Nigh (ない)

by Ryuuzakochou

Summary

Nigh (en), adj: Approaching, close, arriving, imminent
ない nai (jp), aux verb: suffix used to indicate a negative state, ie, can’t, won’t, don’t, isn’t.
Literally: Absent

In the aftermath of a terrible, no good, very bad day Izuku’s mother knows things can’t continue the way they are. Izuku needs to get away from a system indifferent to his struggles and from the presence of UA, physically and tortuously close but crushingly unobtainable. He needs a chance to recover from this latest, devastating blow or Inko fears she’ll lose him completely.

In desperation, she reaches out to the only family she really has left. Her mother had a sister who moved to China and married a man named Cheng. Their daughter, Inko’s cousin, moved from China to France years ago and married a baker there. They themselves had a daughter who was Izuku’s age. Hopefully that would be far enough.

Sabine’s daughter was Quirkless, like Izuku.

… that doesn’t mean she doesn’t have superpowers though.
Okay... so, this is what happens when you have an idle thought and end up with 6000+ words of worldbuilding and wonder what the hell just happened?!

Universe Calibration: Miraculous Ladybug is canonically within a world with known superheroes (the Quantic Universe), so it's not too much of a stretch to put it in the world of BNHA; throw a bunch of mundane Quirks and Marinette's classmates and you're good to go.

Timeline Shenanigans: In BHNA Izuku was fourteen when he met the Sludge Villian (roughly) in November, leaving him ten months of training before starting UA the following September after he turned fifteen. I'm reeling the timeline back about seven to eight months; he met Sludgey in February/March and went overseas in late April will turn fourteen in Paris on the 15th July. His year of 'training' will be spent in Paris instead. The Miraculous Ladybug timeline is nuts to try to sort out (shout out to the Miraculous Ladybug wiki, it was very helpful), but Marinette gets her Miraculous at thirteen in September (start of the school year) and will meet Izuku after she's been Ladybug for about six to seven months.

Cute Side Note: Izuku's birthday is canonically 15th July. Marinette's birthday is also in July but the date is not specified. Since the plan here is for her to become the Best Big Sister to Izuku, I've set her birthday at 8th July, because 7 is the luckiest number in the West and 8 is the luckiest number in the East.

Disclaimer: I don't own either of them, but they would definitely meet if I did
Dearest Sabine,

It’s been a little while since I’ve written to you like this but I don’t think social media is the right medium for this. I do hope you and your family are well.

I’m sorry to say we are not so well. Izuku in particular has had a very rough time of it lately. He had a brush with a villain two weeks ago and the experience has had a profound effect on him. He’s in hospital right now. The doctors are all saying he’ll be fine and there will be no lasting damage, but I’m more concerned about his mental state. So is his therapist, which is why I’m contacting you.

Forgive me, I’m rambling. I believe it will be best for you and I to talk about the details of how he ended up in hospital over the phone. I’m not sure I want to write it all down; the memory is too painful for that. Perhaps the key thing is that my poor Izuku suffered a tremendous disappointment and, thanks to a handful of cruel coincidences, did not cope with it well.

His therapist believes that a change of scenery will likely do him a great amount of good. There’s nowhere we can really go in Japan, no other family. I was wondering if you might agree to take him in for a while? Perhaps a year at most?

I know it is a huge favour I am asking of you, and of course I will be paying all his travel expenses and board while he is there as well. He’s semi-fluent in English and he doesn’t speak any French but my Izuku is a very fast learner, I’ve no doubt he’ll pick it up very quickly. They have him on an online schooling course with his old middle school. It will end in a few months, after that we can re-enroll him, or maybe his language skills will be good enough to attend your daughter’s school.

I’m sorry for asking for so much. It’s perfectly understandable and fine if you are not equipped to take him in and I would not for a moment be anything but grateful for your patience in just hearing me out. Know that I ask out of desperation. Izuku is grieving and dispirited, it just about breaks my heart to see my happy boy this way. I am at a loss at how to fix it. Sending him away from the place that has caused him so much pain seems to be my only option.

Sabine, please call me when you get this.

Yours,

Midoriya Inko

Marinette had some misgivings over this whole thing.

Granted, waiting in an airport for their new guest to arrive was probably the exact wrong time to dwell on this, but Marinette was idly chewing a fingernail while her parents scanned the arrivals board, pensive. She’d never actually met her cousin (second cousin? First cousin once removed? Ugh, cousin) before, but her mum did sometimes mention e-mailing and Facebooking back and forth with relatives in Japan. Marinette had known she had cousins there but only in abstract, not in...
any meaningful way.

Two weeks ago her parents had elevated her cousin’s status from abstract to very much real by
telling her that her Izuku would be coming for a stay; not a few weeks, but maybe a year at that.

Her parents had asked her if she’d mind having a teenage boy in the house. The bakery was a
lovely, homey place, but it wasn’t the biggest; they’d be bumping up against each other constantly.
They understood it was her home too, so she could cast a vote.

She’d wanted to say no. Not because she had any feelings for her cousin either good or bad, but
because she had secrets to protect. One more person living in close quarters would make it even
more difficult to hide the fact that she had a secret double life as the Paris vigilante Ladybug.

She was supposed to be Quirkless, but one old man, a Miraculous and a kwami later and suddenly
she had superpowers, a partner in crime whose actual name she didn’t know and there was a real,
live supervillian gunning for her, her Miraculous, Paris and the world. Hiding all that from parents,
friends, her crush and the Paris Hero Police wasn’t exactly a cake walk as it was.

So yeah. Misgivings.

But after hearing her parents relate how lonely and sad her cousin was, what could she say? This
boy was the same age as her but he’d been through so much. Japan was so insular that anyone
deviating from the norm there was in deep trouble. Granted, it wasn’t the funnest thing in the world
to be Quirkless in France either, but it wasn’t even remotely as brutal as some of the stories she’d
heard from the east. Her call to duty warred with her conscience, but in the end her heartstrings had
drowned out her more pragmatic impulse. She’d just have to be careful.

She’d have to keep a close eye on him too. According to her mother he wasn’t in the best emotional
state. Given that Hawk Moth could turn even someone experiencing a minor frustration or
disappointment into an unstoppable villain that ordinary Quirks couldn’t touch, Marinette couldn’t
imagine how attractive a target someone with genuine troubles would be.

Oh my god, Marinette despaired. This is going to be such a disaster!

“Can you see him?” Sabine was asking Tom, who was squinting at the arrivals screen.

“His plane is definitely here,” Tom mused. He fumbled with their sign as a whole bunch of people
came walking past.

“The sign’s upside down, dear,” Sabine corrected gently. “The three pronged radical means
‘mountain’, and the tallest part of the mountain is the peak. Like so,” she righted the carefully
written sign.

They scanned the crowds hopefully, though Marinette couldn’t be of much help. She hadn’t even
seen a photo of the boy. She settled for looked for anyone her own age that was all by himself.

“Ano...” came from behind her.

She turned to see a short, fluffy, green haired kid, eyes huge in his face. He was dressed in khakis
and a long sleeved shirt, he carried a backpack and had a pair of vividly red boots on.

“Dupain?” The pronunciation was all off. It came out like Tzupaeen.

“Dupain, yes!” Marinette hurriedly waved at her parents. “Yes. Hai,” she added, because that was
almost the only Japanese word she knew.
The boy – Izuku, breathed a quick sigh of relief and hurriedly brought out a tablet. He typed something into it before turning it around so they could see it, and bowing deeply. The screen read
 <pleasure meeting for first time. pleased take care of me.>

Marinette found herself smiling. He was an awkward, shy, polite boy but he was clearly trying his best in a bad situation.

Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad.

As it turned out there didn’t seem to be any time available to get to know her distant cousin. Marinette was at school and the bakery opened six days a week. Izuku was relegated to the little back store room they’d cleaned out for him. Marinette saw him at mealtimes and occasional brushes in the kitchens and the living room. They rarely even glanced at each other, let alone spoke.

Izuku didn’t interact with anyone very much, really. It was like they had a hermit living in the house, he made so little ripples. About the only thing she saw him doing other than school work on his laptop was kneading dough.

Yes, apparently he was able to force himself up at a bakers crushing early hour and go down and help her father knead the day’s dough for about three hours straight until it was time for breakfast. She was astonished when she found that out. She used to do it too when she was little, but the luxury of the sleep-in beckoned when she turned eleven or twelve and her attendance had dropped off entirely. Her father hadn’t minded – apparently he’d done the same when he was her age.

Now thirteen (nearly fourteen thank you!) she couldn’t imagine making such an effort, especially not since the whole Ladybug thing had come along to eat up her hours and her energy.

But Izuku went down every morning and arrived at the breakfast table still lightly dusted with flour, smiling quietly. Marinette wondered if he liked it because he’d never done it before, or maybe he was trying to be a good guest. At any rate, she didn’t envy his hours!

Life went on. Marinette relaxed infinitesimally. All her fears seemed pretty ludicrous once things settled down. There was almost no chance of Izuku finding out, any more than her parents. She seldom transformed inside the bakery and Izuku literally never left it.

“It’s very sad, you know,” Tikki said to her one night after Marinette had finished her homework. “Hm?”

“Your cousin,” The centuries old Ladybug kwami flitted over to her. “It can’t be very nice to live in a strange new place. Especially when you have no one to talk to.”

Marinette squirmed a little. She hadn’t avoided Izuku or anything but she hadn’t actively sought him out either. She was super busy and that wasn’t just an excuse. Between class work and homework she’d had to deal with Pixelator and Guitar Villain and Dark Blade, plus the usually trappings of Heroes work.

Three villains in just over a month – between that, homework and designing an album cover she barely managed to keep her grades steady for April. They were heading into May now and there was a statue being made of her (what, what, what was happening to her life?!) that she’d have to do an appearance for and...and...

It was all just excuses from there, she knew. She was ashamed to admit it but even after a month of Izuku being here she tried to avoid talking to him whenever she could. It was excruciatingly
awkward to try to hold a broken conversation with a boy in three different languages, none of which they spoke well between them. Marinette could tell it embarrassed Izuku too, the way he hunched down like a turtle going into its shell whenever they tried to converse.

“He’s trying to learn French,” Marinette offered, because he was. He’d taken to lugging around a notebook that he was filling with useful words that he actually needed. She knew her mother was trying to help him out and her father had hung picture signs all over the bakery to he knew where stuff was kept. Sometimes she’d see Izuku in the living room watching the TV like a hawk, mumbling rapidly – and, if she was honest, creepily – under his breath as he tried to parse out the news. “He’s learning very fast. He just seems, I don’t know, like he doesn’t want company most of the time. He just blushes and stammers a lot whenever I ask him something. I don’t want to make him more uncomfortable.”

Tikki did not look convinced. “Do you speak to him in French?”

Marinette nodded.

“Well, there you are, then,” Tikki waved her tiny hands. “He feels intimidated because he can’t understand you. Maybe you should try learning a few words of Japanese! I’m sure your mum would help you.”

Marinette grimaced. More study.

“Come on Marinette,” Tikki encouraged. “The heart of a connection is always communication. Even if you don’t bridge the gap straight away, I think just the fact that your trying would make him feel much better. I know it will help him come out of his shell! Then he can go to school and meet your friends!”

“I guess so,” Marinette replied. “But Tikki, he’s so shy. I don’t want to drag him out and force him to meet people if he really doesn’t want to. He’ll do it because he’s really polite but it wouldn’t be any fun for him.”

“Everybody needs friends, Marinette. Even really shy boys.”

Marinette sighed. Even though she hadn’t interacted with him much she had cottoned on to the fact that Izuku didn’t have many of those, even in Japan. He called his mother religiously and there was someone that sent him an occasional text but other than that his phone was barely in use. She couldn’t imagine waking up and not seeing a bunch of links and news and messages from her classmates and she saw them every day in person.

“I’ll... I’ll think about what I can do,” Marinette offered. “There must be some way to include him.”

The knife of guilt twisted worse in her once she got to school and Alya started asking after Izuku too.

“Come on, girl, it’s been a month!” Alya beamed at her. “When are we going to meet your adorable green bean of a cousin?”

The words green bean briefly etched themselves on the walls and floors around them before fading. Alya’s Quirk was Transcription; microscopic powdered ink particles would flow from her skin when she spoke the words would write themselves, which was dead handy for school work but also meant she couldn’t wear white gloves.

When she focused she could make them stay permanently on a paper (but not on a computer screen
because coding and science). When she was unfocused she Transcribed onto walls, floors, doors and faces which had lead to, as they say, hilarious consequences whenever Chloe got involved. Walking around with QUEEN DOG written on her forehead all day until she spotted it had not exactly endeared her to Alya. Luckily the unfocused Transcribed words faded away pretty quickly; or you could wash them off.

“He’s being homeschooled for the rest of this school year,” Marinette told her. “He might come to school in September when the new school year starts over. His French isn’t very good yet.”

“Surely he’s not at it seven days a week,” Alya snorted. “You should bring him out to do stuff! That’s what weekends are for. He’s so fluffy and cute, I think I might pet him!”

Marinette regretted ever showing her a photo. “Well... I can ask, I guess. He might say no, though. He’s really shy.”

“That poor kid has got to get out of the house some time,” Alya pointed out. “You said he likes Heroes. Maybe we can go to the Ladybug and Cat Noir statue unveiling together.”

“Who are you talking about?”

Marinette.exe stopped working.

“Oh, Adrian, hi!” Alya beamed brightly, discreetly wheeling her suddenly stiff-as-a-board friend around to face her crush so it didn’t look like she was ignoring him while she rebooted. “We were just talking about Marinette’s cousin from Japan. He’s staying with them for a while.”

“Oh. That’s sound neat. I don’t have any cousins,” Adrien sheepishly ran his fingers through his perfectly coiffed golden waves. “Is he coming to school?”

“Uh,” Marinette managed after being nailed in the spine by one of Alya’s elbows. “Cousin...uh, cousin doesn’t French so good.” And promptly died inside.

Adrien burst out laughing. “Good one Marinette. Well, if he does come here I’d love to meet him,” he waved them goodbye before going to sit by Nino.

“Uuuuhhhhh,” Marinette’s moan came from the dark despair in which her soul was slowly pickling. “Just... just kill me now Alya. Just. Kill. Me. Now.”

Alya was bent double, nearly busting a gut trying to keep her guffaws silent. “No, no, no,” Alya wiped tears from her eyes. “I’ll die laughing first. Come on you poor, poor thing.”

Alya lead her broken robot body to a chair where she could at least die comfortably. Alya was a good friend.

“Seriously, you’re my best girl and all, but this is getting really, really sad,” Alya shook her bronze head. “The dignity of my gender is at stake here. I’m going to write you a script.”

Marinette lifted her head a hairsbreadth from her forearms. “Wha?”

“A script,” Alya repeated patiently. “You know, like a TV show? I’ll write something that you can read to him over the phone; that way you’ll both have something to say and you won’t get distracted looking at him.”

Marinette’s head popped up. “Hey! Maybe that will work!” Marinette firmly believed if she could just get past the crushing anxiety of communicating with the love of her life and actually have a
normal conversation with him then confessing would be so much easier. “You’re the best Alya!”

“Buuuut,” Alya poked her nose. “You have to promise to bring your cousin out to see daylight. It must be hell for a teenage boy to be cooped up all day with no one to talk to.”

After this Marinette gave in and borrowed a Japanese phrasebook from the library.

All the best intentions in the world couldn’t help her when her life fell into a heap as it was wont to do. She had genuinely planned to coax Izuku outdoors, but the weekend was a total wash when she spent her time desperately trying to get a hold of Adrien’s phone so she could erase a stupid, stupid message she’d accidentally recorded onto it.

To her shame, she’s wound up inadvertently getting the Ladybug statue artist akumatized, leading to even more problems. By the time everything was fixed and the akuma de-evillized, the thought of bringing Izuku out of the bakery was not to be entertained.

Izuku did prove to be an unexpected help though. He’d timidly knocked on her trapdoor while she was staring at Adrien’s (stolen) phone, frazzled and nearly in tears. After all that trouble the phone was locked and she couldn’t unlock it so her message was currently immortalised. Adrien would geotrack the phone eventually and then what? How could she even begin to explain what she was doing with it?

Marinette’s name would live in infamy by this time tomorrow.

Izuku took in her bleary eyed look of despair and shuffled in once she nodded to him. He held out a hand for the phone. Marinette was so depressed at this point she just handed it over.

“**Rokkusareteitta ka?**”

Marinette looked at him blankly. She had no idea what he just said.

Izuku frowned at the phone speculatively, hit a couple of keys and side buttons, and then handed the phone back to her.

The screen was lit up with a text field and a security question. *What is your mother’s name?*

Gaping, Marinette fumbled around to her computer and rapidly typed in *Gabriel Agreste wife* into the search engine. Seconds later she was painstakingly typing *Emilie* into Adrien’s phone.

“It worked!” Marinette bounced upwards in glee, startling Izuku badly. “It worked, it worked! Thank you! Oh,” Marinette corrected herself; she had gotten a couple of pages into the phrasebook. “**Arigato gozaimasu.**”

Izuku looked taken aback for a second before beaming at her. Marinette was stunned; his whole face changed when he smiled like that. “**Douitashimasite, Marinette-chan.**”

She didn’t know that one, but it sounded like *you’re welcome.*

Maybe this communication thing wasn’t as hard as she’d thought it was. Maybe she just had to try more.

For a smile like that? Totally worth it.

* 

Izuku didn’t like to think about the amount of trouble his mother had to have gone to in getting him
all the way to Paris. He understood why of course, but it was a lot of trouble and Izuku hating causing her trouble.

Even with the trouble he’d caused, Izuku couldn’t deny his mother’s plan was working. Paris was practically another world from Japan, it’s streets cobbled and pretty (at least from what he’d seen so far). The Dupains had been really welcoming. They spent his first few days in Paris doing all the touristy things and Izuku was not ashamed to admit he went for the full stereotype with his camera at the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre. They even braved ghastly line waiting times to see the Mona Lisa in person.

It had been nice. It was new. Right now, Izuku needed a little new.

His room in the bakery was a little side room that had apparently been a store room so it was cosy, but Izuku didn’t mind it. As he managed to convey to his generous hosts, if you live in Japan you get used to small rooms.

Really, that was his only major problem; the communication barrier. Aunt Sabine spoke a little Japanese and his cousin Marinette spoke a little English, which put them in better communication straits than Uncle Tom, who only spoke French and a handful of Chinese endearments. Izuku could hold a simple conversation in English but he didn’t speak any French at all. Communication became like performance art involving phrase books, a woefully inadequate translation tablet and a lot of charades.

After their touristy first weekend, however, they had to settle down into a routine. The Dupain’s had to re-open the bakery and Marinette had to go back to school, leaving Izuku to the drudgery of trying to set up his new life here. He didn’t have to start the homeschooling program until next week at least, but after that he’d be swamped with work trying to play catch up for all the lessons he’d missed while he’d been in hospital.

Aunt Sabine was more than generous with her time. Izuku had medications he needed to take which he needed prescriptions from a French doctor in order to buy in France, so they spent a day at a local psychiatrists that Izuku’s own psychiatrist had set them up with. Izuku had a session with a Japanese/French translator on speakerphone, going through the motions of therapy techniques and medical records. Eventually they were able to go to the pharmacy and pick up Izuku’s anti-anxiety medication. He was to Skype with his therapist every week at set times and his physiotherapist every fortnight while they scrambled to find some sort of in-home recovery plan for him.

Underneath his long sleeves were sports wraps covering his wrists tightly. Izuku never took them off. He put on a clean set after every shower but otherwise they stayed covered; with double layers of shirts as well whenever he could get away with it. They were giving a lot of support to his hands while his physiotherapy was going on.

His physio had told him that while his motor and grip skills would improve if he struck with his exercises, but some of the fine control had been lost forever. Izuku could no longer grip a pen with his right hand and couldn’t bend some of the fingers anymore. His left was better, but it was non-dominant and suffered intermittent fine tremors thanks to nerve damage.

His kana were atrocious. His kanji; illegible. He took notes on a laptop now, or used katakana. The blocky letters meant for foreign words were at least easy to write.

It took a while, and a few hilarious misunderstandings, but eventually Izuku managed to get word across that he’d like to help out in the bakery. The physiotherapist had recommended a program of gentle, repetitive motions that worked his wrists every day and after a blitz research attack on the
internet Izuku thought that kneading dough would be the thing. He had to get up so early he was
tired by mid afternoon but he would do it. He was determined.

