggestion. Marinette tried to make her room look slightly less like a messy atelier and a little more like a presentable place. She turned down the music. Her smile fell a little. Oh, but she had other things to take care of, Kagami had already seen her room with all these offcuts scattered across the floor. needed to get back to her seat and take care of the dress, and the trench coat, and the dressing gown, and the turtleneck top… She heaved a long sigh. From the chaise longue, Kagami was looking at her with a puzzled expression, which soon turned into understanding and guilt.

“Are you sure you’re fine with me being here?” she asked, getting up. “I can leave if you want, really, no problem!”

“No no, you can stay, just… I might not be very talkative,” Marinette replied. She hoped she didn’t sound mean or tense, or mad at Kagami, because she certainly wasn’t. “I mean, we can talk, but my answers won’t be very deep… You can do whatever you want, well, except for touching the tunic and all the other things when I’m done making them. But I’m happy you’ve decided to keep me company.”

“Is there anything I can help you with?” Kagami offered. “Otherwise I’ll just read on the chaise longue.”

“I err, I’d like that, you helping me… If I ask you to bring me the wing needle or the…” Marinette stopped when Kagami pointed towards, to her surprise, the right needle. “You learned which were which?”

“Well, not all of them, but those you’ve got, yes,” Kagami said. “I mean, you’ve learned a lot about fencing so I thought that was the least I could do.”

“That’s… That’s really nice of you,” Marinette whispered. If she hadn’t been wrestling with that
piece of muslin, she would have hugged her girlfriend. “I don’t know if I’ll actually need your help for this? No offence, but…”

“I understand,” Kagami smiled. “You do your thing and I won’t bother you and if you call my name, which you don’t have to, I’ll be there. Weren’t you playing Phillip Glass, before?”

“Yup,” Marinette nodded, not even surprised that her girlfriend had identified the composer. “Would it bother you if I played it again? It helps me concentrate a little better, I’ve found…”

“It’s your room,” Kagami said. “And in the meantime… Oh! I know, I’ll water your ficus!” She gave Marinette a short kiss and went downstairs to fill a pitcher of water.

Marinette found that working in the same room as her girlfriend wasn’t difficult at all. They’d done their homework together before, on multiple occasions, and it had went well, they had gotten things done, not letting themselves get distracted by the other’s company. This was no different. Marinette started gathering everything she would need to make the dressing gown. It wasn’t long before she was surrounded by muslin cutoffs — Nino had asked her if he could use it for his next, smaller project, she’d put it in a bag later— and left with pieces that were flawlessly cut. Sure, it was only a prototype, but this would be what she would be judged for.

She ran the tip of her finger over the edge of the last muslin piece and allowed herself a satisfied smile. Now came the trickier part. She started her sewing machine. Her brow was furrowed in concentration as she sewed the pieces together, her hand perfectly still. She had to re-do a slightly faulty stitch. A silly mistake, really the sort that would have made her turn beet red had Mme Maalouf been there. This was alright, it was only a muslin, and besides, not that terrible of a mistake. Freaking out would do her no good here, a small voice that sounded suspiciously like Master Fu’s spoke in her head. She could complain to her heart’s content when it’d be over.

She was completely immersed in her work, so immersed that, for a while, she did not notice that Kagami had stopped reading her book to look at her. She did not notice how fascinated Kagami was with the way she worked. And she certainly did not notice that Kagami had taken her Polaroid camera out of her bag and was taking snapshots of her, the music and the whirring of the sewing machine drowned any noise that could have given it away. In fact, Marinette was only reminded of Kagami’s existence when she was entirely done with the dressing gown.

“It’s amazing how focused you are,” Kagami said, as she moved the dummy Marinette had put the gown on to the side. “And the precision with which you sew.”
“You think so?” It mustn’t be very fun for you, just being there while I’m doing my thing… I’m sorry I’m not paying attention to you tonight and—”

“Hush now.” Kagami said. “We’ve had this conversation before, only you were the one to tell me that I didn’t have to feel guilty for not inviting you over or not taking you on dates all the time and that…”

“And that it was fine as long as we talked about it beforehand, and that relationships were meant to be enjoyable and not a kind of to-do list,” Marinette finished. She sat back. “I know, I’m… A little stressed out about that whole contest thing…”

“So it’s alright if we’re not always together, and if we don’t do everything together,” Kagami smiled. “You never come to watch me have my fencing classes with M. D’Argencourt and I don’t blame you for that, just like you don’t blame me for not always having lunch with you and… What I’m trying to say is, I’ve chosen to be here tonight, not because I wanted you to only pay attention to me, but because I wanted to be here and because I like seeing you work. And it’s not boring at all.” She laughed a nervous laugh. “I’m not used to making speeches about things like that at all, relationships and everything…”

“Well it’s something you’re getting good at,” Marinette said, a chalk in her right hand, a piece of fabric in the other. “The drama lessons with Marjane helped? Or is it going to the opera that had inspired you?”

“A bit of both,” Kagami said. She had planned on going to the Palais Garnier more than once since the beginning of the school year, and her wish had finally come true. She had enjoyed Bizet’s Carmen a lot, and it had piqued Marinette’s interest as well. The costumes, based on the pictures Kagami had taken, had been great, and the music as well, she had listened to it almost ad nauseam. She might just give opera a second chance some other day. Some other say when her main preoccupation wouldn’t be that dressing gown.

For a while, there was only the sound of music, and of scissors cutting through fabric. Marinette had enjoyed imagining the dress and the turtleneck top the most, but it was a whole other story to make them into real thing. Creating the patterns had been exceedingly frustrating, and the accuracy with which she had to work for the final product to look as good as she had pictured it. And she had chosen the least difficult of the two. Now, she had done turtlenecks before, her girlfriend sometimes wore the jumper she had made for her, which had a turtleneck. Did it mean that it was something she enjoyed making? The answer was quite clear.

And this was the precise reason she had planned on two nights to finish it all. Putting simple
garments together, for instance a tunic, would not have taken more than half an hour if the patterns were ready. More complex clothes were a whole different matter. The dressing gown hadn’t been all that difficult in that she had made one as a personal project a few days back, she’d wear it when the weather would get a little warmer. Now the turtleneck top… Sewing the pieces together made her grit her teeth and scrunch her nose, making her movements a little tense. She needed to something to distract herself from the less-agreeable aspect of dressmaking.

“So Marjane and Adrien,” she simply stated, hoping that it would be enough to restart the conversation with her girlfriend. It would be somewhat less stressful than talking about fencing.

“Well, in the words of Nino, it’s not looking too good,” Kagami said, not taking her eyes off her phone. “They only see each other at school, these days.”

“There is a lot of advertising for Gabriel lately,” Marinette nodded, cutting a loose thread. “In magazines and newspaper and all of that… He’s fired some of his creative team and hired new ones…”

“Well Adrien is, in Marjane’s words these time, and I’m reading the text where she says that…” Kagami stopped. “There it is. He’s sweet and kind and smart and I really like him but he always has to go to these photoshoots and his schedule is awful so all we do is text each other and it’s making me sad not to see him.”

“So M. Agreste is trying to have them break up,” Marinette said. “Well, in my own words, that sucks and that’s exactly the sort of thing I’d expect from the man.”

“I think they might break up and maybe start again when things are a little calmer for the both of them,” Kagami put away her phone. “I mean, their entire thing was that they’d spend some time together, away from Adrien’s obligations with his father, and if they can’t have that…”

Marinette made a sour face. Yes, that was just awful and exactly the sort of thing Gabriel Agreste would do. He was the kind of person willing to make people miserable if that meant it could fit with his plans and make them work more efficiently. Which reminded her of someone else, though she couldn’t quite put her finger on who that was exactly. A final snap of her scissors and all the pieces for the turtleneck were ready. Now, all she had to do was put them together. Which sounded easy when you put it that way. If she were to make something able to meet Manlardineaut’s criteria, however, it would not be this simple. Especially if they planned on hiring some of Gabriel’s former employees. They wanted the very best. Marinette hadn’t expected any less of them.
It started pouring outside, but the aspiring fashion designer did not bother looking outside the window. She’d have more time to watch the mesmerising spectacle another day. Perhaps that was silly to think that, but she had to find a way to convince herself that she needed to finish this, didn’t she? Kagami, however, had no such deadlines. And so, she took out her Polaroid camera once more, as well as a notebook and a pen and sat by the window. She was about to write a poem, Marinette was almost sure of that. But she was looking track of her work here, and she went back to her work.

Halfway done! After this, she’d only have two other garments to take care of, if she was lucky, that would mean no all-nighter. Maybe she would even do something other than dressmaking this Friday evening. That would require some help, however. Kagami had volunteered for this, hadn’t she? She was, as it turned out, a great assistant, bringing her all the pins and needles and spools of thread she needed without making a single mistake in the process. She had translated an entire book just for her, she may have picked some vocabulary here and there, but it wasn’t just it. Had she asked her mum to help her memorise everything?

It wouldn’t have been this surprising. Itsuko Tsurugi’s work as a translator included being an interpreter during conferences and more recently, interviews on the radio, translating books, but also doing the same sort of job on instruction manuals and other less interesting things like that. Or perhaps Kagami had learnt it on her own. Either way, she made things much faster for Marinette, who went from “halfway done” with that terrible, terrible turtleneck top — terrible to make, not to look at, she hoped— to “done” in no time. The dress was next, and she’d ask for Kagami’s help once she was done cutting through the muslin.

Marinette had to come to the conclusion that she probably hated herself deep down, otherwise she wouldn’t have made this so difficult. But it had to be done that way, it had to be technically complex even though it would it wouldn’t appear to be that way, it was supposed to be the key piece of what she’d present this Saturday, the one that would make the biggest impression on the jury. Not that the rest of her collection would automatically be any less good, she simply hoped that this would be as technically impressive as could be. She could make it.

She did not pick up her phone the first time it buzzed, and barely recorded the fact that Kagami’s phone had rung too. She would only drop her scissors if absolutely necessary, there was no way she’d stop now, she was so close to getting this done… Her phone buzzed once more, Kagami looked at hers, and had Marinette turned around, she would have seen the worry on her girlfriend’s face, the worry and the determination. One last buzzing sound and Marinette had guessed what it was all about. She put down her scissors, read the texts and had to keep herself from swearing.

“C’mon, Hawkie, couldn’t you postpone your attack to next week?” she groaned. “Has it hatched yet?”
“No, the butterfly has been spotted, it’s all over Twitter and Nino has seen it too,” Kagami said.

“So, what do we…” Marinette stopped before the end of her sentence. She felt terribly dumb saying that. The answer was clear, she had been doing this for a year and a half.

“I’m supposed to be home for dinner, which is soon, so I’m leaving now,” Kagami said. “The question is, how much time do you need?”

“What?” Marinette wasn’t sure she understood.

“To finish the dress,” Kagami clarified. “How much time would it take if you don’t rush it?”

“Ten minutes, maybe?” Marinette said. “Fifteen if I want to make sure it is perfect.”

“Well I’m sure we can deal with it in fifteen minutes,” Kagami’s voice was full of bravado. She put on the Dragon pendant. “All you’ll have to do is wave your yo-yo and voilà!”

“I don’t know… Are you sure you can handle it?” Marinette asked. “I feel bad thinking that I could show up later just because I’ve got a side project.”

“I punched a man-shark in the face last week,” Kagami deadpanned, trying her best to hide her grin. And that worked, Marinette laughed. “And besides, other than you, there are seven of us, we’re all allowed to keep our jewellery, so I’m sure we’ll figure something out,” she added more seriously. “You’re going to be exhausted if you pull an all-nighter and then your hero-ing might suffer from it, no? So finish that dress and join us later.”

“Alright then. I’ll try to make it ten minutes,” Marinette said. “Will you be using the trapdoor?”

“Your parents might wonder why they saw me enter the house but not leave it, so I will walk for a little while and find a convenient place to hide my bag and transform,” Kagami said.

“Makes sense,” Marinette smiled. “It’s silly to say that but… Be careful?”
“I will be,” Kagami said. “I need to go now, I don’t want to be late for dinner!”

Marinette kissed her — that tingling feeling when Kagami put her hands on the small of her back… She’d never tire of it— opened the trapdoor for her, and returned to her desk. She took a deep breath. It was fine. She trusted her girlfriend, she trusted Chat Noir and the other heroes. They would be fine without her. Paris would be alright. She started her sewing machine and kept an eye on the clock. And sure enough, it took her twelve minutes and fifty four seconds, exactly. She took a step back to admire her creation, making sure there were no imperfections, even though she had checked a hundred times before. She looked outside the window. No devastation, no smoke, no helicopters or anything like that. A small-scale fight, then. And, according to the Twittersphere, the akuma was under control.

“Tikki, spots on!”

She turned up the music a bit. Her parents would respect the rule. She opened the skylight. It was nice to be able to count on other people, to be able to trust Kagami completely on… Everything, really. If she had some kind of Paris journal, she would have written a whole page about her day. When Marinette went to bed, a little before midnight — Kagami was already sleeping, her theoretical bedtime was not so theoretical on the days she was not on patrol— she was entirely done with her fashion project and ready for what would await her on Saturday. She slept soundly.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

I thought we could spend some time with Marinette again and see how she balanced her daily life between her many responsibilities! Which makes for a calm chapter but hey, in a way it's the calm before more intense things!

No references or anything that need explaining, I think! As always, my Tumblr is here, for previews of incoming chapters and the other things I make! Want to ask me things? I'll be happy to answer! Tomorrow or the day after, depending on how busy university work keeps me, I'll post a Lukadrien one-shot about the aftermath of Desperada, so keep an eye out for it!

I'll see you in the next one!
Duel 30: Premieres

Chapter Notes

Slight warning: though nothing explicit, underage drinking is vaguely discussed in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Change of strategy, everyone,” Ladybug yelled, hopping behind the bus where the other heroes had taken cover. “Chat, Red, Lae, you’re with me! Think you can take care of that akuma, Carapace?”

“It’ll be dealt with before you even know it,” Carapace nodded. “Stripes, Vi, behind me.” He brought his shield to his face. “Bee, is Mayura…” he spoke into it.

“Still can’t spot her,” Queen Bee’s voice came out as tired. “She must be controlling it from really far away, just like Hawk Moth does. We really did a number on her back at the Gare de l’Est, didn’t we... Well, looks like I’ll have to get down from that roof... Shame, I really wanted to kick her in the teeth!”

“Well we need to hurry up, I’ve got a busy late afternoon and there’s that thing in ten minutes for which I absolutely need to be there in time,” Carapace said.

“Same,” Viperion said. “C’mon, are you sure you don’t want me to come with you, Ladybug? That guitar guy is getting on my nerves…”

“No, we stick to the plan, I’m sorry but we gotta make it quick, Chat can’t go walk on scaffolding, remember what happened last time? We sure looked smart under that pile of metal poles. So do as I say. On the count of three!” Ladybug said. “One, two, thr— Chat Noir wait!”

There was something up with him, the Crimson Empress observed as she and Ladybug ran after him, followed closely by Laelaps. He was always eager to help stop Hawk Moth and fight off evil, but never with this much eagerness and recklessness. That was a recent development, and she wasn’t sure whether it was a good one or not. It wasn’t as though he was unskilled, he and Ladybug were the veterans of the team. He was the most versatile fighter out of all of them, and if she had to fight him hand on hand, she knew she’d lose. The Crimson Empress couldn’t even accuse him of putting other people’s lives in danger, he was irreproachable on that matter.
Still, it was as though the civilian underneath the mask was using his time as Chat Noir as a way to vent, to release some pent-up frustration and energy. Why else who he be taking so many risks, trying the most perilous and complex acrobatics while still trying to make these terrible puns? Well, there were worst things he could have done with all that energy, the Crimson Empress thought as she jumped to the side to avoid the Virtuoso’s weeping guitar riff. The beam shaped like a sound wave faded away in the distance. Oh, she’d definitely need to dodge these. She would not feel what the man’s instrument wanted her to feel. Had that musician had an emotional range not only comprised of “sadness” and “fury”, he would have made an excellent opponent. Well that wasn’t entirely true, Mayura’s latest amoks had been on the weak side, to put it kindly.

“Hey, can you play Wonderwall for me?” Chat Noir quipped, and the look on the Virtuoso’s face was priceless. “Stairway to Heaven, maybe? Or is that too complicated for you? You don’t believe that anybody feels the way you do?”

Having Chat Noir fight amoks had been a good strategic call. His jokes had fuelled an akuma’s anger more than once, whereas they disconcerted Mayura’s sentimonsters. Was it what they were called? Sentimonsters? What a silly name. Amok was three syllables shorter and sounded better than that. Ladybug summoned her Lucky Charm — a pack of bubblegum — and it was fairly easy to guess what to do with it. Managing to get close to the amok without being touched by his attacks, however… But Ladybug was always two steps ahead of everyone, and she had already figured out something.

“Lae, get ready to run! Chat, the ground! Then it’s your turn, Red!” she yelled, and popped the gum in her mouth.

“Cataclysm!” Chat Noir yelled over the cacophony, and slammed his fist against pavement. Laelaps pushed him out of an attack’s way just in time. The Crimson Empress closed her eyes and focused her powers. A gust of wind sent all the dust and ruble formed by Chat Noir’s power at the Virtuoso’s face. He had to shield his eyes for a second, and it was all it took for Ladybug to throw the wad of gum, successfully sticking it to the guitar’s strings. She jumped back. When the amok tried to play a chord, all he got was a weak, muffled sound. Laelaps took the instrument from him and gave it to Chat Noir.

“Wow, for real? I’ve always wanted to do that! Well, thanks, dawg,” he said.

That particular pun always made Laelaps roll her eyes, though it had become a kind of game between the two of them. Chat Noir grabbed the guitar by its neck and swung it like a hammer, hitting the closest lamp post repeatedly. The instrument broke and a dark feather flew out of it. Ladybug purified it in the blink of an eye. She did the same with a purple butterfly a minute later, when a gilded Queen Bee gave her a losing lottery ticket she ripped unceremoniously. Defeating
Midas —Hawk Moth was running out of clever names, the blond girl snickered— had not been that difficult, thanks to Tiger Eye’s power.

They did not waste a second to enjoy the landscape of the Parc Monceau, which was almost too bad. Spring was beautiful, and the hesitant buds of March had opened at last, or at least it was what Kagami would have written in her poetry notebook. No, no standing around wouldn’t have been a good idea. They respected Carapace’s request to make it short. They all had places to go anyway. They parted way after a short fist bump and their usual “pound it”.

Kagami was happy to find that Marjane had managed to save everyone a seat, thanks to a mix of strategically-placed jackets and intimidation. It was quite a feat, especially when the Grand Rex’s biggest auditorium was filled to the brim. There were many familiar faces, M. D’Argencourt, the headteacher, Mme Berthes, everyone who had worked on the film, safe for her mum and Adrien. Today was the day the world would discover Starkross. Nino had first planned on releasing it online, he had uploaded a few trailers that had generated a million views, mostly thanks to Jagged Stone’s patronage. And it was thanks to Jagged Stone again that Nino’s short film would premiere here, in an actual cinema, the cinema, even.

“Thank you, thank you all for coming here tonight,” the rock star spoke into the microphone he was handed as though he was in the middle of one of his concerts. Because of course, he had planned on making a small speech, Kagami thought. And it was going to be awful. Or perhaps not so awful after all, she decided when he finished a tirade about visionary young artists being the future. A little consensual for a man in such an eccentric getup? Yes. But the speech wasn’t self-congratulatory which, for someone with his fame, was rare. And Jagged Stone finished his speech with something she hadn’t expected him to do. Then again, unlike Marinette, she had only seen him once. He invited Nino on stage.

Alya was looking at her boyfriend with stars in her eyes as he talked about his influences, what the cinema meant to him. He thanked everyone, everyone he could think of, Jagged Stone of course, his parents, his girlfriend, Nathaniel for helping him with the storyboards, Marinette with the costumes, the actors, all the people doing the stunts, the lycée for allowing him to shoot his film here… Nino wished everyone a nice show and left the stage under a thunderous applause, his legs still a little shaky when he went to sit next to Alya. Adrien would have cheered the loudest had he been there, Kagami thought. The auditorium went dark.

It was amazing, watching the result of their hard work on the silver screen. And Starkross deserved the Grand Rex. It was a great film, Kagami decided after the first minute. Sure, she was a little biased, but the people who hadn’t worked on Starkross seem to agree with her, no one was on their phone, there were a few oohs when the spaceship filled the screen in all its retro glory. And then she appeared on screen. That was the ninth take there, she knew it, and a bit of the twelfth. She
looked around her to see some of the spectators clenching their fists, completely involved in the duel. It was the mix of choreography and cinematography that made it look this impressive. The transition from Kagami to Aïssatou was really hard to notice, thanks to the costumes.

Mum would have loved how well everything flowed during these sequences, how the shots lasted more than one or two seconds, making everything easy to read, without any of it dragging for too long. She had feared the combat suits would look a little wonky and ridiculous. Somehow, the lighting and the sound effects made it work. Such was the magic of cinema, Kagami supposed. She had seen the film before, multiple times, with minimal re-edits each time, yet she hadn’t grown tired of it, if anything, there were new things to discover with each rewatch. She always found new details or small mistakes she hadn’t noticed before.

The credits rolled, “Lovers of the Stars” played and there was her name on the screen. Many times. Kagami had forgotten she had done this many things, and that Nino had insisted on crediting everyone for everything they’d done. In her defence, it had been a month since they had shot the film, and a lot had happened since then. The last notes of Jagged Stone’s song rang out and the auditorium’s lights went back on. The sound of so many people clapping at once was almost deafening. Nino gave a watery smile to his friends, gave Alya a quick kiss and went back on stage. There would now be a discussion about space opera with other directors, academics, and other people wearing glasses.

Some left the auditorium, not interested in that small masterclass, among them, many students who could not care less about laser beams and the symbolism of the Cavorite and had only come for Jagged Stone. Most, and that included Chloé Bourgeois, stayed. It was an interesting talk, when one of the older men wasn’t trying to hijack it and make it all about him. Kagami did her best to follow, and even took down a few notes, while Alya and Nino’s parents filmed the whole thing on their respective cameras.

And then came the time for the audience to interact with the participants. The organisers had brought extra microphones for that purpose, and Mme Berthes herself was the first to ask a question, a very good question, Kagami thought, about the process of film-making, which gave Nino the chance to do something other than nod, smile vaguely and listen to the older, more experienced people talk. Other questions from the public followed, and when the masterclass came to an end, Kagami had a long watchlist, which featured many old Japanese series she could probably find online. The dialogues wouldn’t be too complicated… Perhaps she could translate them for Nino and whoever else was interested? Not now, she had more important things ahead of her, but after the competition, maybe?

The conversation ended at last and the audience started exiting the auditorium, some gathered to get an autograph from Jagged Stone, some to congratulate Nino and shake hands with him. Alya had guessed right when she said he needed some breathing space. He was used to that kind of attention, but not as his civilian self. And so, Alya, Marinette, Kagami and most of the film crew waited for him outside the auditorium. When he arrived, with his parents next to him, he looked disheveled but happy. They walked out of the cinema together. It was time to go home, Kagami
thought, since there would be no fencing class today.

“Hey, everyone,” Luka Couffaine’s voice was loud, clear and amused. “I’m organising a party at my mum’s houseboat tonight at 8, so if you wanna come…”

The sound of chatter grew immediately louder, and Kagami understood why perfectly. Luka Couffaine was one of the popular kids in lycée Carnot, and for three reasons, the first being that he was not just a pretty face but a more than decent musician, the second that he did not exploit his status as a cool kid to get whatever he wanted out of people. And finally, he threw the best parties in the entire school. Despite that, Kagami did not let all that enthusiasm get to her. She knew she would probably be heading home soon. The Challenge International de Paris was only a week away. And this would be a party organised by a student, not a birthday, nothing prestigious or deeply intellectual. She couldn’t present it as a date either.

It was alright, she had missed parties before, most parties in fact, when she had been invited at all. And besides, fencing came first. Tomorrow, she would train for hours and hours with her mum, though she hadn’t stopped training with Marinette. Kagami would win that gold medal, she just knew it. Her opponents would be as formidable as her, that was for sure, but still, she had that certitude ingrained in her. She had been taught by the very best, and they had all been impressed with her. Yes, staying home tonight made sense, it was the reasonable thing to do. So why did she want to be there with the others, to see what that stupid party could be like? And to make things worse, Marinette had noticed her hesitation.

“I’m going,” Marinette said. “You’re not sure if you’ll be there too?”

“It’s… Complicated.” Kagami avoided Marinette’s eyes. “And besides, my mother wouldn’t let me if I told her.”

“Are you sure of that?” Marinette asked. “I mean, a few months back, it would have been true I guess, I have no idea what it was really like between you and your mum… But things have changed between you two, no?”

“Some things, yes, others, I’m not sure,” Kagami said. “She hasn’t ever reproached my being at your house, and she always wishes you were here more often… But this is not the same.”

She knew what Marinette was about to say and she almost hated that she was right and not just a bright-eyed girl who didn’t understand anything. She almost hated that but it was one of the things she liked and respected the most about her girlfriend. Marinette knew that she knew, and decided to keep quiet. Kagami wouldn’t do it over the phone, that would have been just rude and definitely
not brave of her. Cowardice was not one of her flaws. She’d ask her mum over dinner, and that would be it. At least, she wouldn’t regret not giving it a try, no matter how stressful it was, it’d be better than mulling over what could have been.

“I should go home for dinner, it’s already…” Kagami glanced at her wristwatch. “A quarter to seven. I’ll text you to tell you how it went?”

“If you don’t mind,” Marinette smiled. She kissed Kagami on the cheek. “Well, see you tonight, or tomorrow! And tell your mum I said hello!”

Walking home was a better option than taking the métro, and not only because of how uncomfortably crowded the rolling tin cans were at this hour. It allowed for Kagami to think, about what she would say and how to say it, which was not as easy as it sounded. Or perhaps she could make it easy. Without grandfather Ando breathing down mum’s neck like it had been the case back in Tokyo… Things had changed, and perhaps she could ask and not be met with indifference and refusal. Still, she could feel the stress build up in her stomach as she unlocked the door and took off her shoes.

“I’m home,” she said, switching to Japanese.

“Welcome home!” Itsuko Tsurugi called from her bedroom.

Kagami washed her hands, went to her room to take her bag off her shoulder, checked her phone — no new messages for the moment, at least none she had to reply to urgently— then to the kitchen. She’d be the one to cook tonight. If mum was in her room, it either meant that she was really tired, or that she was working on a time-consuming translation. It was the latter, she found out when she knocked the door — “may I come in?”— and peered inside. As always, her mum’s room was tidy, not as mineral as it had been at first, she had bought a small lemon tree and a pathos vine back in January, but still very much pristine. Mum turned to her.

“So, I was wondering…” Kagami started. She couldn’t do it. She was wasting her mother’s time. “…If you would like to have dinner in about ten, fifteen minutes.”

“Yes, of course, thank you for asking,” Itsuko Tsurugi said. “Oh, it is already this late?” Kagami knew she had felt that something was off with her, but as always, she didn’t comment on that.
Marinette had once told her that one of the reasons she enjoyed cooking, other than the fact that she could eat the result of her hard work, was how repetitive motions could be relaxing. Kagami had to agree with her. Juliennning the leeks and carrots had that soothing quality to it, as silly as it sounded when she said it aloud. She set the table, went back to her room to water her plant, and returned to the kitchen just in time for the alarm she had set on her phone to ring, informing her that the food was cooked. Mum went to join her, thanked her for the meal. Kagami was proud of herself, for a first try, it wasn’t half bad. She could have just enjoyed dinner, she could have gone to her room afterwards and she could have read a book and fallen asleep soon after.

It wouldn’t have been a bad way to end the day, far from it. But it was not what she wanted. But would it be worth it, asking her mum? Months ago, finding the courage to ask her if she could go to Nino’s birthday hadn’t been easy, and it had shocked her mum how apprehensive she had seemed about talking to her about that. A few weeks back, she had apologised for how she had behaved in Japan, for how strict, too strict, her parenting had been, too. These had been awkward moments, Itsuko Tsurugi was not one to apologise often, or to acknowledge that she had been in the wrong. The words had not been empty. She had not become over-permissive all of a sudden. But she had more trust in her, her daughter.

“I have been invited to a party tonight,” Kagami said as she went to the fridge, turning her back to her mum as she went to retrieve a jar of peer compote. Looking her in the eye would have been too stressful. “Most of the film crew will be there, the boy who organises it, Luka Couffaine, is an older student and a good person, I think, and his parents will be there to supervise us…”

Her mother’s face closed. She asked, “are you certain this is a good idea to go there? The Challenge International is a mere days away, Bradley and Rostova will be your adversaries and I have heard they have become formidable fencers too. I am not sure going to that party is very reasonable thing to do.”

“I understand,” Kagami whispered.

That was it, then. At least, they had been able to discuss this peacefully, there had been no yelling — not that there had ever been— and no hard feelings. She’d text Marinette later to keep her informed. It was alright, she was a little disappointed, but it was fine, her mother had made up her mind, not on a whim or to spite her, but because it was indeed the reasonable, more adult thing to do. It wasn’t unfair, she knew it, and they would move on and talk about something else. Or perhaps not? There was something shifting in her mother’s eyes, a struggle.

They talked about how well Kagami had done during the most recent exams she’d had — the headteacher, him again, had decided that it was time for the Seconde students to know what the baccalauréat was like with longer, more demanding tests; Kagami was still top of her class— and about the texts Itsuko was currently working on —funnily enough, a scientific article about Teppei Tsurugi’s findings, the latest developments on a device meant to stop the development and spread
of defective and dangerous cells around a tumour. The meal was over, Kagami started putting the dirty dishes in the dishwasher.

“I am sure you had taken the competition and your training into account, before you chose to tell me about this party,” Itsuko Tsurugi said as she got up from the table. “I know you will be careful, as far as I am aware, you do not drink nor smoke, and I know you will still be up at the usual hour tomorrow morning.”

“Mum…” Kagami’s heart was filled with hopefulness.

“So I think you should go, if this is what makes you happy,” her mother smiled. “Make sure you do not forget your keys and bring a little something if you want!”

“Thank you,” Kagami said.

Before she could stop the impulse, she pulled her mum into a hug. That was unplanned, unexpected, and frankly, Kagami had almost expected her mother to stand there, awkwardly, with her arms wide apart, doing nothing until she let go of her — she knew she would have reacted the same way had she received an impromptu hug from anyone back in August. Instead, after a second or two, Itsuko Tsurugi returned the embrace, gingerly, softly.

“It’s so cool you’ve all managed to come!” Luka Couffaine said, fist-bumping with Alya before he shook Marinette’s hand, and Kagami’s at last. “Marjane told me she wasn’t a fan of super big parties but perhaps she’ll come some other time!”

There were already many people on the Couffaine houseboat, with music playing, though not too loud. Kagami was fairly sure there were some faces she hadn’t seen during the shooting of Starkross, they had probably been working on some other aspects of the film, or maybe other sets. Nino was not there yet, but she spotted Nathaniel and Marc and Alix. It was a nice place to organise a party. The air was a little frisky, still, a little humid because of the Seine, and so when Luka offered to take their jackets to put them on his bed like he had done with a few other people, Alya politely declined and so did Kagami.

“You should get on the boat, well, unless you want to stay here with the smokers,” Luka motioned towards the six boys and girls, most older than Kagami though she recognised a student from
another Seconde class. “Yeah I thought not,” he laughed as Marinette wrinkled her nose.

Kagami was not anxious when she set a foot on the boat’s deck, she’d had to deal with many people as the Crimson Empress, she had had practice talking to them informally so that they wouldn’t be intimated by her horns. It had mostly worked, though she’d still need to train a little more. Untransformed, she managed to talk to most of her classmates without it being awkward. Talking to people at a party… This would be a first. She knew acting self-importantly was a big no. Which mean she didn’t have to downplay who she was or what she did outside of school, if someone asked her about it, she would answer in earnest and say something in the lines of…

“…I’m a sabre fencer, and next year I’ll go professional. I did stunts for, well, the fencing scenes. Also, I like reading.”

“Awesome,” Tom, a gangly boy with curly hair who, if she remembered well, liked playing the drums and had been in charge of some of the spaceship models said.

“And you are?” Julia — or was it Juliette?— asked Marinette. She had helped with the lights and enjoyed skate-boarding, and had a very short haircut, much shorter than Tom’s.

“Marinette!” Oh, she had that way to put a smile on people’s face just by stating her name, when she was in a good mood, Kagami had no idea how she did it but it worked every time. “I did the costumes, most of them, and you’ll find it very surprising that I dabble in fashion design!”

“You’re underselling yourself a bit,” Kagami said, putting her arm around Marinette’s shoulder. Alya agreed with her and nodded vigorously. “You are also an intern at Manladrineaut, and a dress and a dressing gown you’ve designed will be part of their summer collection!”

“Wow, for real? Awesome! So, you’re Alya, you’re Kagami and you’re Marinette,” Tom said, pointing to each of the girls. Small talk was… Alright, mildly annoying but she could put up with it “Do y’all want to go grab a—”

A small clamour rose, that made them all turn their head to the banks of the Seine. Kagami couldn’t see, but she knew that all this agitation could only mean one thing: Nino had arrived at last. And then, the party truly began. Beer bottles were uncorked, glasses were clunk, Kagami and Marinette kindly refused the glasses of whisky and coke Juliette — that was her name, Kagami was sure now— offered them (she didn’t insist after that) and were happy to find that they weren’t the only people who had chosen to stay sober, though Nino, Alya and, to a much bigger extent, Chloé Bourgeois who had somehow landed there, were not part of these people at all. Would their kwamis purge the alcohol out of them if they were to transform? Luckily, they wouldn’t have to
find out tonight.

“You’re not drinking?” Rose Lavillant raised an eyebrow.

“Nope,” Marinette answered for the two of them, putting an arm around Kagami’s waist. They were really affectionate in public, tonight. Not that Kagami minded, she almost wished Marinette had put her hand a little lower. “My girlfriend’s got to stay clean for her competition,” Marinette explained, “and I don’t want her to have to deal with drunk me tonight.”

“Oh, that’s sweet,” Rose cooed. She found everything sweet, Kagami would find out later. “Well, gotta find that girlfriend o’ mine, I’ll see you later!”

They danced for a little while when Nino started DJ’ing, or rather, they moved to the music with no clear choreography whatsoever. Had Marinette not dragged her to the improvised dance floor, Kagami would have never found out how much fun it could be. Perhaps they could take dancing classes, the two of them? They’d start at the same level of incompetence, they would be complete beginners. That could be fun, if they found the time for it next year. They danced with Alya, Luka, people whose existence they hadn’t been aware of until the moment she met them, Alix, Nino and many others. If the Kagami from before her duel against Adrien all these months ago had been told she would one day enjoy partying, she wouldn’t have believed it.

When Kagami’s feet started to hurt, she decided to sit back a little while Marinette enjoyed herself. And before she knew it, she found herself dragged in a game of poker in Juleka Couffaine’s room—the walls covered with posters from obscure films and bands felt very much like her—which saw her face Juleka herself, her girlfriend who had had a few drinks too many and some other people. She was the only completely sober player, though she felt a little inebriated. She knew very little about the rules, but she was fairly sure she could win this. Or just have fun, she found out. Because out of all the eight players, six, including Kagami herself, didn’t know the rules.

They ended up playing Kemps instead and much to Rose’s sadness, Kagami was teamed up with Juleka who was definitely not so shy after a couple of drinks. Did she usually keep all these snarky remarks in her mind? She had a very sharp tongue, though she never was too mean-spirited. They worked well as a team, in fact they had yet to be defeated. They were about to win their fifth game in a row when Marinette found her. Had she been worried about her disappearance?

“I’m going outside for a little while, getting some fresh air,” Kagami said, and she got up to join her girlfriend.

Marinette let out a happy sigh after they shared a kiss that made Kagami’s toes curl — “I’m glad
They went to join Alya, Chloé, Nino and surprisingly enough, Luka who had ditched some of his older friends. As it turned out, they had all been brought together thanks to their mutual disgust and contempt towards Gabriel Agreste.

“… really enjoyed that party we threw at his place a few weeks ago to cheer him up,” Nino grumbled.

“And then his father freaked out and almost reduced Wayhem to tears… I’m sure he would have enjoyed it here,” Luka nodded.

“He could really use another of these parties now, I don’t know if he’s dealing with his break-up all that well,” Alya added. “He’s really good at smiling and pretending that nothing bad ever happens to him but…”

“Wait, he and… Marjane broke up? But they were so cute together!” Luka looked genuinely sad.

“As much as I hate to admit it, you are right,” Chloé said. “My Adrikins looked happy with her, dorky but happy and that b-bastard Gabriel Agreste did everything to ruin their relationship. And his assistant, Nathalie… She’s not here often these days, health problems and all, and she used to help tone things down with Agreste…”

“I think Adrien is aware of that too,” Kagami nodded. “I mean, he’s not blaming Marjane for any of what happened…” They talked about it some more before they returned to the houseboat, where the party hadn’t stopped just because they had gone out for a while, far from it.

“We should go to Agreste Manor and help him escape,” Marinette said very seriously. “Break him out of here or something.”

“Maybe not that, but we can definitely bring him cake on Monday,” Kagami suggested. “Hey, would you like to dance some more? With me?”

“Need an excuse to have my arms around your neck?” Marinette wagged her eyebrows.
“I… And what if I do?” Kagami shot back defensively.