His life turned into a peaceful, regimented routine. The early hours passed serenely elbow deep in
yeasty flour, then breakfast where he mostly listened to the Dupain-Chengs chatter in inscrutable
French, then he went to his room and dove into schoolwork until Aunt Sabine brought him lunch,
then back to schoolwork, then dinner which was mostly a repeat of breakfast, then two hours back
in his room diligently and slowly working his way through the online French/Japanese language
course he’d paid a subscription out of his allowance for, then he’d call his mother right before bed,
just as she was getting up.

He figured it would be better to be lonely and busy than lonely and idle.

It wasn’t bad to live in France. Uncle Tom was big and buff and endlessly patient as they worked
their way across the abyss of the language gap between them and Aunt Sabine was always very
kind, gently encouraging him to talk like his own mother would have done. Izuku wasn’t sure
Marinette liked him very much, but that could have just been nerves talking. Izuku had never really
spoken to a girl his own age before, even a cousin. Opening up a line of communication would
have been intimidating enough just for that, but when you add in bad translation apps and
incomprehensible pronunciation, there were exactly zero chances for Izuku to cover himself in
glory here. She frightened him, quite frankly. He tried to avoid her as politely as he could.

Besides, she had a lot of friends, judging by her social media posts. Izuku took in this fact with no
small amount of awe. To a boy ostracised from a very young age, Marinette’s outgoing confidence
and popularity was like a fairytale. Quirklessness wasn’t the same in Europe than it was in Japan.
People saw it differently. It wasn’t treated like a huge disability. It wasn’t treated like anything
more spectacular than a different hair colour. Maybe it helped that Marinette wanted to be a
fashion designer and not a Pro Hero like Izuku did, but the contrast was still startling for him.

Still, even with reams of school work, constant therapist appointments and mounds of dough to
knead, Izuku found himself at loose ends sometimes, unwilling to have his hosts forced to entertain
him, but at a loss with what to do with his time.

Despite all his best intentions, his old Hero analysis hobby reared it’s head soon enough. After an
internal tussle, Izuku decided to just roll with it. His mother kept telling him to have fun and, while
this wasn’t what she meant, that was fun for him.

The first thing he learned was Heroes in France were so different.

Not completely different. They definitely had Heroes and they were most definitely respected. But
in Japan heroes belonged to agencies. In France – and pretty much the rest of Europe, Heroes
worked directly for the government with no privatisation. They were actual police officers,
INTERPOL agents and various monarchy guards. They didn’t even have costumes! They wore
uniforms – very neat and high tech uniforms, but still uniforms. It was so weird.

There was barely any chart system. There was no number one, number two or number four
hundred. That’s not to say some Pros weren’t more popular than others. Majestia seemed to be the
biggest draw around Paris; the French/American worked for INTERPOL officially but did do some
PR stuff as well. There was also Cosmique, Vivid, Knightowl and apparently a sort of underground
Hero who worked exclusively around Notre Dame called Quasimodo, which, if Izuku was reading
the badly translated blogs right, was a hereditary title.

A lot of the French Pros were inherited titles; and they weren’t bloodline inherited either. Izuku
was surprised to realise that once the current hero retired, a suitable replacement took up the
mantle. There was always a Majestia. There was always a Knightowl. Always a Quasi, as he was affectionately known.

It was nothing like Japan, where aside from a scant handful of Hero families, every new Hero was eager to carve out their own niche tooth and nail. It’s like the Heroes in France felt no drive to leave their mark.

Also, Pro Heroes in France were trained later than in Japan. In Japan a middle school student would have to beat out a bunch of other hopefuls to reach even an only semi-decent Hero course High School. Here the people who wanted to be Pros started their careers in special universities for training Pros after they graduated high school. Imagine waiting that long to become a Pro Hero!

There were also vigilantes. This is where Izuku fell down the rabbit hole of Ladybug and Chat Noir.

Because all the holy gods, Paris’ view of vigilantes was insane.

They were treated like Heroes.

Not all of them, Izuku amended fairly. Illegal Quirk use was a thing in France too, even if the punishments weren’t quite as harsh for misdemeanour level stuff. But there were two vigilantes in Paris that were treated like they were adjunct to the Pro Hero forces. They worked in daylight, on camera and even gave interviews. They even had merchandise and everything.

If a vigilante had pulled that kind of stunt in Japan they would never get out of prison, ever.

*Tentomushi* and *Kuroneko*, Ladybug and Chat Noir, the most celebrated vigilantes in the world. Izuku watched video after video of them in awe. They were so similar to All Might; no one knew what their Quirks actually were although Ladybug was at least powerful enough to essentially warp reality, according to the Ladybug sites. They were both strong and fast, though, both able fighters looking at the videos, both well equipped though the internet was awash with theories about who supplied their gear.

Unlike All Might, they weren’t actually licensed Heroes, though.

When he tried to find out why not Izuku ran up against the wall of losing-in-translation. Ladybug was known but not well known outside of Europe so most of the sites he looked at were in French. He got out his big French dictionary and gritted his teeth though weeks of bilingual research but eventually he figured it out.

There was a villain the Pro Heroes in France couldn’t stop. He had a couple of different names but Izuku stuck with the most common one he read – Hawk Moth. Nobody knew his real name. Nobody knew his Quirk either, because it was so fantastically weird that it didn’t exist on official records.

He could turn innocent people into villains.

Izuku read that about twenty times before he accepted it wasn’t some bad translation error.

Much, much more research gave him the rough parameters of how it worked. Hawk Moth had some kind of Quirk that allowed him to make a construct of pure energy – in this case, in the form of a butterfly. That would have been a rare enough Quirk as it was, but somehow when the constructs – the *akuma*, a word he actually recognised – entered something an innocent bystander had on their person, the akuma would, well, possess it would be the only description. Once possessed, the energy took over the person, giving them a new body and superpowering their Quirk
to levels they had never reached before, sometimes twisting into something new.

Like, the first of Hawk Moths victims had been a middle school student the same age as Izuku with a mutation Quirk that gave him stone-like skin. When the akuma took him over he transformed into a massive stone monster a thousand times stronger than he was in his normal life. There was another who had a Quirk called Perception, which meant she could slow her perception of time right down. When she had been akumatized she gained the ability to actually *time travel* which was well beyond what her normal Quirk would ever be able to do.

They became not just villains, but supervillains. Worse, the person akumatized lost all sense of themselves and became this darker version with no inhibitions.

Worse still? *Ordinary Quirks couldn’t stop them.* If a Hero had super strength, the akumatised villain would be stronger, more indestructible. Emitter Quirks like energy beams or telekinesis or anything like that would just bounce off. They weren’t effected by heat or cold, they didn’t seem to feel pain. They could enslave people to their wills, or turn other people into copies of themselves. That was the thing that gave the Pros pause. If they, with their training and powerful Quirks, were subjugated to a villains will, there was no limit to the damage they could do.

Plus, even if a Pro could somehow hurt the possessed villian, then what? They were still an innocent bystander. It wasn’t really their fault. The Pros in France were scouring Paris to try to find Hawk Moth but it was impossible. There was no way to track an akuma to or from the source. He’d only ever appeared once, as a construct of his own making. They weren’t even sure what people saw was his real face.

That’s why Ladybug and Chat Noir could do what they did. The authorities didn’t exactly like it, there were still calls from them to at least register with the government, but the Pros themselves had intervened on the vigilantes behalf. Ladybug and Chat Noir were the only ones to have any chance against Hawk Moth. Paris would have been in ruins long since without them. As long as nobody knew their identities then Hawk Moth wouldn’t know them either.

This sort of thing would never happen in Japan but France was in a bind. Imagine having a supervillian that could get any ordinary citizen to do his bidding and given them superpowers to do it with. How could you win a fight like that? The Pros pointed out that the vigilante duo were the only weapon they had that worked.

Izuku wondered why.

He started yet another notebook. He started keeping it on him at all times, filling the pages with every little titbit he could find. He even practised drawing again, but his efforts weren’t very good. He winced to look at them, frankly.

Still, it... helped. Living is Paris was scary and lonely. He didn’t speak the language and he didn’t really know the Dupain-Chengs very well. He’d left a lot of unfinished business behind him in Japan that tormented him on occasion. He couldn’t study All Might anymore. He was still that mans number one fan, but All Might was too connected up to other things that were too raw for Izuku to deal with in his state.

He was staring down the barrel of having to accept that some people just aren’t born to help in the ways he wanted to help. He’d hoped for the longest time that he’d find some way, but it seemed less and less likely now. That hope was fading. Dying.

The Ladybug notebook became like a guilty little secret, an addict sneaking his drug in on the side.
He didn’t tell his mother or his therapist.

There was one other person he might tell, if he could work up the courage to bother them.

Until then, something to focus on that wasn’t mandatory school work, physiotherapy or trying to talk to his hosts helped. Izuku still and always would love Heroes and he’d never seen anything like Ladybug before.

He was just adding some (somewhat illegible) new notes on Ladybug and Chat Noir versus the villain the media called ‘Copycat’ when he heard a frustrated yell come from over his head. Nervous, but unable to ignore it, Izuku carefully made his way up the steep steps to the attic, where Marinette’s room was. He avoided it like the plague usually. It was a girls room, after all.

He sheepishly knocked on the open trapdoor. Marinette turned towards his. She looked nearly in tears, clutching a phone in her hands. Oh, phone trouble. Well, he’d been his mother’s in-house technical support for a decade now. Maybe he could help with that, if nothing else.

To his mild surprise she handed the phone off without a word. “Locked, huh?” he murmured, mostly to himself, but he saw the familiar blank look of incomprehension steal across his cousin’s face. Rather than embarrass himself further, Izuku quickly went through the emergency unlocking protocol. He wordlessly handed the phone back once the security question was up because he couldn’t read it.

Marinette was clearly astonished that he was able to do it do quickly. She spun around and hurriedly typed something into her computer, which puzzled Izuku. Wasn’t it her phone?

Before he could tease out the thought properly, she whirled back to him so fast it made him jump backwards. She shouted something in French while smiling hugely, clearly relieved. Then she truly surprised him by saying, in perfect, slightly accented Japanese “Thank you very much!”

Izuku was taken aback for a moment. Then he spotted the French/Japanese phrasebook laying on her desk, dripping with bookmarks. He smiled without thinking. Marinette didn’t dislike him at all. She was trying to learn to talk to him too. To someone who had almost no experience with someone his own age actually liking him, that was a huge step forward.

“You’re welcome, Marinette-chan.”

Marinette, still smiling, grabbed him by the hand and tugged. Faintly bewildered, Izuku followed her lead up to the rooftop garden directly over her room. Izuku was amazed to see it. He hadn’t even known it was here in the month he’d been here. He was so caught up in looking at the view of sunset over Paris that he didn’t realise Marinette was leaving.

As she clambered back down, she held up a finger; ‘Wait here’.

Bemused, Izuku looked out over the balcony railing while he waited. He’d never get a view like this in Mustafu. He wondered if he should get his camera and take a photo for his mother. Idly, he reached down to the necklace he wore around his neck and drew it out from beneath his shirt, the pendant round and glittery in the fading twilight. He’d asked his mother if he could take it with him to Paris. It had been given to her by Izuku’s absent father; Inko used to wear it all the time when Izuku was really little but had stopped after a while. He guessed because the reminder was too painful.

Little Izuku had been drawn to the pearly sparkle. The fact that it made a noise had made him giggle. Inko associated it with her deceased husband, but to Izuku it was a tangible reminder of her
and of early days when hopes and dreams didn’t seem so impossible. He raised it to his lips now and blew through the hole; a clean, sweet note rent the still Paris night.

“That sounds pretty,” Marinette’s voice came from behind. She had come back toting his tablet, which he’d left in the living room, and a cake box from down in the bakery. The one immortal perk of living in a patisserie bakery was that you got the best desserts. “Kirei.”

Izuku grinned. Right sentiment but slightly the wrong word. “Utsukushì. Belle.”

“Hai. Utsukushì,” Marinette corrected. She handed him a cupcake from the bakery, green frosted with sugar pearls.

Izuku smiled. He loved those cupcakes. She’d noticed.

They both sat together, speaking the language of delicious cake for a while. Marinette pointed to the pendant curiously. That was a tablet-level explanation so Izuku typed up an explanation and held it out. It’s my mother’s. My father gave it to her as a last gift before he died.

The translations were usually fabulously erratic, but he thought his cousin got the gist from what she read. She tapped something back in, which came to him as sweetness. Is it a whistle?

“Ocarina,” Izuku corrected.

Marinette blinked. “O-ka... oh! An Ocarina! Yes, I know that! Wakarimashita. We made them in art class one year. Not this small, though.”

It was true. The little instrument was about the size of a large marble.


Marinette gave it a go. It made a rather nice sound. The one she made in art class hadn’t made any sound at all, because she’d made it all wrong.

It was getting very dark now so they rose to go back inside.

Marinette made to get to her feet, tripped over an untied shoelace and ended up slaloming into poor Izuku, who yelped, stumbled and went down, accidently dragging her along. They both scrambled upright, red as tomatoes.

In the exact same moment as Izuku cried. “Pardon!” Marinette cried “Sumimasen!”

They stared at each other and then burst out laughing.

The heart of a connection is always communication, with words or without.

Marinette scooped up Izuku’s notebook which had fallen out of his jacket in the crash. She was surprised to see some very familiar if slightly wonky drawings in it. “Ladybug?”

Izuku was blushing again. He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “Uh, hai. Yes. Ladybug. I,” he tapped his chest. “suki da. Like? Admire. Ladybug is... kakuii. Uh, very cool.”

Marinette could tell her smile was odd as she looked at Izuku’s incomprehensible notes. She tapped her own chest. “Me too.”

Izuku smiled awkwardly. “I like Heroes.”
Marinette saw an oddly melancholy look come over Izuku’s face, though he did his best to hide it.

Suddenly she got it; Izuku didn’t just admire Heroes, he’d wanted to be one.

He was Quirkless, like her.

Marinette remembered how devastated she’d been when they diagnosed her, that she’d never have her father’s Hot Hand Quirk or her mother’s Bloom Quirk. She’d wanted to be a Hero too – all kids did at some stage. To be told you never would was always crushing, even when your dreams changed like hers had done. She’d wanted to make gorgeous things; she came to the realisation from her parents hard work in the bakery that she didn’t need a Quirk to do that.

Still, that old disappointment still flared on occasion, especially whenever Chloe or someone else mocked her for it.

Marinette couldn’t imagine how bad it must feel if you’d reached the age in Japan where young Hero hopefuls start planning for their future and you got left behind, friendless to boot. Maybe that’s why it got so bad he’d gone into hospital. Her mother hadn’t given her many details.

*Well, he’s got one now,* Marinette thought. It might not be everything, but it was a start.

She was going to help him no matter what.

* Izuku was surprised when his phone rang the next day. It was the afternoon, the Dupain-Chengs were dealing with the afternoon rush before closing but it was still very early in Japan which was the only place he got calls from.

He hurriedly picked up. “Kaa-san? What’s wrong? It’s 3am where you are.”

“Izuku,”

Izuku faltered. “Kacchan? What’s going on? Is my mum okay? Has there been a villain attack? What is-?”

“Izuku, shut up! Aunty Inko is fine. I borrowed her phone, that’s all.”

Izuku was momentarily rendered speechless. “Kacchan it’s three in the morning in Japan! Why would you ask to borrow her phone?”

“To order take out, dumbass. Why the fuck do you think?”

Izuku felt a churning of anxiety in his gut. “Why do you want to talk tome? What could you possibly have to say?”

Silence. Then “When are you coming back?”

Izuku felt like he had been punched in the gut. “I don’t know. A year, maybe. Why?”

“A fucking YEAR?” Kacchan yelled so loud that Izuku looked around his room, certain half of Paris heard. “So that’s it then? You’re just going to run away and hide? Like a coward? I thought you wanted to be a Hero, you useless Deku!”
A band tightened around Izuku’s chest. “I don’t want to talk to you anymore,” he croaked and hung up.

It didn’t do any good though. His phone started to ring. Even the ringtone sounded angry.

Izuku had to get away. He darted down the stairs into the bakery proper. There was a crowd there getting things, but Izuku moved through them on autopilot. He waved to Aunt Sabine at the counter, trying to act normally, grinding out the word “Walk.” He sometimes took walks close by because his therapist recommended both sunshine and exercise, but Izuku wasn’t sure that he’d passed muster with Sabine, who was frowning at him in concern.

Izuku got out though, heading at a run from the nearest park where he could just sit and be anonymous for a while. There was an old man far away feeding pigeons, but Izuku took a bench and gripped his clammy hands together, struggling to control his breathing.

Kacchan always managed to strike where it would hurt the most, whether he meant to or not.

He looked down at his trembling, half numb hands. As if he could be a Hero now with hands like these. He drew out his notebook and looked dismally at the shaky, ugly katakana and the weird, crazed drawings where everything used to be so neat and precise. Underneath three layers, the scars on his wrists pulled when he flexed his fingers.

He remembered telling someone once that he’d hoped to be a Hero and that the hope hurt. Well, here is was, three months down the track and it still hurt. The hope would not die and leave him in peace. It was still there, teasing and tormenting him.

I thought you wanted to be a Hero!

“Painful, isn’t it? To want something that you cannot obtain? To be mocked for it? Your detractors deserve to be silenced, don’t they?”

Izuku has just enough wherewithal to think what? before a black shape flitted into view. Before he could make the mental leap between butterfly and akuma, the akuma had flown into his notebook and vanished.

A wave of despair overtook Izuku. Colour faded away. He was immersed in a black ocean. He was in it before he knew what it was, too late to even fight it. Izuku vanished.

Silence rose to his feet. He was dressed all in black. His hair was black. His eyes were black. Not black of iris. His eyeballs were black from edge to edge. So was his mouth. His skin was blinding, lifeless white.

Black tears tracked down his face. They fell like little ink drops on the ground. Wherever they touched, the ground turned into a miasma of dull grey. Black ink started soaking through his wrist wraps too.

“Go forth Silence. Show them what it’s like to live without hope. But you must get the Miraculouses of Ladybug and Chat Noir when they come to silence you!”

Silence didn’t answer.

The grey miasma started to spread.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Ladybug defeats a villain, Izuku gets some stuff of his chest. Also, there's a new Miraculous.

Chapter Notes

HO-LY! This one is taking me for a ride (but I am getting back to All Sight after this).

BE WARNED; Izuku is going through recovery for an emotional breakdown, so there will be tears. He's dealing with a lot of stuff. His journey is all about the loss of hope and the regaining of hope, so of course the Miraculous ties in with that elusive 'thing with feathers'.
Wang Fu frowned and looked towards the hidden Miracle Box.

“No,” Wayzz shook his head. “Not one in there. Another. The Guardians were happy for this one to roam.”

“There was only one...” Wang Fu trailed off. “Huh. Well I’ll be. Maybe Hisashi did manage to save it after all. Wayzz, it’s such a nice day. I think it’s time for a walk, don’t you?”

*

Why was the last half an hour of class always so excruciatingly long? Marinette wondered as she tried to force her swiss cheesed brain to work their way through the Quirk History worksheet on her school tablet and the great, dull slabs of reading she had to get through in her history textbook in order to find the correct answers.

“How do we even need to know half this stuff, anyway?” she muttered to herself. The Quirk Wars were kind of interesting in an extremely horrible and nasty way, but this part of the history lesson was just layer after layer of how all the legal bits and pieces got decided and enacted into today’s laws. As far as Marinette could tell it was a lot of ‘well, we’ve decided not to kill each other anymore, whoopsie, our bad, let’s just not use these Quirks for killing, you know, like it was written in the law before the wars.’

“Ex-cuuse me, Miss Bustier!” Chloe’s grating voice destroyed whatever was left of Marinette’s will to live. “Marinette is disrespecting the usefulness of our Quirk History lesson. After all,” Chloe smirked at her. “Just because she doesn’t have a Quirk doesn’t mean the rest of us don’t find this useful!”

Marinette gritted her teeth.

“Yes, thank you Chloe,” Miss Bustier replied carefully. “I did hear her.”

“I’m sorry Miss Bustier,” Marinette mumbled, red faced.

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean it like that,” Miss Bustier smiled. “You asked why we have to know our history and that’s actually a very valid question. Memorising a lot of dates and names isn’t a great deal of fun, but here’s the kicker – it’s nothing to do with names and dates and everything to with not repeating our mistakes. The Quirk Wars decimated almost fifty percent of the population of Earth. That’s an enormous toll. You could combine every war before it and all the plagues and you still wouldn’t get a death count like that.” The rest of the class started to pay attention. “So all of the aftermath, all of the boring Treaties and Conventions, they were all designed to make a world where one rule,” she held up a finger. “One rule holds sway over all the others. The strong are kind the innocent. That’s actually a pretty rare phenomenon in history. From that you get Heroes like All Might and Majestia, you even get Ladybug. Think how awful Paris would be right now without Ladybug. Ladybug can exist in our society because of the foundation those laws laid down. That forms the frame through which we view Heroes, the values with which we judge them. We accept her because she lives up to that ideal exactly; the strong protecting the innocent.”

“Well some people will need more protecting than others,” Chloe replied sniffily. “Like the poor, powerless Quirkless.”

“Like me?” Adrien said quietly. “I’m Quirkless too.”

Chloe tripped over her own haughty and began to bluster. It was a terrible thing to be grateful for, but Marinette couldn’t deny the Quirkless jabs had dropped off to nearly nothing now that Adrien
“Oh don’t be silly, Adrien! It’s just an example! Besides if you need protecting you only need to go as far as moi.”

“Your Quirk is Skin Deep. What, exactly, are you going to do?” Nino asked, eyebrow up. “Change your hair colour at the enemy?”

It was true Chloe only had the most minor shapeshifting ability; she could change her hair or eye colour or her skin complexion, but not to any huge degree and not permanently. Marinette hated herself for it but she was, as a would-be fashion designer, really envious of that Quirk. Whatever else you could say about her, Chloe always looked her best.

“Oh duh, what am I to do,” Chloe sneered. “I guess I’ll just have to get my father – the Mayor of Paris – to call all the Hero Police Agents he has the direct numbers of!”

“Bet he doesn’t have Ladybugs though,” Alya murmured slyly. Ladybug wrote itself in elegant cursive across the desk before fading. Nino began coughing up bubbles as he tried not to burst out laughing at Chloe’s outraged scowl. It was the bane of her existence – the only Hero that wasn’t at her figurative beck and call was the one she wanted to see the most.

One of the bubbles popped on Ivan’s desk, letting loose a quick burst of Nino’s laughter. “What’s that?” Ivan asked.

“Nino’s Quirk is Sound Bubble,” Marinette explained, before stopping. Ivan was frowning out the window.

“No, I mean,” Ivan pointed one of his stony hands out of the window. “What’s that?”

Marinette looked out the window and felt the amusement drain out of her.

Paris was turning grey. A dull miasma was rising through the streets like a fog. Even as they watched it spread silently and ominously closer.

“Everybody,” Miss Bustier’s voice was suddenly sharp. “Leave your bags, move out of the classroom quickly and calmly. We’re evacuating.”

They hustled out at speed, Chloe complaining mightily about leaving her bag behind. Marinette tucked her own tiny purse close to her body, hoping no one noticed it.

Somebody hit the fire alarm; suddenly it was a mad scramble as several different classes spilled out into the hallways in varying state of distress. Students were shouting and teachers were shouting over them to try to keep the peace.

Marinette shouldered her way out of a throng and into the empty music room. “Wow, that escalated quickly,” she breathed while she opened her purse. “Tikki, spots on!”

The little kwami gave a grim nod and then vanished in a streak of red light into Marinette’s earrings.

Transforming had felt so strange at first but now the rush of energy across her skin was a welcome delight. Marinette called it the fizz in her head. Whenever she turned into Ladybug, her skin fizzed with energy for as long as the transformation lasted.

There; dazzling red suit, domino mask and yoyo that was practically telepathically operated;
Ladybug had arrived.

Ladybug kicked open the music room windows and jumped down onto the street, heading for the miasma that was slowly working its way towards her. It wasn’t a fog; at least, not in the traditional sense. There was a line between what was grey and what wasn’t and she could clearly see what was on the other side of it.

It was just all in greyscale.

All the colour was gone.

She hadn’t even been Ladybug for a year at this point, but she’d learned to trust her instincts. She slowed before she reached it. She didn’t dare get close to it until she knew what it was doing. When she got closer, she gasped.

There were people in there.

They weren’t moving.

They weren’t lying down or hurt or anything. Most of them were sitting on the pavement or the road, staring at nothing, dull eyed. They were alright, they just didn’t seem to have the will to do anything.

“Hey!” Ladybug yelled, waving to the nearest one to her – a woman with a baby in a stroller. “Hey! You need to move!”

The lady looked up at the sound, looked at her blankly but then looked back down at the ground sadly. With one hand she disconsolately moved the stroller back and forth in what looked like the last drop of maternal instinct she had left. Her face was grey, her floral print dress was a mess of dark greys and blacks.

The people were all staring and silent.

Ladybug felt a chill run through her as the grey spread an inch further. It made everything look like an old, creepy horror film.

“I don’t know about anyone else, but I’m never watching another old Hitchcock movie again."

Ladybird jumped and then glared up at the top of a streetlight, where Chat Noir perched.


“Good to know kitty,” Ladybug sighed. “Now can we please focus on the problem at hand?”

Chat Noir sobered. “From up here it goes for about three blocks. That doesn’t sound like much but it’s spreading.”

“Can you see what’s causing it?” Ladybug called up to him. He shook his head.

They were interrupted by a car turning into the road they were on, swerving around all the evacuating students and turning towards the grey zone. Whoever it was slammed on the brakes but the front of the car had nosed just inside the miasma.

The red sedan slowly began fading to grey.

Ladybug didn’t hesitate. She sprinted for the car and nearly yanked the door off getting to the
petrified driver before the grey could take him over as well. It had just reached his fingertips on the wheel before she snapped loose the seatbelt and Chat Noir grabbed him and bodily hauled him out of the car.

*Everything* lost colour. It faded into an old black and white film.

“Are you okay?” she demanded of the man they’d rescued.

“Ladybug what...” he stuttered. “What is this?”

“We’ll find out,” Ladybug assured him. “In the meantime, you should get to safety.”

“What’s the point?”

Ladybug jerked in surprise. “Pardon?”

The life was draining out of the drivers eyes, leaving a familiar, dull look. “There’s no point,” he repeated softly. “I’m sorry,” he sat down, eyes lowered.

“Hey! What-“

“Lady,” Chat Noir grabbed her and hauled her back. “Don’t touch him. Look at his hands!”

His hands had already turned grey and the colour was starting to seep out of his forearms and neck. He wasn’t in the grey zone but he was a part of it, slowly losing his colour like everything else.

“I think that grey thing might be contagious,” Chat Noir said in her ear. “I sure don’t want to test if I’m right.”

“Akuma,” Ladybug said grimly.

“Definitely Akuma,” Chat Noir nodded. “So the question is if we can’t reach the villain, how in the heck do we stop them?”

Ladybug left the driver where he was; there wouldn’t be any way to help him unless they took out the source. She unspooled her yoyo and latched a streetlamp, vaulting up and landing as light as a feather. She surveyed the scene as Chat Noir had done. Yes, just what she thought.

“The grey doesn’t extend over the rooftops,” she told her partner below. “It sits at street level. We’ll make our way across it that way.”


He slammed the butt of his staff on the ground and telescoped it up to a ridiculous length where he could pluck Ladybug from her perch as he went past.

“Right,” Ladybug huffed as she hung onto his shoulders as they shot upwards. “*Your* speciality.” She folded up, used his shoulders as a springboard and then leapt from the nearest rooftop, leaving Chat to wobble ominously. She was already on the next rooftop after that, yoyo grappling from pediment to pediment, before he caught up with her.

“So cruel milady!” Chat Noir pouted as he sprinted past her. “What if I’d fallen into that fog? What would you do without me?”

Please. She’d angled to keep him from doing just that. She leapt to the next building top, scuttled across the balcony edge and down the lip of the roof and then across the street to the next balcony.
The grey was just under her feet but Ladybug wasn’t worried. She was careful and skilled. She could do this.

“All jokes aside,” Chat Noir added less cheerily. “Can I just say for the record that this? This is extremely creepy.”

“Yeah,” Ladybug breathed. When you looked down into the grey miasma, there were scores of people just sitting there, staring blankly. Dogs were lying down. It was frankly a miracle there hadn’t been any serious car crashes, but the people in car seemed to have calmly put on the brakes, switched off the engines and were now just sitting there. Everything was eerily silent.

Paris was a grey still life painting.

“Look for the centre,” Chat Noir added, uncharacteristically grim.

“Look for the leading edge,” Ladybug pointed. “Look; it’s spreading like a comet tail but there, see it?”

Yes, there at the other side of it was an edge moving faster than the others, grey trailing in it’s wake. Ladybug and Chat Noir looked at each other then wordlessly headed for the source. They jumped ahead of the line first, running up and across rooftops as easily as they would on a street. Below them people were fleeing in terror, knocking each other over in their panicky scramble to get away from...

“Wow,” Chat Noir breathed. “Just when I thought it couldn’t get any more creepy.”

Ladybug felt anxiety grip her stomach as she first laid eyes on the akumatized villain. He didn’t look like much as first glance. His skin was as blazing white as his clothes and hair was bottomless black. Those empty, black hollows dripping black tears were haunting. Even as she watched, a drop of pure black ink stuff dripped from the end of his fingers and landed on street. Grey expanded out from it, deadening the noise. In one sharp move the villain flicked black drops towards the last of the wave of fleeing bystanders and watched, unmoved, as they went grey and still.

He seemed to be attracted to the noise. The louder the noise, the harder he went for it.

“Right,” Ladybug gritted her teeth. “This guy clearly needs some colour back in his life. Where do you think they akuma is? Those wrist guards? That’s where most of the black is coming from.”

“Maybe the pendant thing. See it?” Chat Noir pointed. “It’s the only thing I can see that has colour.”

Forget anxiety, Ladybug gut just got sucker punched.

Izuku! Marinette thought from deep within Ladybug. It happened! Hawk Moth got him! Why didn’t I check in with him? I should have been more vigilant!

Ladybug shook her head. Focus! The only way to help Izuku was to get the akuma off him. Chat Noir was right; the pendant, the thing he hung onto whenever homesickness bit down, had to be it.

“You keep him busy in the front,” Ladybug told her partner. “I’ll get up on the rooftops and swing down to grab it once he’s focused on you.”

“Got it!”
Chat Noir swung into action, making a flying leap at the villain staff aloft. “Hey ugly! You missed one!”

The villains head snapped towards the sound.

He was forced to drop and spin his staff to shield himself while blackness was flung in his direction. Since the stuff wasn’t exactly solid he was forced to do a lot more dodging than attacking, but it was working. Chat Noir’s reflexes were predictably cat-like. He could dart a sunbeam and was clearly keeping the villain on his toes as the superhero danced circles around him, yelling insults and puns to get his attention.

Ladybug leapt and grappled the nearest rooftop. This whole thing was odd. Usually the villain was made bombastic and loud, happy to announce their grievances. The endless silence was far more intimidating than any villain that Hawk Moth had made before. Even now the villain who had been Izuku wasn’t engaging with Chat Noir, he was just trying to brush the hero aside.

Ladybug wrapped her yoyo around a streetlamp below and waited. Chat Noir would get the villain into the right position, then she could get the akuma out, de-evilize it and then go home and feed Izuku more cupcakes. Some introduction to France he’d had!

Chat Noir tumbled neatly into position, carefully getting the villain to follow him in. He gave Ladybug a subtle nod; this was as good as it was going to get.

Right. Deep breath, drop and reel in; Ladybug swung in a neatly calculated arc down to the street level, using the streetlamp as a pivot and landing silently not inches from her target.

Then it all went wrong because the villain spun with preternatural speed right as she landed; at the exact point Ladybug was too close to dodge. A black tear dropped from the villian’s face and onto Ladybug’s hand.

Grey overtook her. The world went underwater, deadened and numbingly cold.

Why was she even doing this? Why did she bother? The villains just kept coming and coming. It would never end, there was no victory in the making, no triumph to enjoy. She kept doing the wrong things, she kept failing, she could never ever get the Ladybug to Marinette ratio right, never find that elusive balance that would let her live both of her lives to the full. She would fail one day, Hawk Moth only had to be lucky once and then what? Everything that happened after that would be her fault. Why did she fight it? Why did she fight?

“Now! Take her Miraculous, Silence! Her earrings!”

Silence ignored him and continued on down the street.

“What? I command you, Silence! Take her Miraculous!”

Silence didn’t heed a word. Frantically, Hawk Moth tried to take back the power he’d granted the boy who’s transmitted his distress to him so strongly. He couldn’t grasp it. Every time he tried to forge the connection, something inside him just gave up as soon as it was made.

He didn’t have control over this one.

Something was happening to her body but Ladybug was so lost in the feeling that her defeat was inevitable, that it was right here and now, that she barely tracked what was happening. Someone was carrying her up and up, she felt the jolts of it in a distant way. Sound was distorted; still existent but muffled and far away.
Sound blasted her ears. Ladybug sat up, gasping like she’d been drowning in the ocean. She was shocked to see the searing red of her suit seep back into life, all the brighter for the grey that scattered out of it.

“Hey,” Chat Noir was panting from his mad climb to the rooftops. “It worked!" The dark energy of his most destructive strike fizzed out from around his claws.

“Did you,” Ladybug gaped at him. “Did you just use Cataclysm on me?!”

Chat Noir did respond to her shocked outrage. He was slumped on the ground. He was turning grey.

“Chat Noir!” Ladybug scrambled over to his hunched form, but his domino eye lenses were fading to white. She stopped short of actually touching him, knowing how that awful grey tended to spread. Ladybug felt sick. The minute she’d spent in the grey had been an eternity of despair. Char Noir must have dove into the miasma to drag her out, uncaring about the risk to himself.

Char Noir might be hit and miss as a Casanova but his strike ratio when acting like a Hero was never less than one hundred percent. In hindsight, Ladybug could only forgive him for pulling such a desperate and risky stunt, if she’d looked as lifeless as he did now.

“I’ll end it, Chat,” Ladybug told him earnestly. “I promise.”

She’d have to do it fast. Chat Noir’s time limit was ticking down fast. If he de-transformed out here in public, the risk of his identity getting out would be huge. He didn’t have the wherewithal right now to hide himself.

Ladybug spun her yoyo. “Lucky Charm!”

There was a rush of energy before something red and black dotted felt into her hands.

She stared at it. “A pneumatic pressure sprayer?” she turned the can of pressurised air in her hands, the nozzle a needle thin pipe. “What the heck am I supposed to do with this?”

She peered over the edge of the building. Took in the street, the parked cars the villain was walking past, the hanging flower pots outside the abandoned cafe, Chat Noir’s staff and her yoyo.

Okay. Here goes.

Ladybug dropped off the rooftop, repelled down to the street level. The grey miasma was right next to her, not even an inch away, so her window of time was going to be tiny.

With one quick throw, Chat’s folded staff was flung across the street, expertly shattering one of the hanging clay flowerpots. The noise was deafening in the grey silence.

The villain spun towards the noise, but even as his body turned, Ladybugs yoyo was rolling across the street to the parked car across the way, where it bounced up and wrapped around an axle. Ladybug yanked the string taunt, catching the villain across the shins while he was half turned, causing him to flail wildly as he stumbled.

He fell hard and landed on his side, but Ladybug had moved to pin him at close to the speed of sound. One awful, black dripping hand was pinned under his body and the other got pinned to the
street by one merciless red-clad elbow.

Ladybug shoved the sprayer nozzle into the ocarina and blasted it.

She expected the ocarina to pop like an over filled balloon or maybe just blast the akuma out of it. What happened instead was very, very different.

The ocarina let out a high, clean note, almost like a birdcall, shattering the silence. Dark energy bubbled out of Izuku’s skin, leaving the boy gasping and disorientated on the ground.

In his lair, Hawk Moth jumped. “What was that?!”

The akuma. Ladybug’s eyes darted left and right. What was the akuma?

“La...dy...bug,” Izuku gritted out between clenched teeth, his body clearly still in the fight. He was clawing at the still black wraps desperately. “N-No...Notto...Notto!”

Ladybug was alarmed; the akuma hadn’t emerged and the grey, while it had been pushed back, was coming back with a vengeance. Izuku’s eyes were turning black again; the akuma was still on him!

Suddenly, Marinette jumped to the fore of Ladybug. That Japanese phrasebook just became her favourite book ever.

Notto.

Notebook!

Ladybug snatched it from Izuku’s inner jacket pocket even as the villain came back to the fore, black eyed and terrifying. She ripped it to two and there! That evil black butterfly was revealed.

“Gotcha!” Ladybug snapped back her yoyo from under the car and swatted the akuma in midair. She let the yoyo do it’s purification; what emerged was a far more hopeful, glowing white butterfly which took off into Paris, unable to cause any more havoc.

“Bye bye butterfly,” Ladybug breathed and tossed the sprayer skywards. “Don’t come back. Miraculous Ladybug!”

The sprayer vanished in a wave of pink light. Energy surged across Paris, bringing back noise and colour to everything the Silence had touched.

“Not bad Milady,” Chat Noir’s warm voice came from behind her. “The City of Lights glows again!”

“Chat!” she beamed at him, then scowled. “Oh no you don’t with the flattery! Don’t think I’ve forgotten you used your Cataclysm on me kitty!”

“Aww, come on. It was a purrfect plan!” Chat Noir sounded way more sheepish about it than he should have, given his assertion. “I can only destroy one thing at a time and that grey thing was a thing. Or something. You getting anything from this?”

“Yes,” Ladybug poked his nose. “Exasperated. You’d better get going; looks like you’re out of time.” She pointed to the rapidly diminishing power pads on his ring.

“Hmm,” Chat Noir sighed. “I suppose I need to pussyfoot away for a catnap. You,” he jerked his
“Better see to that in the time you’ve got.” Then he was up on the rooftops and out of her sight.

Ladybug turned to see Izuku sitting on the ground staring at his notebook, shaken and lost. His wraps were undone and he looked dishevelled and beaten.

She scooped up the notebook and handed it to him. He jerked back from it. Ladybug felt herself wince seeing it.

“No, no,” Ladybug said slowly, holding it out. “Daijoubu. Abunai... ja nai.”

“Ah,” Izuku took it carefully. “Hontou?”

Ladybug nodded. Izuku tentatively started leafing through the pages like he expected the akuma to suddenly pop out at him. Ladybug shuffled around to see the pages he’d drawn. “Sugoi.”

Izuku blinked at the compliment, then flushed. “Thank you. Boku...ah, I am... fan.”

“Arigato,” Ladybug wished with all her heart that she knew more Japanese than the bare bones basics she’d managed to memorise. Trying to comfort someone without words was difficult.

Maybe Tikki was right; maybe luck was on her side. Shuffling down the street right at that moment was an extremely wizened old man with an oriental history in his face and eyes. He smiled and nodded to her as he came up. “A pleasure to see you, Ladybug. Is everything okay?”

“Yes, everything is fine,” Ladybug reassured him confidently. “The akuma has been taken care of.”

“I’ve very happy to hear it!” the old man said, relieved. “And you young man?”

Then, to Ladybug’s astonishment and delight, he greeted Izuku in flawless Japanese.

“I’m sorry, you speak Japanese?” she asked.

The man nodded. “I do. I speak many languages. A consequence of being an old traveller.” He translated this for Izuku’s benefit and Izuku answered him in rapid fire Japanese Ladybug couldn’t follow.

The man turned to her. “The young man wishes to thank you Ladybug, for saving him. He says he doesn’t remember what happened.”

Ladybug smiled. “Tell him that’s okay. No one ever does with the akuma. Oh, and please tell him that I’ve never seen anyone fight one off before. He must be a pretty special kid.”

Izuku looked shocked when he was told this, but then gave one of his beaming smiles. He looked awkward for a moment, before thrusting out the notebook, blushing. “Ano...sign, please?”

Ladybug grinned. This was too cute. She took the pen out of it and gave a big, flourishing signature as befit a student of design. She even drew a little Ladybug on it.

Then her earring started to flash. Her five minutes were running out.

“I have to leave. Do you know how to get home?” She asked Izuku. She guessed the answer was no given by his panicked expression as he looked around for any familiar landmark.

“It is alright,” the old man assured them. “My clinic is just up the street,” he pointed. “I will take
him there and we’ll wait for him to be picked up. I’m sure we’ll find something to talk about.”

“Thank you,” Ladybug told him sincerely. She held the signed notebook out for Izuku to take.

She looked down at his hand as he took it back reverently. Her heart lurched in her chest.

There was no more time; she fled up the street, last spot vanishing on her Ladybug earrings as she grappled up to a rooftop and into a private spot to de-transform.

Then she sat there for a minute, trying not to throw up.

Izuku’s wrists were covered in pink, new scars.

*

Izuku wasn’t concerned about his scars. He was too busy freaking out about being turned into an actual supervillian.

“Supervillian!” He threw his hands up as he paced in a tight circle around Fu-Sensei’s tasteful eastern style sitting room.

Wang Fu was watching him placidly as he prepared tea.