“Then I’ll be happy to oblige,” Marinette laughed.

And they danced again, kissed again, and Kagami did not leave Marinette’s side for the rest of the party. Which, for them, did not last for long. Alya’s father went to pick them up, his daughter, Nino, Marinette and her, around 1AM. Luka and the others would be up until much later, but Kagami felt quite tired—even when she patrolled, it usually wasn’t this late, or rather this early, and dancing, as it turned out, had left her exhausted. She gave her girlfriend one last kiss for the evening when M. Césaire’s car stopped in front of her flat. She wished Marinette a good night, to which she answered with a “thank you”.

She took a quick shower, brushed her teeth and went straight to bed, not even bothering to write in her Paris journal. She took off the Dragon pendant which hadn’t left her neck all day, wishing Longg a good night. She was up at 9AM, just as she had promised she would be, and her legs didn’t even hurt all that much from all that dancing. Mum asked her how the party had gone over breakfast. Kagami didn’t find it difficult to say that it had been genuinely fun. Mum looked happy to hear that.

The training that day was just as difficult as it had always been, and for that, Kagami was grateful. She wouldn’t have had it any other way. In exactly one week, all her efforts would show, she would make a great comeback and victory would be hers. That had been the first reason why they had moved here, after all. For Kagami to train with the best fencers, for her to win such competitions. They would have to work out what to do with Marinette, because she had bought her ticket to watch Kagami compete, of course. Introducing her as her girlfriend would be… Complicated to say the least. They would have to work things out.

For now, however, Kagami focused on her training. She was ready for the Challenge International and in seven days, she would have the opportunity to show the world her worth. She would earn the gold medal.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

Can you imagine Kagami from the first few chapters play Kemps and have a good time at a party? Or her and her mum sharing a hug? We’ve come so far! They’ve come so far!

Le Grand Rex is very much real and really big and even though it's not my cup of tea,
it suited Jagged Stone's sense of grandeur very well! Very few young directors get the chance to show their films here, so Nino is extremely lucky to have such good relations (remember Kagami making that big speech in chapter 6? Yup, that's a prime example of that).

I think this is it for this chapter!

My Tumblr is only one click away so if you want to ask me things, see previews of the next chapters of this fic before I post them, see what I write in general, about Miraculous and other things… It's all there!

À lundi prochain!
Perhaps being exempted from the round of pools hadn’t been that great an idea, Kagami thought. It had its perks, for sure, it was the sign that she was recognised as one of the best competitors before the actual start of the competition. It meant she had been able to go to school on Friday, too, instead of being crammed with all these other less competent fencers. How many of them had there been in the beginning? Not counting the other fifteen fencers who, like her, had been spared this preliminary round. They had been two hundreds and fifty six, then. Now there were only a hundred and twenty eight young women left.

Not a good idea, because while Kagami had a vague sense of who these fifteen other fencers were, she had defeated most of them once or twice in the past, she didn’t know the others. At least, now that she had won her first bout, and fairly easily with that — but she had learned not to get too cocky after a small victory— she could catch up on the other competitors and see who could be a challenge. Among all these names, there were three other Japanese fencers who had made the cut, many Italians, Americans, Russians and a few French fencers Vincent had told her about. Kagami did her best not to look at the terraces, where her grandparents and her mum were having lunch, alongside her girlfriend.

“… Pas de touche,” the referee stated, his amplified voice carrying through the Pierre-de-Coubertin stadium.

It was a far cry from the Gymnase Elizabeth. The place was more elegant with a wooden floor instead of linoleum, the terraces were fairly new and very clean, the lighting gave the impression that this was a theatre rather than a stadium with the slightly elevated piste, impeccably set up. The scoring box had been made obvious for everyone to see, making each scored touch all the more dramatic. No, it was not a theatre, rather, an opera house, where everyone knew everyone — Kagami had spotted Mme Legrain and M. D’Argencourt and many others — and where no libretto was needed to follow.

Kagami had nothing to do for now but watch the piste and the directeur and his jury, and her potential future opponents. That and stretch and drink from her water flask and eat, but mostly watch the other bouts play out. It was quite instructive, in that she could see who the interesting fencers in the lot were, and how she could defeat them all. It also allowed her to not take the other girls standing next to her into account, which was a relief. So many were anxious, because it was their first competition on such a scale, she supposed. She didn’t want it to get to her. The truth was, Kagami wasn’t tense at all, at least for the time being.

It might come later on, if she were to face a worthy opponents, and it was inevitable. Or maybe if
her mother started looking at her the way Ando Tsurugi had during her first bout. Not that her
grandfather had been too disagreeable yet, her grandmother had spoiled her rotten like she always
did. Then again, they were only here for the week-end and slept at a hotel, so Kagami hadn’t been
forced to constantly deal with the man’s cold eyes and unsupportive behaviour. Had Marinette
introduced herself as anyone other than her “best friend here in Paris”, things between the two of
them would have been even worse than they already were, from the looks of it.

She winced a little when Mako Tachibana lost her fifth point in a row. If things kept on going like
that, she wouldn’t make it to the next round. Which meant she would have to listen to a speech by
Mr Nakajima, the Japanese Fencing Federation’s envoy. Not that Kagami needed to be reminded
that she was fighting to defend her country’s image, her fencing mask bore the flag of Japan, she
had even donned a white lamé for the occasion, just so that she would match outfits with her
compatriots, and all the other fencers.

“Yes, that Kovalchuk girl is excellent,” Mr Nakajima ranted, “but we need to keep our chins up and
support each other, as a team, we need to.” His eyes lingered on Kagami for a little longer than she
would have wanted. Yes, so she hadn’t trained alongside the others, what if she hadn’t been in
Japan in almost five months. Unlike the others, she would win.

As much as Kagami loved Japan, winning an international competition while training there would
have been nonsense and the perfect way to ruin here future career as a fencer. If that had been
possible, she wouldn’t have left Tokyo in the first place. She was fairly certain she could defeat the
three other members of her team, and that wouldn’t have been too bold an assumption. All of this
was keeping from keeping an eye on the other fencers who would certainly be more interesting
than whatever this was. Her face betrayed none of these thoughts, however, and she listened to Mr
Nakajima in silence, nodding whenever she was expected to do so, and trying not to look at his
yellowed teeth for too long.

Mr Nakajima finally let them go. Kagami didn’t waste her time and went back to the large window
that jutted out over the terraces. She didn’t know any of the two fencers on the piste, one was
Brazilian and the other Egyptian, if she had gotten the flags rights — not that she could check, her
phone was in her bag alongside the Dragon pendant and that ugly family ring she hadn’t worn in
ages. She had only been allowed to take her food and her flask of water with her. She didn’t want to
brag, but from what she had seen so far, her chances to win were rather good so far. She had spoken
too soon. Giulia Caproni, whom Kagami remembered as a snotty-nosed kid, stepped on the piste.

The name of her Korean opponent was not even worth remembering, because it soon became
obvious that Giulia had gotten very good over the last few years. Good enough for Kagami to find
her an interesting future adversary. More and more bouts went on, with a few other promising
contenders. Soon, there were only sixty-four people left, and though one or two fencers didn’t truly
fit in with the others and looked a little stressed out and shaky on their feet, Kagami could tell that
this was about to become a little more challenging for all of them. She didn’t mind. If anything,
this made her glad to be here.

Out of the three disciplines comprised in modern fencing, sabre was the fastest of them all, with most duels lasting less than two minutes, when the rules were not broken. This round would last half as long as the previous one, Kagami’s duel would not be the tenth like it had previously been, but the fifth. She did her usually warm-up exercises, drank some more water, put on her fencing gear. When her turn came, she was ready. She would face one Andrea Segovia, who looked sure of herself, almost too sure of herself, even. Yes, she was overdoing it, and quite frankly, she had no class. And Kagami knew exactly how to deal with the type. They shook hands, waited for the signal.

Andrea fell right into Kagami’s trap by scoring the first touch in the bout. Underneath her fencing mask, Kagami smirked as she watched the other girl almost jump with joy. She wouldn’t even need her full focus for this one. It wasn’t a terrible attack per say. Simply, her opponent was full of misplaced pride. And blindly prideful people tended to make stupid mistakes when victory seemed near. When Andrea tried to repeat the small success of this first touch, she was meant with an unforgiving parry and immediate riposte. Not that Kagami scored all of her touches as unceremoniously as this, but it did its effect, and Andrea visibly went from overconfidence to nervousness.

Kagami’s lunge was a bait, and Andrea took it, parried, only she was not quick enough to get the right of way for a counter-attack. Kagami only had to extend her sword arm and the scoring box flashed green for the second time. It blinked again and again, the referee called for a one minute break as it was customary after either each touches or one minute of fencing, and in this case it was the former, not because Kagami had overdone it. She had put as much effort as she would have for an average bout against a rather average opponent. Simply, she was giving Andrea a public lesson in fencing, which also served as a prolonged warm-up session.

The short break did nothing to calm Andrea’s nerves. Kagami almost felt bad for her, tried her best not to humiliate her, and did her best to earn her touches through more complex attacks than what would have been necessary to actually earn them. The bout came to an end shortly, Kagami took off her fencing mask to shake Andrea’s hand. She looked at the terraces for a brief moment. Marinette and her mum were not clapping as loudly as they wanted to, this was clear in their eyes. Grandmother Kiyo was trying to subdue her joy, while grandfather Ando was reserved, and mildly annoyed, though that may as well have been his usual face. There was something next to her mum, but it wouldn’t do to stay on the piste just to see what it was.

She left the piste and went to the space reserved for the fencers, which would go back to being an ensemble of private boxes over the next few days, when the adults would be the ones to compete. It gave Kagami a great view, not only on the piste, but also on the terraces. And the rectangular
object next to her mum had been a tablet. She squinted her eyes, almost ignoring the fact that in a few seconds, there would only be two Japanese competitors left other than her, following Yui Hino’s ineluctable defeat. Why would her mum bring a tablet to… Was her father actually there, watching the competition? She’d later learn that day that he had indeed taken a day off just for that. Which was rare enough to be noted and appreciated, especially considering the time difference between Paris and Tokyo. Not as good as being here in person, but nice nevertheless.

Sixteen fencers had been exempted from the round of pools, only ten of them were still there for the next round. Only thirty one other contestants that could be her potential opponents, Kagami repeated to herself. Now, this was getting interesting. And a lot harder too. She took a bite off her cereal bar and stole a glance at the other fencers. She saw exactly what she had expected to see. A good third of them looked tired and a little on the edge. Kagami had been in their shoes a few years back, she knew exactly what they were going through. The build up of hours of mental pressure, the start of physical exertion, she had been through that too. Unlike them, she already knew how to deal with that.

Being relatively proficient in four languages had its perks, such as being able to eavesdrop on many conversations. Kagami learned that the American fencers put on bright smiles but mostly couldn’t stand each other, or her, apparently. Why did they all have to call her “the Chinese chick”? Wasn’t her name obvious enough? And they rarely used the world “Chinese”, come to think of it, but much more unpleasant words instead. The British fencers, Violet Bradley who had been one of the sixteen not to have to deal with the table of pools, Hannah MacDonwal and a newcomer Kagami didn’t know, were discussing the possible outcomes of this round, while the Italians relaxed and made jokes about being too hungry to compete. She didn’t understand what the Russians were chatting about, though Evgenia Rostova looked amused, and for the rest of the contestants, they weren’t very talkative, and they spoke languages she did not understand.

Kagami warmed up once again, more as a ritual than because she truly needed to. That, and it was the perfect excuse not to deal with Mr Nakajima. She was happy to find out that in this round, her bout would be against one of the French fencers Vincent had told her so much about, one Aude de Rambouillet. And Vincent must have told the girl about her too, Kagami noted, judging from the way her future opponent was almost smiling at her. Aude was not a sore loser, apparently. Which was fortunate for her. If Aude had expected to win today, she would have been sorely disappointed. They shook hands, put their fencing masks on and waited for the referee’s signal.

The world dimmed and became a little smaller. Nothing truly existed outside of the piste, her opponent and the vague presence of the people on the terraces, the judges and the referee. His final word rang out, Kagami executed a flawless feint, advanced, followed with a remise in a cutting motion, and scored the first touch of the encounter. Aude tried to even the score and Kagami had to admit, she was good, better than she had expected. She had been trained in foil fencing too, if the weight she put in her thrusts was anything to go by. Kagami deflected Aude’s attack, flicked her wrist and was rewarded with another touch.
It would take three more touches before Aude almost managed to end Kagami’s winning streak. The red and green lights on the scoring box blinked at the same time. It had been clever of Aude, she had feinted her stop hit and tried to be faster than Kagami when she had thrust her sabre. Now came the one minute break. Aude did not look too exhausted, or frustrated which was both a good thing — finally a level-headed opponent— and a mildly irritating one — it wouldn’t get easier. Kagami was almost taken aback when Aude scored two touches in a row. So she hadn’t pushed herself to her limit yet. This was fine. Kagami was only getting started.

Aude was a little faster than her when she thrusted her sabre? It was hard to deny, but it came with its fair share of flaws. These attacks always started and finished on the same line, and it was that directness that had surprised Kagami in the first place. Aude’s fencing style was straightforward, too straightforward in fact, even though her technique was superb. Vincent had probably warned her about ripostes. Which was fine by Kagami, she could simply dodge if she had to. She sidestepped Aude’s attacks with ease, now that she was certain of their trajectories, and took full advantage of the slight loss of momentum that followed each thrust.

Which didn’t mean that Kagami’s opponent was sluggish or incompetent, far from it, simply, she did most of the work for her. All Kagami had to do was dodge, sometimes parry when she didn’t have the choice, and try not to lose ground. This was the “hard” part, and it was still very much manageable. Well, this had been an interesting bout against an honourable opponent, but it was time for it to end. Kagami won the bout with little effort. This didn’t seem to annoy Aude, who seemed happy to shake her hand with a genuine smile before they parted ways.

Kagami watched the next bout with great interest; whoever won would be the one she’d have to face in the next round. She was taken aback. She hadn’t paid all that much attention to the loud-mouthed Americans, they hadn’t seemed all that interesting. Charlie Booker hadn’t looked very memorable, she was an athletic, flat-nosed blonde, and her previous matches hadn’t been much of a spectacle, not stellar from a technical standpoint; she had had to go through the round of pools. It was now clear that she had held back. She moved a lot, her legwork was clean and efficient, with no excessive flourishes.

She did scream a lot, however, which would get old in the long run, it was already getting on Kagami’s nerves. If only she could find a way to silence her permanently… But now was not the time to entertain such fantasies. Kagami shook her head and went back to observing her adversary. She had to figure out a strategy that would allow her to win and to amaze everyone while still saving some of her energy for later. That was feasible. There it was. The American girl was very mobile, relying mostly on her dodging. This could be a dangerous plan, and the execution needed to be perfect; this was what she had trained for.

By the end of the round, the number of fencers still in the competition was halved. There were only
two Japanese fencers left, counting Kagami. That was to be expected, in fact, she was surprised that Hana Akagi had somehow made it this far, she noticed, just as Mr Nakajima reappeared, perfectly composed but reeking of cigarette — she had suspected he was the kind to chain-smoke when stressed out, she had the confirmation now— and only two word in his mouth, one order. “Win this.” As if it was something she needed to be told. She was only four duels away from victory.

All the competitors that had looked tired and a little anxious had been kicked out at last, as Giulia put it rather inelegantly. There wouldn’t be a sudden dip in quality coming from a bout to the next one, which was probably for the best. Kagami had to admit that this was a relief, facing anyone less proficient than Aude now would have been anticlimactic at this point; the French girl could have easily made it as far as Kagami had she been pitted against anyone other than… Well, Kagami herself. Not that she felt sorry about defeating the girl.

There were more people in the terraces, she observed as she and Charlie Booker made their way to the piste. Alya and Nino had come! And Marjane! She couldn’t wave at them, however, it would ruin her aura. The atmosphere had started to change, and it’d only get more oppressive as time went by. Ando Tsurugi’s stare was harsher than it had been during her previous bout, mum’s face was unreadable, as it always was until the last minute of each competition. Marinette seemed eager to see her fence. It mustn’t have been easy for her, sitting through all these bouts. At least it made for a lesson in observation, Kagami supposed. She shook hands with her American opponent, who gave her a curious glance — probably because of her last name— before they went to their en garde lines.

Before she had the time to fully focus, Kagami heard the referee yell “allez” and it was all Booker needed to hear to lunge at her. Kagami parried, but before she could actually follow through her plan, her opponent had already retreated to her initial marking. She would try to attack again, this time a compound attack. This was fine. Kagami managed to darken the world around her just before Booker attacked her again. First a feint, a yell, then a thrust meant to misdirect her and leave her right side exposed, followed by another thrust. It was an efficient plan Booker had come up with.

Too bad all it took for it to come crashing down was a single stop hit, which gave Kagami the right of way. She scored the first touch of the bout, and the second one after that thanks to a simple lunge — Booker didn’t switch for her tierce to her quarte quickly enough—but not the third one. If she had wanted to, Kagami could have been faster than her opponent, if she had truly wanted to, she could have parried each blow. She would not waste that energy for this bout, and so, she reluctantly allowed Booker to take this point, which she did, with a ridiculous yell.

Kagami was relieved when the one minute pause came. She still had the upper hand, with five touches against two, but her ears were buzzing. On the bright side of things, Booker was a little red-faced, and sweating profusely. She had moved on the piste a lot more than Kagami had, and
though it hadn’t been entirely futile—in fact it had prevented Kagami from scoring more touches than was already the case—it looked like it had its downsides. Her footwork was as good as Kagami’s, even a little more dynamic, but the movements of her wrist were too slow, too imprecise.

Booker needed to get close to her opponent, a simple extension of her sword arm would mean a poorly aimed attack, potentially a foul, and she was aware of that. So was Kagami who made sure she never got the chance to get near her, forcing the American girl to backpedal and rethink her strategy. Kagami’s sabre found Booker’s lamé, then her fencing mask, her arm and her lamé once again. Booker stayed relatively calm, her yells didn’t get any louder. Her change of strategy didn’t pay off, unless scoring a single touch counted as such. She could only rely on her dodging skills for so long. Kagami found out that she was good at dodging thrusts. Cutting motions, not so much.

Of course, Kagami won, with three times as many touches as Booker. And she had to say, she was happy with her performance. She wasn’t exhausted—the same couldn’t be said about Booker—and she had managed to score these fifteen touches with a wide range of attacks and parries. M. D’Argencourt and Mme Legrain seemed impressed with her, as were most of the other fencing masters sitting in the terraces. Grandmother Kiyo seemed proud, though she couldn’t quite express it with her husband by her side. The directeur, just like mum kept a neutral face. Truly, Ando Tsurugi was the only hostile person here, cold and impassive and seemingly uninterested. But it didn’t matter to Kagami, Marinette’s smile was all she needed to see.

The competition went on, many more were eliminated, among which, and that was to be expected, Hana Akagi. Mr Nakajima excused himself and went out, probably to smoke again; he had completely given up on making speeches, or on talking, at this point. Now, only the very best and the luckiest remained: Giulia Caproni, Celeste Mangano, Violet Bradley, Crystelle de Noireuil, Mary Williams, Zoë Pulaski, Anja Kovalchuk; Kagami would only have to defeat three of them to be victorious. She was almost disappointed Evgenia Rostova hadn’t made it. Other than that, it was an interesting list of adversaries, and she had been accurate in her predictions.

They waited for the referees to call their names, in near-silence. Some were trying to play it cool, Caproni, Bradley and Kovalchuk had adopted laid-back attitudes of some sorts, probably to give the impression that they hadn’t noticed the shift in the general mood. Some others hadn’t bothered. Pulaski looked almost murderous when she glared at Kagami, which mildly amused for a short while, though she kept an eye out for any suspicious-looking butterfly, just in case. She supposed Booker and the other American girls had been friends after all, though they had a weird way of showing it. Kagami mimicked her mother’s composure from earlier, which only seemed to irritate Pulaski more.

Perhaps they’d face each other in the next round, if they both made it to the semi-finale. It didn’t seem too unlikely. For now, it was Mangano who would fence against Kagami, and she didn’t look too concerned about that. She supposed the Italian fencer didn’t care about her family name, and
she could hardly blame her. Almost ten years had passed since her mum had stepped out of competitive fencing and had managed to avoid the press, just like grandfather Ando before her. Both girls warmed up, stretched and exchanged a few words in Italian. And all too soon, it was time for them to go and face each other. There was no history between them, or the need to avenge one of the eliminated fencers.

The usual procedure —making that the scoring box and the body cords worked well— always took some time. Instead of turning to the terraces and feel all that pressure on her shoulders, Kagami started to plan the match. Mangano was a capable fencer, with no glaring weaknesses. In other words, Kagami would have to improvise on the spot. That, or she could trick Mangano into playing her game. Which wouldn’t be this hard to do. Or so she thought. The only problem was, her opponent was not naive, and did not fail for her feints, and managed to time her attacks well enough so that there would be no chance for a riposte unless Kagami made the effort.

In other words, Mangano was annoying to deal with. Not that Kagami let that annoyance show, she was above that. She did not groan when she failed to score the first touch, the other girl had earned it. This opponent was observant and quick to act. Her attacks were not as strong as her defensive moves, however. Kagami took a risk and purposefully let her guard down. It did not pay off as well as she had wanted it to. While she managed to touch Mangano’s lamé six times before the one minute break, mostly thanks to her ripostes, she had also been hit the four times she had been the one to attack. Mangano knew Kagami’s tells.

Or at least she thought she knew what they were. While they were training, Marinette had pointed out that Kagami made her feints too easy to notice. That had been on purpose, of course, otherwise that lesson would have been humiliating for Marinette. Kagami was on the offensive as soon as the pause was over. Where Mangano had expected a feint, however… It was a simple lunge, nothing an experience fencer couldn’t deal with. For someone expecting absolutely nothing and staying perfectly still, this was another story. Kagami had found the key to her victory here.

Except Mangano caught up on her, and blocked most of the attacks she managed to identify as such, and her defensive moves hadn’t suddenly gotten worse. Kagami’s score of thirteen touches against four — her passata-sotto was terribly efficient— turned into thirteen against nine by the end of the second period. This had been her longest bout in this competition so far, and it would only get longer. Only two touches and then she’d say goodbye to the Italian fencer. When Mangano tried to be clever with her attacks, she was met with a compound riposte, a feint followed by a simple cutting motion. Kagami only had to repeat this a second time, and she did

Celeste, no, Mangano — they wouldn’t be on friendly terms just yet, Kagami supposed— looked bitter and dejected when she shook her victor’s hand. Marinette had noticed it, Alya and Nino were trying to sneak out of the stadium, probably to transform. If a dark feather were to appear… But nothing. Mangano gave a tentative smile when a woman — her mother, they looked very similar— got up from her seat to clap for her. Kagami immediately went to the fencer-reserved space to
watch the next match. Mr Nakajima would be happy, she thought darkly, he could ask her to avenge Tachibana: Mary Williams lost to Anja Kovalchuk, fair and square.

After the Ukrainian girl, Kagami would have to face either Bradley or Pulaski. Giulia had been very close to winning but the American girl had snatched the victory at the last minute. Crystelle de Noireuil didn’t stand a chance against Violet Bradley. Kagami had to admit, she’d rather face her than Pulaski, whose fencing was energetic but without an ounce of class. But she was getting ahead of herself. She had one Anja Kovalchuk to deal with before planning the grand finale. She finished her cereal bar and waited for her name to be called.

Marinette clenched her fist a little as her girlfriend walked to the piste with an air of confidence followed closely by that short brown-haired girl with a calculative look on her face. Or perhaps she didn’t have a calculative look at all and Marinette was just imagining things because of how worried she was for her girlfriend. Because Kovalchuk had completely crushed that American fencer, who had scored a grand total of two touches during the entire encounter. And Kagami could only save her energy for so long, especially against someone like Kovalchuk.

Months and months of training with Kagami allowed her to have a very clear understanding of what was happening as both fencers went to their en garde lines, and she could almost visualise the piste the way her girlfriend did: a space floating in the middle of nothing, with the residual presence of demanding spectators. Marinette didn’t look at Nino and Alya, or Kagami’s mum to see their reactions, she definitely wouldn’t look at Kagami’s grandfather, who had immediately struck her as the disagreeable type who did not deserve his spouse. They were all part of another spectacle themselves, a very interesting one, too, but the one occurring on the piste mattered more to Marinette for the time being.

The problem with Kovalchuk was that she kept on pressing, forcing her opponents to step backwards until it was no longer possible lest they leave the piste, and only then would she score the touch. It was brutal, implacable, impeccable in its execution and overall an efficient strategy that had allowed her to get this far. Though Kagami had become more mobile, her forte was and remained her ripostes. And using such a technique against a persistent adversary wouldn’t work, even in the short run. Marinette knew her girlfriend had noticed it too.

The first touch was Kagami’s, an advance followed by a cut, with a great sense of tempo. Kovalchuk followed immediately, with a barrage of blows, none of which were meant to actually touch Kagami, but to force her to fall back. Which she did, until she was mere centimetres away from the end of the piste. And the touch was Kovalchuk. But there was something off. Why had Kagami let herself be cornered like that? She had known what was bound to happen. Marinette watched silently as Kovalchuk repeated the same tactic over and over again. Kagami did little to fight back, and had Marinette not known better, she would have assumed her girlfriend had given
Kovalchuk was leading with eight points against two and the one minute pause was the only thing that kept her from scoring one more. Kagami wasn’t distressed in the slightest. Why hadn’t she actually fought back? All she had done was parry and parry again until she couldn’t possibly take another step back. This bout wasn’t pretty to look at, so far. And then, Marinette noticed. Kovalchuk’s sword arm was twitchy, and she looked vaguely uncomfortable. All that moving around and hitting violently against Kagami’s sabre. A transfer. Her own sword arm didn’t take all that surge of power. She hadn’t been forced back like all the unfortunate fencers who had had to face the Ukrainian powerhouse. Now, Kovalchuk would lack accuracy, her strength would be diminished.

And Kagami beat her opponent’s sabre away effortlessly, and scored a touch. A second one, by sliding her blade against Kovalchuk’s and touching her sword arm in the end. A third occasion came, when Kagami pressed her sabre against the Ukrainian, redirecting the lunge, making it fall out of line. All it took was a slight flick of her wrist. She scored eight touches in a row, all earned in a similar way, with a simple redirection of Kovalchuk’s raw brawn. She tried to come back to a more impersonal method of fencing, the kind she had been taught, but it was too late, and besides, Kagami’s ripostes didn’t allow for her to win any more points. Her defence was good, it would have been more accurate had her sword arm not become numb.

Despite her defeat, Kovalchuk shook Kagami’s hand with enthusiasm and wished her a good luck for the next and final round, from what Marinette could hear. Kagami left her sight and so, she turned to look at the Tsurugis. Itsuko looked somewhat more tense than before, the joy that Teppei had expressed had completely left his face, or perhaps the video feed was just bad. As always, Kagami’s grandmother looked proud, though the expression was hard to discern, while her grandfather was clearly dissatisfied with her. Then again, when was he not? Would it change if Kagami won? But now was time for Violet Bradley, the very aristocratic-looking Englishwoman to have her match against Zoë Pulaski who all but crushed her hand when she shook it.

The floor was not a very comfortable place to sit, but it would do for now. Kagami breathed in and out just like Master Fu had taught her. She almost wished Tikki had given her another necklace to take her weariness away. Not that she would have been allowed to wear it, now that she thought of it, but it would have helped. This was a different kind of exhaustion from the one all these months ago at the Gymnase Elizabeth. Most of the bouts there had been easy, perhaps not the finale, but she had made so much progress since then that it retrospect, it didn’t feel like much. And there was little pressure compared with an international competition like this one.

This was her official return to this world after almost a year of not showing up to important events, and she couldn’t fail at the last moment. Not because mum would hate her, she wouldn’t, she was
sure she wouldn’t think any less of her for only finishing second, not because Ando Tsurugi would call her a disappointment as soon as they’d be in private. She would go back to the piste for her own sake, because she owed it to herself, after all that hard work. It wasn’t a matter of legacies, of perpetuating a dynasty of fencers, her style was very different from her grandfather’s and was already becoming its own thing. She had what it took to win. She would crown herself.

The calm before the storm, the febrile terraces and the hushed conversations as she arrived, regal, almost made her smile. The atmosphere was electric. All these eyes fixed on her were not crushing her, they elevated her, added to her prestige. All knew that what they were about to see would be memorable. Her side of the scoring box would blink red this time. Violet Bradley shook her hand and the look on her face said it all. She wouldn’t hold back, and she expected Kagami to do the same. Truly, their conception of fencing was similar. A show of exactness and controlled strength. An artistic performance, when pushed to its highest degree.

“En garde!”

The world got smaller and smaller until it was just the piste and the referee’s voice. Something certainly existed outside of these limits, but Kagami couldn’t see it now that she had obscured it. No, not exactly, it was as though she had curtained all that was around the piste. She closed her eyes and breathed it. Time had slowed down, but not her. She had at least five ways to score the first touch, and Violet knew them all. She would just have to execute on them perfectly, then. Her pose was flawless.

“Prêtes?”

Of course she was.

“Allez!”

A feint. an advance, a cut. Kagami parried the attack aimed at her chest — *prime*— though it was a close call. She readied herself for a riposte. The scoring box blinked red. This had been a bold first move from Violet. Then again, Kagami hadn’t expected less coming from her. She was the one to be on the offensive this time, and she had to fight back a smirk when the English girl parried instead of trying to dodge. Of course she’d do that. Kagami didn’t give her the chance to get the right of way and immediately followed with a second thrust aimed at Violet’s fencing mask. Her sabre was hastily beaten away and the scoring box blinked green this time, a simple cut to the arm.
Kagami was on the offensive again, and this time it worked. An advance and then a lunge. Violet parried, riposted. Kagami dodged and her blade grazed her opponent’s arm before it touched her shoulder in the blink of an eye. She scored another touch before Violet’s patience paid off: after a complex game of parries, feints and missed attacks, she finally landed at touch on Kagami’s fencing mask. A second one on the Japanese girl’s lamé, a third on her arm again. She was stopped from making it four, however, and it was Kagami’s turn to score, a fast cut on Violet’s flank — she could have sidestepped it if she had withered to, but she refused to take a single step back unless it was to attack again.

She should have, but she didn’t need to, at least for now. She knew all that there was to know about Kagami’s techniques, so misdirection wouldn’t work. And her parries were efficient, perhaps she could have put more strength on the foible of her sabre so that they could be even more accurate. The scoring box blinked red one last time before the one minute pause. This was when Kagami saw it when they stepped back to their en garde line. It wasn’t that Violet chose not to move a lot. She had a slight limp, barely noticeable, the people in the terraces and the judges wouldn’t be able to catch sight of it.

This was risky but it could work. Kagami didn’t press her sabre against Violet when the girl tried to start an engagement. The English girl wouldn’t be able to take it. Did she downright ignore the pain? Kagami didn’t know whether she should admire her or feel sorry for her. Violet was a great fencer, she deserved her place in this finale. Kagami wouldn’t be the one to end her career prematurely by exploiting her injury and purposefully putting her in harm’s way. Her sabre slid down Violet’s and the touch was hers. She was tired. The scoring box flashed green when she lost her momentum following her flunge and Violet used that split second to strike.

The bout went on and they were in a tie now, ten touches on each side. Only five touches left till victory. Four now, she’d never try using the moulinet in a competition again, her wrist felt sore, but at least it had made for a spectacular touch. Three, her ceding parry followed by a riposte worked. Two— Three still, Violet’s attack had been deceiving, Kagami’s quinte too slow to stop the hit. Two, she had never expected to use a septime but it had saved her from a cut to the side. Violet scored, replicating the move on Kagami’s other side. Kagami lunged at her opponent, beat the British girl’s sabre away, making sure not to throw her off balance. The touch was hers, a clean thrust.

One point. One point and she would become a champion. She could almost feel the weight of all these eyes on her. No, she wouldn’t look. Her sword arm was tired, her feet hurt, she couldn’t compare her pain with Violet’s, but she couldn’t pretend the sensation wasn’t there. One more touch. She readied herself, a perfect en garde pose, a little flashier, maybe. It was fine for her to do this. It wasn’t gratuitous, or arrogant. This was the final scene of this opera, after all. Her opponent mirrored the gesture. Oh, she wouldn’t make this easy.

Violet lunged. Kagami parried, took a step back. She dodged the next thrust, and the one after. Now. She leaned to the right and jerked her wrist to the left. One last dodge. A parry, now, followed by a stop-hit. That was it, Violet had lost her right of way. Kagami extended her arm,
twisting it slightly to the right as quickly as she could. She felt a slight resistance at the tip of her sabre. The scoring box blinked green. Kagami and Violet stayed completely still for a few seconds. Around them, silence. The referee’s voice rang out, its words unintelligible. Kagami straightened up and took a step back. The world around her was incredibly bright.

The applause was deafening. She turned to the terraces. There was Marinette, her cheeks glistening as she gave her a standing ovation, her mother, clapping with happy tears in her eyes — she could feel her own eyes well up a little too — and she understood. It. She had made it. She really had made it. She took off her fencing mask. ran a hand through her hair. Violet had done the same. She gave Kagami a friendly smile, before grabbing her arm and raising it above her head. Pulaski had finished third, and she didn’t seem too unhappy about it. They shook hands with the judges, the referees, photographs were taken, many photographs. Kagami posed with her head held high. It felt wonderful, a fever dream of some kind, but not the unpleasant kind.

“You should have a doctor examine your leg as soon as this is over,” Kagami told Violet as she stepped down the podium. Pulaski was already gone, not that they would have had a lot to talk about.

“I will,” Violet promised. “Thank you, for making arrangements. You’ve earned this,” she pointed to the gold medal Kagami wore around her neck.

“I am looking forward to duelling you again,” Kagami smiled. “Let’s keep in touch?”

She let Marinette kiss her cheek and hug her, and Marjane and Nino and Alya, she shook M. D’Argencourt’s hand. She really felt like a sweaty mess, and so, she decided that her family and friends could wait a few minutes. The warm water of the stadium’s showers eased her sore muscles. She felt less sticky already, refreshed and relaxed. She’d take a bath before dinner, and change into something a little nicer, too. She reluctantly stepped out of the shower, got dressed and walked to the stadium’s entrance, where mum and her grandparents would certainly be waiting for her. And perhaps Marinette, if she was lucky. She put on the Dragon pendant out of habit as she left the changing room.

The greyish late-afternoon sky was unwelcoming, and worse, she arrived in the middle of an
argument, between her mother and her grandfather. She hadn’t noticed Ando Tsurugi’s expression when she had won; now that she thought of it, he had probably scowled at her. She couldn’t understand why. She had become a champion, hadn’t she? He had often muttered about the greatness of his blood… That was nonsense, of course, but was he not happy that someone carrying his family name had won such a prestigious competition? It was unlike him to yell and scream, even more so in public. Had she done something wrong?

“… thinking, bringing that stupid friend of hers with that too bright smile and her butchered Japanese? A Chinese? You should have spent more time teaching my granddaughter the noble arts, she can barely hold a sabre, let alone a shinai!”

Oh. He was ranting about Marinette and herself, that was sure, and about her not knowing kendo and it being her mum’s fault in particular. In other words, nothing new, but he had never expressed it with such violence. And that comment about Marinette made her blood boil. Grandmother Kiyo was embarrassed and confused, mum looked irriate, but this was nothing compared with Ando Tsurugi’s face, covered in an angry reddish blotches, a contorted mask of fury. And he had noticed her presence.

“There you are!” he barked. “You found it amusing to do everything but perpetuate my fencing, didn’t you?”

So this was all it had been about. He had expected unrestrained force, raw, unchecked power, no mercy. He had wanted her to push against her adversaries and pass through by sheer might alone. She hadn’t used a single one of his techniques, it as true. Her fencing style was closer to her mother’s, to M. D’Argencourt’s too. She wouldn’t let him spit in her face like that.

“I found it necessary to fence with honour and respect for my opponent,” she answered, keeping her voice in check. “My style is my own, and it has lead me to victory. Insulting the people who are dear to me is low, and for that I demand an apology.” He was not worth arguing against. He was not worth her anger, barely worth her attention in fact. She was done chasing after his approval, but she needed him to apologise.

“You let your disgrace of a daughter talk to me like that!” he yelled, turning to Itsuko. “What does this mean?”

“I am proud of her,” Itsuko all but yelled back. “She gave her best today! You are the one making a scene, Father! Take back what you’ve said about Kagami.”
A little butterfly fluttered by, its wings shining a vibrant purple, turning around Ando and Itsuko Tsurugi. Kagami felt her stomach sink. Marinette was nowhere to be found, Nino and Alya weren’t there either. They must have witnessed the beginning of this argument; they were certainly getting ready to strike down whoever would get akumatised. But she couldn’t see them. And what if they weren’t there, what if they had left because of a sentimonster? Master Fu had left Paris the day before with the Fox Miraculous to meet with some other Guardian… She’d have to transform and stop the akuma on her own, and reveal her secret identity to the face of the world. She couldn’t have Hawk Moth use her family.

“I should have stayed in Kyoto!” Ando Tsurugi roared.

“Perhaps you should have, yes!” Itsuko said through clenched teeth.

“Or maybe you should have never come to this country in the first place!” There it was. The same old reproaches. “Leaving for Tokyo was already a terrible idea, and now you’ve gotten worse!”