“He turned me into an actual supervillian! How? I don’t even have a Quirk!”

“A Quirk,” Master Fu said softly, pouring water into the teapot. “Is not necessary to the process. Please, Midoriya-kun, do sit. You’re doing no favours to your internal harmony by pacing around like that.”

Izuku slumped at the table, still in shock. Tea was set before him. “Thank you for your hospitality, sensei,” he mumbled.

“Drink the tea. It will help. You don’t need to worry about anything you did while under the influence of the akuma.”

Izuku drank. He still didn’t feel much better. “A villain. What if I hurt someone? What if I killed someone, Fu-Sensei?! Oh god, I’m a murderer, I’m going to be locked up in Tartartus! They’re going to arrest me, aren’t they?!”

Wang Fu sighed, picked up a gong stick and expertly threw it at the gong across the room. They great booming clash broke Izuku from his panicked fugue. He jumped and nearly got tea everywhere.

“As I was saying,” the old man continued calmly as Izuku looked around for how the gong had been rung. “They will not arrest you. Hawk Moth has done this to many people and it is with him the authorities will place the blame. It is becoming a saying around here; you haven’t lived in Paris unless you get to play a villain at least once.”

“But if I hurt someone,” Izuku continued wretchedly. “They may not blame me, but I’ll blame me.”

Wang Fu smiled. “It is one of the blessings of having the protection of the Ladybug, young man, that if she captures the akuma she can undo all of the damage it does. Do not concern yourself over maybes when you can rely on certainties like that.”

“Yeah,” Izuku relaxed slightly. He had read that on some of the sites. Reality warping, indeed. “I
Izuku lapsed into silence. He had rewrapped his wrists as discretely as he could. He was relieved that nobody had been hurt thanks to Ladybug, but the day’s events still left him at a low ebb. Izuku was, in this moment, about as far from being a Hero as it should be possible for him to get.

A villain, he thought bleakly. One bad phone call was all it took. Even after reading all those websites and official warnings, Izuku still hadn’t been prepared for how easily all his principles and convictions had been washed away in the dark tide of the akuma.

Would that have happened to All Might?

Probably not.

Izuku’s inability to get even close to his idols ideal never seemed starker.

“Such weighty thoughts,” Master Fu broke in mildly. “The day has passed and you are here, unharmed and unharming at the end of it. Is that not a thing that brings you joy?”

The question was innocent enough, but hit an already pounded flat nerve. “Yes, great joy,” Izuku replied bitterly. “I’ve wanted to be a Hero my whole life, you know. To save people with a big smile on my face, to help. Like All Might,” tears began to drip down his cheeks. “I wanted to do something that matters.

My therapist told me I seek validation because my father left me when I was young and I blamed myself for it. I’m trying to validate my existence because I internalised my abandonment and never got closure. It all sounded so overcomplicated to me. I just wanted to help. What’s wrong with wanting to help?”

I thought that I could help, I could be a Hero. I thought being a Hero had nothing to do with power and everything to with... I don’t know, caring, I guess. But look where I’ve ended up! I’m in a foreign country and my hands are ruined and I got turned into a villain so easily! I’ll never be a Hero. Everyone always said it and they were right,” Izuku started to cry in earnest. “I’ll never be a Hero.”

Later he would reflect about how humiliating it was to bawl his eyes out in a kindly old man’s sitting room while the latter patiently waited him out. But in the moment the dam had burst and all the grief Izuku had spent months carefully avoiding came pouring out to drown him.

He didn’t know how long he cried for but it was quite a while because Master Fu had replaced his tea with a new hot cup. And a handkerchief.

“I’m sorry,” Izuku mumbled after he’d cleaned himself up. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

“Meant or not,” Wang Fu told him gently, patting his hand. “It seemed like you needed to do it. Sometimes the energy must flow as it flows. It’s unhealthy to hold onto these things. Especially in Paris nowadays,” he added with faint irony. The old man looked him over. “Your chi seems a great deal less blocked up and knotted now. Believe me, only good comes of such things.”

Truthfully, as exhausted as Izuku was right now he could kind of see what Master Fu meant. He felt lighter for having gotten it all out. So much had happened to him in the last few months that he’d never taken the time to properly grieve. He didn’t want to upset his mother and his therapist was still mostly a stranger to him.

It still hurt. But at least he could see the shape of it now. Maybe he could kind of feel the edges of
“Young man,” Master Fu said slowly when Izuku finished his tea, now much calmer. “If I may ask a personal question? Did you want to be a Hero, or did you want to me the Number One Hero?”

“Number One,” Izuku answered promptly. “Like All Might.”

Master Fu pursed his lips. “Let me rephrase that. If you never made it to Number One but you were still a Hero, would it matter to you?”

“Um,” Izuku thought about this. “No, I guess not. I mean, if I was helping people then I could be number one thousand, I wouldn’t care. It’s just that the number one gets more opportunities to do that.”

“Hmmm,” Master Fu was thoughtful. “You know I get many patients here. I help them with energy flows in their bodies. I have a patient about your age. She has cancer, one of the ones that slipped through the usual genetic screening. Now, I am not a doctor and I do not, in the traditional sense, have a healing Quirk. I cannot fix her illness. However, I can sense when the chemotherapy which is helping her throws her bodily energies out of harmony and makes her too sick to each rich foods like ice cream. I can help with that.

After her appointment with me,” Master Fu smiled. “The first thing she always does is go right down the road and get a huge scoop of chocolate ice cream. The first time she came here, she made her mother bring me back one as well to say thank you. She hadn’t been able to eat ice cream in months and, while I couldn’t cure her or take away all the pain, I could at least make it so she could have that. To someone who was allowed so little because of a terrible disease, that little thing helped quite a lot. For one hour of the day, she gets to be a totally normal little girl.

“Now I ask you, Midoriya-kun,” Master Fu queried pleasantly. “What is the difference between All Might and I to her? All Might couldn’t cure her either and he also couldn’t make her nausea subside enough to eat ice cream. While I’m certain All Might would if he could, the fact of the matter is he couldn’t help that girl whereas I can. It seems to me,” Master Fu looked Izuku in the eye. “That you’ve gotten the idea in your head that the only way to help is to be a Hero. I’m sorry, but if that were true, the world would be a terrible place indeed.”

Izuku absorbed this thoughtfully.

“Just remember, young man, when you are deciding to go from here,” Master Fu told him. “That the only difference between a Hero and a doctor or a lawyer or just a man who helps an old woman carry her shopping is the empty applause of strangers. If someone is saying thank you to you with tears in their eyes, you have helped. They will know and so will you. Who else needs to?”

Izuku didn’t have an answer for that, so he said nothing.

“Also, your pendant.”

Izuku blinked. “Huh?”

“Your pendant,” Master Fu pointed to the ocarina. “It is very interesting. Is it yours?”

“Um,” taken aback by the non sequitur, Izuku ran his fingers over it. “No? I mean, it was by dads and when he died my mum got it, so I guess it’s hers. I asked if I could take a keepsake with me when I came to France.”

“Hmm,” Master Fu contemplated him for a long moment. “The energies surrounding you seem to
have an affinity for it. Check with your mother. Perhaps your father left it for you.”

Izuku thought this was highly unlikely, but Fu-sensei had been very kind so he didn’t say anything.

“Ask,” Master Fu repeated like he’d read Izuku’s doubts. “Such a thing as that needs to know its proper owner. And if you ever have any questions about it, feel free to come back and see me.”

Izuku stared at him. He had no idea how the conversation had gone so far off the rails.

He didn’t have time to question the old man further because that was the moment Marinette stumbled in, followed by her parents. Izuku was too distracted getting enveloped in a huge, unexpected hug to explore the subject further.

* 

Wayzz was a wonderful diplomat. After their guests had all left the Turtle Miraculous asked “Are you sure that was wise, Master?” and it was very nearly impossible to hear the words ‘Are you sure that wasn’t the stupidest thing you could have done, Master?’

Master Fu shrugged. “That boy needs to hope for something. If I told him he could be the Hero he’d dreamed of being, he would have rejected that entirely. He no longer hopes, he actively seeks to weed it out. Hope is important; especially for that Miraculous. Even if he no longer hopes to be a Hero, at least now he hopes for something. He is prepared to go forward. That’s better than nothing.”

Wayzz frowned. The Midoriya boy had has his feet knocked out from under him too many times. Wayzz wasn’t sure he’d be particularly open to the idea of having his reality reset again once the Miraculous did show up. He said as much.

“If,” Master Fu corrected. “If it shows up. We still don’t know what happened to it, or to Hisashi,” old pain briefly flickered across his face. “She may not be willing to try again after this time. She lost a lot of holders to the enemy she fought. Besides, the rule of possession is very clear; the Miraculous must be given freely. If his mother has not stated that she has given it fully to Izuku then there’s nothing we can do.”

* 

Izuku’s brilliant plan to maybe not tell his mother about all this was scuttled once Aunt Sabine got involved. It took a lot of fast talking and pleading to keep his mother from booking a flight home quicker than you could say ‘Hawk Moth’.

She cried a lot. That set Izuku off too. Thank goodness that Dupain-Chengs had left them to Skype in private.

Inko mentioned that she and Kacchan had accidentally switched phones. Izuku kept his mouth shut. He didn’t think calling Kacchan on his lie to her would solve anything. Besides, he was still wondering why Kacchan had even bothered.

“Are you sure about this?” Inko asked anxiously from the screen. “I thought Paris would be a safe place! I didn’t know there was a brainwashing villain wandering around! I want you to be happy, Izuku; dealing with that on top of everything else can’t be helpful.”

“Really, I’m okay,” Izuku assured her for the sixtieth time. “I know I say that a lot but... I think I am this time. I think the whole experience helped me come to terms with... with my issues.”
“What?” Inko was baffled. “That doesn’t make any sense!”

“No, it does,” Izuku replied. “I thought about it a lot. I’ve spent a long time telling myself that things ‘weren’t so bad’ or ‘they could be worse’. I kept denying my feelings were as bad as they were. But they are that bad; this whole experience showed me that. But that’s okay!” he added hurriedly as Inko looked like she was about to start bawling again. “I mean, at least now I acknowledge that. Dr Sato told me that I need feel what I feel before I can, you know, find healthy ways to cope. Today I felt what I felt and, I don’t know... I guess when it was all brought into daylight then it wasn’t quite... not quite as bad as I thought it was, you know? Like, I’ll never be a Hero. Now I really do know that.”

“Izuku...”

Izuku gritted his teeth. “I’ll never be a Hero and that’s fine, mum. Now that I acknowledge that I can start thinking about what else I can do instead. Stuff I should have thought about way before this. Really, that’s a good thing. It’s not all or nothing anymore; now I have... options.”

Inko was silent for a while. “I’m sorry that... you didn’t get the thing you’d hoped for. I know that’s very hard. I hoped your father would still be with us now but I have to accept that I won’t ever have that. And... and I’m so sorry I didn’t think to tell you that you always had options. It wasn’t enough for me to tell you that I wished things could be different. I should have said, I always should have said that maybe something different would be even better.”

She was tearing up again and arg now he was too.

“It’s okay,” Izuku managed hoarsely. “I don’t know that I would have listened anyway. I’m pretty stubborn.”

She chuckled wetly. He’d take it as a win.

Desperate to get off the subject before dehydration kicked in, Izuku hurriedly held up the ocarina. “Hey, uh, I had a question about this. Someone asked if this belonged to me, but I didn’t exactly know. Um... did dad leave this to me? I think I remember you telling me it would be mine one day when I was really little.”

“Oh,” Inko blinked. “Actually, he did.”

Izuku’s mouth dropped open. Fu-sensei had been right?

That energy affinity thing must be his Quirk.

“He wore it all the time,” Inko smiled, fond and bittersweet. “I only found out he had died long after he left, when it was sent back to me. His letter said to give it to you when you turned eighteen. He wrote a letter to you as well.”

“He did?” Izuku was shocked. He’d never gotten anything from his father. “Do you still have it?”

“Oh, yes. I never would have thrown that away. I don’t know exactly where it is but it’ll be in our papers somewhere.”

“What did it say?”

Inko shook her head. “I only read mine. That letter was for you. It wouldn’t have been right for me to read it.”
Disappointed, Izuku nodded. “Okay. Do you think...” he asked hesitantly. “Do you think he’d mind if I kept this for myself a little early?”

“Given the circumstances, I don’t think so. It’s yours, Izuku. Please be careful with it. It’s about all we have from your father now. And it’s extremely old, as I understand it. An heirloom.”

“I will,” Izuku promised, clutching it. “I’ll protect it, always.”

“I’ll see if I can dig up the letter too,” Inko added. She winced slightly. “It might take a little while.”

Remembering the state of their footlocker filled with papers, Izuku nodded ruefully. “Thanks mum.”

“Goodness, it must be getting late where you are! Time for bed,” Inko flapped her hands at him. “Just rest tomorrow, okay? No schoolwork. And call me anytime you need it, or Dr Sato. Or talk to Sabine, you know she’ll listen. Promise?”

“I will,” Izuku yawned. “Goodnight.”

“I’m glad we talked, Izuku,” Inko added gently. “That helps me too. Get some rest, I’ll call you tomorrow. Goodnight.”

She signed off, leaving Izuku to his empty room.

He checked his laptop. There was a Youtube compilation of his villain spree because there were people who actually did that sort of thing in Paris now. He watched it with a certain horrified awe. Who knew something that ugly was lurking inside him? What he told his mother was the absolute truth; he had to face those feelings and come to terms with them. That had been made abundantly clear.

He had to turn this corner. But how would he know if he had? Was it something he could even gauge for himself?

He cautiously texted a number he seldom ever used. He probably wouldn’t get an answer tonight, but a different perspective on the whole thing couldn’t hurt. He wrote: *Had a little adventure today. I’m okay. Look up ‘Hawk Moth, Paris villain’. Crazy, huh?* And sent the video link as well.

Izuku sighed and flopped back onto his bed which literally took up about half of his room. He was basically sleeping in the basement of the bakery. Tiny, street level window slots were his only view of the outside. His hosts seemed a bit embarrassed about it, but Izuku didn’t mind it. It was homey.

As he stared at the night sky out of his open window slot, it occurred to him he should at least thank the giver of his gift. There wasn’t a home shrine in the bakery. Sabine did have one for her grandparents in the living room, though. Izuku didn’t feel like getting up to use it. Lighting incense at this time of night would have been rude.

Instead he clapped his hands together around the pendant in the traditional prayer pose while he was flat on his back on the bed. “Thank you for your gift to me, father. I accept it with honour.” There. That should be enough.

The ocarina turned bronze. Izuku, eyes half shut, didn’t notice.

He did notice the ball of bronze light that flashed out around his clapped hands. He sat up yelping,
but the light was gone as quickly as it appeared. He looked around him but couldn’t see anything in the pitch dark room.

Still blinking in after images, Izuku fumbled for his reading lamp.

“What was that?” he muttered to himself.

He held the ocarina up to the light. It was bronze now, not pearl-coated.

Izuku jumped when he heard a fluttering noise. Was that a bird?

There it was again. Izuku got out of bed, eyes darting around the room, heart hammering.

Flutter, flutter, flutter....

He picked up his tablet, the heaviest object to hand, and raised it.

A streak of bronze flashed up in front of him. He jumped.

It was a bird.

It looked like no bird Izuku had ever seen before. Its wings moved like a hummingbirds, but it had a short little beak. Its head was too big for its bronze body, its dark eyes too big for its head. Its tail was two long, curly green feathers and it had a green curled crest feather as well. It looked like the idea of a bird, not an actual bird.

“What?” Izuku whispered as he squinted.

“Hello,” the bird chirped back at him, causing him to drop the tablet. “I am Haane, the Nightingale Miraculous.”

“WHAAAAAAAT?!!”
Chapter Three: The Pharaoh - Part I

Chapter Summary

Izuku's trying to hard to hit Normal. He really is...

Chapter Notes

Sorry folks. April was total hell; there were a couple of weeks were I didn't write a word. In my defense, Endgame also came out and that movie is a serious time sink.

I wanted to get The Pharaoh in one chapter but the characters weren't cooperating so here's Part I, Part II will be forthcoming. Poor Izuku is going though A Lot Of Stuff and having a Miraculous isn't exactly helping.

Plus Marinette's trying to juggle teen angst plus super hero identity reveal threat level: infinity, plus how she feels about what she'd found out about Izuku… it's all hands on deck, even without an akuma coming to make everything so much worse.

Disclaimer: Don't own them, just playing for fun and not money, more's the pity.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“A kwami.” Izuku’s voice was very carefully quiet.

“Yes, a kwami.” The... thing was totally unruffled, which seemed unfair.

Izuku tried not to freak out.

“A kwami,” he croaked again.

He was trying. He really was.

“That’s right,” the... kwami nodded patiently.

Izuku put his head in his hands. He’d already brought the household running in when he screamed. He wasn’t sure if he was grateful or not that they had misunderstood his half crazed babbling about birds. They must have assumed a pigeon had come in through one of the street level windows and subsequently scared him half to death.

The... well, the kwami had vanished to parts unknown until they’d all gone. Izuku had almost managed to convince himself it was some crazy, exhaustion induced hallucination until she popped up again, iridescently bright. Izuku had forgone screaming that time; he’d just dropped onto his bed feeling like he was having a heart attack.

“Okay,” he muttered. “Okay. Let’s be rational about this.” He subjected the bird-thingie to a stern three minute glare of analysis, willing his brain to set aside all the insane possibilities and focus of what was possible.
It? She? The kwami was very patient about this. She waited him out with perfect amity. Her wings had stopped moving but she was still airborne, cheerfully breaking the laws of physics. It wasn’t helping. At all.

Izuku stared a bit more.

Then it hit him.

“Nezu!” Izuku managed not to yell by the skin of his dignity.

The kwami backpedalled midair. “I beg your pardon?”

“I figured it out! Nezu! The Genius Hero,” Izuku beamed like all his birthdays had come at once. Ten freaking years as a Hero fanboy was paying off. He could feel sanity poking through the clouds of unreason. The world made sense! “He’s a... well, actually, no one knows what he is, but he’s an animal with a Quirk. It’s called High Spec. High Spec isn’t just intelligence either, there’s some anthropomorphic element and I always thought there was a strain of gigantism in there too... or maybe dwarfism, if he’s actually a bear.”

The kwami looked at him kindly, but blankly.

“You’re a bird,” Izuku explained. “A bird with a Quirk. Like Nezu. That’s really rare! Have you gone to the authorities with this? Actually, come to think of it, I’m not sure what the Quirk registration regulations would be for a bird...”

“Ahem,” the kwami interrupted quietly. “I do not know this...Nezu, but I assure you I am not an animal. I wasn’t born, I was made. Created, I suppose. I didn’t have parents, or come from an egg. I am very old. I existed before Earth existed.”

Izuku looked desperately for any sign the kwami was lying.

Conviction rang on every word.

Moaning, Izuku folded back onto the bed, hands over his face in sheer despair.

The kwami gave an odd little trilling noise. “You’re very dramatic!” she giggled.

Izuku peeled open an eye to glare at her. “What is the right reaction to having an impossible being come into your life in the middle of the night?”

“Well,” the kwami replied gently. “While I have been dormant within my Miraculous for a little while now and social mores may have changed, I believe it is still customary to introduce oneself. Hello!” she flitted up to his face and cheerfully held out a wing. “I am Haane, kwami of the Nightingale Miraculous. It is my duty and pleasure to serve and protect my Holder.”

“Um,” Izuku gingerly reached out and shook the proffered appendage with a finger, which was all that would fit against it. Also noteworthy was that the wing, unlike an actual bird’s wing, was prehensile. Tiny little feathers curled around Izuku’s finger like they were fingers themselves. “I’m Izuku Midoriya.”

“Yes, I know,” Haane smiled. “Nice to meet you.”

“Um....”

“I’m sure you have a lot of questions,” Haane prompted kindly.
“How are you still flying?” Izuku asked the first thing he could coherently grasp. “You’re wings aren’t moving and you’re flying...well, I suppose you’re floating? I’m not an expert on aerodynamics either but I’m pretty sure those wings way too small for your body anyway.”

“Oh, I don’t use these for flying,” Haane wriggled her impossible wings. “I don’t fly at all. I just move through space,” she tilted upside down. “Any which way I want.” Then she became a bronze streak of light that flashed through a solid brick wall and emerged in an entirely different part of the wall.

“You can phase?”

“I am made of pure energy,” Haane have a tiny shrug. “The real trick for me is not getting lost in the gaps between electrons.”

“Oh huh,” Izuku replied to this weakly. Then he rallied. “You said you’re the kwami of the Nightingale Miraculous. What is a Miraculous? What is a kwami?”

Said kwami flitted back to land on Izuku’s pillow. “A kwami is a physical manifestation of a concept or an action that helps shape the universe. We come into being the instant the concept or action starts to exist. I, for example, am the kwami of hope. When hope first existed in the universe, I was given a physical form; a kind of... spirit animal avatar, of sorts.”

“Of a nightingale?” Izuku asked curiously.

“We didn’t have a word for it then, but yes,” Haane nodded. “A nightingale symbolises hope. When the night is the blackest it can be and one is lost on the road, out of the chill silence there will suddenly come most beautiful song in the world. Then the moon will come out and the darkness with disperse and you’ll believe that everything will turn out alright. That is a great gift from a small bird.”

“Oh,” Izuku said slowly. “And... and the Miraculous?”

“This,” Haane darted up and tapped the bronze ocarina dangling on Izuku’s chest. “Is a Miraculous. All of the have kwami existed for a long time, but we were intangible beings. We could sense tangible beings like humans but we could not interact with them. Long, long ago a human mage found a way for us to interact with physical beings. He created magical jewels that the kwami could inhabit on the physical plane. Thus, we began to have Holders whom we could serve.”

Izuol grasped the ocarina in his fingers. “You were trapped in here?”

“No, silly!” Haane gave that trilling laugh again. “I am the one who serves you.”

“Not trapped,” Haane shook her head. “Just dormant. Sleeping. When you accepted me, you became my new Holder.”

“.... Okay?” Izuku squeaked. “What does that mean? Like, do you need anything or is there something I have to do...?”

“No, silly!” Haane gave that trilling laugh again. “I am the one who serves you.”

“Um... I don’t know if I need anything right now,” Izuku said slowly. “What can you do for me?”

“Advice, companionship and knowledge,” Haane replied promptly. “And I can transform you into an avatar of my domain’s energies so that you may protect the innocent.”

Izuku’s mouth dropped open. “Uh...what?”
“I’ll show you,” Haane replied. “Repeat after me. Haane, let’s fly!”

Still completely baffled, Izuku said “Haane, let’s... fly?”

The whole world filled with bronze light.

When Izuku opened his eyes against the blinding flash he felt different.

Calmer. Sharper.

The sounds of Paris street life began pouring into his ears despite the closed windows and walls.

Everything around him was bright to the point of lurid, despite the dimness of the room.

He looked down at his hand and then yelped. He was wearing different clothes!

He didn’t have a mirror in the room so he fumbled for his laptop and turned on the camera and the video chat app.

He nearly fell over when he saw himself.

He looked like a Hero.

The body suit was shimmering bronze and covered everything from his neck to his fingertips to his toes. He had feathered gauntlets on his forearms and calves, feathered epaulettes on his shoulders. He was wearing a domino mask. It was shaped like a swallow in flight, wings curling downwards towards his cheeks and fantail spread out across his nose.

His ocarina, the Miraculous was still there. It was embedded in a triangle chest plate outlined in green lines, with offshoots up to his shoulders. It looked like one of All Might’s signature costume touches.

Suddenly all the wonderment burned away.

The band tightened around his chest again.

“No,” he breathed. “No, no, no, no, no no nononononON! Get if off! Get it off!

There was a bronze flash and Haane reappeared again, looking shocked and distressed. “Izuku? What’s wrong? What happened?”

Izuku was writhing on the floor, clawing at his skin in a panic.

When it suddenly registered that the transformation had reverted Izuku just managed to make it to the trash can before miserably throwing up everything in his stomach.

“Not this,” he sobbed, tears running down his face. “Not now. I was getting better.”

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Marinette was fast, she was furious.

She was freaking panicking.

“Oh my god. Oh my god,” Marinette paced the room wildly.

“Calm damn Marinette,” Tikki told her soothingly. “This isn’t the end of the world. We can fix it, I
“Fix it?” Marinette spun wildly, knocking three books, her sewing bag and whole assortment of pens from her desk in one flail. “Tikki, Ladybug dropped a history textbook. Marinette Dupain-Cheng’s history textbook. Which Alya picked up. Alya. And she knows Ladybug dropped it. It’ll take her about four minutes to find out who it belongs to, including getting a coffee. She’s relentless!” Marinette dropped to her knees and moaned. “How did I even drop it anyway? I know I was swinging from a helicopter but it was in my bag. I thought all that stuff got tucked away somewhere when I transform!”

“Centrifugal force met inertial force met sudden stop,” Tikki shugged her tiny shoulders. “There’s only so much a localised pocket dimension can take when it’s swinging from the back of a helicopter.”

Marinette stared at her.

“All that energy had to go somewhere.”

Stare.

Tikki didn’t look like she could or would dumb that down, so Marinette gave in. “What are we going to do? She’ll never give up that book! And when I come into class Monday without it?” Marinette shuddered. It didn’t bear thinking about that level of exposure.

“You cannot change the past, Marinette,” Tikki smiled at her. “Even we kwami know better than to tinker with time. You can only learn, and go on.” She tapped some keys on Marinette’s keyboard. Up popped a very Egyptian looking display. “Take Alya to see this. Tell her to bring the book with her; After all, it is a history book. We will be able to get the book back while she’s distracted.”

Marinette squinted at the screen. “An Egyptian collection at the Louvre? What about it? Alya’s not really interested in that stuff.”

“Trust me, Marinette,” her kwami grinned and zoomed over to bring Marinette her phone. “She’ll be very interested. So will you.”

Marinette had no idea what Tikki was thinking but her kwami hadn’t been wrong once so far.

She made the call.

She would have fretted a bit more about pickpocketing a large and heavy book from under the watchful eye of her best friend but her mother’s voice rang from downstairs. For lack of anything else on her schedule aside from constant worrying, Marinette headed down to her.

“Maman?”

Sabine was sitting at the kitchen nook, calmly drinking jasmine tea. Marinette felt her heart plummet. Jasmine tea meant Serious Business.

“I need to talk to you about Izuku.”

Marinette felt her heart suddenly jump from her stomach to her throat. “Is he okay? Did something happen?”

“He’s fine,” Sabine held up a hand. “He’s studying in his room. But I thought you might like to
Marinette crouched down on a kitchen chair like a wary cat. “He’s been so quiet lately!” she burst out after a moments silence. “He barely ever comes out of his room! He never speaks! I thought he was okay after... you know, the akuma. He was fine at dinner, we played some video games. He seemed...okay. Smiling and talking. And now he’s...”

Well, Izuku just wasn’t fine. Slowly over the last week his quiet but earnest presence had almost completely vanished from the bakery. He’d pretty much retreated permanently to his tiny little repurposed storeroom in the basement. Marinette had watched him like a hawk whenever he gave her the opportunity to do so, but she drew the line at invading his room. It drove her mad with helplessness, watching the shy boy withdraw even more.

Sabine nodded. “Izuku has been trying to get past some very difficult and complicated emotions right now, Marinette. The akuma isn’t the whole reason for it, but it was a setback for him. I don’t want you to get upset or worry too much. He’s talking with his therapist and with me. He’s working through it. He’s recovering from serious trauma and that sort of thing is a messy, slow acting minefield.”

“I saw the scars,” Marinette blurted.

Sabine’s eyebrows went up.

“The day he... when he got akumatized by Hawk Moth,” Marinette admitted. She very carefully didn’t mention the exact circumstance. She was getting good at omitting. “I saw them. That’s a little bit more than ‘hard times’ maman. I think I’d be a lot less upset or worried if you could just tell me what happened.” Marinette had lain awake at night sometimes wondering how anyone got to that point. Especially someone her age.

“Oh.” Sabine’s lips pursed briefly. “That explains why you’ve been watching him so closely. That must have upset you a lot.”

“I don’t understand why you didn’t warn me,” Marinette replied. “What if I accidentally said or did something that hurt his feelings? What if he’d-” her jaw clenched down on the words even as her brain thought them.

“That’s why we didn’t tell you, Marinette. You would have treated him differently, like you’ve started to do now,” Sabine chided her gently. “Part of the reason for what happened to him was that he was treated differently to all the other kids his age. That made him isolated and lonely. Having to deal with the stigma of mental illness on top of that would have made it all the worse. I thought it would be better if you saw him as normal, everyday teenager. After all, that’s what he is, underneath it all. He needs... no, he deserves to be treated that same as any other teenager, as any other friend as yours.” Her mother raised an admonishing eyebrow at her. “Not like he’s an exhibition at the zoo.”

Marinette blushed. “It’s not like that. I was just worried about him. What did happen?”

Sabine sighed. “I can’t tell you everything,” she held up a hand when Marinette made to protest. “The truth is, I don’t know it all. I don’t think even Aunt Inko knows it all, really. It started when Izuku was attacked by a villain on the street about three months ago.”

“What, really?” Marinette gaped. It’s not like that sort of thing didn’t happen in France too, but since Hawk Moth had started his campaign all the little fish had been just that; little. “Like, a mugging?”
“No,” Sabine shook her head grimly. “The villain tried to... kill him. He had a mutation Quirk that made his body into this slimy sludge. He’d take over regular people’s bodies to commit crimes.”

“...and kill them doing it,” Marinette croaked. Akumatised villains were pretty bad, but Marinette had never faced something like that.

“Yes. He survived the attack and got away from the villain, but a little while later he met the villain again. The villain had taken one of Izuku’s classmates hostage. Izuku ran in to help him.”

“Really? That was brave!” Marinette praised, before frowning. “Did... did his classmate die? Is that why?”

“Oh no, the other boy lived,” Sabine continued. “All Might showed up and defeated the villain.”

“Wow,” Marinette breathed. He wasn’t mentioned very much in Paris but everyone knew All Might. “Lucky. So... wait, no one died and the villain was creamed. So what...?”

Sabine blew out a breath. “The other Pro Heroes on the scene were a little hard on Izuku. They told him that he was reckless, that his actions could have gotten both him and his classmate killed.”

“What?!” Marinette was suddenly a thousand shades of outraged. “He does their job and they turn around and call him an idiot for it? He ran in to save someone! It might have been reckless but it was also really courageous! And what were the Pros doing? I don’t think Izuku would have had to jump in if they had been doing their jobs!”

Sabine took a sip of tea. “I don’t think they were trying to be nasty to Izuku, honey. They just wanted to discourage him from doing that again in the future. They were probably worried that he might take it into his head to try something like that again and die doing it. Their words were poorly chosen and Izuku... well, Izuku was a poor target for them as well. Quirklessness carries a huge stigma in Japan. Izuku hasn’t been able to make friends since he was four years old. The other children would either ignore him or bully him relentlessly.”

Marinette absorbed this with a dawning sense of horror. Sure, she’d had a lot of trouble on the friends front too until Alya, but as she went to an international school it had been more about people moving away and losing contact than active hatred. Chloe and a couple of the older boys were the only ones who had made any big deal out of her Quirklessness. The older boys had both been expelled for messing with her and Chloe had contented herself with verbal jabs and a handful of pranks and it did have to be said that she did that to everyone regardless of Quirk, so Marinette’s Quirklessness was less the reason for it and more just the weak spot Chloe fixated on. It wasn’t all sunshine and roses, but Marinette had never had to dread going to school.

Izuku’s school experience sounded like hell on earth.

“Inko never told me for certain,” Sabine finished sadly. “But after years and years of bullying, having the Pros talk to Izuku like that, combined with the trauma he suffered, might have just been the last straw.”

Marinette felt like crying. “That’s why Aunty Inko sent him so far away,” she deduced. “So he’d be away from... all of that.”

“He needed some distance to make a fresh start, yes. But Inko warned me – and Izuku did too – that he’d have bad days sometimes. That’s just a part of the healing process, Marinette. It’s not anyone’s fault and there’s nothing we can do to prevent them. We just have to wait and let him know we’re here if he needs anything.”
“That’s it?” Marinette asked. She was a fixer at heart, she yearned to just reach out, to do something.

“That’s it,” Sabine nodded. “It’s not nothing, Marinette. Being there matters a great deal to the person you’re there for, even if it doesn’t feel like very much to you.”

Marinette nodded slowly.

“I wanted to sit down and talk with you about this because I didn’t want you to get the wrong idea about Izuku. I thought it might seem like he was being an ungracious guest because he has been avoiding us the last few days and didn’t want there to be any bad feelings,” Sabine shrugged.

“There isn’t,” Marinette affirmed staunchly. “I was just worried, that’s all.”

“Good girl,” Sabine smiled. “I also wanted to ask something of you in the coming weeks.”

“Yes?”

“I want you to take Izuku out to have fun sometimes,” Sabine told her. “You haven’t been out with him since his first weekend in Paris and he’s been here for two months now. I know it’s very hard to talk to him sometimes but I really think it will help him if you make an effort to include him. He needs to go out there and make a few friends.”

“Yeah, okay,” Marinette brightened up at the prospect of something tangible to do. “I’ll do that.”

“Are you going out somewhere today?” Sabine asked. “No time like the present.”

Marinette’s high note instantly and terminally crashed and burned.

Arg, how was she supposed to get out of this? After what her mother told her, Sabine would not be very understanding about her daughter saying she would make every effort to include Izuku and then leave him behind when she went out to do something perfect to show a foreign guest.

And she had to see Alya because she had to get the stupid book back. The threat of her identity being revealed was looming larger by the minute.

“Well...” Marinette said slowly, not seeing any way out. “Alya and I were going to the Louvre today to see an exhibition...?” She crossed her fingers, hoping her mother might veto. After all, Izuku was feeling a bit fragile, bussing across Paris might be a bit much...

“Perfect! I’m sure he’ll enjoy that!”

Marinette sighed. Her life was a disaster sauced with a catastrophe.

Her misgivings fell away at the sight of Izuku’s tired face in his doorway. He looked terrible, pale and dull eyed. His hair was a greasy rats nest. His eye bags had bags of their own. He literally looked like he hadn’t slept for a week.

“Well...” Marinette faltered, then rallied. “Look,” she pulled up the exhibition website on her phone and showed it to him. “Do you want to go? Ikimasho ka?”

Izuku blinked at the screen a couple of times. Marinette mentally gave herself a fist bump; there was a sudden spark in his eyes. “Ishouni? Together?” he asked softly.

She waited while Izuku looked down at the phone. “Okay. Oma- uh... just a minute?”

“Sure!” Marinette told him. “No problem.”

Izuku was very quick; he was ready to go in less than ten minutes, enough time for Marinette to shoot a quick text to Alya warning her that her cousin would be tagging along. Alya approved, given the number of emoticons she texted back.

Marinette looked over Izuku with a critical eye when he came into the living room. His hair was still lank but at least he’d brushed it out. It was growing long now, almost halfway down his neck.

All the gods, who taught this boy to dress? His clothing was neat but to Marinette’s designer gaze didn’t suit him at all. They didn’t fit properly on his small frame and seemed almost aggressively nondescript.

Maybe that was the purpose of them. From what he mother had told her Izuku’s best defence would have been to make himself as unnoticeable as possible.

“Oh... okay?” Izuku was looking at her funny.

Marinette shook herself. “Yep, ready to go! Oh, I didn’t mention it earlier but we’re taking a friend...” she pulled up Alya’s picture on her phone and showed it to him. “Alya Cesaire.”

“Rin-chan no dachi ka?”

“Yes. Ichiban tomodachi.”

“Yuujin,” Izuku corrected her. “Your... close friend? Yuujin.”

“Yuujin. Best friend,” Marinette nodded. Then she blinked. “Did you just call me Rin-chan?”

“Ah! Sorry!” Izuku rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “Is... is normal in Japan to give... imyo wa nani...” he muttered to himself as he pulled out his translation tablet. “Um... nickname? To... to family.”

“It’s okay!” Marinette told him hastily. “I wasn’t upset. Rin-chan. Like MaRINette, right?” She began ushering him out into the sunshine day. “Some of my friends call me Mari, but I like that name. Rin-chan,” she smiled at him.

He tentatively smiled back. “Rin is girls name in Japan. It means,” Izuku’s lips moved soundlessly for a moment. “Dignity? Can also mean ‘a thing that glows’.”

“Awesome! I love it,” Marinette said cheerfully. “I guess that makes you Ku-chan.”

Izuku snorted. “Ku-kun. Chan is for girl! Well...” Izuku added sheepishly. “Sort of? I call my friend Katsuki ‘Kacchan’. But I knew him long time. From when we were three. I called him that and it... stayed.”

“Stuck,” Marinette nodded in understanding. “He doesn’t mind?”

“Maybe,” Izuku shrugged. “We’re... not friends now. I’m not good at finding friends,” he added quietly.

It wasn’t even said sadly, Marinette thought. It was matter of fact. The sky is blue, water is wet, Izuku doesn’t have friends.
“You found me,” Marinette pointed out. “I’m your friend. I’d love to keep being one too, if you let me.”

“...Really?”

The surprise in that small voiced question just about broke her heart. “Of course! _Mochiron! Yappari Izuku wa watashi no tomodachi yo!”_”

Izuku was taken aback by her vehemence but allowed a small smile to grave his tired face. “_Sou ka?_ Good. That’s good.”


Izuku stared at her before grinning. “_Izzy._”

“Izzy,” Marinette nodded. “It’s nice and French, since mine is Japanese. _Kakuii namae ne?”_”

“_Hai. _Very cool,” Izuku smiled shyly.

“Look,” Marinette pointed across the street. “There’s Alya.”

Waiting at the bus stop was indeed a super enthused Alya, book bag slung over one shoulder and waving furiously. “Marinette, there you are. Just in time, the bus will be here any minute. And _you_ must be Izuku! It’s a pleasure to meet you finally! I’m Alya.”

Izuku leaned back slightly as he was hit with the full force of an Alya-generated wave of enthusiasm. He fell back onto ingrained social graces and bowed low. “Hello. My name is M- uh, Izuku Midoriya. It’s very nice to meet you.”

Marinette reflected that Izuku’s French was coming along in leaps and bounds. Stock greetings were now perfectly smooth and well accented which was a pretty big achievement for a Japanese speaker whose native tongue didn’t include dental fricatives and rolling vowels.

Alya beamed at him. “I’ve looked forward to meeting you! Marinette talks about you a lot.”

Marinette could tell Izuku was having trouble following Alya’s words. All the residents of the bakery had gotten used to speaking slowly and clearly without consciously thinking about it. He sheepishly drew out his translation tablet for her to write on and was promptly amazed as words wrote themselves on Alya’s arms and hands as she typed before vanishing like dust.

“That is your... Quirk?” he asked tentatively.

“Yeah! It’s called Transcription.”

Izuku smiled in genuine fascination as the word *Transcription* wrote itself up one of his arms briefly. “Transcription,” he repeated softly. “_Sugoi, Cesaire-san!”_”

“He’s impressed,” Marinette told Alya when she looked at him blankly.

“I study Quirks,” Izuku explained haltingly as their bus pulled up. “Sometimes.”

“Oh, neat! Hang on.”

Alya was occupied with tapping out a description of her Quirk on the tablet for most of the bus ride.
for Izuku to eagerly read. Marinette was distracted by the sight of Alya’s bookbag laying temptingly at her feet, not inches from Marinette.

How was she going to do this?

The bus afforded no real opportunities and it wasn’t long before the Louvre was in view and Alya’s attention was drawn firmly back to being on the brink of the biggest scoop of her life. They talked about it while Izuku went to enthusiastically take a bunch of photos of the Louvre exterior.

“I’m telling you Marinette, I’ve got it; it’s going to be a piece of cake to find Ladybug. This textbook,” Alya waved it while Marinette gamely tried to keep a straight face. “Will lead me straight to her.”

“Are you sure?” Marinette tried. “I mean, there’s got to be loads of schools using that textbook. Hundreds of thou-“

“Nope,” Alya’s cheerful voice was like the death knell of doom for Marinette’s hopes. “Only one very exclusive school in Paris uses that edition and that book and guess what...” Alya leaned in conspiratorially. “It’s ours.”

Marinette was dying inside.

“Can you imagine?” Alya was wreathed in smiles. “Ladybug could be a student in our class even. All I have to do is wait and see who hasn’t got their history textbook and then I’ll know who the biggest hero is Paris is. I’ve already narrowed it down to forty three possibles, not including me...”

“Forty two!” Marinette blurted. “I mean, you don’t think I could possibly be a superhero, do you?”

Alya leaned close, giving Marinette a squint eyed scan of analysis. Marinette felt herself starting to sweat. “Well I do remember a certain someone asking to share my book on Friday...”

“O-Oh come on,” Marinette stammered desperately. “You know I never remember my stuff!”