Itsuko had stopped listening to him. “We are going back to our flat” she said as she tried to regain her composure. “I see there is no point talking anymore. I wish things had been different”

“You are a complete failure, as a daughter, as a fencer, as a teacher,” Ando Tsurugi spat. “And you’ve sullied my name.” The butterfly landed on his shoulder, not that he noticed it. It was too late.

“Longg, crown m—”

“This is enough!” Kiyo Tsurugi’s scream of frustration stopped her husband from opening his mouth. He paled visibly. “You had promised you would not start a scene, you had promised you would be nice and that we would try to enjoy it here and all you managed to do is… We are going back to the hotel, immediately, our taxi will be here any second now, we’re leaving.”

“But I…” Ando mumbled. The butterfly flew away from him. “I’m only…”

“Now.” Kiyo’s said coldly, imperiously. But her tone was softer, sadder, when she turned to her daughter and granddaughter. “Itsuko, Kagami… I am sorry for all of this.”
The car drove away and Kagami let out a shaky breath. Was mum alright? She was a little pale, and a lot more tired than she had been. She looked lost. Kagami had no idea what to do. This should have been a happy day, she should have gone home to change and then to an expensive restaurant with a pretentious name and enjoy a celebration meal together, as a family. She had been stupid for feeling happy about that gold medal of hers. Mum squeezed her shoulder and gave her a sad smile. Kagami heard the sound of Marinette’s footsteps getting closer. So she had been there on the lookout for the akuma, after all. And she had seen it all. That row had probably chased Marjane away… Kagami felt ashamed they had to see this.

“Mme Tsurugi, Kagami,” Marinette’s voice was warm and full of solicitude. “I know this is not exactly what you had planned on doing, but would you like to have a little celebration dinner at my house tonight? We would be happy to have you there and, well… I think your victory is worth celebrating, Kagami.”

She was in love with that girl. It took all of her might to not hug Marinette on the spot, not to kiss her right away.

The heavy blanket of clouds started to move away as the three of them walked to the Dupain Cheng bakery. Kagami took Marinette’s hand in hers and was surprised when the girl threaded their fingers together. Truly, her girlfriend always managed to find just the right words to congratulate her, the right gestures to make her feel a little better about all that had happened. Tom and Sabine baked her a cake to celebrate her victory, they uncorked a bottle of champagne for the occasion. Dinner was nothing extravagant, but it was delicious, perhaps even more so that it usually was. By the time they returned home, mum looked much happier, and Kagami herself felt warmer too.

When she turned on her phone before going to bed, later still, she found out that she had missed more texts and calls than she had ever received in an entire day so far, even counting her birthday. She tried to answer them all. Words of praise, from her friends with a dramatic recreation from Taneda and Aiko, a long message from her father… It was a little overwhelming, but not disagreeable, far from it. At last, she put her phone back on her night table.

“Is it alright if I turn off the light?” she asked the girl lying next to her.

“This is your room,” Marinette smiled sleepily. “You do what you want.”
“Good night, then. And… Thank you for today,” Kagami said before she switched off the light. She snuggled closer to Marinette and heard her mumble something that sounded like “sweet dreams”. She fell asleep soon after that.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

The Challenge International de Paris, as it currently exists in the real world, is a sausage fest. A good thing that fiction can fix it! The Pierre-de-Coubertin stadium is very much real.

I tried to keep the fencers' nationalities as true to the actual world of fencing as possible (though there has been no Japanese world champion in years), and everything else too, but hey, this is a work of fiction so if some things are inaccurate, let's say that in this universe, they are in fact very much correct!

The Tsurugis are… A complicated family, to put it politely. But hey, Itsuko stood up for her daughter, and Kagami stood up for herself, so… At first, I had that idea to make a kaiju-sized fight between akumatised!Ando and sentimonster!Itsuko, but it was all too much so…

My Tumblr is still here if you want to read previews of the incoming chapters, if you want to ask me things or just share your mind about this story or if you want to know about the other things I write from time to time! Thank you all for the kudos and the comments!

À lundi prochain!
M. Dupuis was a punctual man; though he was seldom early, lateness was not what he was known for, unlike, say, Mme Vidal. And this applied to everything he was involved in, including leading conversations with each of his students to know what they had planned on doing next year. He had become a better form teacher over the course of the last few months. And scheduling this on Saturday, while the Première and Terminal pupils were having their mock exams, was not a bad choice per say. But it had prevented Marinette from enjoying a much-deserved sleep-in, especially after this tiring, though instructive evening spent at Manladrineaut.

At least, the chairs lined up in front of the room where the biology teacher was now discussing with Lise Doinot were comfortable to sit on. The school rules clearly stated that using one’s phone in the corridors was strictly forbidden unless absolutely necessary. Not dying of boredom qualified as “absolutely necessary”, didn’t it? And so, Marinette rummaged through her bag, checked her phone, discreetly waved at Tikki who waved back at her, and answered Karim’s text — apparently the HSK 2 results were available online, and he had done well — before putting it back where she had taken it from. She’d check these results later, but she wasn’t worried about it in the slightest.

The door opened and Lise walked out of the room with a bright smile on her face. She whispered a small “hi” to Marinette who answered with a “hello” of her own. She got up and waited for M. Dupuis to tell her to come in. She was almost surprised when she heard Mme Berthes’s voice say her name. So that was what he had chosen to do? To have another teacher with him? It made relative sense that he wouldn’t be the only one to give advice and encourage his students to follow specific courses of study rather than others. And Marinette had to say, she liked the literature teacher.

“Good morning, M. Dupuis, Mme Berthes,” Marinette said in a confident voice. She closed the door.

The teachers greeted her back from behind the desk they shared, and motioned for her to sit. M. Dupuis made a joke about her not bringing croissants for them, before telling his colleague for the umpteenth time that the Dupain Cheng bakery was the best in the city, probably in the entire world — Mme Berthes nodded in polite agreement — and this was the start of the actual conversation. The small Marinette from troisième would have been panicked about it. It wasn’t that her marks had been terrible back then. But they hadn’t been particularly good either. The Marinette from now was serene. She had gotten much better at balancing her life as a hero and as a student, and thanks to a little help from her friends and girlfriend, her marks had vastly improved too.

“I’ve got your copy for the latest biology test,” M. Dupuis said. “You’ve done it again, you’re in
the top three! And you’ve said you wanted to study in a Première S class? Judging from your other marks, you should be an excellent student there!”

“But I’ve heard it was fashion design you were interested in,” Mme Berthes quipped in. And this was one of the reasons why Marinette liked her. She cared about what her students did outside of school, while still maintaining a teacher-student relationship with them.

“It is,” Marinette nodded. “But just in case it doesn’t work out, I need to have other options ready… I thought biology, perhaps? I want to use what I’ve learned to help people…”

“Yes, an excellent choice!” M. Dupuis all but clapped. “We need more people like you! Would you be interested in studying medicine?”

“It is a plan,” Marinette said in a neutral voice. The truth was, at this point, it seemed unlikely that her career in fashion design would fail. She had had her doubts at the beginning of the school year, it had only been a time and money-consuming hobby of hers, and sure, she had made a hat once, but nothing too serious otherwise. How things had changed… She suspected that M. Tamarre saw her as some kind of golden goose sometimes, but she tried to not think about it too much.

“What can I say, I wish I still had you in my class next September, but I am sure you will do well,” Mme Berthes smiled. “Will you continue learning Chinese? Of course you will keep English, Mr Ellison is very happy with your work? ”

“I want to!” Marinette answered. “My mother will be happy to keep helping me practice!”

This was going really well, Marinette thought. Then again, teachers this year tended to like her, and had she bribed them with cakes or pastries from her parents’ bakery, it would have gone even better. They talked some more about the different classes she’d have to take in Première, how many hours she would have a week — about thirty five — and the teachers she might have. She’d finally be rid of M. Granvillet which was always a good thing — though she did her best not to look overjoyed at that— unlike Alya and many others who had chosen to go in Première ES.

“We need to wrap this very soon, we don’t want to keep Maelle waiting…” M. Dupuis grumbled.

“I know what you are going to ask me and the answer is yes, I’ve found an internship for June!” Marinette said.
“With Kagami, I am sure,” M. Dupuis smiled, and Mme Berthes all but glared at him. His smile became apologetic.

“No, actually, she will tell you she will be working in a bookshop, whereas I still am an intern at Manladrineau, until at least the end of the school year and perhaps a little longer if I’m lucky,” Marinette replied. “There will be a new boutique opening in Tokyo so perhaps they will need me even after that, who knows?”

The truth was, this was not really a “perhaps”, her internship was supposed to end by the end of July, but she didn’t worry about it being renewed for at least another four months like it had been the case so far. M. Tamarre had jokingly said that they hadn’t planned on letting her go; there had been some truth in that. And she would soon get paid for her hard work, instead of basically doing it for free. She wouldn’t have to babysit Manon to get the money to buy her supplies anymore. Being freed of that brat would be a relief, not that she was that bad, but being around the moody and easy to anger child was never an enjoyable experience, and it had ended up with her having to deal with the Puppeteer more than once.

“This concludes our conversation,” Mme Berthes said warmly. “Have a nice day, Marinette!”

“And a nice day, Mme Berthes, M. Dupuis!” Marinette snapped back to reality and gave them a polite smile.

She made sure to close the door behind her and waved at Maelle on her way out. It was a beautiful morning, she hadn’t enjoyed April nearly enough; the only times she had been outside for a prolonged amount of time, akumas and sentimonsters — no, amok, definitely amok, they’d stop calling them that— had been involved too. She made the silent promise to go on a picnic date with Kagami one of these days. Perhaps they could go to the Buttes Chaumont? It would be better than Place des Vosges, she had grown tired of going there all the time. Yes, the thought was nice. But she didn’t stay outside for too long, she had many things to do.

And so, Marinette went to Alya’s flat. Sure, she was a good student, but it was in great part due to her hard work. Her internship, Mayura — if she was still alive at this point— and Hawk Moth wouldn’t stop her from doing her homework in time. It wasn’t to say that it was interesting, quite the opposite in fact, but if it was what it took to make sure she had understood that chemistry lesson, then it was worth the mild headache. And working with Alya was a lot more enjoyable that doing it alone. Tikki and Barkk sat cross-legged, levitating in silence like they often did these days, trying to communicate with Nooroo and Duusuu. That hadn’t worked the previous times, but they hadn’t given up yet. Marinette had seen Longg do the same.
They were quick to finish their homework. Alya’s parents weren’t there, neither was Nora, the twins were away — bless “bring your children at work” day, Alya thought, and besides, they wouldn’t get bored at the zoo—which meant one thing: they could play Dance Like You Want To Win 5 with the sound at the maximum. As always, Marinette didn’t stand a chance to win. Yes, she was much better at this game than her girlfriend and Nino combined, but Alya still crushed her completely, on all the songs they danced to. Not that they played the game with a competitive mindset anyway, otherwise Marinette would have been miserable.

They stopped when they noticed that it was almost time to eat. Or more precisely when Alya’s stomach growled. Lunch at her place was always something. While she didn’t enjoy taking care of the meal all that much and often let the others handle it for her, there always were the best ingredients in her pantry and in her fridge, the best kitchen utensils. Marinette wasn’t in the mood for something very complex, and too hungry and impatient to calmly wait for something that would take a long time to cook. A rice salad would do nicely, she decided. Alya approved. Marinette made sure to cook a lot more than two regular teenagers would need.

“… and so we were thinking that we could ask for donations instead of putting ads on the Ladyblog just to afford the servers,” Alya said as she took her third helping of rice salad.

“I know I’d be willing to pay, and with so many people logging in every single day to use the forums, submit new footage and all that. I’m sure it’ll work,” Marinette agreed.

“Say girl, was your appetite a little messed up the first few months you got your earrings?” Alya asked, her mouth full. She swallowed and continued, “I really need to eat a lot to feel sated these days… Like, a lot.”

“In the beginning, yes,” Marinette said. “I mean, being a hero helps burn calories and makes you buff!” And she flexed for good measure.

“Yeah, there have been some pretty noticeable changes since Nino became Carapace,” Alya laughed. Marinette could only agree. It really showed when he wasn’t wearing unflattering baggy clothes. One day, she’d make an entire new wardrobe for him, she decided.

“You actually need these calories in the first place to burn them, so it’s normal that you need to eat more,” Marinette continued. “You’re the one who patrols every single day and stays up at night to help at the homeless shelter and walk people home. That and I think Barkk’s weakness for food is rubbing off on you.”
“Damn kwami knows well that gluttony is one of my too many sins,” Alya faux-grumbled. “Seriously, though, one of these days, if this doesn’t stop…”

“It will,” Marinette dispelled her doubts, “it will stop, I think it might depend on the kwami and on the time it takes for your body to adjust to the change, I mean, you went to a couple of kickboxing lessons and PE at school to parkour on an almost daily basis… For Kagami it took a good two months. So, if anything, it’s better that you eat a little more than necessary than not enough! And if you’ve got questions about that…”

“I can always ask Master Fu about it,” Alya finished. “Didn’t he strike you as worried last time we saw him?”

“He looked happy to be rid of the Fox Miraculous, I mean it would be too simple if he told us where he had went to but… Yeah, well, there hasn’t been any large-scale attacks from Hawk Moth lately, and let’s not even talk about Mayura,” Marinette frowned. “He’s right, neither of them seems to exit their lair? Lairs? Well, anyway, we still don’t know where these are either, so yeah, perhaps they’re scheming something, or waiting for something in particular, I don’t know… I understand why Master Fu isn’t at peace.”

“What’s that stupidly long rule again?” Alya groaned. “You can’t find who the wielders are when they are untransformed unless they actually reveal it to you, or if they want you to know, if you recognise the Miraculous because you’ve worn it before, or if you actually witness their transformations. Or if you’ve given them a Miraculous yourself. Yeesh. No wonder why my search for your secret identity lead me nowhere for so long. So that was Trixx breaking the rules I suppose.”

“And Lila wanted Ladybug to know it was her, out of spite, I guess,” Marinette stated. “While Mayura and Hawk Moth don’t want to be found out at all, which… Makes sense, I guess. And Chat Noir, Viperion and Tiger Eye fall under that category too. And our hunch about Chloé… Well, we still can’t prove it. On the bright side of things, it works the other way around, too.”

“That’s some spooky ancient magic right there,” Alya commented. “It works but sometimes, you know, I hate that it works so well, if that makes sense.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Marinette nodded.

Lazing around at Alya’s was always great, the couch was comfortable, it was a place that felt warm and homely. Not that Marinette didn’t feel home at home, but there was always the temptation of starting yet another fashion project, which would inevitably happen tonight, or the risk that her
parents would ask for her help at the bakery. At her best friend’s flat, she could do absolutely nothing of importance and not feel guilty about it. She could have taken a nap on the couch. Alya had collapsed on the carpet, holding her stomach and mumbling something about not being able to move and not wanting to get up ever again. Truly, the prospect of a nap was very alluring.

But she had places to go, and lazing on the couch wouldn’t take her there, as much as she would have wanted to. She had fencing lessons to take, from one of Paris’s very bests, after all. She left Alya’s apartment after thanking her best friend for the meal and the good time, and made sure to close the door behind her. She had no need to hurry, and plenty of time. The weather was nice enough to enjoy a stroll and make a detour or two. She was in no hurry, and still, she kept an eye on her watch. In almost eight months, she had never been late, and this had yet to change.

She accidentally ran into M. Agreste as he was speaking in a rather harsh tone to his assistant, Mlle Sancœur. They had come back from a restaurant, and though she didn’t tell them so—that would have made things even more awkward between them—she couldn’t help but notice that they were looking worn-out, ill, even. Was Mlle Sancœur’s disease contagious? She had stayed in bed for weeks, according to Adrien, but then again he worried about her a lot. The only thing Marinette was sure of was that she got extremely bad vibes from the both of them. M. Agreste had always managed to make everyone around him uneasy, but this time it wasn’t on purpose. She was relieved when the conversation was cut short, and let out a small sigh.

How Adrien had managed to live with the man for so long while resisting the temptation to strangle him every second he saw him was beyond her. She couldn’t believe she had once idolised him. His creations were still amazing, but giving her money to him would be a big no, if she were to have the kind of money to buy clothes from Gabriel one day. At least Mlle Sancœur was alright, she only had an unfortunate surname and a terrible boss. How someone like her had ended up working for someone like M. Agreste, she could only make wild guesses, but she always came to the same conclusion, that no one should have to bear with the man.

As always, Marinette arrived early, the fencing salle was entirely empty, she’d have it all for herself, at least for a little while, ten minutes until her teacher arrived, she counted. She’d get ready for her. Marinette warmed up a little, stretched, did a few cartwheels, her usual routine. Now was time for her to put on her fencing gear and rehearse all they had done so far. En garde… Then a feint, a lunge, a remise, a parry, an extension and back her en garde position. It wasn’t very easy, especially with no opponent in front of her, and no one to assess her performance, but she managed. She repeated the movements, a little faster this time.

Marinette didn’t stop when Kagami entered the salle — was it one of her shirts she was wearing? Yes, it definitely was—and tried some more complex moves instead. Perhaps that’d impress her a little? Judging by the other girl’s smile, it had, or perhaps Kagami found it endearing that she tried
so hard. She went to join her, wearing her red lamé — it looked right on her, much more so than the white one she had worn for the Challenge International de Paris— and they warmed up together, like they often did. Not the worst kind of routine, if you asked Marinette, plus it allowed her to refresh her memory. Finally, she stopped, and so did Kagami.

“Hey,” Marinette said as she took off her fencing mask. Kagami mirrored the gesture, and it was all Marinette needed to kiss her.

“Hi,” Kagami smiled as she took a step back back. She cleared her throat went back to her “teacher” mode. “So,” she said, “I was thinking we could try duelling again today, perhaps get another look at your footwork so that you won’t make the same mistakes as last time, I know, moving like her and switching to this is a bit disorienting, but…”

“We’ve still got a month until M. D’Argencourt opens his academy to three, maybe four more students,” Marinette finished. “And yeah, we’re going to make sure I’m one of them.”

“He won’t have you duel me, he’s learned a lot from last year,” Kagami said, and when she saw the remorse on Marinette’s face, she immediately added, “by that, I mean that he will probably have you face one of the least proficient fencers, say, Éloi. Who is still perfectly decent, compared with mere amateurs. Or perhaps M. D’Argencourt will choose something else, he won’t tell me. But let’s get to it, shall we?”

One of the things Marinette enjoyed the most about these private lessons with Kagami was that her girlfriend tried to put herself on her level, at least in the beginning. Which didn’t mean that Marinette won most of their friendly bouts, but at least Kagami didn’t wipe the floor with her systematically. They always took things slow in the beginning, which allowed for them to chat some more, all while not neglecting their fencing. It often got more complicated afterwards, but at least that transition wasn’t too brutal. And so, the fencing salle was filled with the sound of their footsteps, sabres that sometimes clattered against one another or one of the girl’s lamé, and their conversation.

“So, your interview with M. Dupuis and Mme Berthes?” Marinette asked. “You know how mine went but I have no idea how yours was!”

“Well they did let me go right on time, so I didn’t have to run all the way to here, which is a good thing,” Kagami answered as she sidestepped Marinette’s lunge. “Otherwise, not a lot to say, I’m afraid…”
“Because you’re so good at everything you do?” There was amusement in Marinette’s voice.

“It helps that I’m top of the class,” Kagami said very bluntly. “M. Dupuis was a little disappointed that I didn’t consider going to Première S like you.”

“But Mme Berthes was very happy to have you as a student next year,” Marinette retorted as she parried Kagami’s thrust — *quarte*, no, *quinte*—and winced when Kagami flicked her wrist at the last moment, her sabre slipping through her defences with ease. Getting used to the idea that she wouldn’t be in the same class as her Kagami, or most of her friends, still wasn’t easy for Marinette. She was being irrational, she knew it, of course they wouldn’t stop seeing each other all of a sudden, they’d still have some time together. But still.

“She has sent me the reading list for the Première and Terminale L syllabus, and to Nino too,” Kagami said as she stepped back to the en garde mark. The future didn’t seem to worry her all that much. Or perhaps she was thinking of other things. “Your reaction time was fine, but you should try to look at my wrist a little more to get a hint of where I might strike!”

“Well, you’ve got four months to read all the books,” Marinette half-joked. Not that her girlfriend wouldn’t be able to. “I guess she was happy with you finding a job at that bookshop too!”

“Not as happy as I am,” Kagami retorted as she feinted before attacking for real this time. “I don’t think I’ve told you, but they’ve got a book binding workshop and actual printers in the back! I was already happy to learn that I would get paid for my work, but this is even better!”

“Look at us, having paid jobs,” Marinette said, beating Kagami’s sabre away. In a sweeping motion, she scored a touch. “I mean I’ll have to wait until…”

“July, because you turn sixteen on the 9th of June, I haven’t forgotten that,” Kagami finished for her. “Oh, and that Japan thing is solved at last.”

Marinette feinted — it must have been convincing, because her “opponent” tightened her grip on her sabre’s hilt— advanced and in a sweeping motion, she caught Kagami in the shoulder. Wait. No. Kagami had parried at the last second, and was now pressing her blade against hers. Marinette pushed back, but with little results. Which was to be expected, she supposed. Still, she let out a little frustrated groan when Kagami scored the touch, seemingly without breaking a sweat.

“How can you be so strong!” Marinette half-complained.
“You were good, really!” Kagami said. “Your feints have gotten much better! And to answer your question, it’s mostly a matter of redirecting strength, I’m not that strong… And you’re holding back, strength-wise.”

“Yeah yeah,” Marinette shook her head, amused. Though it was true that she wasn’t using all of her strength. She took off her fencing mask, Kagami did the same. “So about Japan?”

“I’ll attend that national competition, otherwise the Japanese Federation of Fencing won’t let me compete under the Japanese flag at all,” Kagami said. “Which makes sense, I suppose, I have ignored most fencing events there since I’ve lived here in Paris.”

“Two competitions in a month…” Marinette thought aloud. “But you don’t seem worried about the outcome of this one.”

“No reason to be,” Kagami said. “When you look how far the Japanese delegation went at the Challenge International de Paris… I am not going to walk in this competition with my eyes close but my chances of winning are very good, mum agrees with me on that. I don’t want to sound cocky, but this is the way things are.”

“So a short trip in a week and a half, you’ll stay there for two days, and then back to France?” Marinette summed it up.

“That’s about it,” Kagami nodded. “Mum won’t be coming with me, there’s that really important conference and they need interpreters there… But there should be someone to pick me up at the airport! All I need is to book a flight, and Father has promised he’d come to watch the competition.”

“I’ll send you the notes for the classes you’ve missed,” Marinette offered. “And you know I’ll cheer for you, even from France. Except a video call from me every night!” She put her fencing mask back on, Kagami did the same.

Marinette parried Kagami’s thrust, tried for a riposte but the timing was just a little off. Not that Kagami used it as an opportunity to score a touch, she took a step back and they repeated the sequence until Marinette got it right, and only then did they return to their respective en garde marks. They continued fencing for a little while, and Marinette followed all the important advice her “teacher” gave her. Focusing on her footwork and resisting the temptation to switch to her “Ladybug” mode was still the hardest part, she couldn’t just jump around, no matter how efficient
it would have been — though against Kagami, it wouldn’t have worked.

The exercises Kagami had imagined were good, and sometimes, it felt as though they were taking dancing classes together more than fencing. Dancing classes where the ultimate goal was to go faster than your partner all of a sudden, to mislead them and finally to stab them with a sword, that was hard to deny, but the image had remained in Marinette’s head, she had even sketched her girlfriend as a ballet dancer with a sword once. For now, she was trying to mirror Kagami’s movements, and she felt rather competent at that. An advance, a lunge — “try to bend your knee a little more if you can” — and a parry against an imaginary adversary.

Practice made perfect. It was no use comparing herself to Kagami, unless she wanted to make herself very self-conscious about her abilities as a fencer. All she needed to do was to be patient and to follow the exercise rigorously. It paid off, and reasonably quickly, probably because Marinette had a brilliant teacher, and maybe because she was always doing her best, probably a bit of both. If the best sabre fencer her age had told her that she could enter the D’Argencourt fencing academy, it was probably true. Besides, Kagami never lied to her, even when it was uncomfortable things they needed to talk about.

“Say, will you continue teaching me next year?” Marinette had asked.

“I… Honestly don’t know whether I’ll find the time for it.” That hadn’t been the answer Marinette had wanted to hear. “We will still train together, under M. D’Argencourt’s supervision! But only the two of us, I don’t make promises I can’t keep.”

That had made sense. She didn’t like it but it made sense. And so, Marinette tried to make the best of what may be her last fencing classes with Kagami and Kagami alone. Before they knew it, it was time for her to leave, Kagami’s lesson with her mother would begin soon, and she knew that she couldn’t keep up with the more experienced fencers here, she was quite competent for someone who had only trained for eight months, but she would get overwhelmed if she tried to follow Itsuko Tsurugi. And she knew the woman would not go easy on her, and neither would her students. It would have to wait a few years, if they still lived in the same places at that point.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to Beaubourg with us tomorrow morning?” Kagami asked Marinette as she opened the door for her. “Really, I know it makes you uneasy but mum doesn’t mind paying for you!”

“I really wanna sleep, to be honest. I’m babysitting the little monster tonight.” Marinette made face. “And then I’m on a late night patrol with our feline friend, so I’d rather stay in bed a little longer this Sunday.”
“I understand,” Kagami said. “See you on Monday then?”

“See you on Monday,” Marinette smiled. “Or any time before that if you want to stop by my house!”

Kagami kissed her goodbye — Marinette loved it when she put her hand on her cheek like that— before closing the door behind her. Itsuko Tsurugi nodded at her, but a slight crinkle of her eyes betrayed her otherwise austere expression, the one she always adopted when she was around the people she taught. Marinette decided she could take her time to go home, today. Perhaps she’d meet friends on her way, if so, she’d stop to talk to them for a little while. Perhaps she’d find something very inspiring and she’d put it in her notebook she had labelled, very originally, “ideas”. Or perhaps none of these things would happen, but she’d enjoy this April day nevertheless.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

It's just nice to have all these characters live their lives without life-threatening events or major competitions, sometimes! You know, almost living regular lives. Almost.

If you're confused about all these Première S things, I've got you covered!

And in general, there's my Tumblr if you're curious about the other things I write, if you want to be informed about my deteriorating mental health or if you want to ask me stuff!

Thank you for sticking with me for this long, thank you for the kudos and the comments! I'll probably speed up the update schedule once I'm 100% sure I'm done with this fic, but in the meantime…

À lundi!
How she had missed this, the sensation of sinking in the bathtub with the soapy water up to her shoulders, the knowledge that there was no one to ask anything of her for a little while, the warmth that helped her muscles unknot. She could have stayed there for hours, listening to the radio — France Musique as always— and doing absolutely nothing now that she had washed herself. She let out a satisfied sigh. Sometimes, life could be genuinely good to her, and she had these moments to remind her of that. Truly, few things managed to make relax Kagami the way a hot bubble bath did.

Not that she had gone through events that could have made her nervous and tense, all she had done in the last twenty four hours could be summed up in three words: sleep, sleep and sleep. The most eventful thing that had happened to her? A vivid dream about Animal Crossing — she had played a lot during her flight back to Paris— and her father and an enormous insect with great wide purple wings, though it hadn’t felt particularly threatening in her dream, she blamed it all on her then jet-lagged brain. Truly, the last two days had been notably uneventful. She had been happy to reunite with her mum, with Longg — the Dragon pendant had stayed in Paris — and with Marinette, otherwise, nothing spectacular.

The previous days that had lead to that return had been more interesting. She had left on Monday afternoon, Father had bought her plane ticket. Somehow, she had ended up on the same flight as Gabriel Agreste. He had travelled without his assistant, which was odd enough. Even more suspicious, she had been given a seat next to the man himself. What he was doing in Tokyo in May, while no major fashion events was taking place, she had no idea, but she wasn’t here to judge what he was doing with his money. Even more suspicious still, he had been oddly polite and almost nice to her, as though he hadn’t filled the Tsurugis’ letterbox with his unwanted missives and invitations to various galas and other events. Somehow, she had the feeling he had been the one to book the flight for her; she had no substantial evidence to sustain that claim, however.

Father had sent a chauffeur to pick her up, and to her surprise, he was there to greet her. The flat was clean, even her room, he had bought new plants and had worked out a system to water them automatically. What had made him care so much and so suddenly, she didn’t know, but it had been a nice touch, a lot nicer than the butterfly cocoons in the terrariums he had put in the living room — a side project of his for a certain Mr A, he had said. Father had been kind to her, he had cooked for her, he had invited Aiko and Taneda over for dinner, he had even taken a day off to watch her competition — her grandparents hadn’t shown up though they — her grandmother, probably— had been kind enough to send her their words of encouragement, wishing her the best for this national championship.

Despite her jet-lag, despite the fact that she had worn a lamé and used a sabre that weren’t hers, she had won. It had been just as difficult as she and mum had predicted it would be, the championship.
Which was to say, fairly easy compared with the Challenge International de Paris. Kagami’s opponents had been… Fine. Not too bad. Definitely not good enough for her to have felt threatened once during the entire competition, but fine, around Louise’s level for the most of them. M. Nakajima had almost looked unhappy, while the other judges and referees had found her performance outstanding and encouraged her to continue training hard in Paris, at least for the time being.

She had hopped back on a plane the next morning, Marinette and mum had been there to pick her up at the Charles de Gaulle airport a good eighteen hours later. She had managed to stay awake for a little while, just the time to chat with mum and to kiss Marinette. She had fallen asleep the moment she had put herself to bed. Kagami had only woken up a couple of times, to eat, to go to the bathroom and to take a shower. She hadn’t stayed up for long. Now, she felt well-rested, perhaps a little hungry but she had readjusted to the timezone. She wished she hadn’t wasted so much time sleeping, but she knew it had been necessary.

Soon, she would need to get up and get ready for the evening, but she still had some time to laze around.

One of the perks that came with being an interpreter for important events was that Itsuko Tsurugi was often rewarded for her services, as a supplement to her salary. Sometimes she got flowers, a bottle of expensive wine, a copy of a book she had translated with a signature from its author, among other things. And so, she had been given two tickets for the premiere of Puccini’s Tosca at the Palais Garnier. Kagami was quite the classical music enthusiast, and so was she, they had gone to many concerts together. Instead of going with her daughter, however, Itsuko Tsurugi had had a different idea.

Of all the places Kagami could have taken Marinette on a date, “an opera house” was at the very bottom of her list. Not that her girlfriend wasn’t interested in classical music. Kagami had been happy to find out that among the music she listened to when she worked, Verdi had found its place next to Glass. But actually going to the opera with her had seemed unlikely, it was still a little expensive for them, and unlike her, Marinette’s experience of live music was associated with going to rock concerts — she had promised she’d take Kagami to one of these— where there was no strict etiquette outside of being nice to one another and enjoying the good time and being careful in the mosh pit.

Going to the opera with her girlfriend, for no less than a première, was more than Kagami could have ever dreamt of. The music would be great, without a doubt, she knew it quite well and Marinette certainly knew some of its arias too, both the orchestra and the singers, the costumes and the scenography should be breathtaking. It would be a society event, too. That meant she’d need to wear some of her fanciest clothes, that meant being surrounded by important figures from the
world of classical music, the kind of people she’d listen to on France Musique and amateurs of the arts in general. And Marinette would be there to share this unique experience with her.

But it could wait. Of course, there was no such thing as being fashionably late to that kind of event, and at some point, inevitably, getting out of the bathtub would be necessary, the water would turn lukewarm and then cold. It wouldn’t be the case for another fifteen, twenty minutes, however. Kagami sighed once again and let herself sink a little more, tranquil and satisfied. She almost fell asleep again, and only then did she decide that this had been enough. She put on her bathrobe — after all these months, the fabric still felt like hugging a warm cloud— dried her hair, combed it a little and tiptoed to her room.

She refrained from collapsing on her bed once more. At this point, this would have been laziness. She was awake, perhaps not a hundred percent awake, but still, and besides, she would have hated herself for going back to sleep when there was so much to do. She stole a glance at her phone. One hour and a half to get ready, which wasn’t limited to clipping her nails and shining her loafers and her high heels, though she had already done these two things. The most difficult part wouldn’t be her makeup either, she hadn’t been long to choose what she wanted, though she’d make some adjustments depending on the trickiest part.

And there it was, the other reason why she couldn’t have fallen face-first on her bed. The clothes she had put there. She had to decide between the suit and the dress. Kagami liked to think she rarely had a hard time making up her mind about most things. Sure, she needed to think for a little while, when it came to making important decisions, but it seldom took her more than a few minutes, unless they would have major life-changing consequences. Making a choice for something as trivial as “what to wear to go to the opera” was proving quite difficult here. Kagami liked the way she looked in both the dress and the suit, they were perfect fits. Perhaps it wasn’t all that trivial.

Kagami decided to water her plants — that small eucalyptus plant Marinette had gifted her was growing well!— after which she went to the kitchen to eat a little something — there would be a buffet during the entr’actes, she knew that, but she didn’t want to be distracted by her hunger during the first act of the opera. She couldn’t give her mum a call and ask to choose for her, she was in the middle of a fencing class with some of her best students. She couldn’t ask Marinette, otherwise it’d ruin the surprise. Perhaps she could let something else decide in her place. What was the weather like tonight? She checked her phone. Perhaps wearing a dress that left part of her back exposed was not a good idea.

She went back to her room once she had finished her toast and glanced at the suit. It was time to get ready for the evening. She reluctantly took off the bathrobe, and got dressed, after which she coiffed her hair and did her make-up, emphasising her cheekbones. She made sure that everything was just like she had intended it to be, nothing short of perfect. She put on the Dragon pendant last before glancing at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She was surprised with how good she looked. The suit had been made for her, after all, and it gave her an air of elegance and refinement, but still, she hadn’t expected it to work this well.
They were supposed to meet in front of the Palais Garnier, at exactly five past seven, twenty minutes before the beginning of the opera, and Kagami was beginning to think she should have chosen somewhere less crowded, because everyone had had the same idea as her. And she was a little early, which left her with nothing to do but to wait for Marinette. Not that it was uncomfortable to stand in the middle of that crowd of well-dressed people, though the self-important tone of some of the voices she heard made it hard for her not to roll her eyes. But these kinds of conversations didn’t feel out of place in front of a building as self-important-looking as the Palais Garnier.

She had never been inside, but she knew it would be even more spectacular and ostentatious than the facade in all its Napoleon Trois style glory, with its abundance of statues, its lavish chandeliers and decorating, the spectacular staircase mum had told her so much about, with a mixture of admiration and derision. Kagami couldn’t wait to see it for herself. She checked her phone to see what time it was— no watch at the opera, or so she had read somewhere, though it was probably an outdated rule at this point— and saw that she had a new message from her girlfriend.

From: Mari

To: Me

I can’t spot you in that crowd :p
So I’m waiting for you inside ;)

The message then consisted of a good dozen of completely unrelated emojis. Kagami shook her head in amusement. Her girlfriend always had that way to punctuate her texts with the weirdest things. She got inside the building and started looking for Marinette. There were too many things going on at the same time, too many conversations and people, the statues of some old composers, with their names written on the socles, Lulli, Rameau and two others she couldn’t see. She had the feeling she was being spied on by a certain someone. She turned her head slightly to the left and there she was.

Marinette Dupain Cheng was the most beautiful girl in the world, that made no doubt, and Kagami
felt herself melt a little as she watched her girlfriend walk to join her. She was alluring in her black dress — she had made it herself, obviously, it was so very her — and effortlessly classy too with her chignon and her red, red lips, and that smile… She was lovely and she knew it well. Kagami decided that there was no better time and place to kiss her than here and now, and it was exactly what she did.

“G-good evening,” Marinette said dazedly after she took a step back.

“Good evening,” Kagami repeated, amused. She hadn’t expected her girlfriend to blush, and this only made her smile more

“So, err… Should we… Find our seats now?” Marinette asked awkwardly.

“We can do that,” Kagami offered. It was unusual, seeing her at loss for words. “Is everything alright?”

“You’re beautiful,” Marinette whispered. “You’re always beautiful and I’ve seen you wear the suit already but I…”

It was Kagami’s turn to blush, and she whispered, “you are beautiful, too,” before taking her hand in hers.

They went to the rotonde des abonnés, a circular room with an intricate mosaic floor, a colonnade and a small bustling crowd which formed a line facing the door that would take them all to the next room. Kagami and Marinette waited and chatted for a little while. Kagami had brought her Polaroid camera with her, and took a few pictures of her girlfriend. A receptionist checked their tickets before allowing them to proceed to the next room. They couldn’t stay to look at the Bassin de la Pythie much longer, the crowd was pushing them forward, or at least the weight of its impatience did. They’d admire the absurdly ornate arcs with their sculpted leaves, another day. They climbed up a flight of stairs and Marinette let out a small “oh.”

The two girls had seen dozens of pictures of it, they had seen it in films, they had read about it in books, including that Gaston Leroux novel they had both absolutely hated. And still, they had to admit that the Grand Escalier was an impressive sight. It had been built to be memorable and imposing, and was almost excessive in its ornaments, a bizarre blend of baroque and classical styles that unexplainably didn’t clash. It wasn’t a complete change of atmosphere per say, but the multicoloured marbles, the double staircase, the high, painted ceiling and the abundant statuary, the candelabras, it was all almost overwhelming.
Not that they could stay there, completely still, and admire the staircase for too long, that would have meant blocking the way for the other people and who knew what they could have done to them, the crowd of well-dressed old people and music enthusiast. Probably glare at them until they turned into puddles of shame and self-repentance. Kagami had to drag Marinette by the hand so that it wouldn’t happen, but quite honestly, she couldn’t blame her, she would have been tempted to do the same had she been in her shoes. They’d visit the Palais Garnier another day, she decided.