Alya burst out laughing. “Just kidding! You’re pretty awesome, girl but Quantum Object Creation would be a pretty difficult Quirk to hide, especially if it manifested in early childhood. I can’t imagine a Quirk that powerful would come in late.”

“Yeah, exactly,” Marinette willed her heart to calm. Saved by the Quirkless bell!

“Of course, I’ll only drop you from the list of suspects if you bring your textbook in on Monday,” Alya continued blithely. “A good reporter has to be an ace investigator.”

Marinette winced. So close. “Come on,” she sighed. “Let’s go find Izuku. We’d better get tickets now or the capacity might get sold out.”

“What exactly are we going to see in a bunch of dusty of Egyptian relics anyway?” Alya asked as they headed towards the entrance with its glass pyramid. “What could they possibly have to do with Ladybug?”

“Uhh,” Marinette desperately tried to think of something. Tikki hadn’t exactly been a font of information. “You’ll have to see it to believe it,” was the best she could do. She shook her purse which held Tikki, but it wasn’t like she could begin talking to the kwami with Alya right there. “So, uh, Quantum Object Creation? Is that what Ladybug’s Quirk is?”

“That’s the latest theory on the Ladyblog message boards,” Alya nodded. “Some regular poster
started a whole thread about it on the Quirk Theory section. It would kind of explain the Lucky Charm thing,” Alya admitted. “But all the rest of the Quirk research nerds pointed out that even then that still didn’t explain the strength and speed and reflexes. Gah, she’s so awesome and we don’t know anything about her. Doesn’t that drive you nuts?”

Marinette forbore to make a comment here; instead she waved over Izuku who started waving back at them.

“Oh and by the way? Your cousin is super adorable,” Alya grinned. “He’s also a bit of a Quirk nerd himself. He gave me a pretty neat analysis of my Quirk on the bus, all correct even with a bad French translator app.”

“Izzy likes Heros,” Marinette affirmed. “So I guess studying Quirks is just a part of that.”

“Super duper adorable,” Alya sighed. “Now come on; where is this dusty old exhibit? What is this thing I have to see to believe?”

Thank goodness for Izuku. His actual, unhindered enthusiasm for the exhibit meant they did a little mini tour of the place, which gave time for Marinette to a) fret over what exactly she was supposed to show Alya and b) how she supposed to relieve her friend of a heavy history textbook. Neither problem had a solution offered by the end of it.

“Where to next, Marinette?” Alya asked pointedly.

“Uhhhh,” Marinette peeked down at her open purse where Tikki was held. The kwami pointed towards a scroll laid out across one corner at the back and nodded encouragingly. “Here! This is what I wanted to show you.”

Then she almost went flying as a running man knocked into her from the back.

He was quite young, shedding papers as he frantically felt around of the floor for what looked like some sort of pendant. “It’s alright!”

“Yeah,” Alya glowered at him. “We’re okay too, thanks for checking.”

“Oh, sorry,” the man said sheepishly as he rose, collecting papers. “I get a little bit, uh, focused sometimes. Hey! You girls go to Alix’s class, don’t you? I’m her brother, Jalil Kubdel. You guys are interested to Tutankhamen too?” Then he peered over their heads and gave a yell. “Hey! Dad!”

Then he pushed past them again to meet an older gentleman at the other end of the room, completely abandoning all conversation with them.

“Yeah, he’s focused alright,” Alya muttered.

Then Izuku let out the weirdest sound - it was half a shriek and half a squeak - and clapped a hand to the back of his hair.

“Izzy, are you okay? Daijoubu?” Marinette asked. “He didn’t hit you when he knocked into us, did he?”

“Oh, uh,” Izuku stammered. “No! Anou... daijoubu ah! That is, I am fine! Just...uh, just itch! Yes! Itch!”

He didn’t look fine; he looked pale and the whites of his eyes were showing. His hand was still clamped to the back of his head. But as he turned around he marched towards their destination,
leaving Marinette and Alya to shrug at each other and follow him.

There was the sound of raised voices echoing through the exhibition room but Marinette paid it no mind. She was busy frantically looking between the scroll and Alya’s unimpressed face trying to find whatever it was that Tikki had sent her here for. She risked a look at her purse – Tikki’s head popped out and she looked towards the side that Izuku was staring at so avidly.

Before Marinette could see what she was getting at, Jalil Kubdel managed to unthinking bump them aside for a third time, pushing in between Marinette and Izuku and leaving Izuku on the other side of a barrier of flailing hands and gatling gun level explanation involving an ancient Egyptian princess, and sundered love story and what sounded like a pretty creepy ritual to raise the dead; made all the creepier by the fact that the younger man clearly wanted to try it out.

It sounded crazy; the older gentleman – Jalil’s father apparently – clearly thought so. “We deal in history Jalil, not fairytales,” he snapped angrily. “Our reason is informed by science, not magic. Great heroic epics were the tall tales of taverns refined for the entertainment and propaganda of the wealthy, not actual historical events. I am not going to let priceless, five thousand year old artefacts be used like cosplay in order to enact a ritual with no more significance than a theatre play! Come back to me when you’ve finished fantasising and started to study the past like an actual scholar!”

He left Jalil head-bowed and sadly shedding a few more papers. Clearly upset, he shuffled away.

“Wow. Harsh,” Alya commented as the three teens stared after the departing Jalil.

“Yeah,” Marinette felt sorry for him.

“Can you imagine actually wanting to raise the dead?” Alya asked. “I mean, it sounds like the most crackpot plan ever, even if magic was real.”

Except it might work, Marinette thought to herself. After all, she was a Miraculous holder and could transform into a superhero without having a Quirk. What could you call that but magic? And if that was real, who was to say that there couldn’t be others?

She felt a chill thinking about all those mummies. That was a lot of people dying just to bring one person back to life.

Alya suddenly spun on her heel, the target book bag swinging just out of Marinette’s reach. Speaking of chills...

“Ladybug,” Izuku’s quiet exclamation had got Alya’s attention.

“What was that?” Alya darted over.

“Ladybug,” he repeated slowly. “See?”

Izuku had retreated to a far corner near one of the pillars, probably looking at some other part of the exhibit judging by the intense look on his face as he turned.

Then he went white.

Then all of Marinette’s hackles went up.

Then she was tackling Alya to the ground at a bubble of time popped against the wall where she’d been standing.
After all the therapy, all the reassurances, all the preparation, the slide back into pure depression still took Izuku by surprise. They warned him he’d have bad days, that he’d have triggers. It was a measure indeed of how dystopian up his emotional landscape had become that it was the image of his deepest and most fervent wish that knocked him down again.

For a week all Izuku wanted to do was sleep. He struggled to get up by late morning. Sometimes it was Aunt Sabine worriedly shaking him awake. He tried to get back into his routine, to force himself to be busy, but his successes landed erratically. He wasn’t doing his kneading therapy like he should, but he was sort of keeping up with his school work. He didn’t go out into the sunshine, or indeed, out anywhere at all, but he did try to be there for meals with the Dupain’s, who were very forgiving about him not talking much. He ceased worrying about his personal neatness but still kept calling his mother every day. He wondered how well he was playing this off with her. Probably not well, if she was talking with Aunt Sabine.

They were all so worried about him. Izuku couldn’t stand it. He looked at the fear and compassion in their eyes and just wanted to die.

Haane was still with him. She had meekly apologised for scaring him after the transformation and had tactfully stayed mostly quiet for this last week, only asking him the date and year before leaving him be. Sometimes at night Izuku would come to a half-awake state to hear an old song in a dead language being sang quietly near his pillow. He didn’t have bad dreams those nights.

Her efforts to help him were so sincere that Izuku couldn’t find it in himself to be angry with her. To any other kid, what she’d offered would have been a marvellous gift. She couldn’t be faulted for the fatal flaw in him.

He probably should have been more concerned about what to actually do with Haane and her Miraculous, but most of the urgency, as well as his curiosity, was swamped under the fog of his latest setback.

The pressure in his chest never abated.

The nightmares were the worst of it. He kept having the same one.

“Izuku,” Haane asked him quietly when he’d woken up screaming for the fifth time in a week.

“Can I ask what you dream about?”

Izuku rubbed his eyes blearily. The question surprised a certain amount of candour from him. “I dream about a lot of different stuff. Being at school. Running from something on the streets. Watching TV with kaa-san. Eating in the bakery. Just... normal stuff, you know? My boring, ordinary life. But they always end the same,” he took a shuddering breath. “Everything starts to go grey. And then I try to tell the people around me to run away but it’s like they can’t hear me. Then there’s always a mirror. Like, sometimes it’s an actual mirror and sometimes it’s a reflection in a window or something. That’s when I see... it.”

“It?”

“Me,” Izuku sighed. “Akumatized me. Silence, or whatever it is they called it. I’m trying to warn people about danger but then I realise that it’s me. I’m the danger. That scares me a lot, even when I’m awake.” Izuku’s hands bunched his sheets convulsively. “It feels like Silence is still lurking in
me sometimes, trying to get out. It feels... very close to the surface sometimes.”

“Akuma...tized?” Haane repeated slowly.

“Oh, that’s right. You wouldn’t know,” Izuku scrubbed his forehead. “You were in your Miraculous for...uh?”

“Twelve years.”

Izuku gaped. “Really? That’s a long time!”

Haane shrugged placidly. “I’ve been dormant for far longer stretches than that, I assure you.”

“Oh,” Izuku blinked, before getting back to the subject at hand. “Well, there’s this villain in Paris called Hawk Moth. He sends out these little butterfly things called akuma that possess people and turn them into villains. Apparently it’s happened quite a lot over the past year. He got me, too. I turned into a villain they called Silence.”

“Butterflies?” Haane asked sharply.

“That’s what it looked like to me, what little I saw,” Izuku sighed. “I don’t remember very much about it. I... I remembered the bit afterwards though. Hawk Moth took my feelings and turned them into a villain’s weapon. It... Silence, was so ugly, Haane. So ugly. If hanging onto my dream was being a Hero was going to turn me into something that ugly inside, then I had to give it up.

“So I did,” Izuku said heavily. “I cried about it but I let it go. Once I had time to think about it after, I realised I was mostly relieved. I didn’t have to be a Hero, the pressure was off, and it was just such a relief, you know? So when you showed me that thing you did...”

“It must have seemed a very cruel trick to you,” Haane summarised quietly.

“A little bit, yeah.”

“I’m sorry, Izuku,” Haane said remorsefully. “I was very wrong not to ask first.”

But Izuku shook his head. “It’s not your fault. You couldn’t have known. You weren’t trying to be cruel or anything; believe me, I know what that looks like. But I don’t think I’m the one who should be a Hero. I’m just not suited for it. I know that now. I just wish,” Izuku sighed tiredly. “I wish I knew what else I could do instead. I never planned to be anything but a Hero and they never really offered any alternatives at my old school. We’re pretty close to UA, we’ve kind of got Heros on the brain in Mustafu. They’re literally everywhere you look. I guess that’s why my mother sent me here.”

Haane gave a fluting noise of consideration. “You are my Holder until such time as you die or willingly pass on your Miraculous to someone else, Izuku. I wonder if you and I might make an arrangement.”

Izuku turned to her, eyebrows raised.

“I once had a Holder who was both blind and deaf,” Haane told him, apropos of nothing. “She wasn’t born that way, but she was struck with it early in her life. When she was transformed she could see and hear perfectly. But you know what? She almost never used it. ‘Magic is all very well and good, my friend’ she told me ‘but it doesn’t actually fix any problems that it doesn’t make in the first place!’ She was very wise, you know.
“I was her companion until very nearly the end of her life. In the end, that’s all I was. A guide... and a friend.” Haane looked at him shyly. “I could be that for you too, if you like. If you don’t want to transform, you don’t have to. It’s not a contract. You don’t have to use my power for me to be of use to you. I’m very old. I know a lot. Maybe I could help you find your way.”

“Really? You could do that?” Izuku asked.

“Certainly,” Haane replied. “I’m sure I can find a path that will make you happy. I have lived many different lives with many different people, surely some of their stories will inspire you. I am bound to do all in my power to help you, Izuku, if you want that. And if you don’t,” Haane added carefully. “If you feel having that which pains you the most so close is too hard, you may renounce me entirely. But if you choose to do that, I would ask that you find a worthy successor beforehand to hand the Miraculous off to. If I am discarded, then I will be at the mercy of whomever finds the Miraculous next, even if that person is evil.”

“Really?” Izuku gaped. “But you’re like... like a god! Or a youkai, maybe. You’re far more powerful than any mere human, even with Quirks!”

“I am bound by certain constraints that cannot be broken,” Haane replied seriously. “For good reason. There are some kwamis that shall remain nameless,” here her tone went dark. “That have wreaked havoc when unleashed without a Holder to control them. The burning heart of a star is but a dim ember compared to the energy we can unleash in our natural state. He need humans to channel it so they can act as the safety valve.”

“Oh,” Izuku’s face was more animated than it had been for the last seven days. “Wow. I didn’t think of that.” He mulled it over thoughtfully for a slew of minutes while Haane waited him out. “Okay,” he held out a finger. “Deal. You can be outside your Miraculous if you want. I’ll keep it safe. And I’ll try to find another Holder. A more worthy one than me, anyway.”

Haane forbore to comment on the last bit, but shook the proffered finger sweetly.

Izuku looked around his room, suddenly realising just how messy and neglected it was. He felt a sudden surge of energy.

The world suddenly felt like a much kinder place just for talking out his troubles.

He couldn’t sleep again, so he shuffled out of his room and into the main bakery where Uncle Tom and the other workers were gearing up to start the days work.

Tom was startled to see Izuku hovering awkwardly in one corner, but he warmly gestured the boy over to his usual place at the kneading table. Izuku got his hair net on, washed his hands, and started his routine anew.

When he was freed from his shift at the kneading table (and after being shown how to make croissants by a cheerful if watchful Tom, Izuku went back to his room and started to tidy it.

Then Rin-chan knocked on his door and showed him a museum exhibit site on her phone. She asked if he wanted to go so earnestly that Izuku was spurred to try to get out of the bakery, and maybe out of his headspace as well.

He had to keep trying. Even after this, after everything, Izuku had to keep trying.

He didn’t know if he could blame his muted feelings or his exhaustion, but Izuku ended up having an actual conversation with an actual girl.
Sort of. A translation tablet is a pretty effective shield in a social situation.

Alya-chan was very... intense. As vivid as her exotic looks, she was full of questions for him, most of which he could not follow and the rest only barely. He was properly fascinated by her Quirk though; imagine just thinking about all the things he scribbled in notebooks rather than having to write them out! Envy and awe were the only responses he could possibly have made. He was gratified at her amazement that he correctly guessed it was a combination of a mutation and an emitter Quirk. She was gratified when he gave her the statistics on just how rare that was.

The Louvre was bustling and beautiful. It was so different from the aesthetic Izuku was used to that he couldn’t resist taking a mass of pictures. There were plenty of Japanese tourists there doing the exact same thing, so he was in good company.

Marinette and Alya were both chatting away with each other. Alya seemed really enthused about something when she showed Marinette a book from her bag. Judging by the cover it was a history book. Maybe this place had been Alya’s idea. It was still very nice of Rin-chan to invite him along if it was.

It was when they reached the actual exhibit that things went slightly sideways.

They were nearly knocked down by some man who was so wildly excited about something that Izuku didn’t stand a chance of following his rapid fire French.

That was until a small voice in his hair said “He says his name is Jalil Kubdel and is asking if we’re interested in the exhibit.”

Izuku screamed and tried not to scream in the same instant, causing a weird, dying mouse sound to emerge from his throat. His hands flew up to his hair.

“Izzy, are you okay?” Marinette looked very concerned. “Daijoubu? He didn’t hit you when he knocked into us, did he?”

“Oh, uh,” Izuku flailed mentally and physically for something to cover his gaffe. “No! Anou... daijoubu ah! That is, I am fine! Just...uh, just itch! Yes! Itch!”

He marched off before he suffered the embarrassment of what their expressions must be. He found a scroll unfurled across one of the back corners and huddled by it, poking fingers into his hair.

He couldn’t find her.

“Here I am!” Haane flew out of his chest.

Sheer will made Izuku stop himself from choking as she nestled in to the inner pocket of his jacket. “What are you doing here?!” he hissed while Alya and Marinette were distracted. “Were you in my hair the whole time?”

“Not in your hair,” Haane admitted sheepishly. “Sort of... closer to your skull?”

Izuku shuddered. “Don’t do that,” he muttered. He hadn’t really felt her flapping about in his scalp but it was still a bit gross to think about.

“I’m sorry,” Haane told him contritely. “But you were going out and this is the first time I’ve been able to go out too.”

Izuku sighed. That was true. She shouldn’t be his prisoner or something. “Next time just ask, okay?
That was really creepy.”

“I will,” Haane smiled warmly. “Are you enjoying yourself?”

Izuku nodded discreetly. “It’s been... nice.”

Here they were interrupted when the young man came back, spewing more rapid French.

“Oh, I know this story.” Haane murmured. “Tutankhamen – the Pharaoh who tried to bring his consort back from the dead. What a tragedy that man was! He was a good man before that. He was so lost to grief after Nefertiti died.”

Izuku frowned. “You’re talking as if you were there.”

“I was there,” Haane affirmed placidly as Izuku’s jaw dropped. “Many Miraculous Holders ended up in the River Kingdom. Me, the Ox, the Snake, the Dog, the Scorpion, the Jackal; we all had a part to play. This story,” Haane admitted cheerfully. “Was mostly Ladybug’s though. When she heard that the Pharaoh was going to sacrifice an innocent, of course she stepped into to stop him. We couldn’t believe how far that man fell. As if there isn’t a price for raising the dead no good person would pay!”

“Ladybug?” Izuku’s voice was half strangled. He didn’t even notice that the French conversation to his left had gotten loud and then abruptly ended.

“Yes,” Haane pointed from the folds of the jacket. “See? She’s there on the scroll.”

Izuku squinted.

Holy little gods, there was a pictograph of Ladybug on the scroll. It showed a yo-yo and everything!

Wait a minute... Ladybug was a Miraculous Holder?!

“Ladybug,” he breathed in shock.

“What was that?”

Izuku nearly jumped as Alya darted up to him.

“Ladybug,” he made to turn towards her. “See?”

Something flickered on the edge of his eye line. Something gold.

He turned.

He felt himself go white even as Marinette tackled Alya down to avoid what looked like a ballistic bubble, which burst in a shower of gold sparkles.

It was an akuma.

“I am the Pharaoh!”

Chapter End Notes
Side Note: Yes, the Holder Haane is talking about is Helen Keller. Not every superhero need be a warrior.
Chapter Four: The Pharaoh - Part II

Chapter Summary

In the conclusion of an epic battle, it's the home truths that deliver the knockout blows.

Chapter Notes

Annnd we are back again.

The last couple of weeks have sucked for me big time. I had a flare up of a chronic ailment I suffer and that always sucks. One IV later though and I feel a lot better. Writing was sporadic during but I pushed through as much as I could. I really enjoyed writing this chapter, though I want to go back to some other fics after this. Serves me right for starting two at once!

Crowd Vote: It's been mentioned that I should do a glossary of foreign words I use in the fic. Usually I'm having characters immediately translate themselves after using Japanese because they are, in essence, speaking a kind of French-Japanese pidgin to one another so I thought it would be sort of understandable in context, but I'll add translations and other fun facts down at the end of the chapter for anyone that wants them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The scuttle in an underrated skill. It makes you look like a ridiculous human cockroach but it also allows you rapidly traverse a short to middle distance underneath the immediate sightline of a potential aggressor.

In Hawk Moth’s Paris, Marinette had learned to scuttle like nobody’s business.

“İzzy,” she hissed as she cockroached her way over to him. He had frozen up like a statue, staring at the... the Pharaoh dispatching screaming museum patrons with... well, they were bubbles.

Honestly, where does Hawk Moth get these ideas anyway?

With no other option readily available, Marinette kicked the back of Izzy’s locked knees as hard she dared. The boy folded and collapsed next to her, wide eyed.

“Shhh, it’s okay,” Marinette tried her best not to sound terrified. “Daijoubu. Have you got your phone? Alya are you...” Marinette trailed off when she realised Alya hadn’t followed her over to Izuku.

She was filming this! There she was, huge, beaming grin of delight, phone out and camera running, about a thousand times closer to danger than Marinette ever wanted to see her. She even turned around to them and gave a silent, cheerful wave.
Izuku and Marinette shared a look.

“I’m going to sneak around and try to grab her,” she dug her phone out of her pocket. “Call the police. *Stay hidden,*” she added sternly. Bad enough she had to go and rescue one apparently suicidal friend!

Izuku nodded, taking the phone. Whatever panic had gripped him appeared to be ebbing away, leaving a shaken but resolute determination in its place. Good. He was at least moving.

Marinette hated to abandon him like this but this was a Ladybug problem; the sooner she transformed the sooner this would all be over. She rapidly scuttled out of their section of the exhibit, looking for somewhere she could transform without being in the sightline of either patron or camera. The Pharaoh took out the last of the museum security and threw the bubbles holding them out of the wing entirely, leaving only them, the akuma and a few misfired bubbles floating around.

Perfect.

“Tikki, spots on!”

Ladybug emerged just as the Pharaoh took the scroll they’d been looking at off the wall. The alarms started blaring and the security gates came crashing down but Ladybug rolled under them gracefully, coming up face to gold mask with her enemy. The scroll and the sceptre too, she realised, floated behind him.

“You know,” she quipped. “I’m pretty sure that’s considered stealing.” She didn’t let her eyes stray from the akumas face. She didn’t dare look for Izuku. He must have found another hiding spot. He must have.

“I am merely taking back what belongs to me!”

“That may be so,” Ladybug spun her yo-yo, ready to move. “If you were the real Pharaoh, which you’re not.”

“Look at Ladybug go! If I’m dreaming, don’t wake me up!”

Ladybug’s focus shattered. Alya wasn’t seriously...

But she was. She was filming and doing colour commentary *mid-akuma battle* while she was locked in *with* one. Ladybug waved at her frantically to get her to get into a hiding spot and hope against hope that Pharaoh didn’t notice her.

In vain. Alya had stars in her eyes and apparently rocks in her brain. “Ladybug waved at me!” she squealed way too loudly.

Ladybug engaged with the akuma in the next blink just to keep the akuma focused on her, but desperation made her yo-yo cast too slow and too imprecise; the Pharaoh caught the yo-yo and reeled her in before swinging her around like a bullroarer and letting her fly. She braced as she went back first into a stone relief. Thank goodness for Miraculous invulnerability because otherwise he’d have broken her spine and probably cracked her skull like an egg.

While she peeled off the wall and landed in an ungainly heap on the floor, the Pharaoh intoned “*Sekhmet, give me your strength!*” and bent the solid steel security bars back like they were made of cardboard.
“Thanks for getting the door for me,” a welcome voice rang out from the corridor beyond.

Chat Noir! Ladybug couldn’t be happier to hear that pun cracking would-be Casanova slink into the action fashionably late as usual. But her stomach gave a lurch as he went for the akuma while the akuma was still getting through the hole in the bars. One narrow window of striking range gave exactly zero chances for the cat hero to manoeuvre; the Pharaoh grabbed him by his head and flung him into the same wall Ladybug had hit before, except Chat Noir bounced off and landed with a meaty thud into an open sarcophagus, which promptly slammed shut on him.

“Chat!” Ladybug dug her fingers into the coffin seams and yanked, but the Egyptians who had made it had built it heavy. The lid wouldn’t just pop up again, even with her strength behind it.

“OMG, this is hecka crazy! Keep your eyes peeled!”

Ladybug spun around to see Alya repositioning herself to frame a shot of Ladybug trying to rescue her maybe injured partner, totally oblivious to the danger she was in. “Seriously!” Ladybug groaned.

Two things happened at once; one, Ladybug managed to wrench the sarcophagus lid up and free her dazed and thankfully safe partner.

Two, the akuma noticed Alya.

Some of the keen drained out of Alya’s expression when faced with an akuma that big up close.

“Uh...hi?”

“Your face,” the Pharaoh rumbled. “Fate has placed you in my path. Come with me.”

He unceremoniously hauled her over one shoulder.

“Hey, hands off the threads, buddy!”

Ladybug was ready to go after them in a spectacular red rage at the akuma for daring to grab her best friend, but a sudden movement at the top of an exhibition case made her freeze up like a statue.

It was Izuku. His eyes were burning in his pale face. She could see his hands shaking for here. But nevertheless he crouched and sprang before she could shout a warning. For one horrified moment she thought he was trying to tackle the akuma, but no, his target was that sceptre hovering behind one of the Pharaoh’s shoulders.

He snatched it on his downward plummet. Because it floated by some arcane and unexplained ability of Pharaohs, it jerked him wildly off tangent and therefore made him land with a total lack of grace, but it didn’t matter. He still had it in his grip.

With one reedy battle cry he raised it and smashed it against the museum floor. Glass globe and bits of the staff scattered across the museum floor.

“What?” Alya was kicking from the Pharaoh’s shoulder. “Izuku? Is that you? Turn around you jerk, I can’t see what’s happening!”

“N-Now you can’t use it,” Izuku panted, shoulders shaking with fear. “Alya-san ohanashi nasai! Let...” he faltered into French. “L-Let her go!”
The Pharaoh picked him up and threw him across the room like he was a ball.

Ladybug moved at something approaching the speed of light, leaping to intercept before Izuku could be smashed against the same relief she’d been earlier. She’d had the benefit of Miraculous-induced invulnerability when she’d hit a foot thick slab of sandstone at high speed. Izuku didn’t.

Izuku hit her hard, then she in turn hit Chat Noir hard, as her partner had leapt right after her. They all hit the relief but the heroes took the brunt of the collision that a mere fragile human could never have done without grievous harm.

“Ooof,” Chat Noir grunted as they slid down the stone once more. He’d taken the worst of it.

“Now I know how a sandwich in a press feels.”

“Are you okay?” Ladybug asked frantically as they untangled. “Are you hurt?”

“Daijoubu,” Izuku gasped. “I’m... okay. Nani?!”

“What?” Ladybug looked along Izuku’s shocked sightline and repeated. “What?”

The Pharaoh still had Alya over one shoulder. He’d also conjured another bubble and glomped it over the sceptre pieces. He spun it in his hands with one careful twist...

And the sceptre rewound back to it’s pristine, unbroken state.

“Now I have all that I need to return my beloved to life,” Pharaoh rumbled as he nonchalantly reached into the bubble and drew out the sceptre. “Nothing will get in my way!”

“Oh, excuse me?” Chat Noir rose to his feet, grinning viciously. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

They both lunged for him but the Pharaoh was already climbing out of the hole he’d made in the security gates. He effortlessly bent the bars back into shape before they could reach him.

Ladybug slapped a hand against the bars. “Let Alya go! It’s the Miraculous you want, right?”

Her attempt bore no fruit. The Pharaoh continued down the corridor of bubble-trapped museum goers, ignoring her entirely. Alya was still slung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

“Hey! Where are you going?” Chat Noir shook the bars.

“This just in; I’m currently being abducted by the latest akuma to terrorise Paris,” Alya narrated into her phone steadily. “Will the heroic duo make it in time. Stay tuned to the blog,” she locked eyes with Ladybug briefly. “To find out.”

Right, Alya’s livestream. They could at least track her location on it.

Chat Noir shook his head. “She is one brave chick.”

“If by brave you mean bossy, feisty and bold, yep, that’s Alya,” Ladybug quipped. “Now how do we get out of here? I don’t think she’s got all the time in the world.”

“I could Cataclysm the bars,” Chat Noir suggested. “You can go after them.”

“This one is powerful,” Ladybug pointed out. “I think defeating him will take both of us.”

“I’ve got some stuff to recharge with me,” Chat Noir replied. “I can join you in a bit.”
“Um…” a quiet voice startled them out of their brainstorming session. “Move, please?”

Izuku had grabbed what looked like an ancient Egyptian sword from one of the displays and had very carefully and quietly used the flat of it to push the Pharaoh’s latest, spinning time bubble over to where they were.

Startled, they back out of the way of the spinning bubble. “What are you...?” Ladybug asked, baffled.

“Is time, yes?” Izuku replied haltingly. “Put on...” he pointed to the bars. “They will go back, yes? To before?”

“When they were bent!” Ladybug grinned. “That’s brilliant! Hang on, let us help.”

Together, Ladybug and Chat Noir used their indestructible weapons to gently direct the time bubble into position without doing anything to burst it. With one very careful push they managed to settle it so that the bars went through the bubble and almost instantly the bars folded back to their bent state. Chat Noir burst the bubble with his staff and they had their exit.

“Thank you,” Ladybug told Izuku sincerely. “You were very brave to do what you did. Now please get to a safe place, okay?”

Wakarimashita ka?

Hai,” Izuku nodded. He looked pale and shaken, but Ladybug had to go help Alya.

“Thanks,” Chat Noir ruffled Izuku’s hair. “You’re the purrfect sidekick. Shall we, my lady?”

They both leapt through the hole and were off to save Alya.

Izuku sighed after they left. “I tried to transform,” he whispered. “I really did, Haane.” When Marinette had crawled over to try to nab Alya, he’d grasped the ocarina around his neck without thinking.

The words hadn’t come.

He’d gotten far as “Haane,” but his chest had imploded and his jaw had locked tight. He couldn’t force the words out. So he’d hidden.

“You don’t have to, Izuku,” Hanne declared. “You don’t. You smashed the sceptre all on your own, remember?”

“That was your idea,” Izuku retorted, but he relaxed slightly at the praise. “Too bad it didn’t work.”

Haane was sheepish. “In my defence, he couldn’t do that before. And besides, using the time bubble to re-bend the bars was completely your idea. That was spectacular on-the-fly thinking!”

“Oh, well,” Izuku blushed. He went to sheepishly rub the back of his neck and nearly stabbed himself with the sword. “I wasn’t trying to be brilliant or anything. It just seemed logical.” Izuku looked at the sword soberly. “What does he want with Alya?”

“Life and death are always in balance with each other,” Haane told him. “That’s what makes the wheel spin. If you want to bring back someone from the dead, then you have to send...”

“Someone from the living,” Izuku paled. “Alya-chan!” Then his face crumpled. “I can’t help.”

“You can’t help her, no,” Haane corrected. “Ladybug will, though. In a sense, this is rightfully her fight. But look, Izuku,” she floated up to look him in the eye. “You have a pointy object and I see a
lot of people around here trapped in bubbles. The idea of heroism is to help someone, not every last person on Earth.”

Izuku firmed his resolve. Right. This he could do. “Hero Procedure Code 1.02,” he intoned from years and years of research. “Get As Many Civilians As Possible To Safety.”

* 

“This just in,” came Alya’s voice from the popup screen on Ladybug’s yo-yo. “I have just discovered that I have been chosen as a ritual sacrifice to the sun god Ra! Ladybug! Help, please!” Alya sounded jaggedly stressed.

“This is bad,” Ladybug said grimly as Alya’s voice went on in the background. You could say this much for Alya, she had absolutely committed to the role of a journalist. Even now she was trying to interview the akuma that had abducted her.

Chat Noir kicked open the door to the roof. “We’ll stop him. I have a good feline about it.”

“Chat,” Ladybug replied seriously. “I don’t know if the Miraculous cure can undo damage by a magical ritual. I have no idea what its limits are when it comes to supernatural damage.”

“Then we better make this fast,” he replied as they went out onto the roof.

There were a lot of mummies in the courtyard. There was also a beam of light shooting from the top of the Louvre pyramid that opened a swirling mass of darkness in the sky.

“This guy,” Chat Noir commented as they stared. “Is like the Swiss army knife of akumas. Seriously, he literally has a setting for everything.”

“Did you say Ladybug is five thousand years old?!” Alya’s shocked voice came out from the livestream to the yo-yo.

Ladybug was momentarily completely baffled.

“Well,” Chat Noir grinned after a pregnant pause. “You don’t look a day over three thousand.”

“And you wonder why I’m so much smarter than you,” Ladybug snarked. “There’s Alya,” Ladybug pointed to the hapless amateur reporter who was being carried by a platoon of mummies across the courtyard towards the pyramid. “You distract the mummies while I get Alya.”

“Why do I always have to play decoy?” Chat Noir grumbled. “It seems like we do that a lot.”

“Because only I can take out the akuma,” Ladybug rolled her eyes. “And besides, you’re the bravest of us!”

“I know you don’t believe that!” Chat Noir called after her as she swung away. “But I’ll pretend it’s true.”

It went surprisingly well. Akuma henchmen had varying degrees of self will and adaption abilities, and the Pharaohs mummies were clearly at the lower end of that spectrum. They chased Chat Noir mindlessly, arms outstretched, but dodging them was child’s play.

One graceful sweep of swing and Ladybug had grabbed Alya from her captors, getting them both up to the opposite roof with ease.
“Thanks for the save, Ladybug!” Alya enthused, still unstoppably filming away.

Ladybug sighed silently. “It’s not over yet. We still have to-“

“Get the pendant holding the akuma, purify it and turn everything back to normal,” Alya finished

Ladybug blinked.

“Hey, I pay attention.”

“The pendant,” Ladybug nodded. “Good eye! Now we can just-“

But the Swiss army knife of akumas could also fly.

He rose over the rooftops, falcon headed and spitting mad.

The next thing she knew, Ladybug was rammed off the rooftop and was falling. Only a lightning fast throw of her yo-yo saved her from being scraped of the pavement below. Even as she reeled in the yo-yo to get back up there in a hurry, an object was tossed off the roof. Ladybug lunged to catch it.

It was Alya’s phone.

“You won’t win this time Ladybug!” The Pharaoh laughed from where he hovered, Alya struggling under one arm. “Mummies, kill that insect!”

Ladybug tensely assessed her status. The Pharaoh’s mummies were mostly converging on Chat Noir over by the bus stops but a handful of them had broken off to surround her. They came at all angles in a steadily decreasing circle.

Alya was yelling at she was placed on the beam of light and borne upwards on it towards the circle of darkness. If she vanished into that circle Ladybug was convinced, Miraculous cure notwithstanding, Alya would not be coming back.

Ladybug bared her teeth fiercely. “I’ve got better things to do than to take a lesson from walking bits of history.”

She swung her yo-yo in a straight forward throw – crack – against the front mummy’s head. She used ricochet to snap it back behind her – crack.

By then they were all close enough. She went full circle, cracking heads as she scythed through them. Using one that had dropped to its knees as a springboard, she vaulted out of the trap and went for her partner, who had been cornered near to the cars and was about to get one smashed on top of him by a bunch of ultra-strong mummies.

“Careful Chat Noir,” Ladybug thrust her yo-yo into the action and wound it around one black-clad ankle. She yanked, unceremoniously pulling Chat Noir’s feet from under him and dragging him to safety before the car hit the ground where he’d been standing. “Wouldn’t want to see you turned into roadkill. Come on, this way!”

The mummies followed their targets mindlessly as they headed for an empty tourist bus. Chat Noir neatly slid under it and out the other side while the rest of the mummies on piled into the vehicle chasing Ladybug. She darted for the driver’s window even as Chat Noir used his staff as a jack and tipped the bus on it’s side, trapping them in a makeshift prison.
“We have to stop him before Alya reaches the circle of darkness,” Ladybug told her partner as they took off towards the pyramid where the Pharaoh was standing guard.

“You will not stop the ritual. Anubis, give me mummies!”

The courtyard turned into a shooting gallery. They raced across it while both dodging blasts coming from a jackal mask’s eyes. Nevertheless, they were quick and clever and pressed forward. With one cast Ladybug managed to capture the akuma in her yo-yo string so that Chat Noir could get past him and start clawing his way up the pyramid towards Alya.

“Horus, give me your wings!”

*Uh oh,* Ladybug had time to think before the Pharaoh rose up in flight, yanking her along for the ride.

She desperately reeled in her yo-yo string before she could be slammed against the side of the pyramid and ended up gripping the Pharaoh by the back as he soared upwards towards the circle of darkness in the sky, past a startled Chat Noir and a struggling Alya.

“Centrifugal force meets inertial force meets sudden stop,” Ladybug muttered as she gripped the pendant, frog jumped off the Pharaoh’s back and flipped over his head, ripping the pendant loose and flinging it back down towards the courtyard.

“Chat Noir, the pendant!” Ladybug shouted down to him. “That’s where the akuma is!”

Chat Noir spun and headed back down towards where the pendant had landed. Ladybug twirled her yo-yo like a helicopter blade, faster than any human could manage, to slow her decent. They both hit the courtyard in the same moment. They both lunged for the pendant.

The Pharaoh was faster.

He landed in a blast of air right next to it even as they both lunged. Then he had it over one wrist, firmly in his possession. “You’re too late,” he taunted them. “It’s over.”

“No!” Ladybug made to go for him, but more mummies had come out of the woodwork. They were surrounded.

“Great sun god Ra!” The Pharaoh intoned as Alya reached the darkness in the sky. “Accept this offering! Return the princess to me!”

Okay, they were officially out of workable fight options now.

“Lucky Charm!” Ladybug tossed her yo-yo and got back... “A Ladybug costume?”

“That’s our best shot?” Chat Noir asked sceptically.

“Yeah,” Ladybug breathed as she saw the little replica earrings. “It is.” She ripped open the box and yelled to the Pharaoh. “Hey Pharaoh! That girl is not a good enough offering for Nefertiti.”

The Pharaoh turned to look at her. Up on the beam of light, Alya let out an outraged noise.

“Take me instead,” Ladybug offered. “Wouldn’t that be the sweetest revenge? After all, I’m the one that kept you from her for the last five thousand years.”

The Pharaoh bent close to her. “Hmm. You would make a better sacrifice that a mere mortal.”
“Milady,” Chat Noir actually hissed. “What the furball are you doing?”

“Protecting the innocent,” Ladybug took Pharaoh’s outstretched hand. “Come what may.”

Pharaoh flew her up to where Alya was balancing on the beam of light, surprisingly huffy for someone in mortal peril. “What do you mean I wouldn’t make an adequate sacrificialhhhhh!”

The Pharaoh tossed her off the beam and down towards the pyramid. Ladybug’s heart lurched but Alya was fine; Chat Noir had freed himself from the suddenly docile mummies and had scurried up the side of the pyramid to break Alya’s fall. They tumbled to an ungainly heap at the bottom, Chat Noir curled into a ball of pain as one of Alya’s knees had caught him in just the wrong place.

Alya was sitting with her arms folded. “Excuse you, I’d make excellent sacrificing material!”

“You’re welcome,” Chat Noir groaned.

Ladybug was thrust onto the beam of light to take Alya’s place. Affecting an air of defeat, she tearfully reached up and fumbled with her earrings. “You win, Pharaoh.”

She held out her fist. He reached out his hand.

She opened her empty hand and snatched the pendant dangling around his wrist.

“You want my Miraculous?” she told him archly. “Go get it!” And flung the fake earrings as hard as she could. Predictably, he took off after them. She was extremely gratified by his scream of rage when he discovered the trick, but it was too late for him to change it now.

She smashed the pendant with her fist, revealing troublesome akuma that started this whole mess. Even as she did it, the power seemed to drain out of the dark circle and the sacrificial light; she rode it safely to the apex and slid neatly down the side of the glass pyramid to the ground.

One purified butterfly later and it was all over. The Miraculous cure washed over the Louvre, righting the damage and leaving the former Pharaoh Jalil Kubdel himself again, if baffled and disorientated.

Ladybug went over to Alya and calmly handed her back her phone before taking her leave.

“Thanks Ladybug,” Alya gushed. “But I have to ask; how old are you really?”

Ladybug hesitated before answering with absolute truthfulness. “Every time I go out, I have a lot of learning to do. That happens at any age. I don’t think,” she added dryly. “In an ideal world I’d have the time to be a high school student, though.”

And then she was fleeing back to the exhibit room to de-transform.

Ladybug handled adrenaline so easily. She could face down monsters and myths, ghouls and ghosts and her heart wouldn’t even miss a beat.

Marinette was a different story. When the power and confidence of Ladybug fizzled out de-transformation, Marinette felt like she’s been hit with a wrecking ball. She stood in the empty exhibit hall and trying to keep her breathing calm and her heart from kicking straight out of her chest.

She had to find Izuku. She had to find Alya. She had to see for herself – with Marinette’s eyes – that they were really okay. She knew, rationally, that they were, but her brain was not on a
completely rational wavelength post-fight.

She spied Alya’s book bag where Alya had left it when she’d decided to become a front line war correspondent. Marinette’s stomach flipped just thinking about how close her friend had come to actually dying.

First things first.

“Tikki,” she handed the book to the tired kwami. “Can you...?

Tikki obligingly grabbed the book and vanished it...somewhere. Marinette was too worn and shaken to ask.

“Marinette!” Alya came running at her, enthusiasm bubbling out of her. “Where have you been? The most amazing thing just happened!”

Marinette grabbed the redhead by the shoulders, rocking unsteadily from a gut punch of relief. “I know. I ended up in the courtyard with a lot of mummies! Have you seen...”

“Mummified, huh?” Alya grinned. “I hope you weren’t one of the ones trying to sacrifice me to Ra.”