The Avant Foyer and the Grand Foyer, with their gilded ceiling ornamentations, their fluting and their paintings, were only a foretaste of what waited for them when they entered the auditorium. The first thing that jumped to Kagami’s eyes was the massive chandelier, the painted ceiling, Chagall’s work, beautiful, and it was her turn to ooh, which made Marinette laugh. Just mole the Grand Espalier, it was excessive in its ornamentation, the red velvet of the great curtain masking the scene and the seats and the golden ornaments, the stucco and the marble, forming an ensemble that was opulent and a blend of all too many styles, yet somehow it wasn’t glaring at all. Kagami and Marinette found their seats — next to each other— fairly easily, on the the first floor loges, facing the stage. It was perfect, nothing, no one would block their view, no old person with a cough would disturb them either, they wouldn’t even need their opera glasses — Kagami had brought two pairs just in case.

“Thank you for inviting me here,” Marinette whispered. She looked as though Christmas had come early this year.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Kagami said softly. “It hasn’t started yet.”

As if on cue, a spokesperson came on stage to introduce the opera — not that it was needed, most if not all knew the story already, it was quite a famous opera indeed— and asked for the audience to turn their mobile phones down, to not take pictures of the performance so that the singers wouldn’t be disturbed by the eventual flashes, before wishing them a pleasant evening. The sound of the orchestra tuning up filled the auditorium as the light dimmed, and Kagami couldn’t help the smile that formed on her lips. It was perhaps what she enjoyed most about the minute or two before the beginning of each concert. And Marinette seemed to share her appreciation.

The audience grew quiet, it was time for the curtain-up. Marinette put her hand on Kagami’s knee and gave it a small squeeze. And the spectacle began, music and dance — it would be a modern adaptation, it seemed, which only piqued Kagami’s interest even more. This was nothing like what she had imagined, and she had yet to decide whether it was a good thing or not. It didn’t take long for her to make up her mind however. It was good, very good, even. Kagami still needed to read the captions to truly understand what was sung —the libretto may have been in Italian but the pronunciation made some sentences hard for her to grasp, while Marinette simply couldn’t understand the language at all— but it did not distract them from what was happening on stage.
“… le mie braccia...

L’uno al capestro,

l’altra fra le mie braccia...

_Tosca, mi fai dimenticare Iddio!_”

Before they knew it, it was already the end of the first act. And it had felt like mere seconds. The entr’acte happened all too soon to Kagami’s liking and it took her a little while to readjust to everything around her. When she finally did, she couldn’t help the bright smile that stretch her lips. It was even better than she had hoped it would be, the singers — and especially the soprano who played the eponymous character — were incredible performers and actors, the transition from one decor to the next one was clever, the entire scenography, in fact, was very astute. There hadn’t been a minute during which she had been bored, but her enthusiasm was nothing compared to Marinette’s enthusiasm.

The plot had been unexpectedly gripping, this far, the conflict between Scarpia and Cavaradossi after the flight of the political prisoner Angelotti, the chief of police’s machinations… For an opera a century old, it felt surprisingly novel, or perhaps it was the direction, by one Barbara Bonynge, that was excellent. Sure, some liberties had been taken regarding the historical accuracy of it all, in the original libretto and even more so in this production, but it didn’t matter. People started exiting the auditorium, some to breathe some fresh air, some other to eat. Kagami had the latter in mind.

Just like mum had told her, there was indeed a buffet, and their tickets gave them free access to it. Marinette excused herself for a moment while Kagami browsed through the amuse-bouches and the drinks, hoping she’d find something her girlfriend would like. When Marinette came back, Kagami gave her a tapenade toast which she all but inhaled. Of course, everything was delicious, and elaborate for the most part. They didn’t try to mingle with the rest of the crowd, at least for now. Not that they felt out like they didn’t belong in the ridiculously fancy salon, they were dressed to blend in perfectly with this decor, but none of the faces they saw were familiar, or in the case of Mayor Bourgeois, familiar faces they actually wanted to see. Perhaps during the second entr’acte?

They were back in the auditorium and the opera resumed, and Tosca — the soprano was a great singer and a brilliant actress— finally saw through Scarpia’s lies, but not after betraying her lover Cavaradossi. Kagami was completely enthralled and for some time, she didn’t record that Marinette had absentmindedly put her hand on her thigh. When she did notice, she turned the same colour as her seat and she was glad her girlfriend couldn’t see it in the dark. Scarpia, she found — she tried to focus on the opera again— was a vile, hatable villain, and the singer seemed to have a lot of fun with his character.
And the music… Kagami had always been an enthusiast for baroque music, perhaps more so than for most other movements…. And while it wouldn’t change, she was far from disappointed, in fact she found that she enjoyed this opera a lot, perhaps as much as Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* which had been her favourite ever since she had seen in Frankfurt a few years back. Maybe it was because Marinette was here to share the experience with her…

“I honestly hadn’t considered the possibility that operas could be something I’d enjoy, as a performance, that is,” Marinette confessed. “I had mostly come to be with you…”

“That’s sweet,” Kagami said. A few months back, she would have rather died than use the word. “That’s really sweet. And I’m happy I’ve made you discover something new!”

“Next year, we should get a subscription together!” Marinette suggested, and Kagami could only agree with her. It would be a very busy year, absurdly busy, even if they kept making plans like that and stuck to them, but it was nice to think of it too.

The auditorium dimmed again and now was time for the third and final act. It was sentimental and full of suspense, and even though she knew what was about to happen, Kagami’s blood turned to ice when Cavaradossi was shot, and the bitter irony of Tosca’s delusions was just as difficult to stomach. The ending was a bit too much, way too dramatic, and the music swelled. Yes, it was a little excessive perhaps, but that was part of the opera’s charm. Puccini would never be her favourite composer, not by far, but it had been an enjoyable moment. And the other spectators shared her mind.

When the singers went back to bow to the audience, they were met with a standing ovation, and Marinette was among those who said “bravo”. Kagami’s hands started to hurt from all that clapping, but she didn’t stop, on the contrary, she clapped even harder when Barbara Bonynge went on stage to shake hands with the conductor and the singers. They all took no less than seven curtain calls before the lights fully turned back on and people started exiting the auditorium. It had been a wonderful performance, the public was unanimous on that. Marinette hummed the final aria as they walked out of the opera.

“We’re doing that again,” she stated. It was not even a question. Kagami kissed her at that, on an impulse, and Marinette was happy to return the kiss. “What do we do now?” she asked, slightly out of breath.

“How about we go sightseeing?” Kagami whispered. “Not for too long, but…”
The Crimson Empress looked over her shoulder. Ladybug was still following her, she hadn’t lost her, which was for the best. Had she decided to jump from rooftop to rooftop like her, she would have been the one lagging behind, but when she was soaring though the air, she was unmatched in speed. From the Palais Garnier, they went to the Place de la Concorde without touching the ground once. The Crimson Empress had a precise idea of what she wanted to do, but she had to see if her Lady would agree on that. They were facing the Seine now, its surface shimmering with the lights from the lampposts. Paris at night was magical, still bustling with life and beautiful.

“Put your arms around my neck, please?” the Crimson Empress simply asked.

“Are you about to do what I think you’re about to do?” Ladybug raised an eyebrow.

“I might be,” the Empress didn’t conceal the amusement in her voice.

“I trust you,” Ladybug said serenely.

Anyone walking along the banks of the Seine, or enjoying a stroll on the Pont de la Concorde, would have seen quite the unusual sight had they looked at the water. The Crimson Empress was running on water, as she would have done on any other kind of surface, leaving small ripples as she carried Ladybug in her arms, bridal style. They followed the river, until the silhouette of the Eiffel Tower was right in front of them, only a few dozens of meters away. The Crimson Empress crouched, and leapt, carried by a jet of water. Ladybug’s yo-yo — or was it yo-yos now? She had managed to split it into two smaller ones— they were terrific grappling hooks, though the strings might have been shorter than the original model. They landed right on top of the tower and stopped there for a little while, only looking at the city stretching beneath them. It was… Beautiful, the Crimson Empress had no other words for that.

“Come here often?” Ladybug said jokingly as she sat next to her parter.

“Believe it or not, I’ve never climbed up there as my civilian self,” the Empress laughed. “And I don’t think we’ve come here together in times of peace before.”

“What do you think?”
“It’s… I like it here, with you.”

The enjoyed the view silently for a little while, Ladybug resting her head on the Crimson Empress’s shoulder, until…

“When I told you that spotting things was easier here… The troquet d’Ange is right here,” Ladybug got up and pointed at the minuscule building. “Your flat… The lycée Carnot…”

“Is that your house right there?” the Crimson Empress squinted her eyes.

“You’re good at this!” Ladybug clapped her hands.

“And the Opera is… Oh this can’t be good.”

A bright red light flashed from the Palais Garnier, followed by a loud thrill of a great organ that carried all the way to the Eiffel Tower. That looked and sounded nothing like a spectacular party and everything like one of Hawk Moth’s nefarious plans, or perhaps it was Mayura this time. Perhaps they’d have a phantom to hunt down? Ladybug and the Crimson Empress exchanged a glance. Whatever, whoever it was, Paris could always count on its heroes to take it down and protect its residents. As they ran towards the source of the scarlet radiance, they were joined by Chat Noir, Tiger Eye, Viperion and Queen Bee who flew — when had she grown these wings? This was a thing the Crimson Empress had missed— next to them. Whatever it was that had disturbed the city’s tranquility, it wouldn’t stand a chance against them.

“Hey, big lug!” Chat Noir yelled when the akuma came into view. “Over here!”

But there was no reaction from the giant whose body seemed fused with the Palais Garnier’s great pipe organ.

“I don’t think Hawk Moth’s actually there,” he yelled over the tumult. “There’s no dramatic speech, nothing… And he’s not targeting us… Think he infused a butterfly and de-transformed?”

“Nice deduction, Chaton,” Ladybug said appraisingly.
“So that’s why Wednesday’s amok was so weird,” Tiger Eye raised her eyebrow. “Infuse your thingy, de-transform and it’ll stick around for a little while, and you don’t have to deal with it yourself? Seems handy!”

Truly, Master Fu could have told them that, having to find out something so crucial by themselves was annoying to say the least. He had promised he would give them an explanation about what the Core stones were, he had talked about them a lot these days without actually teaching them anything about them, he had promised to tell them what had happened to Trixx and while this was nice and good, the kind of information that would come in handy in a regular fight against an akuma or an amok, it was not… Well, it didn’t matter, they’d defeat this enemy and ask the old man more questions later.

Kagami was a few minutes late that evening, and she blamed it on the métro. Mum was still up, worried about the akuma incident at the opera. She was relieved to learn that her daughter had already left what had become, if only for a moment, a battlefield. By the time things had started to get ugly, she had already reached the métro station, and so had Marinette. Ladybug and the other heroes had dealt with the akuma in the blink of an eye, apparently, there was footage of their flawless battle formation, Ladybug fighting upside down, walking on the ceiling as they had disposed of the foe. But it was not what they talked about. Rather, Kagami gushed about Giulio Cesare, and the fact that her girlfriend had enjoyed it as much as she had.

She went to bed fairly quickly after that, took off the Dragon pendant for the night and fell asleep even faster than that.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

So many things in this chapter!
Japan! Teppei Tsurugi trying to be a decent father? Is that even possible? Everything Palais Garnier related is true! It also has terrible acoustics and mostly you can't see much, or maybe that's because I'm poor and can't afford the good seats. These girls love carrying each other bridal style, don't they? Kagami and Marinette don't pay nearly enough attention to Gabriel Agreste, do they? Let's hope nothing bad happens in the future!

And… That's about it for this chapter! My Tumblr [click click] is always open, if you've got questions or whatnot, if you want to see previews, or just read my thoughts on various things!

À lundi! La fin de cette histoire approche à grands pas, j'espère qu'elle vous plaira !
There it was again, the feeling that she might have done something wrong, that she may have overlooked something important, something crucial and that it would be a complete disaster. Had she done enough? It felt as though she had done enough but she couldn’t be sure. There was still time, time to find her, to ask her not to go, to wait one more year. She had failed her, she hadn’t prepared her enough and it was all her fault. No, it was alright, she had done her best and it would be enough, and besides, she should have put more faith in Marinette and her hard work. Yes, nothing to be anxious about. But the doubt remained deeply ingrained in her mind, she couldn’t extirpate it this easily on her own.

“You’re apprehensive about this afternoon,” Marjane stated as though it was an indisputable fact.

And she was right, of course, she always was when it came to reading Kagami’s mood. Which always amazed the girl in question; though she said nothing to confirm or contradict Marjane. What had given it away, this time? She hadn’t sighed, she had remained perfectly composed like she always was. Or perhaps she was too composed, her face too neutral for someone sitting in her friend’s room and skimming through the next play the aspiring actress might perform in a month or two — though Kagami had been reading the same sentence over and over again and yet she had already forgotten what it said.

Marjane had cleaned her room a little, so that the two of them could pace up and down without accidentally knocking over the precarious piles of books that could usually be found near her bed and around her desk — she was reading all the authors from the list of recommended authors for the Première L students, and Kagami knew some of the books, judging from their cracked spines, probably belonged to her older brother Ihsan, the hypokhâgne student — though they hadn’t done a lot of that so far. Instead, they had sat on the black-and-white carpet and read silently to themselves.

Or, in Kagami’s case, pretend to read. It wasn’t that the play was uninteresting, quite the opposite in fact, she had heard about Koltes before, but it wasn’t an author they’d study in class, and if she had to be honest with herself, plays weren’t her favourite thing to read. Still, she really wanted to focus on this text, it was important for her friend, and the first few sentences she had read before her mind had started drifting towards other things unrelated to the play, these first sentences had been intriguing, well-written and definitely a text that could be interesting to perform on stage.

There was no use doing as though she was actually reading the text, and so Kagami put her sheet down. “I know I shouldn’t…” she said.
“But you’re still apprehensive because your fencing instructor makes the weirdest decisions sometimes, Adrien told me once,” Marjane finished.

That was not something Kagami could argue with, she’d have looked ridiculous doing so. Two of M. D’Argencourt’s fencing classes had taken place during public holidays, and he had decided to speed things up as a way to catch up with the time they’d lost. Which had worked better than he and his students had expected. He had ended up covering everything he still wished to teach each group, which left him with two weeks during which he had planned absolutely nothing new. He had tried to improvise a couple of lessons, the experience hadn’t been very conclusive, and so, he had made, indeed, a weird decision. The so-called entrance test for the newcomers who wished to be part of the D’Argencourt fencing academy would take place this Saturday, and not the week after that as it had been originally announced.

“He wouldn’t tell me the kind of test he’d have all the candidates pass,” Kagami muttered. “Which is fair I suppose, but it annoys me to no end. And I wanted to teach Marinette an extra thing or two to be sure she’d get in and now I’ve got no time for that.”

Marjane didn’t answer that, instead, she hummed to herself, a noncommittal sound, the kind that meant “you can continue talking if you want and I won’t judge you for that but if you want to keep quiet, it’s fine too”. In that moment, Kagami thought Marjane would have made the perfect psychologist, had she not decided to become an archeologist instead. She really fit the picture perfectly with her reading glasses and her absent smile. The two girls went back to reading Koltes, not very successfully, but they tried nevertheless, for a good ten minutes or so. Kagami found herself going over the same sentence, over and over again, and it seemed that her friend was in the same situation as her.

“Nope, can’t focus,” Marjane finally said. She got up and stretched. “Do you want to do something else instead? There’s that board game I’ve recently bought and I thought we could look it up. Or we can do something else, you choose.”

“Is that board game the legendary Dungeons and More Dungeons I’ve heard so much about?” Kagami quirked her eyebrow.

“The one and only, fifth edition” Marjane confirmed. “It’s in the living room if you want.”

“I…” Kagami hesitated. Would it be alright for her to have fun when something so important was about to take place?

“I’m sure Marinette isn’t worried about this afternoon, and I don’t think she’d want you to worry in
her place,” Marjane said. Yes. The perfect psychologist.

“Does it ever get annoying to be always right about people?” Kagami asked grumpily.

“Not all people, but I think I’ve figure out how you work,” Marjane hummed for good measure before taking off her reading glasses and putting them back inside their wooden case. “Now, about Dungeons and More Dungeons, I’ve only played the first edition when I was little and I couldn’t understand a single thing because Ihsan dragged me into it when we were at mum’s last week. I’m still terrible at maths, but I think I get how it works now. Anyway…”

Kagami tried to follow her friend’s story, which she told with conviction and an abundance of details that would certainly certainly make her a Dungeon Master. And it did the trick, it managed to drive her mind away from her nervousness about what would take place in the next few hours, they discussed the character sheets and all the inner working of a campaign — or rather Kagami asked questions from time to time and Marjane referred to one of the many manuals that came with the game box. Yes, she didn’t need to worry about her girlfriend, she was probably more relaxed about this than she herself had been almost a year ago. And M. D’Argencourt had said he’d change things a little, so things wouldn’t get out of hand like they had back then. For Marinette, it would only mean she’d enter a fencing club, it wouldn’t be a major life-defining event for her.

It was a busy morning at the Dupain-Cheng bakery, and Marinette had volunteered to help her parents the moment she was dressed. The surge in customer numbers was a recent development. Tom and Sabine had reluctantly accepted to be featured in the eight-o’clock news one evening, and it had worked was some kind of advertising for them. Which had its good side, of course, and though it wouldn’t last for long, it was still some extra money in the till, and they’d certainly use it to go on a holiday — at least Tom and Sabine, unless the Hawk Moth and Mayura situation was miraculously solved, Marinette would have to stay — or to pay off the house loan a little quicker, something like that. These were for the good side.

But it also meant a constant and gruelling overtaxing, for Tom and Sabine, it meant not showing the customers how tired they were — not miserable or demoralised, far from it, but they seldom wanted to talk over dinner and often went to bed straight away — and for Marinette, it was synonymous with “no sleeping in on Saturday morning”. Which was perfectly manageable, and not the end of the world by any means, she had rescheduled her night patrols so that she could go to bed a little earlier on Fridays, no one had minded and she had woken up in a good mood.

She stole a glance at her phone. Still a good thirty minutes to go, after which she’d have to go upstairs to fix lunch, change her clothes — the apron she had designed could only stop that much floor from getting on her trousers— and get ready for this exam, the key to her admission to the
D’Argencourt fencing academy. Not that she worried about it, Kagami had taught her everything she needed to know, and the chances of someone as proficient as her girlfriend showing up were fairly low, they’d have been noticed by the French Federation of Fencing already, for the great majority of them. Marinette was fairly confident about the outcome of this afternoon, and she knew she had every right to be.

For now, she’d focus on helping her parents instead of daydreaming, and hand her mum the loaf of rye bread she had asked for. Repetitive motions, less relaxing than cooking, less predictable too with the new clients and their various orders. That was a good test for her nerves, as was her need to calculate each of her movements so that she wouldn’t bump into either of the bakers. If she kept on trying to make everything an extended training of some sorts, what would this be? Crowd-pleasing 101? She’d pass that class fairly easily, and it doubled as a great anger management class too. At this point, Marinette was almost sure she qualified as akuma-proof. Only five minutes left and she could leave the bustling bakery and, if only for a few hours, get away from the din.

At last she was free. Marinette wasn’t in a very imaginative mood when it came to lunch, at least not when she was only cooking for herself. She simply settled for an omelette with steamed vegetables on the side — she’d try cooking something a little more elaborate for her parents — and a large cup of coffee with a slice of cherry pie to fight off the fatigue from the last hours. With that out of the way, Marinette brushed her teeth, changed clothes, did the breathing exercises Master Fu had taught her. She felt a little lighter when she went downstairs, a backpack on her shoulders and a tray with lunch for Sabine and Tom in her arms.

She promised her parents she’d phone them as soon as it was over — “you can go out to celebrate your victory with your friends, we’ve taken a lot of your time today already,” they said — and calmly walked to where the entrance test would take place. It would feel weird to return to the collège Françoise Dupont, she hadn’t returned there in almost a year now, at least as her civilian self, and as Ladybug, she hadn’t had the time to be nostalgic. Truly, a year wasn’t a lot, from Tikki’s point of view, it must have been a mere blink of an eye, but to Marinette, it felt like a distant past.

There it was, the familiar sight. Nothing had changed there, or so little that she couldn’t notice. It hadn’t fallen apart, nothing new had been built there, she’d probably be able to find room 3A if she needed to, she still knew where the toilets and the locker room were and it was unlikely they had changed places in her absence. Perhaps they had painted the entrance door a different shade of brown? Other than that, it was still the exact same building, and yet felt different, now, almost nostalgic. She could say “back when I was in collège” now. It was a little smaller than she remembered.

A few people had gathered around the school, most of them younger than her, probably students from the collège, one or two around her age, none of them from the lycée Carnot, as far as she knew. Kagami had told her M. D’Argencourt expected around twenty, thirty new candidates,
among which five would be chosen. Had he thought about the age difference between his potential new students? Then again, he wanted to train the very best, so perhaps that was his line of reasoning. No wonder it had such an elitist reputation, which had only grown over the years. Which clashed with his methods, from what she had seen of them.

Soon enough, they were thirty, waiting in front of the entrance. Marinette had a vague idea of who would get eliminated right away, a few Adrien enthusiasts on her left — they looked like perfect novices, with their running shoes, and she had to give it to them, and to her younger self, it took a great deal of courage and a complete lack of self-awareness to show up here, knowing next to nothing about fencing save for what they had probably looked up on Wikipedia the day before — and a very nervous kids who looked on the verge of fainting. Some others looked like more serious contenders, but before she could list them, the great door was opened at last.

Nothing had changed inside, still the same old entrance, still the same old courtyard. It had been arranged so that there were four slightly heightened pistes. A sign that stated the time-slots for each type of sword, sabre right now, foil at 4PM and épée at 6PM. There were a great many people wearing lamés waiting for them, Marinette suspected that they were evenly divided between foil fencers and sabre, and the dew that remained were épée fencers. That many people… It was meant to impress the newcomers, and it worked fairly well, it wouldn’t have felt out of place in one of Nino’s films — though his current project was on a much smaller scale than Starkross, and somewhat more grounded in the “real world”.

And here was Adrien, who looked happier than he had been a few weeks back — he’d come to terms with his breakup and had stayed friend with Marjane, Kagami had told her, that and he had managed to find an internship in a science lab — and Vincent and another sabre fencer Marinette didn’t know. They lead the small group to Mlle Bustier’s old classroom, where they found… A bunch of paper sheets? Were they going to pass a written exam? That was anticlimactic to say the least.

“Hello, and thank you all for coming today!” Vincent said. “There are many of you and as you know, the D’Argencourt fencing academy only recruits the very best and only three of you will join us by the end of this admission test. Yes, I know, it used to be only one, but there’s been a change” he spoke louder when the faint chatter got noises all of a sudden. “We thought that a small written exam, only a couple of questions, could help us have a clear idea of who may go to the next round, and who won’t have to stay here for long. I hope you’ve all taken something to write with, otherwise we can lend you some too.”

“No looking at your phone if you don’t know the answers, please,” Adrien smiled. “No matter how tempting it could be. You’ve got ten minutes!”

It was fairly easy, at least for Marinette. “Name each part of the sabre”, “name each part of the fencing gear” with the illustrations that came with it, things she had seen during her very first
lessons with Kagami. “Name this type of attack”, “name two sabre fencers who competed during
the Olympics (not counting Armand D’Argencourt)” and a few others. It only took Marinette five
minutes to answer it all. She was very confident with her work, and rightly so. It seemed that many
weren’t as sure of themselves as she was, some had given up on writing altogether. Whoever had
thought about this had been clever, it was a great way to find out who was serious about fencing.

“We’ll go through the correction together!” Adrien really enjoyed playing the role of a teacher.
“Be honest about it, we’ll immediately find out if you haven’t been truthful. Those with a score
below sixteen out of twenty good answers… You may try your chance again next year! Or you can
stay and watch the rest of this… Let’s call it a competition!”

A third of the candidates had to desist by the end of this first phase, but those who left weren’t
upset about that — Adrien had that way of making it painless, had Kagami been in charge, she
would have been intransigent, and Marinette was almost sure some would have cried— and those
who stayed, including the small Adrien fan club, seemed happy to be here. Now came the more
interesting part, the one they were all expecting. The twenty remaining contenders were given
fencing masks, lamés and sabres with rubber buttons on the tip of the blades. They’d be fencing
without the scoring box, it seemed, and against each other during a first round.

M. D’Argencourt and some other fencers would referee the bouts — five touches to win during the
first round, double in the second round— and Kagami was one of them, though she didn’t stop to
kiss Marinette, to greet her or to do anything that would give the other competitors the impression
that she had some inside help. They had discussed it beforehand, of course, but it didn’t make it
any less frustrating. The competitors were divided into two age groups, those below fifteen and
those fifteen and above. Half the fencers would be gone by the end of the first round, and during
the second, those who had won would have to face some of M. D’Argencourt’s students.

Marinette stretched and warmed up until her name was called, fairly early on, to her displeasure.
She was one of the first to go, and her opponent was one Julien Semelle, who didn’t look too
impressed when he saw her. In his defence, it was true that she didn’t have Kagami’s presence
when she came to shake his hand before the beginning of the bout, and Dupain-Cheng wasn’t
exactly a great name in the world of fencing, in fact he mouthed “the baker?” when he heard it.
Marinette couldn’t exactly blame him for that. They stepped to their en garde marks and waited for
the referee’s signal.

“En garde!” Louise said, and Marinette knew that her pose was exactly what it should have been.
A few months back, she would have felt self-conscious about going here. Now, however… Her
grip on her sword was perfect, neither too tight nor too lose. Her focus was on her opponent and her
opponent only, she tried to ignore the eyes on her, the voices, the people. All that mattered for now
was the piste.

“Êtes-vous prêts?”
She was ready enough for this.

“Allez!”

Julien’s feint was not very subtle, his advance not particularly well-timed, his lunge easily parried. And Marinette riposted. One touch, four more to go. The boy seemed to understand that he wasn’t up against a baker’s daughter who had somehow gotten the right answers on a test, but a fencer at least as competent as him, if not a lot more. Marinette was far from done with him, however. It was time to show what she had learned. Her lunge found its target with ease, and she scored a second touch. A third, when she blocked his cutting motion, beat his sword out of line and mirroring his earlier attack, successfully hitting the side of his lamé.

Two touches later, Julien shook Marinette’s hand again, looking at her with respect this time, instead of incredulity and a hint of disdain like he had not three minutes earlier. A shame she’d had to “prove her worth”, as he put it, to earn it in the first place. On the bright side of things, she had made quite an impression on everyone watching, it seemed, and that included M. D’Argencourt himself. Her bout had been the shortest of them all, she had scored all five touches in a row. And Kagami was trying hard to conceal the pride with which she looked at her.

The first phase was over, and only nine fencers remained, five aged fourteen or less, and four Marinette’s age or older. More people had arrived to watch them fence, among them Nino and Alya. The younger candidates, it seemed, respected the rules more closely than their older counterparts, and the bout between Hélène Deutroi and Olive Éttom had been a complete disaster, and M. D’Argencourt had declared the two of them unfit to continue. Not that they were angry when they left, if anything, seeing the master swordsman this disappointed in them had filled the two with shame. Which made things a little more complicated for Marinette. She’d have to eliminate one more competitor before finally going against one of M. D’Argencourt’s students.

Élise Grandier, whom Marinette learned was one of M. Boisse old students who had given up on fencing halfway through the year, would be her adversary for this bout. She’d need to score twice as many touches to win, and she was up against someone who didn’t underestimate her the way her previous opponent had. Victory would be hers all the same. Marinette shook the other girl’s hand, waited for the signal — outside of the piste, everything was blurry, blurry and muffled — and lunged at her opponent. She let her parry, but kept her blade close to him. Now was the moment when she resisted the temptation to do a backflip to dodge Élise’s attack.

Marinette pushed her opponent’s sword out of line, scored the first touch of the bout, and three
more after that, before the tip of Élise’s sabre hit her fencing mask. That girl was a capable fencer, more so than Julien, and scoring the touch had emboldened her. Still, she hadn’t had the chance to have a world champion teach her — and her only — how to fence. Marinette wouldn’t allow Élise to catch up with her score. She could be faster than her if she chose not to hold back. The next time she lunged at Élise, the redhead barely had the time to dodge or parry. This sort of attack would have costed Marinette a touch, had she been up against a more experienced fencer.

The bout didn’t continue for long, it was time for the one minute break. Marinette was clearly winning, seven touches against three for Élise. It was clear for everyone that she had already lost, and her performance suffered from that, no longer as promising as it had been earlier. Not that she got weaker all of a sudden, but her attacks weren’t as eye-catching as before, her footwork was no longer as precise. Her opponent fought on until the very end, almost desperately, and Marinette almost felt bad for her. Élise looked confused, and that confusion turned into something much sinister.

“Do you have any idea of what you’ve just done? What am I gonna do now?”

Marinette’s stomach dropped. The girl refused to shake her hand, threw her fencing gear away and stormed out of the collège Françoise Dupont. Marinette hated that she knew exactly what was about to happen, she could see it already, the carnage, the people running to safety, her old school being turned into a battlefield by Hawk Moth or Mayura.

And Kagami had seen it too, she ran after Élise, asking everyone — she looked at her girlfriend in particular — to stay here and to wait for her return before Marinette’s final bout. This wasn’t good, this wasn’t good at all. Marinette started planning all potential exits, she still remembered most of them. Perhaps she could go to the bathroom and transform there? It had worked back in Troisième, they wouldn’t be able to put the pieces together anyway. But Kagami had asked her not to move, not to follow her. And so Marinette, and everyone else, waited.

It was hard not to think that the worse had happened or was about to happen, that the girl had transformed into an angry, deformed version of herself, not fully herself but what Hawk Moth had turned her into. The silence was deafening, and M. D’Argencourt had to tell everyone about this story of his fencing academy and his career so that it wouldn’t feel so suffocating. It was a little blurry in Marinette head, and she blamed it on the anxiety that coursed through her veins at the moment. Nino and Alya hadn’t moved, Adrien had joined them to chat a little.

And nothing. No sudden loud noise, no explosion, no distant screams. But that didn’t mean anything. Perhaps the villain’s powers didn’t make any kind of noise. And M. D’Argencourt kept on talking, his voice a little tense, and all the students and competitors around him weren’t really listening to him. It hadn’t been five minutes yet it felt like an eternity to Marinette. Tikki was in her
bag, but surely, she’d come to her if her Ladybug said the words. First she’d need a diversion, or an excuse of some kind. She had to loosen her shoulders. It wouldn’t be suspicious if she warmed up in the middle of a miniature fencing competition, right? That was it, she couldn’t stand it, she couldn’t just wait like this, she had to go, needed to go.

But she wouldn’t have to. Kagami was back, with a relieved expression on her face. Marinette let out a small sigh and had to fight back the urge to hug her, to kiss her and to ask her what the hell she had just done. She did none of these things, and Kagami explained what had taken her so long instead. Calming the girl down had been the hardest part, there had been a lot of talking and breathing exercises, and it had taken some time to convince her to give Mme Legrain’s fencing school a chance, but it had worked out. Kagami never lied. Marinette would have to ask her for the full story, but it could wait for later. The competition resumed, the atmosphere was instantly less tense, Adrien was back from wherever he had been earlier.

Marinette was glad to find out that she wouldn’t have to face any of the fencers who had taken part in that competition at the Gymnase Elizabeth back in November. She wouldn’t have stood a chance against any of them anyway. Instead, her opponent would be Maxime Dadet, one of the infamous Éloi’s friends, while Éloi would be up against one red-haired Raphael Bruni, who had managed to get this far in this entrance competition. M. D’Argencourt himself was the one to referee both bouts, which didn’t intimidate Marinette, perhaps because of her adrenaline rush from earlier.

She had to give it to him, Maxime was good, much better than Élise and Julien, and though Kagami hadn’t regarded him as a worthy opponent, he was definitely harder to fence against than Marinette’s previous two adversaries. He scored the first touch, the second too — he just wouldn’t stay still— before Marinette managed to parry — quinte, definitely a quinte, she was sure— and riposte. She scored another touch, he prevented her from making it three in a row. He wasn’t simply good enough, he was as good as her, and he had faced a variety of opponents that Marinette had not, at least not as her civilian self.

Look at his wrist to anticipate his attacks. Now. Dodge, and thrust. She evened out the score. It didn’t phase him. He had no surprises, no secret attack, he hadn’t held back earlier. He kept on fencing the way he originally had. Soon, however, his “en garde” pose was not as precise as before, the aim of his lunges was slightly off. Which didn’t make it instantly easier for Marinette, she wasn’t her girlfriend, but it did give her a few more milliseconds to plan and fight back. And she did. She managed to keep up with him, and when the one minute pause finally came, they both were four touches away from victory.

Which made Kagami all the more tense. Marinette didn’t worry about it too much however. She had finally cracked the code, she had the key to winning this final bout. Had she been transformed, she’d have seen in clear, with polka dotted outlines. She’d use his small timing errors against him, and create openings instead of waiting for him to be kind enough to do so, like she had been taught. It was the end of the pause, and time for her to test her theory. She purposefully left her right side
exposed, and it was all that Maxime needed to lunge at her. Marinette sidestepped the attack.

There. The slight loss of momentum. She pressed her sabre against his, enough to have his side completely exposed, and immediately attacked. Maxime didn’t learn from this, he hadn’t understood how Marinette had managed to score against him, it seemed. She scored another touch — two more to go — and once again, before he could retaliate. It was too late for him. She could feel her fencing teacher’s eyes following her every move. She’d make the last touch as impressive as she could. She feinted, advanced, thrust her sabre, pushed Maxime’s blade out of line when he parried, and touch the boy’s shoulder.

“Welcome to the D’Argencourt fencing academy, mademoiselle,” M. D’Argencourt beamed when she took off her fencing helmet. He shook her hand enthusiastically. “You’ve proven yourself worthy to join us next September, or early than that if you wish! Congratulations!”

Kagami had been very proud of Marinette back when she had told her that some of her clothes had been chosen by Jeanette Manladrineaut herself, to become part of the brand’s collection, but it was nothing compared to the way she was looking at her now. The expression turned from near adoration to amusement as Kagami got closer to her, and Marinette wouldn’t have been able to tell why.

“Helmet hair, above your right ear, it’s kind of adorable,” Kagami laughed. And more seriously, she said, “you were good, you were really good…”

She kissed Marinette and her hands immediately nested in her hair.

The celebration was nothing pretentious, they went to a café, with Nino and Alya — as always, M. Agreste had sent his chauffeur and Mlle Sancoeur to pick Adrien up, the boy congratulated Marinette profusely before the car drove away — and Kagami paid for her girlfriend’s grenadine and lemonade, after which they hanged out at the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont, underneath the gingko trees. Adrien came to join them — “Nathalie” was sitting on a bench a few metres away from them, her dizzy spells again, she was surprised when Nino got up and offered her some of the tea from his thermos, but gladly accepted the cup.

It was a beautiful afternoon of May, and Marinette felt like she could do anything and succeed. They had avoided a battle against Hawk Moth thanks to Kagami, the weather was nice, Adrien’s jokes were so bad they were actually good, Nino’s choice of music was good, Alya always found a way to restart their conversation whenever it lulled, and her girlfriend’s lap was decidedly a great place to rest. Marinette hoped things could stay like that forever and she wanted to believe they would. When Mlle Sancoeur told Adrien that it was time to leave, she looked almost remorseful.
She asked Nino where he had found the tea, and Adrien surprised them all by giving the correct answer. How he knew Master Fu's massage parlour and how he could recognise the taste of that precise tea, Marinette had no idea, but she didn't think of it for too long. Instead, she decided to enjoy the rest of her day. Some clouds had already taken a rosy tinge when they left at last… Truly, it had been great.

“I think… It’s dumb so don’t laugh at me, but I think I’ve never been as happy as when I’m with you,” she told Kagami before she switched off the light on her night table, much later.

“I would not laugh at you for saying that, ever,” Kagami said, and even in the dark, Marinette was sure that her girlfriend was blushing. “You make me happier, too,” she added in a lower voice.

She couldn’t find sleep right away, and neither could Marinette, she knew it. The thought crossed her mind but she chased it away. No, now was not the right time to say these words. Or perhaps it was? There was nothing to be afraid of, and yet, that small voice in her head that repeated “what if?” was the scariest of all. But what if she wanted to say them anyway?

“I’m in love with you.” The words left Kagami’s lips before she could stop herself from speaking them. “You… You don’t have to say anything back. I just…”

Marinette shifted next to her; and she turned to face her. Even in the obscurity, Kagami could see the way she looked at her, the small, crooked smile on her lips, the brightness in her eyes. Her heart fluttered and she knew that she shouldn’t have feared a thing. Their fingers interlocked, the small kiss Marinette gave her felt like home.

“I know… I think I’ve know for a long time now… And I love you, too,” she whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

Well, that was sweet, wasn't it? I hope it'll wash away the sadness of Love Eater!

So, not too many things, but still.
What's an hypokhâgne? Can you eat it?
Well no, the hypokhâgne is the first year of *Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Écoles* which is, to oversimplify things, a glorified and highly selective elitist cram school (in Ehsan's case, he studies literature, philosophy, latin history, geography, and a foreign language or two). You need good marks at your baccalauréat (and during your lycée years) to get in, and at the end of your second year, if you aren't dead, you get to go through the intense stress that is the Concours, the competitive examination that allows a handful of people to become part of the École Normale Supérieure which is yet another elitist (and rubbish) institution (but it's complicated). Very, very few people actually go to Normale Sup, most come from Paris. Maybe I should make a Tumblr post about it.

The Buttes Chaumont is much more comfortable a place to hang out than the Champ de Mars (which is hell, all the time), even though it tends to be quite crowded, it's much bigger.

And I think that's it! As always, my Tumblr ([clickety clickety](https://clickety-clickety.com)) is open if you want to ask me things! If you're curious about the things I write, my thoughts about… Things, or if you just want to be updated on the story… But you know that already.

You take care and do something nice for someone who needs it, alright?

I'll see you next Monday!
“Take that! And that, and… ”

“Oh no you don’t! There’s no way I’m letting you win this time!”

“Funny how it sounds like what you’ve said last time, and the one before that, and we both know how that ended!”

“You’re going to wish you hadn’t said that. Just you wait… Oh, never mind then.”

The TV screen flashed red, and the words “Goraion Unit 01 is the winner”, written in a vaguely mechanical design, appeared accompanied with firework effects which, on closer inspection, looked more like missiles exploding, as the mecha did a victory dance. Marinette threw her arms in the air and vaguely danced along the music, though she didn’t get up from the couch like she had before, while Kagami tried to put on a face of disappointment and ultimately failed. Her girlfriend’s good mood was too contagious, and she wasn’t one to get easily upset over video games. Even though it was her fifth consecutive defeat in a row, even though she had yet to win even one game, it was still fun to play Ultimate Mecha Strike IV together.

Few things made it different from the previous Ultimate Mecha Strike, at least in Kagami’s eyes, but who was she to make such hasty judgements? She hadn’t played a single one of these games before, she decidedly was more of a RPG type of player. Marinette on the other hand, had played all the instalments of the franchise. She had been relieved to find that most combos hadn’t changed, though not all things were the same, according to her. Kagami had listen to her rave about all the little differences, and she guessed it was only fair for her to sit through it all, Marinette had had to sit through her one hour introduction to Dungeons and Dungeons before they had gone to Marjane’s for an entire day to play a short campaign.

Kagami had yet to master the art of complex button mashing, she was pretty terrible at this so far, or rather, or rather, her girlfriend was so good there was no way she could stand a chance against her, and she knew it. Looking up the combos online and doing them for real were two distinct things. And Marinette wasn’t going easy on her. Which was fine, there was such a thing as non-aggressive competitiveness, even in a game in which the main goal was to obliterate the opponent’s health bar. It wasn’t Kagami’s choice of robot that had her lose each and every time and she was well aware of it: even with her hair untied and getting in her face, her girlfriend could defeat her. At least she was a relatively fast learner and though she was nowhere near victory, it took more time for Marinette to win.
Ultimate Mecha Strike IV was also a great way to release pent-up energy, the way complaining about their respective internships couldn’t. Not that there was so much to complain about, Manladrineaut treated Marinette right, and though she worked more than during the school year, she was paid for it. And Kagami was happy to spend about twenty hours a week at a bookshop. The owners were rather friendly, though they were hellbent on keeping track of everything and following the same routine every day, especially when not absolutely necessary. What was the use of clearing and rearranging each and every shelf when no new books had arrived and when the clients hadn’t taken a single book off said shelves, Kagami had no idea, but it was very important to do so.

Mostly, though, working there had been for the best. It had allowed her to print her girlfriend’s birthday presents and to bind them. It had been quite the party, and most of Marinette’s friends had shown up, Nino, Alya, the Couffaine siblings, many former collège Françoise Dupont students, Karim, Marjane, and many more. Her grandmother had come, her parents had taken the day off. Kagami’s mum had been invited, M. Tamarre had unexpectedly come too — had Kagami wanted to be cynical, she would have said that it was to visit his new, underpaid golden goose. It had been a nice party. Marinette had loved all of her presents, from her new headphones to the sewing machine she had talked about for ages.

And she had almost teared up when Kagami had given her the poetry anthology and the photo album she had made for her. Finding all the right poems and printing them on her own, choosing the right pictures and having them developed or printed, binding it all together had been more time-consuming than expected, but it had been worth it, the owners of the bookshop had let her use the binding machine and their very own printer. And the anthology looked like a very real book, the kind you’d find in old libraries, with its leather back and just like for the photo album, the title written in golden letters on the cover. Yes, it had been nice, and…

“Hey, Kagami!” Marinette called.

“Uh?” the girl eloquently replied.

“Is everything alright? You’ve been staring at nothing for the last minute or so.” Marinette sounded concerned. About her. Which was both a comforting and uncomfortable feeling, even after all this time.

“Do you wanna continue UMS? We can play another game if you want,” Marinette said. “Or we can go to my room. Are your shoulders still stiff?”

“No no, everything is fine. I think I might just be able to defeat you this time, so bring it on, Dupain-Cheng,” Kagami smirked.

She lost, of course, but it was fun, and definitely a nice change of pace after what had kept them busy for hours this earlier morning. They hadn’t gone to work at all, as it had been the case for most of Paris’s inhabitants this Tuesday, but they hadn’t used it as an excuse to laze around, in fact in had been the opposite; the atmosphere wouldn’t have allowed for a great deal of lazing around and relaxation anyway. Playing Ultimate Mecha Strike IV was the guarantee that they’d have great fun with minimal effort, both intellectually and physically, though Kagami’s right thumb was starting to hurt a little from all that pressing mostly the right buttons with the proper timing. It was almost frustrating that her reaction time when she fenced didn’t translate all that well when playing video games.

She should have known, because though Marinette’s reflexes when fencing had gradually improved over the months Kagami had trained her, she was often — though less and less often— a few milliseconds too slow. They had continued their lessons together on Saturdays, and they’d probably add some extra another day from time to time. Now, if only Marinette could teach her how to be less terrible at Ultimate Mecha Strike IV the way she had taught her how to be good with a sabre…

Finally, after nine merciless matches, Kagami was victorious, and Marinette was too taken aback to actually dodge the rocket punch fired at her robot. The valiant Goraion Unit 01 was thrown out of the fighting zone, exploded and and the words “Belial Mark II is the winner” flashed on screen. She didn’t do a victory dance, but she did let out a relieved “at last!” and pumped her fist in the air which amused her girlfriend. She went to the kitchen to have a glass of water, took a biscuit — only one for now— from the batch Sabine had baked just for them before sitting down next to Marinette again — who would have unceremoniously let herself fall on the couch had she been in Kagami’s shoes.

It didn’t take long for Kagami to understand that her victory had been a case of beginner’s luck, and even after she looked up what combo would allow her to repeat her devastating attack, she wasn’t able to replicate it again. Marinette’s winning streak resumed, but Kagami’s fighting spirit didn’t falter one bit. She couldn’t tell for how long they’d been there, sitting on the couch, playing that silly fighting game and not doing much else, but judging by the look on Sabine Cheng’s face, the answer was somewhere along the lines of “too long”, though she didn’t put it that way.

“Kagami, Marinette, dears, I know that this morning’s akuma attack was very impressive for all of
us but it is over, isn’t it?” she said. “Our heroes saved us once again!”

Of course it was over, and they had been the ones to put an end to it, but Marinette couldn’t just say that, now, could she? Kagami put on her best “I’m politely listening” face. And she had to say, Mme Cheng was good at this, arguing that yes, being stuck in the métro because of the power cut that had affect most of the city, including the backup generators, had certainly been an upsetting experience, and that as such, making the most of all these modern technologies now that they were available again was good. But still, she argued, it was beautiful out there, and since they’d only go back to work the day after…

“What I want to say is that that Flashy fellow can’t hurt anyone anymore,” Mme Cheng continued. Kagami glanced at Marinette as if to say “yes, she got the name wrong, but don’t you correct her, that would contradict our official version of the story”, which worked.

“…a that it is nice outside,” Mme Cheng pleaded, “so perhaps you could enjoy a walk somewhere instead of staying in the living room. Your game won’t disappear all of a sudden, you can play it again some other day! I’ve hard that the weather will be terrible next Sunday, so perhaps you can play then?”

“I… Alright, this is fair,” Marinette said grumpily, after five lengthy seconds. “I’ll text some friends to see if we can do something together.”

“I will ask Nino and Alya,” Kagami added, getting up from the couch.

They had many things to talk about. Nino’s meeting with Master Fu was certainly over by now, and Alya had been the only one to go back to work, but — Kagami glanced at her watch— she should be out of that office in about ten minutes, unless they had her work overtime, but Alya wasn’t one to be intimidated by her superiors, and she would certainly refer to her internship agreement. She wasn’t sixteen yet, and as such she couldn’t be legally paid for her work, among other things. Yes, they’d see these two, perhaps go to a park again, the weather was nice enough for that.

“Perfect!” Mme Cheng beamed. “As always, you are welcome stay for dinner if you wish, Kagami, and your mother as well!”

Kagami had to decline the offer, there was plenty of work at home that kept Itsuko Tsurugi chained to her desk, and when it wasn’t translation work, she had to go to the university to teach
her students. Which had its good sides, of course, she had been rewarded with a privileged access to the fencing salles at la Sorbonne, which would be where she’d train her daughter during what should have been the summer holiday, though both of them would still be working for the most part, at least during this month, and the three first weeks of July. They had yet to decide where they’d go, if they went anywhere at all. Probably back to Japan for a little while, in her case, but after than that.

“Apparently, André has been spotted near Promenade Pereire!” Marinette said after some time. “They’ll join us there!”

“I will see you for dinner, dear,” Mme Cheng smiled. “Kagami, if you change your mind…”

Marinette said something in Chinese that Kagami didn’t quite understand, but judging by the look on Mme Cheng’s face, it had been flawless. She spoke more and more confidently these days, it was always nice to see. “See you later,” she supposed it meant. She wasn't too far off.

Even if they had wanted to, they couldn’t have gotten there faster than regular human beings, The Dragon pendant had been brought to Master Fu following the events that had taken place during the particularly violent showdown against Hawk Moth’s latest akuma, Electrophile, and Ladybug carrying Kagami bridal style in broad daylight was out of the question, there had been so many articles every time one of the heroes were seen interacting with civilians that taking the risk was simply not worth it. To reach their destination, the two girls had to walk for a good twenty minutes. Worse things had happened to them.

And Mme Cheng was right, of course, the weather was nice, more than nice in fact, not too hot for June, though they weren’t halfway through the month. Knowing that the heatwaves would probably be very harsh this year — Mayor Bourgeois had yet to do anything to anticipate that, making public transportations in Paris free for the day would have been a nice start but then again, it was Mayor Bourgeois they were talking about, not someone competent— they should make the most of it now, the weather was just pleasantly warm, the temperature to wear short-sleeved tops without having to worry about getting cold later on.

There was no trace of the battle that had shaken Paris to its core, Ladybug’s powers had returned everything to normal, nothing had been lost at all, the hospitals had fortunately not been affected. It was as though Electrophile had only targeted specific power sources, which might have explained why the day had been quite bad for the Paris Stock Exchange. The city was intact, undamaged, everything was just as it should have been. The only hint that there had been such a fight at all was the fact that Kagami was missing her pendant, and that many people were enjoying their leisure activities, which was a rare sight for a Tuesday afternoon. And an agreeable sight. Perhaps it’d stay like that for Make Music Day.
The magnolias were in bloom, and so were the roses, butterflies — just regular, plain old butterflies— and bees lazily flew from flower to flower, covered in pollen. People were sitting on the benches, chatting. They hadn’t visited promenade Pereire in quite a while, but it hadn’t changed at all. Since September, Kagami thought. Ten months. She didn’t feel like she girl she used to be back then, at least not completely. Things now were so much simpler yet a lot more complicated at the same time. If she re-read the entry she had written in her Paris journal that day, would she shake her head in disbelief or smile at the words her younger self had left on the page?

Fortunately for Marinette and Kagami, not too many people were waiting in front of André’s ice cream cart. Nino and Alya were on their way. They could either wait for them, or… Marinette took her girlfriend by the hand — she interlocked their fingers— and lead her to the end of the queue. Yes, they could do that too, their friends wouldn’t mind. Besides, “on their way” was too vague, and Marinette was hungry. In no time, the two girls were in front of the ice cream man. André’s polite smile turned into a grin when he saw his customers, and he could barely contain his excitement.

“Oh! Long time no see, Marinette, Kagami!” he all but sang. “Now this is a couple I like to see. But now is time for ice cream, not poetry. Let me see if I remember well… Was it…” His face scrunched in deep thoughts. “I am quite sure, I had given you something like… Strawberry with black chocolate chip, blackberries and a touch of vanilla with hazelnut chip! Yes, it was that!”

Kagami didn’t know what the most surprising thing was, that the man had finally given up on talking in rhymes or that he remembered her name and the exact ice cream he had given them all that time ago. She paid for it and they went to sit on a bench. Sharing her ice cream with Marinette didn’t feel so awkward now, quite the opposite, in fact. She was the first one to taste it, too. It was even better than in her memories. For a little while, they stayed there to chat, until Nino and Alya, came back with ice cream of their own and sat in the grass. Kagami and Marinette followed them.

“Ugh, you have no idea how great it is to finally get out of here, you two,” Alya groaned.

“They still see you as a coffee machine with a human shape,” Marinette quirked her eyebrow.

Alya had been happy to find that her internship at Paris Soir had been accepted. Working for a newspaper, instead of her blog, had meant a great deal for her, and her expectations had been high, as high as her hopes. She had been let down, it had become clear that they didn’t care about what she had done for the Ladyblog at all. Instead of following other journalists around, instead of having them teach her their job, she had discovered unpaid labour in all its splendour. She had wondered whether it had been a joke at first, some kind of extremely elaborate prank, but as it turned out…
“… And I had to proofread Cantel’s article about that new street market, again, because apparently spelling things properly is too difficult,” Alya said with mild annoyance. “Exactly the kind of thing I wanted to do. And of course they were mad at me for forgetting the croissants even though there was a life-threatening situation outside, well sorry Michel but I’ve got other things to worry about than your croissants!”

“Babe, he’s not worth your anger,” Nino said appeasingly.

“I’m not angry, I’m disappointed,” Alya grumbled. “And I’m worth more than that, I’m not some kind of valet, and if I were, at least I’d get paid for that. They say I’ve got an attitude…”

“They’re old, and jerks,” Marinette said. “I mean, on the bright side of things, it’ll be over in July!”

“Only a week and a half and I’m never going there ever again,” Alya nodded.

“Will you stay for the holiday?” Kagami asked. “The other day, you mentioned something about your parents sending your twin sisters to the Martinique as soon as the school year is over…”

Which made sense, Alya’s grandparents still lived there, Alya herself had come back to her hometown of Fort-de-France last summer, which had been the main reason why the Ladyblog had felt slightly emptier, and the quality of the posts much lesser and lacking her personality. But that had been before she’d received a certain piece of jewellery she was wearing around her neck at this very moment.

“Yup, I’m not going anywhere until Hawk Moth is dealt with,” Alya said, half-happy, half-frustrated. “So I’m taking summer classes as an excuse. It won’t hurt my marks for next year, too. So I’m expecting you all to hang out with me and treat me even though you’re super busy with your paid jobs and all, at least you two,” she motioned towards Kagami and Marinette. “And you two are going to leave me for Japan soon!” Marinette still wasn’t sure about this, but said nothing about that. “Well anyway, I can’t just hang out with Lila forever,” Alya finally said.

It wasn’t a subject they discussed very often, Lila Rossi. She had left the hospital more than a month after the Startrain incident, and ever since that, Alya had kept in touch with her. Introducing the Italian girl to Master Fu was still out of the question, besides he wouldn’t have been able to help her more than he had Alya, which was to say not at all. And talking to Lila was difficult, uncomfortable and sometimes, it felt as though it was completely useless. She hadn’t stopped lying all of a sudden, though she had a therapist follow her now. She’d move to Bordeaux next year, or
so she had said. Alya had decided to visit her more often. Still, an uncomfortable topic of discussion.

“Not getting paid for my internship either, you know,” Nino huffed. Nice, Kagami thought, way to discretely go back to complaining about their jobs. It was still much better than being gloomy about Lila.

“Yes, but you get to go to festivals to show Starkross and you’re having fun, and the people you’re working for care about what you do, and not your coffee-making skills,” Alya shot back. “

“Good point,” Nino conceded. “Dude, that ice cream is delicious.”

They needed to address the elephant in the room, but they were putting it off. They chatted about ice cream for a good two or three minutes even though there wasn’t a lot to be said about it, except that it tasted nice, especially the hazelnut chips that were especially nice, and that it was nice of André to have replaced his small plastic spoons with wooden ones, and how it was nice to enjoy the nice afternoon sun, how nice of Manladrineaut and the book shop owners to let Marinette and Kagami take the day off even though the new Gabriel silk was worrying M. Tamarre to no end, how nice that Nathalie Sanceur was back to full health since Nino had advised her to visit a certain Chinese masseur. But they could only say “nice” so many times before it started feeling forced.

There were things they couldn’t ignore, like the lack of bracelet around Nino’s wrist for instance. He looked as though he was rehearsing a speech in his head, and it was because it was exactly what he was doing. He had taken his role as a potential future Guardian very seriously, perhaps even more so than Ladybug, and the idea that he might have forgotten a single detail was one he couldn’t stand, both as a director and as a hero. Kagami had yet to have the Dragon pendant back. As though he had read her mind, the boy rummaged through his bag until he found a small red and black box which he gave her with great care.

“The Guardian still thinks that it’s safe for you to wear it, and to transform again,” he said. “It has cooled down since you gave it to me, Longg is not harmed in any way…”

“But,” Kagami stated. There was always a “but” when it came to Master Fu.

“But he said that you shouldn’t use lightning bolts for now,” Nino continued seriously, “and that it’s a miracle that you didn’t hit something else, kill someone or fry yourself, in his own words. He thinks it was accidental and all the more dangerous.”
It made sense. She had felt intense stress and distress, they hadn’t managed to stop Electrophile’s advance, none of their attacks had worked well enough, Hawk Moth’s champion had proven to be quite redoubtable, even more so as it accumulated more and more electrical power, and so, the Crimson Empress had just made it work somehow. She had just… Done it, she had said words she couldn’t remember, snapped her fingers, and a lightning bolt had struck the villain down. Electrophile hadn’t been able to withstand this sudden surge of raw power, it had been enough to knock him out. The Crimson Empress had had to do that, especially after what had happened to Carapace.

“Your suit will change as a mark of your readiness,” Nino smiled. “Dude, I know, it sounds like the kind of ruse they’d use in a kid’s show as an excuse to sell more toys, with minimal efforts, but somehow, I think it’s true.”

“I couldn’t stay transformed for long once I summoned my Lucky Charm and my feet couldn’t stick to walls before I had my shoulder pads and petticoats,” Marinette explained.

“Queen Bee got her wings, Chat Noir… I think his luck has gotten even worse, but at least he got a cooler suit and better reflexes to make up for it, Nino, your armour is much stronger and you can maleate your shelter as it pleases you…” Kagami listed. “I guess Tiger Girl and Snake Boy also got their upgrades… Let me guess, more stripes and more scales and more useful powers. Which leaves Alya and I behind?”

“For now,” Marinette said reassuringly, sincerely. “It took me more than a year to have my suit change, it took longer for Chat Noir, so you’re not lagging behind in any way.”

Hearing this made Kagami feel a little better. If she looked at it that way, it meant that someday, perhaps soon, she’d be able to use lightning as well as air, and perhaps her control over water would improve even more. Would she be able to change the weather, to wish for a storm and have it happen before her eyes? Perhaps she could vanish the smog that sometimes floated above the city… But it wouldn’t be for today, or anytime in the foreseeable future, she guessed. Which was a shame, she would have created rainy Sunday mornings as an excuse to stay in bed with Marinette a little longer.

“That is the kind of thing he should have told us right away,” Alya grumbled. “He always says that he trusts us but he never gives the full story.”

“And about the Turtle bracelet…” Marinette talked over her best friend.

“It’s cracked, yes, it looks pretty bad,” Nino confirmed what they had all feared. Ladybug’s powers
could fix spectacular damage, but it seemed to be unable to fix certain things, and it included Miraculoues themselves. The bracelet was cracked yet Nino didn’t look panicked at all, he’d have used the same tone to tell someone what time it was. “It’s cracked but Wayzz wasn’t harmed, the Core wasn’t touched. The Miraculous will go dormant until it fixes itself. And the Guardian knows just the right rituals to help the process.”

“How long?” Alya asked. There was relief in her voice, still.

“A week, perhaps two, thanks to the Guardian’s magic,” Nino answered. “We’re lucky I’ve managed to stay transformed at all after I was hit by that lightning spear. And we’re even luckier to have the Guardian, otherwise… It would have taken, like, months, maybe more, for the cracks to fix themselves, for the Miraculous to be useable. Had the Core been touched…” He didn’t finish his sentence.

They all knew what it meant. The Core stone, the only thing tethering kwamis to this plane of reality, hidden deep inside the jewels… Should it be destroyed (Master Fu had read from one of his many spell books), that connection would disappear. Should it be damaged or displaced within the Miraculous, the person wielding it would suffer dire consequences, illnesses that could not be cured by normal means, malfunctioning transformations, and this was for the more optimistic outcomes. It could be reversed, with time and the right rituals, but it was too complex for most mortals. Purposefully damaging a Miraculous, or worse a Core stone… The mere thought of it was sickening.

“But it hasn’t and it it all that matters,” Kagami forced a smile. “Say, where do you want to go next? Here is nice, but the weather is too beautiful to just stay here, don’t you think?”

This was not her most subtle attempt at changing the topic of a conversation, but it did the trick just fine. And indeed, the weather stayed pleasant for the remainder of the afternoon. When they parted ways, Alya with her boyfriend, Marinette with her girlfriend, they had walked for hours, and the sun was slowly setting. The golden hour, that was how it was called, Kagami remembered. She regretted she hadn’t taken her Polaroid camera with her, she could have taken a few beautiful pictures.

“Hey, are you two still doing that Pride thing next weekend?” Nino finally asked when they reached the Trocadero.

“Yessir, I’ve even made my own flags for the occasion” Marinette nodded. “I mean, we’re still doing this, right?”
“I think so,” Kagami said. “We haven’t decided yet whether we’ll go as our civilian selves or otherwise… But I think us going as… You know… It could be important?”

“Definitely,” Alya nodded. “I think you should do it.”

“And so do I,” Nino agreed.

“Well, we’ll see, but it’s probably what we’ll end up doing!” Marinette and Kagami said in unison.

They had to part ways a little before seven — not that they’d be separated for long, they had patrol tonight— so that Kagami would be right on time for dinner. Mum had gone for a short walk, how she managed to stay in her room from morning to evening every other day was both amazing and a little sad as well. Today’s akuma attack had left her more worried for her daughter's safety than the previous ones, and Kagami had to reassure her again. Perhaps she should have come home right after Electrophile’s defeat instead of going to Marinette’s. But this was not what made her the more apprehensive. When she was sure her mother was asleep, she sneaked out and transformed.

It was much, much easier than she had expected. Ladybug had deemed important to tell Chat Noir about them, and so he had been invited to join them tonight. She had expected something awkward… He was not surprised at all, if anything, he had a jubilant “I knew it, you are not as good at hiding stuff than you think but still I’m happy you decided to trust me enough to tell me” kind of expression written all over his face, he hugged them both and when the Crimson Empress brought up Pride, he casually added that he’d be there too. He was grinning during their entire patrol, and when Kagami went to bed, for real this time, she too was beaming. If only things could stay like this, only without Hawk Moth, it would be the perfect summer. She had no idea what was coming, and so she slept soundly that night.

Chapter End Notes

**Bonjour, bonsoir !**

About 30 chapters ago, Marinette entertained the idea of playing Ultimate Mecha Strike with Kagami and hey, here we are! All more or less obscure references to Toku and Mecha shows are absolutely not fortuitous. I love/hate Evangelion, I love all things Ultraman. Goraion… Not so much. Or its remake. Even though it gave us bara Shiro.

What kind of character would Marinette be playing in D&D? And Kagami? Please tell me so in the comments, or even better, via my [Tumblr](http://example.tumblr.com).

Ice cream again! André would never make fun of Marigami, the writers are just cowards and that finale was awful.
Ending on an ominous note, because things have been moving in the background, you'll have noticed if you've read carefully…

I'll see you soon! À lundi !
As much as Kagami hated to admit it, she couldn’t deny it any longer: she had developed some kind of pavlovian reaction, not the worst kind, of course, but it was there to stay. And it was a textbook situation, too. Whenever she heard the chimes that rang out whenever someone pushed the book shop’s door open, she visibly straightened up — not that she was one to slouch— and put a vague, polite smile on her face, not too friendly, but this was not her “default” face, so to say. The perfect face to not deter the customers from asking her for advice concerning what to read, what a teenager would enjoy reading and so on. She had ready made answers for most questions like that, which seemed to satisfy most people.

It was different with regulars, however, she had learned to know a few of them, and to like most of them as well. She wouldn’t call them her friends, not yet, and certainly not while she worked here, but friendly acquaintances for the most of them, with perhaps one or two exceptions. And so, she was happy to find that the person who had walked inside the Librairie du Temps was no other than Margaux Tran. Not that Kagami knew many other customers with blue hair and wearing flannel shirts even in the middle of summer. Kagami walked from behind the cash desk to greet her.

“Hey there, if this isn’t my favourite bookseller!” Margaux sang enthusiastically. She kissed Kagami on the cheeks.

“Hi,” Kagami replied, and returned the gesture. She hadn’t forgotten to bring her art folder with her this time. Good. “They’ve been out of the print for a good two hours so it should be safe to take with you by now!”

“Always so straight to the point and business-like,” the bluenette shook her head in faux disapproval. “Adèle and Jacques are out for lunch at 2, and they asked you to stay here and keep an eye on everything, is that it?”

“Exactly,” Kagami said. “Not that I mind. At least it’s not as hot as… How hot is it outside, actually? And how are you not dying with that shirt on?”

“It’s not exactly unbearable,” Margaux shrugged, “but yeah, I should probably change if it keeps getting hotter. I get why you prefer to stay here.”
If a new customer showed up, Kagami would hear. And so, she didn’t worry too much about leaving her spot, and lead Margaux to the printing room. And just like she had predicted, all the sheets she had been asked to print were ready. This was what had made the book shop famous in the first place: giving the possibility for people and small organisations to create their own zines and posters and have them printed with a quality that could rival with that of bigger businesses and printing works, though it was a little expensive. This had been how Kagami had heard from the place at first.

“Yup, all good,” Margaux said after she inspected each and every sheet.

“Do you want me to guillotine it all?” Kagami asked. “I am also here for that.”

This wasn’t her favourite part of her job, not by far. She had come here to be surrounded by books, first and foremost, and to talk to people who loved books. Not that she minded using the guillotine, slicing through large stacks of paper had been fun the first few times, she had gotten good at this, and besides, she never complained when Adèle, or Jacques, asked her to do something. Not that she complained a lot, it was a very French thing to do, she found, and it hadn’t caught up to her just yet, unlike hand shaking and greeting people by kissing them on the cheeks.

“No, it’s sweet of you,” Margaux smiled, “but we’ll do it with the others tonight… You wanna come tonight and give us a hand?”

“I can’t,” Kagami shook her head. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to, simply…

“Oh, fencing, I remember.” At least Margaux didn’t look too disappointed. “With your girlfriend on Fridays nights, and with your mum on Mondays and on Wednesdays, I think?”

“You’d be right,” Kagami nodded. Just because it was theoretically the holidays didn’t meant she had stopped training, and Marinette had decided to tag along.

“Oh well, I’m sure we’ll manage just fine,” Margaux said. “Help me put them in the folder? I don’t want to accidentally ruin the sheets…”

It was true that they were quite large, these sheets. Kagami got a closer look at what was printed on them now that it had dried. The second issue of “Heroines of Paris” looked quite nice, with its polka-dotted cover and its collection of poems, essays and reproductions of drawings…
again, a group effort, and unless she was mistaken, there were more pages than in the first issue. As always, Margaux looked a little self-conscious when they closed the folder and walked out of the printing room. No new clients had come yet, which wasn’t surprising, there’d usually be more of them in… Fifteen to twenty minutes, unless Kagami’s observations had been faulty.

“Do you think it’s OK for us to actually use Ladybug’s image for our zine?” Margaux asked.

“I think she’d be more than OK with that, and the other heroes too,” Kagami did her best not to sound too happy. “If I were in her shoes, I’d find it nice that some people were inspired by what I’ve said and are willing to fight the same fight. Even more so if it’s a zine about girls who love girls, and all kinds of girls.”

When the Crimson Empress and Ladybug had shown up during Pride, they had made a spectacular entrance by flying over the crowd, with their flags wrapped around their shoulders, before landing and walking with the rest of the participants. It had been a great time for the two of them, if a mediatised one. They were few familiar faces, Nathaniel and Marc, Kim and Max, Juleka and Rose, Alix… The other heroes had been very supportive, though Queen Bee had been more reserved than she usually was when she had learned the news, though that hadn’t lasted for long.

So of course, the press and the media in general had been very divisive on the matter, and while some newspaper articles and talk shows had praised the two girls, declaring that it was a great step for representation and she’d quote a paper here, “the normalisation of non-heteronormative couples”, many others, much louder voices, hadn’t been so kind. It had been the same thing, never open, blatant bigotry and hatred but the same, slimy sentences, “concerns have been raised” and slimier, disingenuous questions, such as “what about the children?” and “can we still trust ‘our’ heroes?” and its cousin, “Is Ladybug truly protecting us?”, sometimes mind-numbingly stupid ones, “is Ladybug getting too political? ”which had been talked about for weeks. With no truly spectacular attacks from Hawk Moth or Mayura, this was all that could be “discussed” on the topic of superheroes. The papers had sometimes been horrible, but it had been much worse on TV, and purely nauseating online.

Kagami had been relieved to find that people had fought back against the bigotry, the hatred. “Ladybug said trans rights” had become a meme of its own after an interview with the Ladyblog, one the super heroine had been happy to endorse, one of the presenters who had spoken so virulently against the Crimson Empress and Ladybug’s relationship had been successfully sued for hate speech and incitement to violence. And the Heroines of Paris zine had been created, the first edition had sold quite well. Kagami knew for a fact that her girlfriend was very happy with it, and while Kagami herself had submitted some of her poems for this second issue, Marinette had submitted some of her drawings. Saying that she supported the project would have been the understatement of the year.

“Yeah, I guess they’d think that…” Margaux whispered. And louder, she added, “Anyway, it was
nice of you all to pass by, our meetings feel emptier without the two of you, though your friend… The girl from the Ladyblog… Alina? Alya? She was there last week, which made me think…”

“Yes, we will try to recruit people from our lycée,” Kagami spoke the other girl’s exact thoughts.

“There are many university students in our ranks, but you three are the only girls from lycée,” Margaux said. “Which is a shame! So if it’s not too much to ask of you, it’d be nice if you could… Well, ask around, you know!”

“I will, I will,” Kagami gave a small smile.

Margaux left not long after that, leaving Kagami all alone. She started cleaning the shelves like she always did. Not for long, fortunately, the sound of chimes — three times in a row — indicated that as many potential clients had come inside. They left a good thirty euros lighter, and Kagami had to say, she was quite proud of herself. More and more people came inside… She knew what to do. The trick was rather simple: no offering unsolicited help, while, at the same time not seeming inaccessible. No looking at her phone, no matter how important the message. She had gotten reasonably good at this job, she knew it. And her employers told her so, too, when she left little after five, like she did every Wednesday since the second week of June. Truly, it wasn’t so bad.

She spent her Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays from ten in the morning to five in the afternoon here, and she even got to use some of that time to read. Marjane almost regretted her own choice, sure, excavating a Roman villa was cool, but it was also dirty, exhausting and hours and hours spent outdoors with high temperatures. Kagami wouldn’t mind working in that kind of environment once her career as an athlete would be over, and if she wished to do something other than teach the younger generation of sabre fencers. Not that her mum’s life choices were bad, on the contrary, simply, she wasn’t sure it was what she wanted to do when she retired. And “nothing” wasn’t exactly the kind of answers people would expect from her in twenty, twenty five years.

One of the other perks that came with working at the Librairie du Temps was how close to the Sorbonne it was. Mum had scheduled her fencing lessons accordingly, and so, at exactly half past five, Kagami was in one of the smaller fencing salles, fully equipped, facing her teacher. Her training regimen had gotten more intense since her several victories at so many official competitions. And finally, they had started duelling against one another. Kagami had still some work to do before she could defeat mum, but the gap between them was getting narrower and narrower, much more so than between her and Marinette — who progressed quickly, though it was unlikely that she’d be able to come anywhere near her level one day, she’d be a proficient amateur, good enough for regional competitions.
Mum knew exactly how to structure her lessons, it would begin rather calmly, they’d warm up, continue with a simple back and forth for a little while which would allow for small talk. Not that they had a lot to talk about tonight, nothing out of the ordinary at least, how Kagami’s day had been, the kind of books she sold, whether she had read anything new… Their motions reflected their moods during that first second phase, and today, they weren’t tense at all, just like their conversation wasn’t all that deep. They usually discussed the more serious topics over dinner. After this… Only then would they duel each other.

And mum looked satisfied to find that the days when she had to hold back to the point where she’d almost get bored were long by gone. Kagami simply enjoyed knowing that she was actually fencing against former world champion Itsuko Tsurugi and not a fencing instructor going easy on her. Knowing that in a not so distant future, she might outmatch her own mother… It thrilled her a little. Was it arrogant, naive, to hope for that that day to arrive soon? It didn’t stop Kagami from hoping, if anything, it only made her want to work harder to reach this goal. Though from the looks of it, it certainly wouldn’t be for now.

Few things were as humbling as losing a fencing match against her mother, in fact it was exactly what she needed, the reminder that though she was a national champion, a world champion, even, she still had a long way to go. Because of course, her mum had not been called a fencing prodigy in her days for nothing. She was able to anticipate about any attack, didn’t leave anything to chance. Nothing in what she did was fortuitous, even what appeared to be accidents, even sudden losses of momentum, was part of a greater plan. For instance, when she lunged at her, seemingly aiming at her shoulder… Kagami couldn’t have told it had been a feint, nor that the real blow would land on her fencing mask.

Humbling, but not humiliating. Because every time Kagami lost a touch, every time she made a mistake she hadn’t noticed, they would stop, discuss what had happened, calmly and without condescension. Mum helped her understand how to improve, and lead her down the right path to perfect what could still be perfected. Which was a lot more than Kagami had first thought. Dealing with them, unlearning them before the beginning of the incoming fencing season was good, and what’s more, it allowed for her to be sure that she would recognise these small errors and not unknowingly pass them down to Marinette.

As always, the lesson lasted for two hours. They stretched, took a quick shower and they were off to their flat. Kagami didn’t feel too tired, though she knew her arms would ache a little when she’d wake up the next morning. If anything, she felt full of energy. Her girlfriend was coming for dinner, and probably for the rest of the evening. Neither of them had work tomorrow, Marinette worked four days a week, and had to get up earlier than Kagami, though on the brighter side of things, she left Manlardineaut at four every afternoon. She had her Mondays, Thursdays, and Sundays to herself. Tomorrow, they’d sleep in together, which was something Kagami would never tire of.
“I asked Marinette to be there around a quarter past eight,” mum said as she unlocked the door. “I wonder what she will bring with her tonight!”

Marinette’s parents and her mum were trading recipes and ingredients, it had become a kind of tradition between them, and for once, this was a tradition Kagami didn’t fundamentally disagree with. She went to her room, wrote in her Paris journal — there were only a few blank pages yet, and it had been quite a big journal to begin with— and played the cello for a little while. Her room was tidy enough, she decided, though she hid the bracelet she was making for Marinette in one of her drawers, it wasn’t much anyway, just braiding, a simple red and black kumihimo… Never mind that. She made sure to leave her window open to enjoy the light summer breeze, and so that Marinette would hear her when she’d come. She was there right on time, with a baguette under her arm, and a bag of courgettes her parents had bought at the market.

They cooked dinner together, the three of them. It was always a pleasure for Kagami to make dinner with her girlfriend, and when mum joined them, it took them no time to have everything ready. It wasn’t the most complex of meals, a sauté of courgettes with pine kernels and a tomato salad to go with it, but simplicity didn’t mean flavourlessness, far from it. They had yet to cook something truly inedible. Some of their tries had not exactly been successful, one time, they had inexplicably managed to make a curry with red hot pepper taste bland, but tonight’s meal was one of the good ones.

“So, Marinette, what are your plans for next month?”

The very question Kagami could have done without, the conversation starter that lead to the serious topic they’d apparently be discussing this evening. It wouldn’t have been a terrible thing to ask, had Mayura and Hawk Moth been out of the picture. The problem being that though they were discreet these days, too discreet, with a lack of strong villains for the heroes to fight, they were still there, looming in the shadows. Kagami and Marinette weren’t too concerned, after all, it had happened before and nothing serious had emerged afterwards or at least the situation hadn’t sensibly worsened, it had been a month since Electrophile had attacked. They only had minor villains to fight against, it was necessary but not alarming. Master Fu, however was more and more worried about it all, and he would tell them so every time they met.

“We are staying here!” Marinette smiled awkwardly. “Though we will go on holiday a little longer in the winter. Since my internship will be over, I’ll have plenty of time on my hands to help my parents! There will be a Manladrineaut boutique opening in Tokyo next month, but I probably won’t get invited, so… Staying here it is! What about you?”

“We followed your father’s advice, I do not know how I could have thought that going to the French riviera was a good idea, I looked in more detail and it truly is overcrowded!” Itsuko
Tsurugi said. “We have yet to decide, between the île de Ré and Brittany. We’ll fly to Tokyo at the end of the month, and maybe Kyoto afterwards if my father… Well, we will leave Japan the week before the fifteenth of August, and stay one week after that. We do not have to hurry, Armand has been kind enough to allow us to stay at either of his parents’ summer houses and it would be relatively inexpensive. We were thinking you might like to join us during all that time?”

Yes, right there. This was the kind of question a normal girl with a normal life would have answered right away, with no hesitation and a bright smile. And Kagami wanted her to say yes, to spent some time with her away from Paris, she had had silly rose-coloured dreams about them travelling around the world together, introducing her to her favourite park in her hometown… Things weren’t so simple, and so, Marinette was reserved, her “I’d love to, I’ll ask my parents if they would be OK about it” was sincere, but there was an underlying bitterness in the way she said it. Kagami’s mum didn’t catch, Kagami herself, on the other hand…

This unease… She could have done without it. She tried to shift the topic of their discussion towards something else, anything else. Not doing so in a way that would seem blatant and clumsy wasn’t so easy, mum was far from stupid. But it worked, they ended up chatting about the translation work that kept her busy most of the time — there was no exaggeration in saying that Itsuko Tsurugi was a powerhouse, with an efficiency that made her a prized translator. She had reluctantly accepted to work on books she didn’t like at all from Japanese to French, but even then, she didn’t make her work a slapdash.

It was a time-consuming job. And so, she went straight to her room after she helped the two girls with the dishes, wishing them a good night before she closed the door. As always, Kagami was the first to shower, which left her time to figure out what to watch this evening as she clipped her nails. They had finished their favourite sitcom at last, for the second time, so perhaps a film would be nice? Not necessarily a cinematic masterpiece, definitely not something superhero-y, not something gory either, that would ruin the mood if they chose to do something other than watch the film. Kagami changed to her pyjamas — that old striped t-shirt she had worn when she had met Marinette, a pair of shorts— and went back to her room, making sure to avoid the creaking part of the parquet floor.

She knew she had a tendency to stare whenever her girlfriend was less dressed than the usual, which the girlfriend in question didn’t mind at all, on the contrary. Kagami had recently found out that it was also true the other way around. Which was unexpected — no, not unexpected Marinette had told her a hundred times that she was the most beautiful girl in the world, and probably meant it— and flattering, in a way, coming from her. Even though the t-shirt was rather baggy, and so were the shorts, she found Marinette stared at her, her mouth slightly agape. Kagami couldn’t help but laugh at that. After a few more seconds, Marinette rasped a small “yes, bathroom’s free, I’m just… Gonna go there and shower, yes” and left.
Kagami tried to find something watchable, anything that wouldn’t require them to use their brains too much. Perhaps a musical? She kind of hated those, except some of the old black and white ones, and even then… That was a part of her snobbish education she hadn’t been able to distance herself from, her taste in art and most things fictional, she thought. Perhaps a children’s show would do? They had finally watched that cartoon Marinette had told her so much about, the one that had caused her to collect gems in the first place, it had been great, but she didn’t feel like re-watching it just yet. Something else, then? But not something too childish, or episodic, the kind of thing where nearly nothing changed at the end of each and every storyline, these were the absolute worse. That was it, she gave up, she’d leave the final choice to Marinette.

She put her laptop on her night table and let herself fall on her bed, made a great impression of a starfish — that was still one of the best things about having a bed this big— and waited for her girlfriend to return. She let her thoughts wander for a little while. Perhaps Master Fu had been wrong to worry, perhaps Hawk Moth and Mayura were away, enjoying their holidays too. She could picture them, with Hawaiiian-themed versions of their costumes, sipping on a piña colada and eating watermelon on a yacht. It wouldn’t be so bad if it were that way, and if the boat had sunk, for that matter. Well, that last part was a little dark, but a girl could always dream. And besides, it was fine to entertain such thoughts about her enemies. Right?

The sound of the bathroom door being closed, the familiar rhythm of Marinette’s footsteps… And wow that nightgown — she must have made it recently— showed a lot of skin. Marinette truly had freckles everywhere, not just her nose, her shoulders, her back… Kagami knew that, of course, she had seen a few of them before, and she had thought about these freckles quite often, perhaps too often, but still, her mouth suddenly felt very dry and she had to clear her throat and find her words before speaking. She wasn’t beet red, she had learned to stop blushing all the time, but her insides had turned to goo. Not that it was a terrible feeling, far from it.

“I… Huh… Is there anything you’d like to watch tonight?” she finally said.

“Had a couple ideas,” Marinette smiled as she stepped closer to the bed, taking her time. She is going to be the death of me someday, Kagami thought. She heard Marinette say, “is there a dumb space opera or something really campy like that? In Japanese?”

“Sure, I’ll… Find something, yeah!” Kagami made some room for Marinette, who kindly refused it and sat in her lap instead.

The result of their search was not entirely satisfactory. Kagami had to admit, the show they were “watching” wasn’t so bad. She wouldn’t have gone as far as to call it genuinely good, the plot was a little simplistic and the lead actors weren’t all that charismatic, but it was entertaining enough, serviceable. Not that she was very invested, Marinette didn’t seem to care all that much about these adventures in technicolor outer space either, in fact they forgot to click on the “next episode” icon, even though the one they had just finished watching had ended on a suspenseful cliffhanger, in fact
they turned down the laptop completely.

She hadn’t expected Marinette to give her a kiss when she went to sit back on the bed again after she put the computer back on her desk, but she couldn’t say she was unhappy with the feel of her girlfriend’s hand on her cheek, and the sensation of her lips brushing against hers. It was gentle at first, nothing more than chaste kisses… Which was nice, but… Kagami parted her lips, slowly, tilting her head to the side a little more. Marinette was eager to oblige, pulling her closer to deepen the kiss. She was almost straddling Kagami’s lap now, and her grin when she pulled back to regain her breath… One day, she would truly be the death of her.

Kagami knew all too well that she probably looked like a mess, with her disheveled hair and her flushed face. She wanted to protest — not whine, she never whined, that was beneath her— when Marinette’s mouth left hers, but before she could do that, her girlfriend softly pushed her against the mattress, pressed a kiss on her neck and Kagami’s breath hitched in her throat. A small moan escaped her lips before she could stop it. Her hand went down Marinette’s back, slow, uncertain And Kagami stopped hesitantly. Was it… Was it alright for her to go any further? The answer Marinette gave her when she put her palm over hers and moved it lower still was crystal clear.

She forgot how to breathe completely when she felt Marinette’s fingertips on her bare skin, her hands sliding under her t-shirt, on her stomach, and she couldn’t make sense of anything anymore, the only thing she knew was that she wanted more.

“Can I turn off the light?” Kagami asked much later that night. Her hair was slightly damp, and her voice a little tired but happy. There were few feelings better than sleeping in clean sheets after a nice shower, though she had seen one or two things that surpassed it in the last hour or so.

“You always ask and I always answer the same thing,” Marinette laughed. “It’s your room, and I’m not doing anything that requires a light so you do as you want! We can read for a little while, or cuddle, or…” She yawned before she could finish her sentence.

The small lamp on the night table had one of these old switches that gave a very audible and satisfactory “click”. The room went dark, Kagami joined Marinette in bed. Slowly, she wrapped her arms around her girlfriend’s middle. The last thing she could feel before falling asleep was her girlfriend shifting around to hug her.
“Sleep tight,” she heard Marinette whisper, and a smile crept on her lips.

Her dreams were peaceful that night, she couldn’t remember them but she opened her eyes, she was well rested, and in an excellent mood. Marinette was awake, reading next to her, too engrossed in her book to notice her. What time was it? She didn’t know and frankly, she didn’t care. She had probably slept in, but it didn’t matter, their presence wasn’t required anywhere, for now. Where would they be going today? They had made a list, back in June, of all the things they’d like to do, many of the items had been crossed, but surely, there were a few things left. She stretched a little. It got Marinette to notice her.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” Marinette said fondly. “It’s almost ten!”

“Hi,” Kagami smiled as she rubbed her eyes. “You should have woken me up, really!”

“But you looked so cute so I just couldn’t!” Marinette planted a kiss on Kagami’s forehead. “I love you…”

“Love you too,” Kagami buried her face in Marinette’s shoulder. “I’m going to try to look a little more presentable and I’ll join you for… Whatever meal this is?”

They had a late breakfast together — outside of her jet-lagged days, Kagami had never gotten out of bed this late, and she exceptionally gave up on her workout routine— though did it really qualify as a breakfast at this point? Mum was already at work, doing some simultaneous translation for some radio programme on France Culture; they listened to her over brunch. Perhaps go to a café or one of the less crowded museums, while most people would be having lunch, they had yet to visit the Musée du Quai Branly and the Muséum national d’histoire naturelle, and if they went there, they could also return to Jardin des Plantes, which they had enjoyed a lot.

And so, they ended up doing just that, with a slight time lag. The lawns had gone yellowish with the heat, most café terraces had great fans and automated misters. There was no wind whatsoever; they ruled out going to the Jardin des Plantes as an addition to the Muséum national d’histoire naturelle, it would have been torture, the animals would all be at least as lethargic as the people they met on their way, Otis Césaire would certainly be in a foul mood. Jorts and caps didn’t keep the herds of tourists from sweating profusely, and Marinette almost felt bad for them. Still, the choice wasn’t hard to make, between walking to their destination and having to face the métro in the middle of summer, with the broken air-conditioners. They were greenhouses on wheels, at this point.
They had the grande galerie de l’évolution almost all for themselves. And it was impressive, Kagami had to say, she wasn’t a great fan of stuffed animals, but it was definitely interesting, the museology — or was it scenography, at this point? — did its job very well. Nino had been denied the authorisation to shoot a short film there, once, and she perfectly understood what he had seen in the place, the high ceiling, the metallic structure, the lights… She was glad she had brought her Polaroid camera with her. Her girlfriend filled the small sketchbook she had put in her backpack with drawings of animals.

They were about to go upstairs when Marinette’s phone buzzed, and Kagami’s as well a few seconds later. They knew who had sent the messages before even looking at them. Master Fu’s text simply read, “The room of Endangered and Extinct Species, in front of the dodo.” He was there, waiting for them, and he had never looked so old as he did now. Or perhaps it was the room’s ambiance, with its subdued lighting, the darker colour of the wooden furniture and the many, too many animals that no longer existed around them that did that. The museum attendant had gone for lunch, it was just the three of them and no one to listen to their conversation.

“Marinette, Kagami,” the old man acknowledged their presence. Even his voice sounded tired. “I am sorry for interrupting your date. But this is an urgent matter. I think Hawk Moth’s plan, whatever it was, has come to fruition. We were too blind to see, and yet… He is everywhere.”

“I am afraid I don’t understand what you mean, Master,” Marinette said. Kagami couldn’t say she understood more.

“Nooroo’s residual presence,” Master Fu whispered. “Wayzz and I couldn’t spot his precise location, only that his Miraculous was active, and Wayzz is the most sensitive kwami that I know of when it comes to that, on this continent. But now, the Butterfly kwami’s presence is everywhere in the city, a faint signature. I am not surprised that you couldn’t sense it. It took us time, but we found the source.” He opened his bag and took out a small plastic vial, inside which was —

“A cocoon?” Kagami asked. She got closer to the old man and looked at the small translucent object. It wasn’t a particularly big cocoon, barely larger than her thumb. What was more upsetting, however…

“The pupae…” Marinette’s eyes widened. At least five of them, Kagami could make out the shape of the small chrysalises inside the silken casing. Their wings were an unnatural scarlet. Kagami’s stomach lurched.

“I have found this one in my mulberry tree,” Master Fu said, putting back the vial in is bag. “A client of mine, with a beautiful red streak of… A client of mine noticed it, and she did well to point it out. I have never seen anything like this. These… They are man-made, not his usual magical butterflies but real ones, infused with magic. I do not know how this could be, if he has done it
himself or if he’s had someone help him.”

Just like with that cuirass.

“There could be hundreds of these cocoons scattered across Paris at the moment we speak,” the old man continued. “And this one looks close to its metamorphosis. If the others are the same, and I am almost sure they are, it could be a matter of a few days. We won’t be able to find them all in time. The other Guardians won’t believe me, if I try to reach out to them. Nothing has happened in a month, after all, nothing out of the ordinary…”

“The others wielders need to know. We need to be ready for whatever is coming our way,” Marinette said, and as she spoke, her eyes shone with a grim kind of determination. “Tonight, everyone’s on patrol. We need to come up with a plan, and to inform the officials. If Paris is to be turned into a battlefield again, we need to be ready.”

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

Bumped the rating up a bit because of that little bit of making out, though it's nothing too explicit, but mostly because of what is to come, which is a lot less pleasant for most of the characters we all love and cherish. And I can't wait to show you.

But! There are a couple of references. The Muséum national d'histoire naturelle is a wonderful place, if you like skulls and taxidermy and spectacular museography. And the room of endangered and extinct species is very much real, and there really is a dodo there.

I'm too lazy to give you my Tumblr this week but I'm sure you remember it by now…

As always, am but a humble baguette, mistakes are not made on purpose, but you know it.

À lundi! Things are about to get a lot darker and I promise pain for everyone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was innocuous at first, odd but not worrisome in any way. Moths were not the kind of insect that could usually be found in métro stations, at least not in broad daylight, at ten in the morning. It looked more like yet another of these expensive publicity stunts, one especially well-put together. There was no way moths could have wings this bright and this red anyway, right? They were practically glowing. They had to be miniature drones, and more than one took pictures, videos of the entire thing and posted them online. They truly were everywhere, in fact, not just underground, but also emerging from bushes and hedges, air ducts… Many commented on how annoying and intrusive they were, angering, almost. What would be all these drones for, anyway?

The moths — or were they butterflies?— were all flying towards the same direction, the Champ de Mars, it seemed, where a swarm was forming, harmless but getting noisier and noisier. Nadja Chammack was already there to report on the situation, happy to have found a brand new story to cover, and a small crew of journalists from other television channels were setting their cameras up. It was an impressive sight, that was for sure, very cinematic, from a distance, it looked like a storm of poppies, growing bigger and bigger still. The already very touristic place was getting more and more crowded.

From: Alya C

To: Nino L, Mari, Me

saw them from my window, vids on twitters legit, not drones, theyre the real thing, ill establish a perimeter

meet you at Fu's, masks on

From: Nino L

To: Mari, Alya C, Me

Al, Nette, carry through phase one without me, need to go to Fu
Kagami didn’t need to read the text to know what to do, they had rehearsed that over the last days, and somehow, she couldn’t help the wave of relief that washed over her. She had encouraged mum to go to that baroque music festival even though it took place at the beginning of the week, in Lyon. It had been sudden, mum had been reluctant, there were too many things to organise, she had said. And yet it had worked, or rather, Kagami had made it work, booking the hotel, buying the tickets online. M. D’Argencourt hadn’t been able to come with mum, in the end. And so she had left Friday night, she would return tomorrow in morning, or perhaps tonight, she hadn’t decided yet. Paris would certainly be quarantined in the next couple of hours.

Now was not the moment to lose control. Kagami checked her satchel one last time. Two water flasks, check, a bagful of lychees, check, painkillers, an extra battery for her phone, her binoculars as well as her opera glasses, two electric torches, maps of Paris and of its underground, a lunchbox and some granola bars, the first scarf Marinette had knitted for her… The kumihimo bracelet she planned on giving to Marinette… All check. She put on the Dragon necklace and Longg popped on her shoulder, giving her a determined look before flying inside the satchel. That was it, she hadn’t forgotten a thing. She made sure to put the little stone plaque Master Fu had given her— and all the others heroes too— on her bed. It was an antique-looking object with all sorts of complex writings carved in Chinese, an odd blueish gemstone in its centre, he hadn’t explained what it would be for, but she wouldn’t take it lightly. At last Kagami walked out of her room. She locked the door, hurried downstairs and ran.

People… People had no idea what was about to happen. Jémérie and Aelita, her next-door neighbours, waved at her with bright smiles, before picking up their groceries bags again. Didn’t any of them visit the Ladyblog every now and then, didn’t they remember what had happened almost two years ago at the Champ de Mars, the grand entrance? This was nothing but history repeating itself and yet the people of Paris didn’t suspect a thing, didn’t run away and just went on with their lives. It was both admirable and sheer insanity. The tourists simply didn’t seem to care, or perhaps they were oblivious to the imminent danger, too busy looking through the screen of their cameras. Their tour operators certainly hadn’t warned them about Hawk Moth and Mayura, which was both a sensible business decision and the most abject and disingenuous thing there was. Or perhaps danger was part of the marketing, which was even worse.

She couldn’t warn them, she couldn’t tell them to lock themselves up inside, the weather was nice again, on the cloudy side but still very enjoyable, the temperature was perfectly bearable; they’d think her insane, no one would have believed the words of a teenage girl anyway. She ran, not caring about the odd looks she got. Her phone buzzed but she ignored it — Nino, saying that Tiger Eye and Viperion were already there with Chat Noir and Queen Bee on their way, she found out while she waited for the traffic light to go green— and did not bother answering it. She transformed in an alley a few streets away from Master Fu’s house, making sure that no one would see her — not that this area was very crowded during the summer holiday— and pushed the door to the massage parlour open.
The atmosphere inside was electric, an old television had been put on a stool so that everyone could see the coverage of the disaster to come. It was almost twenty to eleven, and knowing Hawk Moth’s sense of theatrics, he would make his grand entrance the moment Notre Dame’s bells rung. Chat Noir and Master Fu, who was wearing a ceremonial gown, his arms glowing silver, were talking in a low voice. Carapace was doing breathing exercises, with Tiger Eye and Queen Bee imitating him. Viperion harped on his lyre… They hadn’t forgotten to bring their bags with them, too. They all greeted her before going back to their respective businesses. The Crimson Empress was relieved to find that she wasn’t the last one to arrive. She sat next to Carapace and synched her breathing with the others.

Ladybug and Laelaps came in a couple of minutes later — “phase one complete,” they said gravely — and the meeting could begin after Ladybug put her own stone tablet asserted with a blue gemstone next to Tiger Eye’s. She had done her hair into a tight bun today, rather than her trademark childish twin tails. Master Fu had them all sit around the coffee table. They did not chat with each other, Chat Noir was uncharacteristically calm and attentive, Viperion stopped playing music, Queen Bee looked serious and focused, not full of pride and self satisfaction. The old man poured each of them a cup of what looked like tea, smelled like tea. Tiger Eye asked the question that went through the Crimson Empress’s mind before she could speak it.

“Is this some kind of potion? To make us stronger? You said you would give us some things to help us be more ready.”

“I am afraid it is only tea,” Master Fu smiled. “Though it helps calm down and I was told that the taste was pleasant.”

This did help make the atmosphere a little less tense, if only for a few seconds. But now was not the time for exchanging pleasantries. The Crimson Empress took out her maps out of her satchel.

“I will stay with you until the completion of phase two part two, Master,” Carapace said. “In the meantime, you will all help evacuate the area, save for Queen Bee and the Crimson Empress.”

“We go birdwatching, and if the big turkey doesn’t show up, we will help you all out right away,” Queen Bee nodded.

“If we are able to face Hawk Moth himself, thwart his plot and come out victorious, add Mayura to the list if she decides to bless us with her presence,” Chat Noir sniggered. Master Fu gave an absent smile at that. “Well if he is down, so will his akumas, and the same goes for the Peafowl and her amoks.”
“If we manage to strike fast, we may be able to snatch their Miraculous and Paris will be freed of their threats forever,” Ladybug said. “Chat and I will take care of Hawk Moth right away. But in case this doesn’t work, we continue to protect the civilians and keep them out of Hawkie’s reach… Phase four, retreat to one of the meeting points, the nearest and safest… Red, please?”

“We marked them down,” the Crimson Empress said, putting the map down on the table. “It should be nearly impossible to miss them, these are landmarks after all. We will need to get a clear overview of the situation, and only two of us can fly. From there, Remember, our primary goal is to protect this city, no personal vendetta, no going against Hawk Moth on your own unless it can buy us a few precious minutes, with you making it unscathed.”

“And we need to fight smartly,” Ladybug continued. “Throwing yourselves against all enemies at once is a big no, we need to take out most destructive akumas first, M. Pigeon should not be our main concern. Luckily for us, many will be on holiday, I’ve checked with Ondine, she’s in Spain, we won’t have to swim. Lila Rossi is back in Italy so no Volpina either.”

“But it also means potential new villains.” Chat Noir reminded. “And with so many moths, it seems unlikely that they will choose very specific targets, anyone could be akumatised. This includes us.”

“There is little I can do about it, I am afraid,” Master Fu said. “Creating a protection from a distance and maintaining it will be exhausting and I fear that I won’t be able to do more after that. But I believe that you can fight the akumatisation off. Why don’t we take a moment to relax?”

The Crimson Empress bit back a scathing comment and did as the old man had suggested, breathing in and out, slowly. It was harder than it had been a few minutes ago, with Carapace and the others, there was something weighing her down, squeezing at her throat, nagging at her entrails. But she could control it, just like she could keep her temper in check. She could reach tranquility. She inhaled and exhaled, slowly. Silently, her eyes closed, and when she opened them, she had regained her composure, and her companions too looked more tranquil.

“It’s almost to ten to eleven,” Ladybug broke the silence, pointing towards the clock on the wall. “I think it is time for us to go.”

“Before you leave, one more thing! I almost forgot,” Master Fu exclaimed. He rummaged through one of his storage units. “I need to give you these!” He held out a bundle of necklaces, with blueish gemstones as their ornaments, and what looked like horsehair as the strings. “The stone tablets I have given you and asked to place strategically… You will only be able to use them one time and one time only so make it count, all it needs is for you to crush the pearl and you’ll be taken where its twin is. I asked Kaalki to make me those… There, Queen Bee, have this— wrong one, my bad, this one, and you, Ladybug… Carapace, I’ll give you yours later.”
No one usually went to this part of the city during the summer, there weren’t any interesting museums or restaurants or convenience shops near Wang Fu’s parlour massage, how the old man — and as far as everyone knew, he was just a regular grandfather— managed to pay his bills every single month was a mystery, considering how empty his place was. Which, for once, was for the best, no one was there to witness the oddest of scenes; Ladybug, Chat Noir, Laelaps, Viperion, Queen Bee, Tiger Eye and the Crimson Empress exiting the building, calmly.

“I love you,” Ladybug whispered, pressing a kiss to the Empress’s lips. “Please… I know it is silly so say, but… I don’t want you to get hurt for my sake, I don’t want you to…”

“I love you too,” the Crimson Empress said softly, and she hoped she didn’t sound desperate, before turning to Queen Bee. She ignored the small pang in her chest as she watched Ladybug and Chat Noir run to their destination. She’d give her the bracelet lat— Now was not the time for these thoughts, she berated herself. Now was the moment she needed to focus on her mission. They had to go, immediately. She crouched, and shot into the air, the blond girl flying next to her gave her a slight nod.

And she could see it already, the gigantic swarm, the hundreds of insects following the same motion around the Champ de Mars, a hypnotic pattern. It wasn’t what they were looking for, however, and with the dark clouds slowly filling the sky, it was getting harder to get a clear visibility of things. She knew her binoculars would have ended up coming in handy at some point. She threw them at Queen Bee, who caught them in midair (she murmured a rare “thank you”). The search was on and it was all too calm, she knew she wasn’t the only one fighting that feeling of unease settling in her stomach. She tore her eyes away from the other heroes, jumping from rooftop to rooftop. No obvious villain anywhere, just like patrol except in broad daylight. With a pervasive sense of danger that usually wasn’t there.

A slight disturbance in the air, faraway vibrations… The Crimson Empress ignored it like she often did, she wouldn’t let planes or birds distract her like they had back when she was learning the ropes. And besides, with the rustling of these moths flapping their wings, she couldn’t concentrate. The world was too noisy, too much to process at once. Mayura was somewhere, she had to be, the Crimson Empress could feel Duusuu’s aura in her bones, as strong as it had been back in February if not more. She couldn’t spot the woman, maybe… But she wouldn’t float any higher, she’d need Queen Bee to keep up with her. Three minutes to eleven and still no sign of them. The moths couldn’t have been a decoy, Master Fu had said they reeked of magic. So what was going on?

Two minutes. Ladybug, Chat Noir and the others had reached their objectives in time. Still nothing suspicious in sight, despite the emanation, no sinister silhouette standing on top of a building, or
anything at all. The crowd hadn’t moved from the lawns, still oblivious to what was about to happen. And having superheroes arrive suddenly and ask the people to leave would only stress them out, disorient them and have them fear for the worst, making them the perfect preys. An abject, well-crafted plan. One minute, the vibrations getting stronger, that had to be the sound of her heartbeat reaching her ears. And there it was, just like a year ago, the swarm turning into a sphere that would, in its turn, take the shape of something else or rather, someone. The bells of Notre Dame rung, and just like they had predicted…

“Paris! Long time no see, wouldn’t you agree?”

The voice was loud, and clear for everyone to hear. The Crimson Empress had prepared herself for this, she had watched hours of footage, but seeing the face of the man behind it all was still a shock. Hawk Moth, or rather the shape of him created by the swarm of red moths, looked triumphant, self-congratulatory, almost. Nadja Chammack hadn’t moved from her spot, most civilians seemed startled but hadn’t ran away yet. Hawk Moth seemed perfectly composed, knowing all too well the effect he had on the crowd. Viperion, Laelaps and Tiger Eye were down there, trying to make the bystanders leave immediately.

“I thought it was time we had a little face to face, all of us,” Hawk Moth’s moving statue continued nonchalantly. “I am afraid that the days were I waited kindly for a collaborator to offer themselves to me are over, superficial anger as of itself is no longer sufficient if there is but one champion at my disposition.”

It struck the Crimson Empress that Queen Bee was no longer in the air with her, she had landed to help evacuate the Champ de Mars with the others. She had to be there too. The people weren’t moving quickly enough, some were taking photographs, they probably didn’t understand what was going on here, if anything they looked annoyed at the fact that they couldn’t get proper pictures of the Eiffel Tower because of the big talking head that had just materialised. Forcing a crowd to move without making it angry was not an easy task, and some simply wouldn’t budge. This was not what they had planned, this was taking too long.

And the taking head wasn’t done talking just yet.

“But I have not lost faith in you, Paris!” It was revolting to see such a debonair smile on that face. “Perhaps I haven’t made my motives clear enough, perhaps all you need is a nudge in the right direction! So this is my gift to you, to help you participate in something much greater than yourselves! Let us call it… My summer collection. I will rekindle the passions that once moved you, my arms will be wide open to welcome you all. You deserve better heroes, Paris. Strip the Miraculouses off these impostors and bring them to me, and you have my words, great will be your
The swarm was not looking so peaceful anymore. Phase two, part one. Fall back, step outside the perimeter, let Master Fu do his job. Even if that meant leaving a few people behind, evacuate those than can be evacuated. And they had to carry through with the plan. They hadn’t been trained to deal with such a crowd, let alone a panicked crowd. It was chaos, a sensory overload, people running in all direction. They did their best, it certainly wasn’t enough. There were still a good thirty people still here, including the reporters, a group of tourist… And too many civilians right were the perimeter started. The Crimson Empress couldn’t let herself be trapped inside. She dashed away as the moths started spreading out, just as the Jade Turtle’s powers activated.

If Carapace’s Shell-ter was an impressive sight, it paled in comparison with Master Fu’s, a golden, translucent vault forming in a few seconds only, a cage that englobed the Champ de Mars completely. Not one of Hawk Moth’s butterflies had managed to escape. She couldn’t just watch, she had to help. She would have wanted to say that the police were useful for once but it wasn’t true, the fools were trying to shoot at the very thing that protected them — not that it worked, the bullets disintegrated — and yelling orders, making everyone more tense. Still, the tourist buses were driving away, filled to the brim with passengers that hadn’t necessarily paid to get there. The plan wasn’t failing completely so far, this was good, they had it under control.

And the butterflies couldn’t get past the barrier no matter how hard they pushed against the golden walls, for a split second, the Crimson Empress felt victorious. It only took her one more thorough look for the impression to die down. The butterflies weren’t the only thing trapped in here. People, too many of them, metamorphosing before her eyes, their heads low, in a kind of trance, their hands twitching. She couldn’t stay put, she had to help those she could still help, they still had a good five minutes for that. Five ambulances and as many cars from the firefighting department were here, Ladybug and Chat Noir had joined them in the evacuation of the remaining civilians. Hawk Moth wouldn’t show up, he’d do things in the distance like he’d always done, and Mayura was still nowhere to be found.

No. That wasn’t right.

The same vibrations she had felt in the air earlier, only much stronger, she could almost picture it. Regular and slow, something was flying, enormous and fast, getting closer to them, hidden by the clouds. And there was power, so much power… Two auras. The others had sensed it too. They were coming. The cars, the ambulances were taking too long to drive away. Closer and closer still, the vibrations. Children crying — where were their parents? Had they been left behind? The Crimson Empress’s head was about to burst from all these stimuli. Her blood turned to ice.

It emerged from the clouds, its great purple wings outstretched, with Mayura on its back. Hawk
Moth had turned himself into a gigantic insect, or rather, his partner had been the cause of the metamorphosis. And that sight… Acherontia, the name was whispered in her mind. He was the incarnation of terror itself. Mayura had always made the most vicious Amoks, using bodies instead of objects, but this… This was a new kind of horror. And he was plummeting towards Jade Turtle’s protection. The Peafowl jumped off the behemoth, head first, but the expression on her face was not one of pure delight as the feathers of her coat swelled, instead, concentration, coolness. Queen Bee had already taken off to meet her before she’d land, not even waiting for her partner as she flung herself into the battle. She wasn’t alone for long.

Mayura was merciless, and if the Crimson Empress remembered her as the kind of opponent to fight dirty, her memories were accurate, she found out the hard way. Because of course, the woman hadn’t learned how to fly during her months of absence, and that simple show of puffing her feathers had fooled them completely. She crashed against Queen Bee and grabbed on her ankle to slow down her fall, too quickly for the Crimson Empress to stop her. The two lost altitude and when the blonde regained control of her wings, they were a mere metres away from the asphalt. Mayura let go of her and she would have looked nonchalant, if not for her shakiness.

“Why, thank you for the lift,” she said, fanning herself. It felt forced, too practised to be honest. “I almost feared we would be late! Missed me?”

“It’s especially un-nice to see you here,” Queen Bee wheezed as she landed. “I miss not seeing y —”

The sound was deafening, the Crimson Empress had to cover her ears and so did everyone else. Acherontia — he was gigantic, at least twice her size in height, a much, much longer —had crashed against the golden barrier. To no avail, of course, nothing could get through it, it had stopped bullets, hadn’t it? So why was there a small crack in it? But this was Ladybug and Chat Noir’s mission, not hers. Mayura wasn’t paying attention to her, too busy arguing with Queen Bee. It was the chance for the Crimson Empress to strike. If she managed to destroy that cuirass again, that would take one enemy out of the fight, and for a long time. She summoned her sabre. It missed its target, but not by far, Mayura’s forearm had taken the blow, which had been strong enough for her to drop her hand fan in pain.

That noise, again, as though someone was hammering on a gong, the vibration almost palpable. Acherontia was trying to force its legs through the Shell-ter, and the small fissure was widening, the flapping of its wings was enough to send Ladybug and Chat Noir flying backwards, enough to make everyone else lose their footing. The rush of air, though it felt like a gust of wind, had not been created by the weather, the Crimson Empress was powerless against it. Mayura had recovered from the attack, and raised her guard again. Queen Bee’s incessant barrage of kicks and punches forced her to step back, she dodged the best she could, keeping her plastron away from the Bee’s spinning top.
Though Mayura couldn’t fight back as much as she might have wanted to — the energy it took to power such a massive amok coupled with the necessity to protect what was keeping her Miraculous from damaging her were limiting her set of moves— and though she had to lose ground, Mayura had a self-satisfied mask that threatened to fall when the Crimson Empress joined. Queen Bee. The cracks in the barrier were getting wider with each of Acherontia’s renewed assaults, Chat Noir and Ladybug were getting nowhere in their attempt to stop it, the yo-yo didn’t do much, the staff’s blows probably felt like annoying nudges for the beast, but nothing more. It would be a matter of minutes, and then Jade Turtle’s protection would collapse, the butterflies wouldn’t be contained any longer.

This wasn’t part of the plan, none of this was part of the plan, but they had to stick to it. Unsheathing her sabre now was not part of the plan either, the Crimson Empress thought, but it would give them the upper hand. But if she used it to keep on fighting Mayura, she would harm her, and not just in a way that would force the woman to surrender, blood would be spilled. She would outmatch her opponent by far, but it wouldn’t be just that. What if the next time she hit Mayura’s forearm, she severed it? That couldn’t be her, it wouldn’t be her, she might even destroy the Peafowl brooch, damage it or even destroy its Core stone. No, there had to be other ways to stop these villains than that, and besides, it was bad but not too bad, was it? She needed to have faith in the plan.

At least… At least there were no civilians around the Champ de Mars, and the Eiffel Tower looked empty too, no traffic whatsoever in their direction, right? A part of the plan had worked, and Mayor Bourgeois’s anti-akuma operation had undeniably improved over the last three months. From the corner of her eye, the Crimson Empress could see Laelaps, Tiger Eye and Viperion running towards Acherontia. They couldn’t reach him in time, and the next sweep of his monstrous wings sent them right where they had come from. That slight loss of focus from the Crimson Empress was all that Mayura would have needed to kick her right in the chin, had Queen Bee not been there to push her to the side and to retaliate with a kick of her own that grazed the side of her enemy’s cheek. Not that it would have hurt a lot, their opponent’s footing was all wrong, she didn’t put enough weight in her attacks to cause any real damage.

The repeated sound of the gigantic moth’s legs against the magic shield ceased, Ladybug’s groan as she got up, Chat Noir’s shallow breath, it was all audible, too loud. And something else, something dripping, viscous. Mayura’s forced smile turned into an equally forced grin as she jumped backwards, dodging the Crimson Empress’s sabre thrust, but just barely. And Mayura’s grin widened, and this wasn’t simply because she had recovered her hand fan. It was the parody of a grin. Her pupils were unusually wide. This couldn’t be good. The Empress turned around hesitantly and she immediately wished she hadn’t. Acherontia’s proboscis had inserted itself in one of the golden wall’s cracks, a liquid pouring from it. Whatever it was, it affected the magical shield, its glow tarnishing visibly. The Shell-ter was melting away.

In a burst of scarlet, Jade Turtle’s cage was no more, Acherontia vanished as it landed on the Champ de Mars’s lawn, and outside of the insistent rustle of a hundred wings, all was still desolate. In the place of the mastodons, it was Hawk Moth himself who touched the ground.
For a moment, the heroes all stood there, completely paralysed, the moths flying in circles behind him. They had almost forgotten what he truly looked like, how tall he was, taller than Viperion, even, how gaunt, too. He was dressed smartly, a simple suit, perfectly tailored, which made the dull silvery cuirass he wore all the more glaring. On the right side of the chest plate was the Butterfly brooch, protected behind a glass window of some sorts, on the left side, an empty slot. It was the sister model to Mayura’s. Though all eyes were on Hawk Moth, he didn’t spare Ladybug or the other heroes a single glance.

It only took one snap his fingers, and all the people who had been trapped inside the golden walls walked slowly, lining up next to Hawk Moth the way an army would have in front of its commander. They came to a halt. The Crimson Empress found herself unable to move as the tall man examined the crowd of immobile civilians with glowing butterfly outlines in front of their faces, a rare, self-satisfied smirk grazing his lips. He looked at them with genuine curiosity, as though they were part of some sort of macabre exhibition in the open air.

“Alright, that’s enough!” Chat Noir’s voice broke the silence.

He was the first to try to hit him, and for a second, Hawk Moth’s face betrayed surprise when a dark orb formed between the boy’s hands. Soon, however, the man’s expression turned into boredom. He barely flinched when the deadly-looking projectile was hurled at him. A single glowing feather intercepted the attack in a flash of purplish light and Mayura gave Hawk Moth a weary look as the feather sunk into the dark sphere, which immediately turned a dark violet before dissolving itself. But Chat Noir wasted no time and already, he was on the move. Mayura didn’t put herself between Hawk Moth and his assailant. Not that the man would have needed her protection.

He dodged the baton thrown his way— it bounced back and Chat Noir caught it—, the roundhouse kick aimed at his head, and the next couple of punches without breaking a sweat. No quickly enough, a black claw grazed his cheek and a single drop of blood trickled down the man’s face. He grabbed Chat Noir’s fist with his left hand before the young man could land his uppercut. Hawk Moth’s grip quivered for a moment, but not as much as his opponent’s arm. The Crimson Empress’s stomach sunk. He took a step forward, and there was barely centimetres between the two of them. He inspected the clawed hand and shook his head, disappointed. The Black Cat’s ring was on Chat Noir’s other paw.

“Cata—”

It all happened in the blink of an eye. Hawk Moth let go of Chat Noir’s fist, his stance shifted as he outstretched his right arm, his hand closed. The blow was powerful enough to send the boy reeling backwards as though he had been a ragdoll. Laelaps grabbed him before he hit the ground.
Ladybug ran to check on him immediately. The smile he offered her was strained, his breathing was uneven, he could barely stand on his own two feet. When she turned to look at Hawk Moth, Ladybug’s face was impassible. That pose… She was going to fight him too. The Crimson Empress had to resist the impulse to tackle her down to the ground, to keep her from getting anywhere near the man. A curtain of scarlet moths rose in front of him before Ladybug got the chance to reach him, forcing her to stop dead in her tracks. When it raised, where the unnaturally still civilians had stood was a crowd of monochrome akumatised soldiers.

“I must ask you, before it all begins,” Hawk Moth said. “Will you give me your Miraculouses?”

“After all this time, still asking the same question,” Chat Noir spoke humourlessly as he tried to regain his breath. “I guess you actually can’t teach old monkeys new tricks.”

“We’d rather die than let you get your hands on them.” Ladybug's voice trembled with determination, and this was enough for the Crimson Empress to go back to an en garde position.

“I thought you would say that,” Hawk Moth shook his head. “A shame, really, I thought we could have a sensible conversation, like grown ups do. But I had prepared for this answer. Meet me at the Eiffel Tower when you will have changed your mind, all of you. I am sure my collaborators here will be very persuasive. I hope to see you soon!”

He turned his back on them and walked away from them, catching another white feather that was thrown his way. Immediately, the storm of scarlet spread in all directions, the Crimson Empress could barely make out Mayura holding on to one of Acherontia’s legs. They needed to fall back, and reach one of the meeting points, one with clear visibility, immediately. Where was Marinette? The others? She couldn’t sense them, only Hawk Moth, the rustling sound of a thousand wings flapping at once. A gush of wind knocked her off her feet, and she had to shield her eyes. She had to get up, she’d be dead weight if she stayed on the ground. This was what heroes were for, weren’t they? Getting up and saving the day? She forced herself up.

The swarm flew past them and she could see the others at last, and the akumatised figures towering over them. She couldn’t explain why, but rather than terrified or determined, she felt unexplainably annoyed, angry, almost. And Ladybug was looking at her with fear in her eyes.

Scarlet moths were covering the Crimson Empress’s forearm.
Bonjour, bonsoir!

Everything hurts, doesn't it? Well don't worry, it is going to hurt even more next Monday and the one after that as well, and maybe the one after if I decide to split Duel 37 part 3 into two parts because the thing is more than 11,000 words long.

Have you paid attention to Nathalie during the last few chapters? All the way back to chapter… Whew, 33? Yeah, you might want to re-read them with that in mind, it might play a role later on.

I can't wait to show you what's coming!

In the meantime, if you want to ask me stuff on Tumblr or see previews for the other things I'm interesting in (no preview for “En garde” until “Battle for Paris” is over, I don't want to spoil anything), please do so, it's right here!

À lundi!
The world was spinning around her, blurry, grainy, growing dimmer, spots of colours dancing before her eyes, and then absolutely nothing. Everything was muffled, muted, almost, yet the sound of her breathing had gotten much louder in her ears. Chat Noir was yelling something, panicked for a second, she could hear him but not make out the words, Queen Bee too, a melody played on a lyre, but these noises were drowned, replaced with an ambient, persisting drone, getting louder and louder. She tried to lift her arm. It was heavy, too heavy, as though it had been made of lead, her grip on her sabre tight. She had the impression that the earth was shaking beneath her feet, as though something heavy and immense was stomping. Her legs felt weak, she couldn’t stand up anymore. Something was enveloping her. She couldn’t lose, she couldn’t let Ladybug fight alone, she—

All went dark and silent.

When Kagami managed to get up again, she was in the middle of a landscape of deep red, nothing but an empty expanse stretching itself into infinity and a dark sky that announced a storm. The Dragon pendant… She couldn’t find the pendant, and the clothes she wore weren’t the ones she had chosen for the day, in their place, a red lamé, not unlike one of those she’d usually wear when training with M. D’Argencourt, or her mother. She had this awful family ring on, too. At least these were familiar things. Still, no sabre, no phone, no bag. There were other people, too far off for her voice to carry to them. And she was feverish, her throat felt too dry for her to speak, let alone yell. She turned her head slightly to the right … Absolutely nothing. When she looked back at where the other human shapes had been, nothing. She must have imagined them. People didn’t disappear all of a sudden

There was no one else here, no one to get her out of here. Kagami felt cold at the thought. No. She couldn’t just stay there, standing, gaping, it wasn’t what she was meant to do. She had places to go, she remembered. Hesitantly, she took a step forward, and then another. This seemed safe enough, that dirt wouldn’t suddenly collapse underneath her feet. She had to get the pendant back, wherever it was, an exit, a way to return to Paris. They were all waiting for her. Such a place couldn’t possibly exist, could it? So why did it feel so tangible? Where was she? She felt her ankle sink into something… Some kind of wet soil… No, something moving, living. Her eyes dropped to the ground and she paled.

She had stepped into a sea of insects, hundreds, thousands of them, caterpillars, crawling and creeping. Kagami unstuck her leg, tried to get all these larvae off her stocking frantically, and ran, ran as fast as she could. Behind her, the ground was slowly shifting, turning itself into more and more maggots She had been wrong earlier, it wasn’t just a desert. And there had been people here
with her, too, only they hadn’t managed to escape. Her lungs were painful, her throat and feet ached, but she kept on running. She could see it now, not too far, some kind of shape, perhaps a house, she was still too far to make it out clearly. A house, or rather a manor, standing alone in the middle of of this expanse. It didn’t take long for her to make up her mind, she had nowhere else to go. She should have been relieved to find that this expanse was not empty, but there was something about the place that exuded gloom, unease… And for a moment, she was truly afraid.

The door wasn’t locked, but Kagami had to pull with all her might to force it open. She had the feeling she shouldn’t have come here, that she wasn’t meant to go here. Calling the interior dismal-looking would have been too kind, the lamps flickered, the tapestry was ripped in many places, the curtains were moth-eaten. It was that last realisation that made her stomach lurch. She was in the monster’s lair, this was the only sensible explanation. As to confirm it, a deep growl echoed in the distance. He must have taken her at some point. But it didn’t make any sense; unless she had been out for a long time, she couldn’t have moved to somewhere so remote, as far as she knew, there were no deserts in Paris, and there were no known deserts that turned into insects. So where was “here”? She needed to keep moving.

“… Let me give you the strength you need for vengeance,” a voice boomed in the distance—or was from below?—and Kagami didn’t need to be told whose it was. “You have been wronged and I am offering you a way to bring justice to this unfair world! Is it not unfair that you find yourself so powerless? Is it not…”

Kagami shook her head at that, and stopped listening to the man’s impassioned, and insane speech. He was delusional and his words were honey traps. Vengeance? Who did she need to avenge herself from? She was fairly certain that by the end of Hawk Moth’s tirade, he would have found a way to put the blame on Ladybug, Chat Noir and the others. She knew better than to be impressed by a loud voice and an over-practised, over-written harangue. It would not help her get out of here. She kept moving, the sound of her steps echoing in the empty house.

The corridors were endless, there was no way they actually fitted inside the manor. And though she couldn’t explain why, she could feel herself regaining some of her boldness. She’d find a way out, somehow. Ladybug needed her help, Paris needed her help; there was no way she’d allow herself to become Riposte again, or whatever Hawk Moth wanted her to become. She couldn’t, wouldn’t give herself to fear. Perhaps it was just her, but the air didn’t feel so icy anymore.

Kagami passed by a hall of mirrors, and she took a glance at her reflection. The Crimson Empress looked back at her, a shining butterfly outline in front of her face, her pendant’s light flickering. She blinked and there was nothing in the mirrors, nothing but Kagami Tsurugi wearing that lamé, looking exhausted, her hair slightly shorter than it usually was, looking somewhat younger too, her cheeks a little fuller. She was hallucinating things, and she had no idea where the real stopped and the illusion started. No, it couldn’t be possible, reflections didn’t change all of a sudden. So either it
had been a fake, or it was her own shape, or everything… At that realisation, the world before her 
eyes flickered, creaked and there was a slight weight around her neck than hadn’t been there a few 
seconds before. Her hands were gloved in crimson, and there was a sabre on her hip.

“Finally,” Longg said. “You remember who you are, and not what he wanted to make of you.” 
They sounded exhausted but glad. “Working with the tendrils of Hawk Moth’s mind is certainly 
not the most pleasant thing I have done over the course of my long life, operating discretely so that 
he won’t notice us… But you regained courage and for that I am glad, Tikki helped too. The power 
he has over you is dwindling.”

“Where are we?” the Crimson Empress asked. “What is going on?”

“This is us fighting back against that dangerous man,” Longg replied. “The akuma is still in you, 
but you haven’t turned yet. I don’t know where your physical body is, but it hasn’t metamorphosed 
into something else. Nooroo cannot make everyone into a champion in the blink of an eye, and 
with so many people to turn at once, his is not the best of jobs.”

“These moths were supposed to make this easier for him,” the Crimson Empress realised.

“And those Hawk Moth fails to anger beforehand… He tries to take them by force into his 
mindscape, and there he crushes them and makes them his. The larvae from earlier… It was 
tasteless, really. But it is undoubtedly his plan. Demoralise, then manipulate. Truly a complete lack 
of class. And from what I have seen, his new akumas are approximative, primitive, even, he hasn’t 
been very thorough in his search for new powers. Tru—”

“Have I been compromised? Does he know?”

“Have you wondered why you were wearing that lamé, why your hair was all off?” Longg waited 
for their hatchling to understand. “Yes, to rekindle a fire, there must be embers. A trace of your 
former akumatisation. Why bother creating something from scratch when you can re-use what has 
one existed? Hawk Moth’s magic recognised a signature, Kagami Tsurugi’s. He probably assumes 
he has akumatised your civilian self once again, or that he is about to do so, this was a trick of 
mine. I know what you are about to ask; the other wielders have not fallen prey to him, there are no 
kwami signatures here, Barkk’s pup shrugged it off fairly quickly. They were lucky, and in your 
case, it did not help that so many of these moths were on you. Frankly, I am surprised, and happy, 
that you have not been turned yet. Tikki’s presence has helped you resist too, I believe”

This was a lot to digest at once. The Crimson Empress sat on the parquet floor, her legs crossed, 
and breathed in and out, slowly. She needed clarity. All of this… It still didn’t tell her how to get
out of this place, and if Longg could only slightly alter things without Hawk Moth noticing, turning the lair into something else, using mirrors, and if she had been the one able to free herself from this illusory form, thanks to the Dragon kwami… She wouldn’t be able to fly out of there, would she? It would make her incredibly obvious, and should the wielder of the Butterfly Miraculous see her, he was still the one in power here, the reason why that butterfly outline around her face hadn’t disappeared yet. And if he were to put two and two together… The ground vibrated, and she could feel the crawling of insects again, getting closer to the manor.

The building’s roof structure shook dangerously, she could feel the rotten wood creaking and cracking. There was a loud thumping sound, and another, and another still, getting closer. The Crimson Empress dived to the side just as a massive beam came crashing down, piercing through the ceiling. And the entire world twitched for an instant. That was it. She’d have to think and act quickly, but she had found the key. She’d have to tear the curtain, to reduce it to shreds and step out the stage, run away from that sick play in which she had been forced to play a role. Hawk Moth’s mindscape could only tolerate that much change at once. It would take too long with her sabre, she couldn’t just cut small sections of the ground at a time, she needed something truly destructive, not a Cataclysm per say but if it could come close to it. And something in the back of her mind told her than she could do it, that she had it in her.

She peered through the hole in the ceiling. The leaden sky was still the same, threatening, as could be before a storm. That was it. She had tried it once and once only but if it worked, then it’d be too quick for Hawk Moth to notice, too much for his twisted little stage to withstand at once. This was insane but she had to try. And she could feel it, the tension in the cold clouds high above. Longg had read her mind, it seemed. Despite the exhaustion, they beamed at her proudly. She would certainly de-transform immediately after, but if she had guessed right… At least she wouldn’t be out of power here. The wave of larvae was fast approaching.

The world was still around the Crimson Empress, growing dim, out of her own volition this once, as she outstretched her arm, her palm facing the sky. Longg had re-entered the suit, and she was almost sure they were the one teaching her the movement. She focused, time dilating around her and she could visualise it all clearly, a myriad of thin, glowing threads of silvery light, their source beyond her reach. She extended her index and middle finger higher; one of the streaks shone brightly as her stance shifting, almost an en garde pose, her left hand closed around her wrist. The surge of power pouring from above into her hand was frightening, awe inspiring, and she could bend it to her will. She whispered the words as she lowered her extended fingers, snapping them.

The Crimson Empress could see the flash of lightning descending from the sky, its gleam almost blinding, before she heard the deafening uproar that came with it. It had worked, her surroundings were falling apart, twitching but not yet fading away as the bolt tore through the manor. She could feel her back resting against something hard, her head on something softer, the cold sweat on her forehead and something else too, cool and wet, a compress perhaps? She was drifting away, and she could hardly breathe, her shape was melting away. But it didn’t matter, the butterfly outline around her face was gone, she was escaping this hellish place at last, she was going home.
“… de-evilise!…”

Everything hurt as Kagami gasped for breath, and she couldn’t quite hear things clearly yet, her ears were ringing. She had the feeling that if she tried to open her eyes, she’d have to squeeze them shut again because of how uncomfortably bright she’d find her surroundings. And indeed, all she could make out was a vague spot of red, a flashing light and then darkness again. A second flash, coming from her body. Her transformation was off, she was sure of that, she had tied her shoes too tightly and it was uncomfortable, while on the other hand, her shirt’s fabric was always nice. She had that weird bracelet made of horse hair on her left wrist, with that gem… And her hair was getting in her face, which never happened when she had horns. She was somewhere safe, obviously. And that voice…

“Marinette?” Her voice felt dry in her throat, hoarse. She hesitantly opened her eyes again and was met with her girlfriend’s face a mere centimetres away from hers. “Are… Is everything…”

“Everything’s a bit of a big mess at the moment.” Marinette laughed — or was it a sob?— “but you’ve fought it, you’ve fought it and you’ve won! So… Yeah, a little better.”

“I’m sorry I let you down,” Kagami whispered.

“You haven’t let anyone down,” Marinette replied, caressing her cheek — it had been a sob, before, definitely a sob. She turned her back to Kagami, and rummaged through the girl’s satchel. “You’ve managed to keep Hawk Moth from gaining a tremendously powerful ally. It’s… It’s amazing, really, I don’t know if I could have pulled it off. I’m just so glad you’re ba— No, Kagami Tsurugi, you stay right where you are!”

“But the city…”

“Yes, Hawk Moth has managed to akumatise a great many people, some we’ve fought before, some others we’d never met, and things aren’t looking too good, you’ll have to see for yourself later. But you were out for a good half hour with a nasty fever and I’m sorry to tell you that, but you look like hell. Now, where is it, we used it not five minutes ago…There, found them!”

Marinette handed Kagami two pills — the painkillers she had brought— and a bottle of water. It
wasn’t easy to straighten up, and the compress that was still on her forehead fell on the linoleum floor with a wet noise. Swallowing down everything was uncomfortable, the medicine felt like broken glass in her throat. Had she screamed? She didn’t dare ask Marinette. They were in some kind of staff room, it seemed, in a place she had never been to before. One of the meeting points, she guessed, and judging by this interior, the design of that closed door, it could only be Montparnasse Tower. Longg was feasting on lychees, devouring the fruits whole, unblinkingly. They seemed to be recovering fairly quickly, all things considered. They glanced at the wielder of their Miraculous and gave her a proud smile.

Marinette came to sit next to Kagami, and took her hand in hers, intertwining their fingers. Kagami drew a shaky breath and gulped, and it took all of her might to fight back the tears. They stayed there in silence, holding hands, for a good three minutes, according to the clock on the wall. Kagami got up when Marinette did, and even she was surprised to find that she did not lose her balance when she took a step forward. Still, she was a little pale. She wasn’t the only one The others, she learned, were either recovering in some other rooms — the tower had been completely deserted, they weren’t cramped to say the least — or standing on the building’s rooftop, staying on the lookout for anything new or…

“Phones are useless, network connection is rubbish and there’s no WiFi either,” Marinette said when Kagami looked for her phone. “Queen Bee, Chat Noir and Laelaps should be back soon, hopefully with Carapace and news.”

“Alright,” Kagami nodded. At least, she’d have an excuse for not answering the texts her mum might have sent her. She glanced at her reflection in the room’s mirror. “Can I… Go somewhere to wash my face? I feel kind of gross.”

“The corridors are empty,” Tikki informed them. She sounded oddly serene considering what had happened. Perhaps it was a kwami thing.

The cold water Kagami splashed on her face was like another wake-up call, and a welcome one, too, it washed the weariness away, at least partly. All things considered, she didn’t look that bad, a little tired perhaps, but no longer as livid as she had probably been, her eyes had adjusted to the light, her vision was clear, no buzzing in her ears. She drank some more water. Next to her, Marinette wasn’t staring at her worriedly like she had a few minutes ago. Kagami wouldn’t have called herself “good as new” just yet, though, she still felt a little weak. Her girlfriend had mind-reading skills, it seemed.

“You should eat something, it’s a little past lunchtime. Oh, and if you don’t want to eat one of the granola bars in your satchel… Wait, never mind, I just remembered that Viperion ate your lunchbox. Now in his defence, he did faint and he woke up feeling hungry. So, either what’s in
your bag, or the restaurant’s still open downstairs I mean, technically, it’s not, but there’s nobody down there, you know, and the kitchens are kind of empty so… Err, I’m sure they won’t mind a few things missing in their pantry!”

Using her position as a hero just to get free food did not sit well with Kagami’s principles, as tempting as it sounded. Though the way Marinette had described it… It wasn’t often that she rambled, and the few times it had occurred recently had been associated with a feeling of guilt, or a last minute lie. No, they wouldn’t actually steal from a restaurant. The granola bar would do, and Marinette gave her a homemade biscuit to go with it. It had certainly seen better days, though it was much more enjoyable to eat than to look at. She ate slowly, and sound found out that she was hungrier than she remembered. Marinette’s stomach decided to growl too. They did leave money on the counter when they left the kitchen.

Perhaps it was the food, or Longg’s doing, or it could have been her girlfriend’s kiss, the medicine she had swallowed earlier that finally worked, probably a blend of all of that, but Kagami could feel her strength returning. There was no way she would stand low until it was all over, she had her part to play in this. Marinette had understood it too, and when she gave her an apple which Kagami almost refused, she added, “can’t fight with an empty stomach.” They were back in the staff room where her satchel was, the Dragon kwami looked at her knowingly, and motioned towards a little red and black braid sticking out of her bag.

“Oh, before we go back,” Kagami started, “I just… Never mind, it’s silly.”

“No it’s not,” Marinette smiled. “What is it?”

“I made you a bracelet and I didn’t get the chance to give it to you before,” Kagami said, crouching down to take it. “For luck and everything else you want it to be.”

“Oh,” Marinette whispered very eloquently, and for a second, her eyes shone a little brighter. “I… It’s not silly at all, really, I think I’ll need it more than anything. I… Thank you!”

“So…”

“I’d like to wear it now! If you could just help me put it on, or…”

Kagami’s hands didn’t shake when she tied the bracelet around Marinette’s right wrist. Her touch
lingered on her girlfriend’s hand before she took a step back. They exchanged a glance.

“Tikki, spots on!”

“Longg, crown me!”

Transforming felt... Different, the Crimson Empress couldn’t explain why, but there was something new, and the way Ladybug looked at her, with surprise and admiration, confirmed that it wasn’t just a subjective impression or her senses playing a trick on her. She glanced down at her hands. The outline of a lightning bolt was finely embroidered in small golden scales, starting at the back of her hand and continuing up her arm. She studied her reflection in the mirror. It wasn’t just her arms, her horns too were streaked with gold, her mask and the rest of her suit as well, her tabi boots were slightly more pointy without feeling uncomfortable. She had to fight the small rush of excitement, she would have all the time she needed to gush about her new form some other day, if they— No, when they won. They walked out the door.

“Last time I checked, Tiger Eye was on the roof and Viperion was recovering from... But you’ll see it with your own eyes,” Ladybug said as they walked up a flight of stairs.

“And now I’m a lot better,” Viperion’s voice shot back. “By the way, thanks for the food, Red, it was amazing! Oh, and it’s nice to have you back! I love the new look.”

“It is nice to be back,” the Crimson Empress answered. Wryly, she added, “thank you for putting the lunchbox back in my satchel afterwards. I hope you enjoyed the scrambled eggs for me.”

“I’ll pay you back someday, somehow, promise,” Viperion laughed as he joined them.

It was hard to say what was the most striking, between how heavy the air felt, how dark the sky was and the sorry state of their city. The streets below the Montparnasse Tower were deserted, and it was the same for the rest of the city, if not for the scarlet silhouettes, from giant monsters to people soaring into the air, but they were the most visible around the Eiffel Tower. Which no longer looked like the Eiffel Tower, there was something wrapped around it, a veil of some sorts, a dirty grey colour. A gigantic cocoon, the Crimson Empress understood. It had to be Hawk Moth’s centre of operations, it fit well with his sense of the grandiose. He must have been certain of his victory, to make himself this obvious.
There was something else about the Champ de Mars, however, which the Crimson Empress could make out more clearly when Tiger Eye handed her a pair of binoculars — not the ones that had been in her satchel, she was happy to notice — with a slight smile and a pat in the back. A great structure made of stone, a snake, she could even see the detail of its scales, formed a circle around the area, and though it had been broken in multiple place, it had undoubtedly slowed down the akumatised people who had not able to scale these walls, holding back the dangerous mob long enough for more civilians to find shelter, enough time for them to fall back to Montparnasse Tower too, the tower which was also protected by a similar wall. This was all the Crimson Empress needed to forgive Viperion for eating her lunch, and it was no wonder he had needed to recover.

It wasn’t a static landscape, far from it, there was the occasional flash of light, billows of smoke were rising from the Buttes Chaumont, the carcass of a helicopter, crashed in the Seine, a good chunk of the Arc de Triomphe was missing and the Sacré Cœur didn’t long too good either. The smell was putrid. The Crimson Empress was relieved to find that the Dupain Cheng bakery was intact, rue Troyon as well, the Couffaine houseboat too. Instead of burning everything to the ground, Hawk Moth’s troops had focused on spectacular destruction. The goal was to lure the heroes, even a child could have understood that, and should they decide to go to any of these locations, the welcoming committee would certainly try to rip them to shreds. On the bright side of things, or perhaps not, all things considered, there were no scarlet butterflies flying in the Parisian sky, it was unlikely any of them would get akumatised now. They only had... A hundred enemies to face, certainly more? They had never known odds this poor. And yet, the Crimson Empress’s fear did not paralyse her.

“So, we wait for the others to return,” she said as she handed the binoculars back to Tiger Eye.

“They said they’d be there around a quarter to one,” Ladybug nodded. “Which should be in… Five minutes? And we didn’t get any call for help so they should be fine!”

If by “fine” she meant “not dead” it was an accurate statement, all four of them arrived on the rooftop thanks to Queen Bee’s wings and spinning top, they were all conscious, they could all stand up, all of their limbs were still attached. Otherwise, it wasn’t so pretty, Chat Noir had dirt on his face and an ice pack pressed against his cheek, he winced when Ladybug hugged him. Queen Bee was dishevelled and gladly accepted the bottle of water Viperion gave her, Laelaps was out of breath and famished. Only Carapace looked somewhat presentable, certainly because he had stayed at Master Fu’s for most of this ongoing attack. They hadn’t come empty-handed. In a tightly-closed bag were a good dozen of scarlet objects, their akumatised owners had been knocked out cold, if the Crimson Empress had to make a guess. Chat Noir didn’t speak until all the objects were destroyed and the moths purified, his comrades stayed equally silent. These weren’t shiny white butterflies that flew away, but dull grey ones.

“Master Fu was right, wasn’t he, Red?” Carapace smiled, making her snap out of the contemplation. “I’ve missed most of this but you’re still with us!”
The Crimson Empress nodded and let Chat Noir and Queen Bee brief them on the situation. The shelters they had visited had been full, but most things worked, there was enough food there to last them for days if needed. The Dupain Chengs were there, though their daughter was still missing. The small team had managed to keep the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital safe and with the help of some civilians, they had been able to build barricades while still leaving a section of the road free for ambulances to access. Mayura had been seen leading a troop of akumatised tourists through the Père Lachaise, they hadn’t fought for long — still, this encounter had been the origin of Chat Noir’s contusion— and they had forced her to retreat.

“He really found a way to recycle many of his villains,” Laelaps said. “Gigantitan has returned, that’d make a great headline for a newspaper, Animan’s back too, and so many others it’d be a pain to list them all. Fortunately we absolutely wrecked Pyrotechnician, she won’t be burning anything down anytime soon. I’ll be able to spot Mayura fairly easily now that I know what she smells like. Oh, and we’ve gotten a flare gun from some of the firefighters to tell them where to retrieve people that may need help. That’s for the good stuff. Otherwise, we’ve still got… I don’t know…”

“Certainly more than a hundred goons to take down, not counting the contamination-based akumas,” Queen Bee groaned as she sat down. “We’ve found a few more hotspots and we’ve added them to the map, since having a functioning telephone and internet signal is apparently too complicated these days.”

“There are probably other akumas going about in the streets, but those we’ve spotted…” Chat Noir took out a rumbled map… “Were at the Jardin du Luxembourg, the Jardin des Plantes, and of course inside the Gare d’Austerlitz because otherwise, it’d be too easy. Place de la République is pretty crowded too, in front of the Galeries Lafayette, obviously, the Louvre, the Arc de Triomphe. The Champ de Mars and Chaillot are the most crowded but I’m sure you could see this for yourselves. There’s a squad on the move lead by Stormy Weather and Darkblade near the entrance of the Sorbonne Nouvelle. We’ve forced them to leave the Buttes Chaumont and the Père Lachaise and we ruined the Grand Palais so that they couldn’t occupy it so you’re welcome.”

“Lemme guess, the Palais de l’Élysée was empty and all the officials had been evacuated?” Tiger Eye raised an eyebrow.

Chat Noir grimaced and nodded at that.

“You four get some rest,” Ladybug said, “there’s plenty of food downstairs, and even cheese, but be sure to leave some money for what you’ve eaten if you can?”

“Well I didn’t exactly bring my wallet with me,” Chat Noir shrugged.
“Never mind then, try to be there in twenty minutes? Great job, everyone.”

Carapace stayed, the three others were happy to excuse themselves, no doubt they’d de-transform as soon as they’d be out of sight. Moving from place to place would be exhausting in itself, more so with no traffic and no metro, only two of them could fly and one more could swing, it’d still force five of them to walk boringly. Viperion had once told them he knew how to drive, but they had yet to see it. Perhaps they could borrow a car? People did tend to leave their keys there, as they had been asked to. Ladybug started sketching an itinerary with Tiger Eye’s help, the Crimson Empress, Viperion and Carapace took Tiger Eye’s spot and watched in a mixture of horror and fascination as Gorizilla tried to scale the Montmartre funicular.

It was a risky plan that Ladybug presented them when Chat Noir, Laelaps and Queen Bee returned, risky but it could work. Fighting everyone head on would not be possible, but containing the flux of akumas, cornering them and taking them out methodically was doable, and if they were lucky, they wouldn’t have to return to the Montparnasse Tower, or to any of the other meeting points they had thought of. None of them were unhappy with the roles they had been assigned, Chat Noir wasn’t even tired to play the role of the bait after all this time, Laelaps didn’t mind either. They’d mostly play different parts later anyway.

The ride to the Panthéon, their first stop, was not the most pleasant one, and while Viperion certainly knew how to drive a car, at least according to his own words, doing the same with a bigger vehicle, say, a bus, not so much. Chat Noir jokingly blamed it on the fact that they had packed it with bottles of water and iceboxes filled to the brim with food they had “borrowed” from the Montparnasse Tower’s restaurants and cafeterias, probably to ease the mood. Not that it worked well, and he soon stopped trying to be funny afterwards.

It did not help that there was the constant risk of being spotted by an one of Hawk Moth’s soldiers on their way. Well, Ladybug’s powers would certainly fix the city, including the few things they had bumped into on their way and when Viperion nervously tried to park the bus. They had to kick the doors open. Rue Clotilde was relatively narrow, when compared to the adjacent streets, and it was no wonder this had been the chosen battlefield for their first skirmish. The Crimson Empress flew to the top of the dome. It would be her mission to take any aerial fighters down, her mission to keep an eye on the entire operation.

Tiger Eye’s claws had always looked sharper, bigger than Chat Noir’s, and the Crimson Empress shouldn’t have been surprised to find how easy it had been for her to chop down trees. Certainly, the owners of the townhouse wouldn’t mind a few oaks and hornbeams, half a dozen of them, missing from their private garden, it was for a good cause. After the trees had been fell, Viperion and Carapace, standing on the garden wall — low compared with the building surrounding it, still high enough so that no human being, not even the tallest of basketball players, could reach its top
— would lift the trees one by one, Ladybug’s yo-yo and Queen Bee’s spinning top kept them bound together, each of them at one end of the street. Just like they had predicted, Chat Noir had managed to draw a small scarlet crowd out of the Jardin des Plantes, Laelaps had done the same with the akumas from the Jardin du Luxembourg.

And no flying enemy in sight so far, which was perfect. Or perhaps the Crimson Empress had spoken too soon, someone on a kind of glider— Marc Anciel?— was among the pursuers. She thought they had gone to visit their grandparents for the holiday… It didn’t matter, she knew how to defeat them, they had rehearsed that. Reverser didn’t stand a chance, they were too focused on chasing after Laelaps. The Crimson Empress silently flew behind them, kicked them off their glider, caught the suddenly terrified villain and dropped them off inside the garden. Tiger Eye’s abilities came in handy once more. She had unlocked an ability that would cut things short fairly easily. The Eye of the Tiger — she had named the technique herself, Roarr had been on board with it— allowed her to temporarily detect her opponent’s weaknesses and knock them out instantly if she managed to land her blow. One more de-akumatised civilian, only so many more to go.

Just as the Crimson Empress got back to her post, she saw Laelaps running. The riskier part of the plan was about to start. She got closer to the rue Clotilde, following the wielder of the Dog torque, and judging from the noise clamour, she guessed that Chat Noir was on his way too. Truly, Hawk Moth had done a shoddy job with the new people he had akumatised, it seemed that they could barely look at their surroundings and make sense of it all. Seriously, completely missing all these Miraculous wielders at both ends of a street carrying objects big enough to block? Anger had really done a number on Hawk Moth’s lackeys, it wouldn’t have been an exaggeration to say that the newly-akumatised people had gotten the short end of the deal.

Laelaps stopped in the middle of the street, and a few seconds later, Chat Noir joined her. It wasn’t long before the first hostile face showed up, and many others after that. From her vantage point, the Crimson Empress could see the tide of scarlet filling the rue Clotilde. Only ten more… Six… She’d deal with the two lagging behind personally. She yelled the signal, the plan came into motion. Before the akumatised crowd could reach Chat Noir and Laelaps, the boy extended his staff, the girl grabbed on his shoulder. They jumped on the garden wall, Ladybug, Carapace, Viperion and Queen Bee dropped the cut trees, effectively blocking the road, and the wielder of the Turtle bracelet jumped into the angry mob, bracing himself. It was as though someone had dropped a piece of meat in an aquarium full of pirañas, a single spot of green slowly disappearing under the mass of red, akumatised people and monstrosities climbing on each other, a scarlet panther pouncing on him, and—

“Shell-ter!”

The protection field expanded in the blink of an eye, sending everything and everyone standing in its way backwards and in a matter of seconds, the pavement was covered with unconscious scarlet bodies. Those that were still standing were too stunned to fight properly, for the most of them, and the few that had managed to avoid Carapace’s attack altogether… The Crimson Empress, Queen Bee and Tiger Eye made short work of them, not even allowing them to make use of their powers,
while Ladybug de-akumatised all those who were no longer threats.

Carapace gladly — and shakily— took the bottle of water Chat Noir handed him. These were a
good thirty people that would no longer be Hawk Moth’s puppets, including Otis Césaire. Laelaps
did her best to hide her relief as she helped him to his feet, leading him inside the Panthéon. None
of them had been wounded, it was perhaps the only bright side in all of this. Queen Bee and the
Crimson Empress were sent to check on the Jardin du Luxembourg and the Jardin des Plantes
respectively to make sure no one needed assistance. A few akumatised people were still there,
taking on them while alone would be too risky, though from the look of it, they were rather weak.

“I’d say we’ve got five minutes before they notice something’s truly off,” Queen Bee said the
moment they touched the ground.

“There is little visibility inside the bus,” the Crimson Empress added, “but we still need to keep
track of our surroundings. Flying next to you will give us all away.”

And so, the two girls jumped on the bus’s roof and held on tight to what they could as Viperion
drove them to their next destination, the weather was getting colder, the light dimmer, and they had
to hop inside when it started hailing — the Crimson Empress had the feeling she could have
stopped this, but now was not the moment to waste her powers and tire herself— but not without
glancing at the figure flying above the Sorbonne’s dome. They’d have to stop there. So Aurore
Bauréal had been akumatised, again. Some old wounds never closed completely, did they? She
wasn’t alone, a small crowd was gathered on the square, Laelaps could sense them without having
to peer outside. The hailstones had gotten bigger, about the size of ping pong balls, and only the
other akumatised fighters had been spared by the projectiles.

“So we might not want to step outside and die by deadly ice cubes,” Chat Noir suggested. “We
may want to stop the weather lady first, and then take care of the rest of them. There shouldn’t be
people inside the Sorbonne”

“I can…” Viperion started.

“Fu thinks you’ll de-transform almost immediately if you use that now, so we have to make it
count,” Tiger Eye objected. “So, where’s that ma—”

Lightning struck a few metres away from the bus, and one of the few trees that hadn’t been
uprooted caught fire.
They had been found out, and Ladybug glared at Chat Noir when he pointed that out. The Crimson Empress acted on an impulse, and in that moment, she was more Longg than Kagami. She’d have to make this quick. She stepped outside the vehicle before the others could stop her. The hailstones did not touch her and melted away as she flew to meet Stormy Weather. Good, she could feel these red eyes on her, no longer focused on the rest of the heroes, but on her and her alone. The foe flew higher, the tip of her umbrella shining a sinister purple. The temperature dropped around them and the sinister grin on the akumatised girl’s face told it all. A silvery thread, coming from the umbrella, pointing towards the Crimson Empress.

“Hey, who toldja you could just dispel my hail like that?” she yelled.

“Who told you these powers were yours to wield?” the Crimson Empress shot back.

The silvery thread shone brightly and a bolt of electricity shot out of Stormy Weather’s umbrella.

The Crimson Empress extended her sword arm, the tip of her sheathed sabre connected with the surge of energy and she took it all, unblinkinglly. And an unexpected power boost too, she could feel it coursing through her veins, she wouldn’t be able to keep it in forever. Returning it to its sender would do no good to Stormy Weather, who kept firing at her erratically. The Crimson Empress closed the distance between them, ripped the umbrella out of its owner’s hands and threw it on the ground, immediately ending the hailstorm around them. Hopefully, someone would catch it, and the girl too the moment she stopped hovering above the Sorbonne. Hawk Moth’s goons were about to destroy the place where she had improved her fencing so much, and taught Marinette. She wouldn’t allow it.

She could feel it, lightning gathering on the sole of her feet, mixed with the usual gust of wind. On the rooftops were twelve akumatised people, on the square around about twenty more, not counting — her heart rate went up when she saw him— Darkblade and his foot soldiers. The Crimson Empress lunged, and the thunderous crack that rang out as she was propelled forward was the loudest sound she had ever heard. Nine, eight, seven left standing on the edifice, in a single sweeping motion that sent them crashing against the pitched roof. She jumped to the next building and repeated the motion, four left. She put her sabre next to one of the gargoyles before she continued. A lunge, a high kick, a jab, a crescent kick — she used the shoulder of the woman she had just knocked out as a springboard— an armlock to keep the man in Gondor getup from blowing his horn from the top of the dome. Ten incapacitated, only twenty more to go, and she had still most of that power in her.

Her sabre retrieved, the Crimson Empress did not waste time. She let herself fall from the top of the Chapelle Sainte Ursula, and the very second before her feet touched the ground, she released that built-up power again, leaving an indentation the shape of a footprint on the pavement. Nineteen,
eighteen, seventeen... And two more in one blow, she jumped to the side to avoid a barrel of wine thrown her way, and the pummel of her sabre brought the scarlet Gaul reeling backwards. Darkblade’s minions proved to be a great source of annoyance than she had expected. She dodged a halberd, her head almost got acquainted with a longsword and the butt of a spear caught her in the stomach, knocking the wind out of her, before she decided that she could at least shock them a little. The effect was immediate.

Still fourteen more to go, thirteen thanks to the Viperion and Tiger Eye pair, twelve, eleven, thanks to Chat Noir... Hawk Moth’s army was dwindling by the minute. Chat Noir had turned to face Darkblade now, and as it turned out, the blond boy was a perfectly capable fencer, who seemed to know his opponent’s move set fairly well. Still, it was M. D’Argencourt they were talking about, and his akumatised form was a nightmare, Chat Noir was losing ground, and when Ladybug came to his rescue, she wasn’t much better. Nine left, and the Crimson Empress’s heart skipped a beat when her girlfriend barely dodged the attack aimed at her head. She still had enough of that borrowed power for one last charge before she’d have to start drawing on her own strength.

It was truly amazing how slow time was when she dashed past Laelaps and Carapace, turning her sabre slightly upwards. Her fencing master had a solid metal helmet, surely he’d be able to handle a strong blow to the head with such protection, right? She couldn’t risk this. There had to be an other way, an opening somewhere... Or perhaps... She felt no satisfaction when she parried Darkblade’s attack, or when her riposte landed on her opponent’s weapon, breaking it into a thousand little pieces, freeing the scarlet moth contained in it. She immediately rolled to the side, swinging her sabre in time to avoid being crushed by a particularly spiky crozier. She yanked the unlikely weapon away from its owner, before tripping him. Was it seven or six?

She lunged, advanced, feinted... Legs weren’t part of the target areas in sabre fencing, but then again, nothing about this fight was very orthodox, using a sheathed sword or wielding the power of a divinity certainly wouldn’t stand well with the International Federation of Fencing. Five, four — Gustave, whose face she had been happy not to see ever since he had been expelled from the lycée Carnot back in January, would wake up with a nasty headache — two more in one go. She blew up a fire hydrant, making it only one enemy left standing, and brought that number to zero with a final disarming blow.

A swarm of ashen butterflies flew away weakly before falling to the ground, flapping their wings in vain as they shrivelled. The blue summer sky was back. When the Crimson Empress turned to check on her comrades in arms, she was met with six stunned faces, and her girlfriend looking at her, her mouth wide open.

“Well, I hope you enjoyed this impromptu show, because I may only be able to summon lightning once or twice on my own after this,” the Crimson Empress said matter-of-factly. She could feel her Miraculous’s Core Stone, pulsating slowly, as if to cool down. She too would need to take a few minutes to fully regain her composure. Her glance lingered on M. D’Argencourt’s silhouette. He
looked alright, a little shaken perhaps but otherwise alright. Her head still ached a little. Without a word, she went to the bus to rest her tired legs. The others heroes joined a minute or two later. They had left the freshly de-akumatised civilians inside the Sorbonne, where they would certainly be safe, or at least Ladybug hoped so.

Only five more stops before they returned to the Champs de Mars. They could win this. So why did Ladybug seem so apprehensive when she sat next to her and squeezed her hand?

“Duusuuu… Blinked for a second,” Carapace said worriedly as they drove past the town hall. “They were here for a second, then not, then here again… I don’t know what it means, but…”

It could mean nothing good, the Crimson Empress thought darkly as they drove away from the desolate place de la Sorbonne. Though none of her comrades said anything, she knew the feeling was shared by all of them.

Chapter End Notes

Et… Je suis de retour!

Sorry for last week, as you probably know if you follow me on Tumblr, my laptop decided to die last Saturday, which was rather inconvenient! Luckily enough, I had saved most of my stuff on hard drives and my laptop has been saved (and now I'm poor) so everything should be alright by now.

Duel 37 will be in four parts instead of three with a very very long third part, and I can't wait to show it all to you! But that'll have to wait for next Monday!

Still a baguette, bad English not intended…

À lundi prochain !
Perhaps it was her luck that allowed her to sidestep the scarlet limousine despite the deadly vehicle’s speed, perhaps it had been her lightning-fast reflexes, probably a blend of both. Either way, it had been a close one again. She grabbed on the rosy-cheeked chauffeur’s lapel as the human-sized toy car crashed into a tree. The butterfly escaped the damaged bonnet, she purified it, took the unconscious child under her arm and ran as quickly as her legs would allow.

“Viperion, on your right!” Ladybug yelled and the boy in question barely dodged Thierry Lafronde’s projectile, a rock which sunk into the ground with a heavy thud.

She should have known they couldn’t have followed through their original plan, she berated herself as she forced a door open and all but shoved the kid inside the hall, where he’d wake up with a slight headache and no recollection of the afternoon. Of course Hawk Moth’s army would not kindly wait for them; it had attacked the Louvre, and targeted the museum’s anti-akuma shelter. There had been the relief that her parents weren’t in there, the fear that they may have been in danger somewhere else too. Though Alya knew where her father was, her mother and big sister, she didn’t know, they hadn’t encountered Nino’s family either. There had been uncertainty, and chaos, people trapped under the rubble, so many wounded, some others needed to be rushed to the hospital immediately. There had been ambulances driving away from the Champ de Mars when it had all begun a good five hours ago, many more had been needed since then, the firefighters were overworked as well. With modern communication systems still unavailable for the most part, Paris was in a state of mayhem and confusion.

The fight at the Place de la République had been merciless, and the amber-coloured protective layer around most of them was cracked, Tiger Eye had been forced to de-transform to rest after her face to face with Princess Fragrance which had left her shaken. They hadn’t been able to make use of their surroundings, which had made the showdown against a scarlet sea of enemies, Gorizilla and two oddly silent amoks at their head all the more difficult. Ladybug was covered in small cuts and bruises; she was not the only one, if anything she was relatively unharmed compared with the other heroes, Viperion limped slightly, Laelaps had bandages around her stomach, the Crimson Empress wouldn’t admit it but her left little finger was probably broken. In a way, they matched the state of Paris quite well.

And the battle in front of the heavily scaffolded Galeries Lafayette was just as chaotic and
disorganised as the previous ones, for the time being. At least they weren’t fighting inside the department store like Ladybug had feared they would. At least there were fewer enemies for them to defeat, certainly not as many as during their face to face with Evillustrator and so many others at the Arc de Triomphe—he had been taken down by Queen Bee right away, handling all the others hadn’t been this easy— or against those at the Place de la République. At least the bus was still working, even though it had seen a few crashes. At least they still had food, water and painkillers and they had the upper hand here, she was sure of that. Ladybug threw her yo-yo to purify a scarlet butterfly — only twelve more to go, or was it eleven?— and looked around to assess the situation more clearly.

It was too soon to say that victory was theirs on this battlefield, but it would be a matter of minutes before it would be the case. And then one last fight. Carapace and Laelaps were a formidable duo, almost as efficient as the “original team” and “red team”, as Nino had called them. Viperion had tackled his enemy to the ground and Queen Bee was searching her, while Tiger Eye yanked a scarlet baseball bat from its owner’s grip, snapping it in half immediately. They had become proficient, methodic and relentless fighters, the eight of them, and they weren’t even adults yet. This, Ladybug observed, was almost an uncomfortable thought to have. She purified the first red moth that threatened to flee, the second as well…

Laelaps pushed her to the side just in time to get her out of Thierry Lafronde’s shots. He could really target everything in his field of vision, from his watchtower, or rather the top of the scaffolding, he had the perfect view and it was no exaggeration to say that he was untouchable, quick enough to stop aerial attacks and to block Queen Bee’s spinning top and her own yo-yo, even when she divided it into two smaller ones. Chat Noir’s staff wouldn’t be able to reach it. His staff maybe not, but perhaps… First, she’d have to give him and her girlfriend a hand in defeating Dreadnoughts and Crosses, but it wouldn’t take long, and Laelaps joined her. Ladybug worked in perfect synch with the Crimson Empress, the other duo was fine too. It took about a minute to get rid of them.

“Chat, think you could take our friend with the slingshot down a peg?” Ladybug asked him as she released two white butterflies from her yo-yo.

“You really know how to talk to me,” Chat Noir smiled. “Everybody step back!”

Always so dramatic… Though it had been impressive and chaotic, the one time he had done it, it’d been efficient, she’d give that to him… He zig-zagged his way to the scaffolding, avoiding Thierry Lafronde’s barrage of pebbles with ease, sidestepping the occasional projectile thrown his way as though it had been child’s play, and finally ran under the structure, from one side to the other. On the count of three, it collapsed like a house of cards, as though one of the metal poles had suddenly been misplaced and Chat Noir’s smug smirk was contagious, the momentary feeling of victory, however, was short-lived. As soon as she captured last scarlet butterflies — Lafronde hadn’t been Hawk Moth’s only pawn standing on the scaffolding— she rushed to make sure the de-akumatised man hadn’t been harmed in the fall, Queen Bee and Viperion did the same with the others in silence.
“I think we’re clear,” Carapace said after what felt like an eternity, wiping his bloodied nose with the back of his hand. “I sense one in the sewers or anywhere around… I think… I think we took back his last bastion.”

“There definitely are people inside the building,” Laelaps announced. “Not the other ones, as far as I can tell. Can’t smell how many, but….”

“I’ll get the scaffolding out of the way,” Tiger Eye offered weakly. Chat Noir immediately rushed to her side to help.

It didn’t take long for them to get the broken metallic structure out of the way, and even less time to force the Galeries Lafayette’s doors open. What was more time-consuming, however, was to navigate through all the things that had been stacked in front of the entrances, a barricade made of chairs, coat racks and display cabinets and countless other things. That was a good sign, a proof that there were people inside, that had been in a good enough shape to move all those things to shield themselves from the akumas outside.

If not for that and the enhanced senses that came with the Dog Miraculous, it would have been easy to believe that the place was indeed entirely deserted. Queen Bee let out a small gasp when she finally managed to get inside. She must have shopped here often, she could afford it, and seeing the place in such a dismal state… There must have been a panic reaction and a lot of people rushing to the exit, that would certainly explain the discarded bags. This escape, hadn’t worked out all that well, obviously, and the barricade was here to show it. At least, there wasn’t anything that suggested that people had been hurt, Ladybug tried to rationalise.

The glass dome had seemed better days, and though it hadn’t collapsed yet, it was cracked, covered with something that prevented the daylight to filter through it. It would fall apart soon if nothing was done about it. Thierry Lafronde’s stray projectiles had damaged some of the ornamentation on the walls as well. To make things look even grimmer, someone or something must have tampered with the electricity as well. The elevators and escalators didn’t seem to be working, or anything electric in general. And the silence… The Crimson Empress and Queen Bee silently flew up to the department store’s fifth storey before going back down. No sign of activity anywhere, the blond girl mouthed, neither noise nor light.

Ladybug felt six pairs of eyes staring at her expectantly. It was time for her to play the role of the diplomat, to comfort whoever needed it. It would be a much better strategy than using Laelaps’ powers to track these people. Even though none of them looked particularly reassuring, grimy and wounded as they were. The Crimson Empress put an encouraging hand on her good shoulder. They would still make it work, somehow, they had too, people believed in them, were expecting to get some help from them. Ladybug took a deep breath.
“Hello?” she said clearly, and her voice echoed in the empty space. “There’s no need to worry! We took care of the akumas! You’re all safe now!”

The Galeries Lafayette came alive. The sound of footsteps came from above, getting closer and closer, and soon, other followed, and chatter started to fill the air. A balding man in a tattered suit — one of the concierges, she had to guess—appeared at the third storey railing and started calling for them, and then another voice and another one still, and soon, a cacophony, an entire entire chorus in multiple languages, all of which Ladybug couldn’t make out, though she was sure she heard. Her yo-yo made for a good-enough climbing rope and it wasn’t long before the heroes were face to face with a small crowd of tired-looking but otherwise unharmed people.

“We’ve managed to get under their radar I think,” the concierge — was it Alain?— told her. “The personnel is trying to…”

But Ladybug was no longer listening to him, what he had to say was self-evident once she got a better look at the third storey. A space had been created for the children, and it looked like they had interrupted nap time — coats made for makeshift mattresses and scarves for blankets, they seemed to have plenty to eat and drink — unsurprisingly, it was the Galeries Lafayette after all. Adults had been playing cards — their mobile phones were fairly useless, no signal, she remembered. A kid was toying with Chat Noir’s tail now, the Crimson Empress was chatting with Italian tourists while Tiger Eye’s Spanish seemed to be good enough for her to be understood.

“… safe to get out of here?” the man finished.

“I think so,” Ladybug answered. We will escort you. Could we… Catch our breaths here for a little while?”

“Of course,” the man answered. “Is your shoulder alright?”

She didn’t answer the question, couldn’t have, already, there was a small crowd around her, and all these people had more names than she could remember. There was Julien who had been separated from his wife and daughter he couldn’t join, and Lucia and her friend Ane, Vanessa and Ryan, the Huang family who was surprised when she had answered young Jie in perfect Mandarin — the look on his face was one she would remember, she swore to herself, so many others, some worried, most relieved… She could feel the atmosphere change, get warmer, and perhaps it was just her mind playing tricks on her but it felt like the place wasn’t so bleak anymore. There could have been a good thousand people in here, brimming with newfound optimism. It felt a little surreal. The Crimson Empress was looking at her, eyes shining with something that made Ladybug’s heart swell, not uncomfortably so.
Finding a something to stand on so that she could attract everyone’s attention was surprisingly harder than it seemed. She took a sip of the water bottle someone had been kind enough to give her and cleared her throat, making sure that the pouffe wouldn’t fall over in the middle of her small speech. It took some time still for everyone to be quiet. It would get much louder in a matter of seconds. She counted on her fellow heroes to translate for her. They gave her a small but reassuring thumbs up.

“So…” she started. “We believe that what is left of Hawk Moth’s army is gathered in front of the Eiffel Tower, but the rest of the city should be akuma and amok-free for now. Would you like to wait here until everything is over, or would you rather find shelter somewhere else? In that case, we would escort you…” The chatter was almost deafening and it took some time to quiet everyone. “I thought you all could vote for either option? If that sounds good to you?”

“What do we do?” Chat Noir whispered in her ear. “We can’t have them stand on one side of the room or the other, that’d make it… Confrontational, somehow.”

“I know, don’t worry,” Ladybug replied. And louder, she said, “those who wish to stay here, please raise your hands?”

 Barely a dozen people or so. It looked like it would be much easier than she had expected, no hour-long debate she would have to sit through in silence.

“Well, it looks like we’re getting out of here!” Tiger Eye said enthusiastically. “Everyone, let’s go downstairs and we’ll organise ourselves then! Please don’t run and stay close to the people you know!”

This was going better than planned, all that practice and planning had paid off, they had avoided the worse so far. Perhaps… Perhaps Paris would be freed from Hawk Moth tonight, perhaps forever.

And then Ladybug felt a sickly presence behind her.

Judging from the way Carapace had straightened up, Laelaps’s animal ear had pricked up. It hadn’t been a trick of her imagination. Some unwanted, and very dangerous company was coming their
The evacuation would have to wait a little longer, it seemed. Ladybug glanced at the Crimson Empress who nodded back at her.

“Everyone please stay calm and stay inside!” she yelled as loud as her lungs would allow. “Reform the barricade once we’re out! We’ll come back as soon as the menace is dealt with!”

The eight heroes hurried outside and immediately fell into a complex formation, one of the many they had rehearsed together. She, alongside Laelaps, Viperion and Carapace remained on the ground while Chat Noir and Tiger Eye went to perch themselves on the nearest roofs, Queen Bee and the Crimson Empress were already in the air. They stood there in silence, under the blazing sun. The wait was almost unbearable, the heat, the lack of wind made it worse.

The lone figure walking shakily towards them was not Mayura, yet Duusu’s imprint was all over this woman. She was an Amok, or at least she was about to become one, that made no doubt. For all intents and purposes, she looked like a regular person, she did not sport the scarlet complexion that came with being one of Hawk Moth’s pawns, no extravagant costume either, only a red turtleneck, short dark hair that was unusually messy with a streak of red, broken glasses, a torn blazer. She had a blue outline in front of her eyes… Ladybug’s stomach sunk. Of all the people Mayura had to choose, it had had to be her. She looked ill, and her every step was shaky. Next to Ladybug, Carapace shifted uneasily, Queen Bee as well but it was Chat Noir who looked the most upset, and for an instant, she thought he would jump off the roof he was standing on to help her regain her balance when she stumbled.

Nathalie Sancœur was pale, and when she painfully opened her mouth, it wasn’t the voice Ladybug had expected at all. No, it wasn’t Mayura talking, but unmistakably Hawk Moth. So he was wielding two Miraculouses at once again…

“I see that you have fought valiantly,” he boomed. Mlle Sancœur coughed and clutched at her throat as she did so, before something forced her to straighten up and continue talking “I must confess I had expected you to fail earlier. Alas, this cannot go on forever. You are weary and though you have slightly weakened my forces, you cannot win, I can see it through this coward’s eyes. This is my final warning, surrender your Miraculouses to me,” spoke the man through her mouth.

“Yes, you’ll hurt us, threaten to destroy the city?” Chat Noir yelled. “Guess what, you’ve been doing just that for almost two years now? And what we’ve been doing? I thought you’d get the message!”

“Despite the pain, despite the destruction, truly, you cannot be swayed,” Hawk Moth’s voice was only a whisper. The feathery outline around Mlle Sancœur pulsed. “Had I not known better, I would have called this bravery. This is foolishness. You will learn your place and the taste of
The Crimson Empress glanced at Ladybug who glanced at Chat Noir, all the heroes readied themselves as the glow intensified around the woman. Mlle Sancœur gritted her teeth and for a second, the light around her face dimmed. Her nose started bleeding. She motioned at her wristwatch though that mere gesture pained her — was her forearm injured? The feather-shaped outline around her eyes shone a harsher, cruder light, spreading to her entire body, Ladybug had to look away because of that and she wasn’t the only one. A roar — two voices— rang out and it was time. They had practiced this tactic, and with a clear target like this… It would be short, it needed to be short.

Crashing noises of tiles falling off the roofs and clattering on the ground filled the air with every step the Amok took. The foe was immense, towering over them, but what immediately struck Ladybug was not the size of the enemy — could she call her that, really?— but her two faces or rather, it looked like two people hastily meshed as one, empty eyes with no irises, grotesquely long arms, but only two legs to stand on, absurdly long stilettos. The monster was fighting against its own self. Ladybug’s yo-yos wrapped around the Amok’s legs, Queen Bee mirrored her movement with her spinning top. The Crimson Empress was next, her lunge made the giantess stumble, Chat Noir imitated her, followed by Carapace and in a loud thud, the Amok was on the ground, crushing a car or two in the process. Queen Bee’s Venom was not enough to keep Janus — they’d call her that— still, and the titan swatted Chat Noir and Carapace away before Viperion and Tiger Eye could keep the arm still.

“Got it,” Laelaps yelled, waving the watch around.

Ladybug stomped on it the moment she caught it, but was not quick enough to stop the small feather that escaped out of the broken mechanism from flying back, as if carried by the wind, to the Eiffel Tower, back to the man who now ruled over Duusuu and the brooch. Janus’s shape vanished, and a purplish mucus escaped from Mlle Sancœur’s lips as she coughed. This never happened, people would usually come back to their senses, some fainted, but otherwise, it would have been like a bad dream they had been awaken from, with no traces from the fight whatsoever. The woman was even paler than she had been, her breathing laboured, her skin shining with cold sweat.

Carapace and Chat Noir had gotten up again, and though they looked bad, covered in dust and caked blood, their Miraculouses were intact, and they were nowhere as worrisome as Mlle Sancœur. She just couldn’t stop shaking and wheezing, and it soon became obvious that she wouldn’t be able to stand up, or swallow anything they could give her, the Crimson Empress put her water flask back in her satchel. Ladybug closed her eyes for a second. A solution, quickly. The nearest hospital wasn’t too far away, they could take her there, and certainly it would be alright; wouldn’t it? But it was no ordinary illness, she had never seen anything like it before, or read about it. crouched to lift Mlle Sancœur off the ground with great care before turning to Ladybug.
“I’m taking her to the Guardian,” he stated, as neutrally as he could.

“I… Chat, I’m not sure…” Ladybug started.

“This is not normal, they never… They never react like that once they’re de-transformed. He’ll know what to do. Meet you at the Champ de Mars?” That tone again. But his eyes betrayed him, and his voice quivered when he said, “please. I… I need this.”

“I… Alright.”

“Bug, everyone, be careful, alright? I’ll be there soon.” He crushed the blue pearl he had around his wrist and disappeared with the woman still in his arms. This was a one-way trip, the slate that contained the twin pearl would break in two and the gemstone would vanish. And he was well aware of that.

They would argue about that some other day, if they made it through all of this. For now, however, there were people inside the Galleries Lafayette, they had barricaded themselves — the windows, the door, all blocked thanks to a clutter of objects. Though they probably wouldn’t need food or water, it was a department store they were hiding in, the heroes still needed to make sure they were safe. Carapace sensed no akuma or amok anywhere near them. Good. They didn’t need to give Hawk Moth the opportunity to create new champions. Not that he had any butterflies left for that, those he used died soon after they had been purified, after all. Tiger Eye offered to force the doors open, but was soon discouraged. This would only result in frightening the civilians. They would go for a more… Primitive way of communication.

“Is everything alright?” Viperion yelled in English.

They all mirrored his call, in all the languages they knew. Nothing, at least at first. When Ladybug spoke Mandarin, she got an answer.

“I am not sure,” a voice carried through the walls. “Part of the roof collapsed when… I think we’re blocked here…”

“I…” Ladybug hesitated. “It will be over soon, I promise. You should all be able to leave without problem, but please do not come anywhere near the Eiffel Tower, that perimeter is still unsafe. We’ll fire a flare gun to tell the firefighters you are here, if you’d like? We can try to get the debris out of the way, too?”
“No, no, you are right, it will be over soon and you have to get going! We can handle ourselves in the meantime. Don’t worry about us!”

It took every bit of Ladybug’s self control not to retort that worrying about civilians and trying to protect was very much their duty and what being heroic meant to her. She could only imagine the state of the Galleries Lafayette, the people huddled together, the air conditioning not working well enough and the electricity in general not working at all… But staying in front of the building wouldn’t improve the situation, if anything, it would allow Hawk Moth’s remaining troops to get to them before they could reach the Eiffel Tower and put an end to all of this.

“I promise you’ll be able to get out safely in no time!” Saying it aloud helped Ladybug believe it a little more.

Ladybug lead the way and they hurried to the bus, the beeping of Queen Bee’s Miraculous was only the reminder that they needed to speed things up. They tried to nurse their wounds without de-transforming, here was no safe place to do so. Or anywhere else, really. The antiseptic spray was almost empty and soon they were out of cotton pads. When Viperion turned the key in the ignition switch, smoke came out of the engine. They’d have to do with it, they wouldn’t be able to fix it anyway, and besides, it was their one and final trip, Ladybug tried to reassure herself as she squeezed the Crimson Empress’s shoulder. They were all so exhausted, and while parts of Paris were no longer deserted, the landscape they drove through was empty and devastated…

The bus started catching fire in the middle of the Pont de l’Alma. It had been a miracle that it hadn’t stopped working earlier… Viperion hit the brakes and they exited the vehicle right away. The exhaust had drawn two akumas. Carapace and Tiger Eye wrestled them to the ground before they had a chance to report to Hawk Moth, the butterflies were purified and Ladybug helped the two distressed civilians inside a building, forcing the front door open. They kept low, no longer jumping from rooftop to rooftop. The disfigured Eiffel Tower was not a reassuring presence, and certainly it could be a lookout for some akuma. On closer inspection, it wasn’t the case, but still, they didn’t drop their guard.

Viperion whispered in Ladybug’s ear, and as much as she hated his suggestion, it seemed like the more feasible option. She had considered it and it looked like it would be the least risky strategy, with Laelaps’s torque blinking as well as the Crimson Empress’s pearl, they wouldn’t get the time they needed for a long, beautiful face to face with the crowd of akumatised people eagerly waiting for a chance to rip them up. And so, they shared their plan, the one but last phase, on their way to this final battle. They hadn’t lost the bracelets Master Fu had given them. Crushing the blueish stone would take them to the location of the twin gem, or so the old man had told them… It had better work, if they found themselves de-transforming in the middle of the battlefield, with Hawk Moth to see them.
From the looks of it, there were a good seventy akumas of all sizes gathered here, and most of them were unknown to them. Hawk Moth’s words from earlier had been bravado, it must have sent his best lieutenants to fight them at different outposts in the city, it seemed. Which left him with a mass of newly-akumatised henchpeople. It was a wonder that they hadn’t spotted them. The roof of the École Militaire was not the best hiding spot, but it gave them a clear overview of the situation, the Champ de Mars, and the Eiffel Tower, still covered, for the most part, in a greyish cocoon, the enemy’s fortress, inside of which he was safe, without a doubt.

“Remember, team A, we dash all the way to the Palais de Chaillot and we do not stop, it’d be best if you could use Kaalki’s bracelets there!” Ladybug reminded. That meant Tiger Eye, the Crimson Empress and Viperion. “Team B will evacuate the de-akumatised folks.”

“Are you certain we can do it in one go?” The Crimson Empress frowned. “The Eiffel Tower is certainly well-protected, Hawk Moth’s troops are standing around it but not in it… I doubt we will be able to climb it without destroying the cocoon first… Chat Noir could do that, but that means we need to wait for him…”

“De-akumatise everyone first, Hawk Moth comes second to that,” Queen Bee reminded. “And we’d better hurry, Laelaps is almost out of juice and so is Viperion…”

Carapace nodded at that. It was it, then, the end of this day. There was still some tea in one of the thermoses, a little lukewarm now but still good. They drank in silence, and Ladybug couldn’t help but notice that her hands were shaking as she held the paper cup to her lips. No, now was not the time to be frightened, so frightened that she wouldn’t be able to take a stand. Master Fu’s breathing exercises always helped a little, didn’t they? The shaking stopped.

Finally, they had been spotted, a roar rang out and already there was the sound of the crowd hurrying towards their location. Took them long enough…

“You all,” she said softly as she got up and her eyes lingered on the Crimson Empress, “good luck.”

“Stay behind me, everyone” Viperion. “I’ll give you a short window, thirty seconds maybe, and it’s all I’ll be able to do, so please make it count… Queen Bee?”

“I’ll carry you, obviously,” she nodded. “Thirty seconds trip, thirty seconds window?”
He nodded and jumped off the building and she caught him, while the Crimson Empress did her best to keep all the flying akumas from touching the fragile duo. Ladybug followed suite on the ground, with Tiger Eye, Carapace and Laelaps on her tail, making sure not to go in front of Viperion and Queen Bee no matter what. Thirty seconds… The Crimson Empress was the first to break an akumatised object, Ladybug purified the butterfly immediately. Seventeen seconds… Tiger Eye’s amber armour was covered in stripes, and it was clear that she was keeping herself from running any faster. Eight. Ladybug’s yo-yo had split into two now, and polka dots danced before her eyes. Laelaps’ ears pulled back, Carapace readied his shield.

Three.

Her legs no longer hurt, she could feel a rush of power coursing through her veins. Beeping sounds all around her, most of her friends would de-transform soon but not her.

Two.

Her breathing was deep, regular, her strategy clear in her head.

One.

They wouldn’t fail.

Curtain up.

“Medusa’s glare!” Viperion bellowed from above, and a blinding light flashed from his eyes, and everything the gleam touched was petrified in an instant, covered in a thin layer of stone, save for the objects in which the moths had nested themselves, their scarlet colour glowing brightly. Viperion’s transformation faltered as he let go of Queen Bee and Ladybug thought she saw a mop of teal hair before the boy vanished in a swirl of blue light.

Tiger Eye was a blur, each blow she landed on Hawk Moth’s immobilised soldiers was perfectly calculated and the objects in which the butterflies were hidden were easy targets for her. Carapace and the Crimson Empress joined her to handle all these human-sized foes while Queen Bee nosedived to take care of Gigantitan’s bracelet, with Laelaps’s help, and Ladybug’ for some time. It would be no use trying to climb the Eiffel Tower, she was fairly sure that whatever the cocoon covering the metallic structure was, touching it would be the last thing anyone would have wanted to do, Hawk Moth’s paralysed troops had stayed at a safe distance from it earlier. She tried
throwing her yo-yo at the cocooned wall, and she had to pull on her string to retrieve it. The greyish surface was sticky, gooey, unscalable. Oh, that was just grand. That meant waiting for Chat Noir and giving their enemy the chance to create yet another Amok, or maybe new akumas, didn’t it? She shouldn’t have ignored her girlfriend’s point.

The few remaining foes that hadn’t been touched by Sass’s power were exiting the Palais de Chaillot, disorderly, and by the looks of it, it wouldn’t be long until they reached them. Ladybug threw her yo-yo, managing to trip a few of them, but this was no good, Tiger Eye’s movements were becoming less precise with each of her punches and kicks, her shape twitched and she too had to warp away while Carapace and the Crimson Empress ran past her, lunging at the next giant. Team A was only a duo now… She’d worry about it later. Ladybug readied herself, her feet shifting to a familiar pose. The stone layer keeping all these foot soldiers from moving was about to disappear.

Three.

Her plan had worked just fine so far, now was not the time to falter.

Two.

She summoned her Lucky Charm

One.

An oversized butterfly net. This was exactly what she needed, and she hoped the man hiding in his tower didn’t miss any of this.

Now.

The very moment moment the petrification wore off, a swarm of scarlet moths rose to the sky, expelled from their broken nests, as their human hosts collapsed. In one sweeping motion off her net, Ladybug caught every single one of the insects, or rather, the moment they touched the bottom of the netting, their wings turned white again, Hawk Moth’s taint washed away, and the monochrome cartoonish monsters at their feet had regained their original shapes and colours. Ladybug didn’t look back and immediately ran after the Crimson Empress just as Carapace summoned his Shell-ter. A good ten enemies to defeat for each of them? Not a problem. She used her butterfly net like a lacrosse stick while her partner’s sabre, even when sheathed, was a weapon
But fatigue could be read in the Crimson Empress’s every movement, her lunges had become less energetic, her footwork clumsier with every passing minute, and if not for Ladybug having her back, she wouldn’t have lasted long. Laboriously, Hawk Moth’s last akumatised soldiers were reverted to their unconscious civilian selves but there was barely any time to check on them, they had to keep going.

They crossed the empty Pont d’Iéna and only stopped running when they reached the now empty Palais de Chaillot. Only then did they allow themselves to look back as they regained their breath. Ladybug could make out Carapace’s protection fairly clearly, further away than it had previously been. Further away still, Queen Bee fired the flare gun she had retrieved all this time ago — she could have used a phone, now that they had taken down the akuma responsible for the temporary dead zone, but this would be a more direct approach — before warping away too. And then power, building up inside the cocooned Eiffel Tower. He was in there, this wasn’t a diversion. Ladybug opened her yo-yo and managed to get a glimpse at Chat Noir’s whereabouts if only for a few seconds.

“We can’t wait for him, can we?” the Crimson Empress inquired, her voice trembling a little. Her Miraculous was beeping, louder than before.

“I… No, I don’t think so…” Ladybug closed her yo-yo. “He says he’s at the Place de la Concorde right now, helping put out a fire…”

“Place de la Concorde… This is five minutes away, at least for him… Longg is almost out of power but it’ll only take a lychee for them to get better, but… I am not sure I will be able to stay as I am for much longer,” the Crimson Empress said. This much was obvious, it had been the reason she hadn’t unsheathed her sabre earlier, the mere act of it would have made her de-transform instantly, and her Miraculous had been blinking for ages. Yet, there was a flame in her eyes, hope burning bright, and determination. “But there is one last thing I can do, but after that you will be on your own against Hawk Moth for a little while.”

“There’s no other choice, is it?” Ladybug whispered bitterly. “I should have known it’d end like that…”

“You won’t lose,” the Crimson Empress put her hand on her girlfriend’s cheek. “I know you, and I know that there’s nothing you can’t do. You’re just magical like that. And it’s not the end just yet now, is it?”
Ladybug shook her head and took a step back as the Crimson Empress went into a kind of pose, her right palm facing the sky. Heavy dark clouds gathered around the Champ de Mars in the blink of an eye, the air too felt heavy, electric. Ladybug could see them too, the thin threads of silver light in the distance, pointing towards Hawk Moth’s new citadel. He hadn’t anticipated that, couldn’t have, otherwise he wouldn’t have made such a blatant mistake. His fortress, his impenetrable lair, was Paris’s biggest lightning conductor. One of the sliver threads grew brighter, and Ladybug couldn’t help the grin that formed on her lips.

“Ame no Murakumo no Tsurugi!”

The Crimson Empress snapped her fingers.

The moment the bolt of pure energy hit the Eiffel Tower, the greyish cocoon that was covering it turned black as soot and caught fire, huge chunks of it falling off and turning into ashes the moment they touched the ground, revealing the undamaged metallic structure underneath. The surge of energy from earlier had died out, Ladybug was sure of that, and though she couldn’t make out Hawk Moth’s shape from the distance, she liked to imagine he had been stunned by the shock. It had started pouring. In a flash of red, the Crimson Empress de-transformed; Kagami stumbled to Ladybug’s arms.

“I think I… Need to rest for a little while,” the exhausted girl said shakily. “Let’s have dinner together tonight, alright? With your parents and maybe my mum if she’s back…”

“Sure,” Ladybug murmured, stroking Kagami’s hair. If her parents were alive, if she made it out alive… She knew she shouldn’t have been afraid, and yet it was there, nested deep inside her stomach and growing. “I… I know here and now is not the right place or time for this but… I love y—”

Kagami interrupted her with a kiss, and where Ladybug had stood was a tired Marinette

“And I love you too. But you won’t be able to defeat Hawk Moth just like that, you’ll need something more…”

Longg and Tikki gave Marinette a knowing glance and she understood. It didn’t take long for her to make up her mind. If Hawk Moth truly was wielding two Miraculouses at once, and he had done it before, if she truly was to face him on her own, at least for some time, then she would need all the power she could use. She would have no backup for quite some time. Kagami slowly loosened her arms around her girlfriend’s shoulders, and turned her back to her. The pendant was unclasped with great care; the red pearl felt pleasantly warm in Marinette’s palm. Kagami helped her put on
the necklace, moving her hair out of the way. Marinette knew the words, all that she would have to do was to speak them. Kagami’s eyes were on her, not the sort of concerned look she’d given her the first few times after the Gare de l’Est incident, but one of encouragement and complete trust.

That surge of energy again, coming from the Eiffel Tower, not as strong as before but noticeable enough, she could feel it without even being transformed. A new amok about to be created, that made little doubt in Marinette’s mind. Which meant that Hawk Moth was not looking at them right now, but also… Should any civilian bystander be nearby, he would try to use them, and someone too tired to fight back would be the ideal tool in his hand. Kagami understood, and after she gave Longg a lychee as Tikki nibbled on her last macaron—, her hand went to her wrist, where that rather ugly-looking bracelet with its blue pearl still was. That was the right decision, she had probably put the twin gemstone somewhere that had not been affected by the chaos.

“Wait!” Marinette called. She re-transformed into Ladybug and motioned towards the Dragon pendant. “Just in case it goes wrong… Can you stay with me?”

“I… Alright,” Kagami said. She stepped closer to Ladybug. “First, you say…”

“Longg, crown me!”

Power coursed through Marinette’s veins, and her body was engulfed in pure light. Her feet had left the ground as magic wound itself around her, ribbons of gold, crimson and jet coming not only from her earrings but from the crimson pearl as well. She could picture it with her eyes closed, the slight shift in colour, the golden rims around the polka dots, the shape of her mask changing, almost matching that of the Crimson Empress, scales formed, and though they didn’t speak, she heard Longg’s promise: they’d keep her safe no matter what. She still had her yo-yo, she could feel it around her waist, and something else too, a sash. Not that she would need the yo-yo very much, she would be able to walk on air, she just knew it. Just for a few seconds, she could feel Hawk Moth’s powers wavering, a hitch in the flow of his magic. The gash in her shoulder closed and the constant sensation of discomfort was like a distant memory.

Dragonbug opened her eyes. This was… Perfect, the bangshoudai around her forearms were a nice addition to her shoulder pads, and didn’t quite touch the kumihimo bracelet Kagami had made her, or Kaalki’s wristlet. Her fingertips were almost claw-like, and sharp looking. She reached out and a soft breeze blew on her face. Her girlfriend’s mouth was wide open and she was looking at her with a mixture of amazement and admiration. Dragonbug quirked her eyebrow amusedly at that; it was enough for Kagami to snap out of her daze.

“Text me when it’s over?” she asked.
“Alright,” Dragonbug said. “I… See you for dinner, or a little before that if we’re lucky! And you take care, alright? I love you.”

“I should be the one telling you that,” Kagami almost laughed. Her voice was sombre when she added, “I… I’ll see you very soon, then. Remember, your stance, your tempo, your grip around your sword, not too loose, not too tight, and all of that… You’re going to do great, alright? I love you.”

She quickly brushed her lips against Dragonbug’s and the moment she pulled back from the kiss, she crushed the blueish gemstone between her thumb and her pointer finger.

Chapter End Notes

Bonjour, bonsoir!

Long time no see!

If you follow me on Tumblr, you know that my mental health is pretty bad and that my master's dissertation and all things university related keep me more busy than I can handle. All of that interferes with my writing fan fictions, among other things.

I haven't given up on this fic, I've got another chapter ready after this one (though I want to edit it to make sure it is good enough) and three fully planned chapters after that, including an epilogue.

I haven't given up but it's going to take me some time to get better and to find the time and will to write something I'm actually happy with. It's going to happen, but probably not next week and maybe not the week after that and I want to apologise for letting you all down.

I hope you'll like the fourth and final part to the Battle for Paris, though “like” may not be the appropriate word…

À très vite, j'espère

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