She looked so happy about it. “You were nearly sacrificed? Weren’t you scared?”

“A little,” Alya shrugged. “But Ladybug saved the day, as always.”

“As always,” Marinette repeated slowly, before shaking herself. “Alya, have you seen-“

“Thank you Marinette,” Alya added, beaming. “Without you I never would have learned that Ladybug is over five thousand years old! Can you imagine? I’ll need to put a whole new section on the blog to cover that. Isn’t it fascinating?”

“I don’t care.”

“Do you think she’s just travels around, or does she- what?” Alya turned to stare at her friend, suddenly registering her flat tone.

“I don’t care, Alya!” Marinette’s fists were locked at her sides and she tried to will herself to be calm. “I don’t care if you’ve discovered Ladybug is a goddess or Hawk Moth’s home address or-or how to spin straw into gold! I. Don’t. Care. I’m going to find Izuku. I care about that.”

Taken aback, Alya held out a hand. “Hey, I’m sure Izuku’s fine, Marinette.”

“Yes,” Marinette scoffed bitterly. “I can tell how concerned you were about him by the huge smile on your face and the way you didn’t mention his name once, even though he nearly got his head stoved in trying to save you after you ran into the middle of an akuma battle with no protection except a camera!”

“Hey!” Alya protested, but her face darkened with something like shame. “My blog is very important!”

“So is your life, Alya!” Marinette’s voice echoed up to the tall ceilings. “You nearly died. Izuku nearly died. Doesn’t that register for you at all? How could you be so reckless? What if your sisters had pulled that kind of stunt? What if I did? I’m pretty sure you’d read us the riot act, just like I’m doing now, only I’ve got no hope of it actually sinking in!” Marinette sucked in a breath
and visibly checked herself. “I’m sorry for yelling. I’m going to find Izuku and make sure he’s okay. You can either come with me or stay here and do...whatever.”

She turned and stalked away, leaving Alya open mouthed behind her.

There was no one in the exhibition hall. There was no one on the staircase leading up to it, or the cafe or... Marinette felt a lump of dread congeal inside of her. There was no one anywhere. What happened to all the people in the time bubbles?

Marinette began walking faster. Then she started to run. Room after room, hall after hall, there was no one. Her heart started hammering. They had to be somewhere, right?

“Izuku!” Marinette shouted down empty corridors. “Izuku! Can you hear me? Izuku!”

“Emergency evac,” Alya’s voice was quiet. She’d followed Marinette without the other girl even noticing. “Look, on the signs, see? I bet you they did an emergency evacuation to the nearest safety point. They probably gathered everyone in the lobby.”

“Lobby,” Marinette panted. “Right.”

She took off like a hare, sprinting for the main entrance with Alya on her heels. They reached the mezzanine and looked down.

Alya’s guess proved a shrewd one. A massive crowd of people were all jostling around down there. The police had shown up at some point and were now trying to organise the bedlam. They’d evacuated everyone down there.

Marinette leaned half over the railing, feeling sick. How could she find Izuku in all this mess? Her cousin was as short and she was. He didn’t speak French very well. He didn’t cope with crowds very well.

She looked for any patch of green that she could parse out.

Alya had sharper eyes. “There! See! Over on the other staircase!”

Marinette’s heart was ready to burst from her chest. It was Izuku coming down the staircase. He looked okay, but it was hard to tell from this distance.

Marinette plummeted down the staircase and into the crowd, fighting her way through to the other side of the lobby. Alya followed her, completely unafraid to use her elbows with extreme prejudice. They eventually made it to the last spot they saw him and scanned again.

Marinette spied a shock of messy dark green hair through a gap in the crowd and darted for it.

It was Izuku. He was fine; not a scratch that she could see. He was carrying, of all things, an All Might plushie.

He was bringing it up to what looked like a family of Japanese tourists; father, mother and a couple of kids. The youngest one was a chubby little ball of cuteness, who was currently crying her eyes out in her mother’s arms. Izuku approached her and slowly, theatrically, raised the plushie so that it just crept over her sightline. “Watashi! Ga! KOITA!”

The girl squealed in delight and reached for the plushie while the parents both thanked Izuku profusely while he blushed and stammered.
It was just about the cutest thing Marinette had ever seen.

“Excuse me,” an Asian lady in a museum uniform came up to her. “My name is Akiko, I’m a Japanese translator in the museum. Do you know him?”

“Yes,” Marinette told her. “That’s my cousin, Izuku. He’s staying with my family.”

“Your cousin was very brave today,” the woman told her seriously. “He helped all the people trapped in the bubbles. He organised them to search the museum room to room in groups to make sure we didn’t miss any before we all evacuated. I had to help him translate his instructions into French, but the rest of it was all him. He was very calm and very helpful.”

“Really?” Marinette beamed proudly.

Akiko nodded. “He even volunteered to go back and find that girl’s doll when he heard she’d lost it. We are very grateful for his actions.”

“Thank you for telling me,” Marinette nodded. “I’ll make sure he knows.”

They went over to Izuku as he waved the family goodbye. “Rin-chan! Alya-chan!” he smiled. “You are not hurt? Ack!”

The last bit was because Marinette caught him up in a huge hug. “We’re fine. Daijoubu.”

Alya shuffled her feet. “Are you okay too? You’re not hurt?” She had a really guilty look on her face, as if it had just struck her that Izuku might have been injured.

“Daijoubu. I’m okay,” Izuku smiled. “Ladybug was very cool.”

Alya smiled tentatively. “Totally cool.”

“Come on,” Marinette wrapped an arm around Izuku’s shoulders. “I’m going to buy you the biggest chocolate parfait I can find.”

* 

Marinette lay in bed that night reading a book on the Ladybug papyrus scroll and stuffed to the gills. On top of an extra large parfait, Sabine had made something called katsudon for dinner after she heard what Izuku had done at the museum. Izuku reacted to the praise like a blushing, startled turtle but Marinette was confident that he’d appreciated the gesture nonetheless.

And katsudon was delicious. Marinette could see why it was Izuku’s favourite.

There was a rapping sound against her trapdoor. “Come in!” she called, too full to think about rising. Tikki, who had been reading with her, silently made herself scarce.

“Rin-chan,” Izuku hauled his way up the ladder one handed, juggling his bulky laptop. “Can I show you something?”

“Izzy, hi!” Marinette smiled. “Sure, come on over.”

Secretly she was extremely pleased to see Izuku’s hair was damp from washing and there were less stress lines on his face. The museum trip had really snapped him out of the funk he’d been in. She didn’t know how exactly since it hadn’t been a lot of fun, but there was a spark in his eyes that hadn’t been there this morning and she was prepared to bless the stupid Pharaoh for that alone.
“Took me a while,” Izuku carefully sat on the edge of her bed. “But I found it.”

“Found what?” Marinette asked curiously.

“Tentomushi,” Izuku told her gleefully.

Now that’s a word she knew. “Ladybug? Did you get on the Ladyblog? Alya runs it, you know.”

But Izuku shook his head. “No. Not Ladybug. Tentomushi,” he turned the screen to face her, showing some very old fashioned looking oriental screen prints. “From Japan. Feudal era.”

Marinette sat bolt upright. “That’s Ladybug!” The red and black spot motifs were distinctive enough, and the yo-yo definitely clinched it.

“Tentomushi,” Izuku tapped the screen. “The history is... not very much. But she existed; is proven.”

“Really?” Marinette scrolled through the information, but it was mostly in Japanese that she didn’t stand a hope of reading. “Was she a noble or something?”

“Kunoichi,” Izuku replied. “A... girl ninja.”

“Wow!” Marinette was impressed.

“I think Ladybug is like Majestia,” Izuku told her, gripped with a heartening enthusiasm.

Marinette was puzzled. “Majestia? Like, she can... fly?”

“No, I mean,” Izuku’s face took on the pinched look it got when he was trying to wrangle his Japanese thoughts into a French order. “There is Majestia, yes? Before, different Majestia. After, new Majestia, yes?” he waved his hands wildly. “So this,” he pointed to the book Marinette had been reading and the pictograph of the ancient Egyptian Ladybug therein. “Old Ladybug,” then he shook his laptop. “Next Ladybug. And then-”


“*Manteau*,” Izuku wriggled with excitement. “Yes, that’s the word. Is passed along. I think there are more; I can find them, maybe. Is a very small group of history students that study proto-Quirk history. Quirks before Age of Quirks.”

Marinette thought carefully about what she was going to say next. “You should send this to Alya.”

“W-what?” Izuku nearly fell of the bed.

“Really, you should,” Marinette nodded, firmly convinced this was the right course. “She’s really interested in Ladybug. I bet if you wrote some essays or something she’d publish them on her blog.”

“Oh well,” Izuku’s cheeks went faintly pink. “If... if you think.”

Marinette sensed an incipient crush coming on. It was *adorable*. “I know. She’ll love it. I’ll text you her number, okay?”

‘You’re welcome. And Izzy?’ she added as he made his way to the trapdoor, laptop under one arm. ‘I know I’ve said it before, but I’m so proud of you. Today, at the museum? You were every bit as much of a hero as Ladybug and Chat Noir.’

He blushed. ‘Thank you. It wasn’t very much but... glad I could help. Uh... bonne nuit, Rin-chan.’

‘Oyasumi nasai, Izzy,’ Marinette waved at him as he descended, closing the door behind him.

‘You cousin,’ Tikki emerged from her hiding spot on the desk. ‘Is smart.’

‘Very,’ Marinette nodded. ‘Look how quickly he figured that out.’

‘Do you think it was wise to let him keep theorising?’ Tikki asked. ‘Too much knowledge could prove very dangerous for him.’

‘I’m pretty sure the idea of Ladybug being a Hero Mantle will be a forum battleground topic soon enough, after today. Besides,’ Marinette sighed. ‘He looked so happy to have discovered it. I couldn’t take that from him, Tikki.’

‘Of course not,’ Tikki agreed. ‘You’re right, people knowing that about Ladybug will hardly do any harm. I’m not used to this level of exposure but that’s just the modern world, I suppose.’

‘So that was you? On the papyrus?’ Marinette held up the book.

‘What do you think?’ Tikki floated up to perch on the book edge playfully.

‘Well you don’t look five thousand years old!’ Marinette patted the kwami on the head.

‘I’m not,’ Tikki giggled. ‘I’m far older than that. I have watched over every Ladybug since the beginning.’

Marinette considered that. ‘What were they like?’ she asked, running her fingers over the book page. ‘What was she like? What was her name?’

‘She didn’t start with one,’ Tikki answered. ‘To Marinette’s surprised look she explained “Not everyone starts with a name. In some parts of history, a name was only for the privileged. But she was called Rahema by the people who loved her best. She was... she was a very happy person. She always had a smile for others, even though she spent a lot of her life before me alone.”

‘Rahema,’ Marinette repeated. ‘And Tentomushi? The ninja girl?’

‘Akane,’ Tikki said fondly. ‘She was already a good fighter when I met her. She was a very cool, collected sort of person. She had a very tragic past, though.’

‘They both sound about ten thousand times less clumsy than me,’ Marinette observed ruefully.

‘All Ladybugs are different,’ Tikki replied gently.

‘Yeah, that’s what I thought,’ Marinette sighed.

‘Marinette,’ Tikki flew up to get. ‘It is true you are different than them. But you are different because you are surprising, unpredictable and endearing. And very creative. You learn very fast!’

‘Really?’ Marinette asked hopefully. She wasn’t vain, but Ladybug was a hard legacy to live up to. It was kind of heartening to know she wasn’t messing it up.
“Really,” Tikki smiled at her. “You are not them. You never could be. But they were not you and never could be either. That you are all different was to their credit and is to yours.”

Marinette gave the kwami a kiss on the forehead for that.

* 

“You could be a historian.”

Izuku blinked his way out of a research trance and looked up from his laptop screen. His talk with Marinette had inspired him to dig deeper into proto-Quirk history. “A historian?”


“Of course you do,” Izuku laughed softly. “Me, a teacher,” Izuku mused. His experience with teachers had been a mixed bag at best. He tried to picture a world containing Midoriya-sensei and kept seeing a raucous, shrieking batch of Quirk-laden monsters he couldn’t possibly control. He shook his head. “I don’t know if I’d be any good as a teacher.”

“Oh Izuku,” Haane chided. “Nobody starts out any good at anything. Even if you have talent, you still have to work hard and fail a lot before you get anywhere. Don’t be afraid to try something because you won’t be good at it in the beginning. Try something you want to be good at by the end.”

“Like what though?” Izuku stared at his hands. The tremors were more apparent when he was tired. It was hard to imagine turning them to doing constructive work. Maybe historian wouldn’t be bad? That sounded like it was mostly a lot of reading.

“What are you passionate about?” Haane asked. “Passion helps hard work pass with pleasure.”

Izuku thought about this for a moment. “All I’ve ever been passionate about is... heroes. That’s what caused most of the trouble in the first place, though.”

“But why heroes?” Haane persisted.

“Because they help people.”

“And you wanted to help them too,” Haane deduced.

Izuku nodded.

“Well there you are!” Haane spun in midair gracefully. “There’s lots of options if you want to help people. You could be a doctor...”

“Yeah,” Izuku held up his hands. “No.”

“Or a lawyer...”

“No, no, mum works with them and I’ve heard stories,” Izuku shuddered. “Besides, there’s a bunch of jobs I won’t be able to get in Japan. Being Quirkless means my insurance rating is through the roof. I’ll be uninsurable for any job that involves duty of care – doctors, nurses, criminal lawyers, construction, police. I know, I looked. There’s even a bunch of Support industry jobs out of my price range because they intersect with Hero field work too much. It’s tough in Japan, Haane. If I’d become a Hero,” Izuku clenched his misshapen fists. “Then I would have been in the Hero’s insurance tier – then, no problem. That’s not why I wanted to be a Hero but it would...
I could have bought a nice house for mum or something. But it’s no good,” Izuku sighed. “Wanting something like that now. I’ll only hurt myself. What good will it do?”

“Izuku, hero or not you did a great deal of good today,” Haane flitted up to him. “You must always remember that. You shouldn’t minimise it just because it wasn’t official. You did your very best and others benefited from it. Whatever you might think or feel about it, I’ve known heroes and that was a hero’s work.”

“I know,” Izuku nodded. “And it was great, it really was. But I can’t keep hoping for that. I have to focus on healthier, more attainable things. I have to get better. I can’t keep putting my mum through this. I can’t keep putting myself through it. I don’t want to be a hero anymore, Haane.”

“Izuku,” Haane’s face saddened and she slumped. “Truthfully, a part of me is glad you don’t want to be a hero.”

Izuku’s eyebrows show upwards. “What? Why?”

“Miraculous usually don’t... wander, like I do,” she told him, flying over to land on his pillow. “Most of them resided Guardians until a Holder was chosen. The Holder would return a Miraculous to the Guardians once their time was over. But I have been free of that ritual for nearly two centuries now. I have a mission... and,” she added softly. “A penance.”

“What is it?” Izuku asked softly.

“Long ago, a great evil was unleashed,” Haane explained. “And it was partly my fault. I swore I would not go back to the Guardians until I’d fixed the mistake I made. But I cannot interfere directly, understand? I cannot confront the evil on my own. I must have a Holder. So I’ve found them. Holder after Holder after Holder; all of them bright, brave souls, all of them willing to fight. I found them...and I lost them all.” Haane raised her head to look Izuku dead in the eye. “All of them, Izuku. Young and old, rich and poor. Women, men, mothers... and fathers.”

“Fathers,” Izuku repeated numbly.

After everything that had happened that little detail had flown straight out of his head. 

_He’d inherited the Miraculous from his father._

“My father was a Hero?” Izuku croaked in disbelief. “What... why didn’t anyone tell me? Why did my mother...”

“I don’t know how much she knew,” Haane told him. “All of my Holders had to be so very careful. If they were defeated and the next person to pick me up was the very enemy we fought... can you imagine the kind of damage that I could wreak under the influence of evil, Izuku? I wouldn’t have a choice. Just like poor Nooroo is stuck with Hawk Moth now.”

“Nooroo?” Izuku repeated, momentarily diverted.


This was almost too much for Izuku to process. _“Ladybug and Hawk Moth are Holders. I guess Chat Noir too?”_

“Yes,” Haane nodded. “I believe they were both summoned because of Hawk Moth. It would take a Miraculous to stop another Miraculous.”
Izuku tried to absorb all of this. “My father, a Hero,” he repeated dully. “He left when I was one, you know. All the neighbours said he’d abandoned us. Mum always said he’d never do that. When I was five they told us they’d found remains in a burnt out building. Was it...” Izuku couldn’t force the question out.

“It must have been,” Haane nodded.

“You weren’t with him?” Izuku asked incredulously. “Why not?”

“All my Holders agreed on one thing; we could not let the enemy get the Miraculous. When Hisashi sensed it was too late to escape he renounced me. His last act was to mail the Miraculous back to his wife before... going off to fight, I suppose. I don’t know. But he lost and that’s my fault.”

“Because you weren’t with him,” Izuku guessed.

“Partly that,” Haane affirmed. “But also because I’d weakened him. We kwami are very powerful. So powerful that we change our Holder’s very makeup with the force of our energies. A Quirk might grow strong initially but after transforming enough times eventually our energy will overwrite a Quirks energy; even a very powerful one. The more powerful, the faster it happens.”

“You can destroy someone’s Quirk?” Izuku gaped.

“Weaken,” Haane corrected. “Weaken to the point where it might as well be destroyed. Your father had transformed with me for years Izuku. His Fire Breath was not strong enough to fight with any more. That was the downside of the Age of Quirks. It became harder and harder to find willing Holders. After all, who would give up their individuality for the sake of duty?”

Izuku sat for many minutes, silently trying to digest everything he’d been told. His father, a Hero? Never in a million wild dreams would Izuku have thought a thing like that to be remotely possible. But there it was. He’d been a hero apparently so deep underground that not even his wife had known the truth.

“I was Hisashi’s friend and partner for many years,” Haane spoke again after a while. “I loved him very much. I know when he went to his end, he did it so that you and your mother would be safe; that our enemy would never find you, because Hisashi would take his secret to his grave. All his secrets.”

Izuku flinched.

“I love you very much. I love you so much. I love you so much.” Izuku whispered. “I don’t want to take the son he loved so much and lead him down the same path.”

“I... loved me?” Izuku whispered.

“Oh Izuku,” Haane flitted up to nuzzle his hair. “So much. He loved you so much. From the day you were born it was Izuku this and Izuku that. He worshipped you. I joked with him that he should just build a shrine and be done with it. To be fair, you were a cute baby.”

Izuku let out a breath.

It might take him a hundred thousand years to fully grasp all of this. “What was his name?” he
asked when he could find his voice. “My father’s. Not Hisashi; his Hero name.”

“Uguisu,” Haane told him.

“The Japanese nightingale,” Izuku said helplessly, tears falling down his face. “Of course. And... your enemy?”

Haane went slightly harder. “History erased his name long ago. If he’s still alive, he’s probably only known by the name of his power.”

“If?” Izuku asked. “But my... dad lost, didn’t he? If he lost, then your enemy must have lived.”

“We weren’t the only ones fighting him,” Haane explained. “There were others. We helped them all. I hope they fared better than we.”

“Who is he?” Izuku asked.

Haane spoke softly, as if her enemy could hear it. “He’s called All For One.”

* 

Izuku stared at the ceiling that night in the dark of his room, unable to stop his mind of chasing itself in circles.

Miraculouses, magic, heroes... his father.

He wondered if, on some level, his mother had known. She’d always seemed so wary about the idea of heroes.

He wondered how he was going to tell his therapist any of this.

How he could possibly ask his mother.

He tried to set all of this aside. It was too immense to deal with in one go. He had to break it down into tiny pieces and digest them slowly, bit by bit. Maybe he’d write down everything he wanted to know and then go through it step by step with Haane.

Maybe he could also wrote down all the things he wanted to try. Try everything Haane had said. It was good advice.

He didn’t want to be a Hero and he doubly didn’t want to be one now. The thought of living up to a legacy like that on top of every other insurmountable obstacle made him curl up and die in the inside a little. He didn’t dare entertain the thought of it. He’d be asking for failure.

Izuku Midoriya was no Hero.

It didn’t matter that he had the option of a Miraculous transformation. That only changed the surface. It couldn’t fix what was inside of him.

You couldn’t fix ordinary.

Unable to pretend to try to sleep any longer and mindful that he shouldn’t let his thoughts meander down a dark road, Izuku grabbed his phone. He could start making a list of things; careers paths, hobbies, interests, passions. Things he could try. He had a rough grasp of the native language, a small budget and an infinite amount of determination. He’d gotten by with less.
When he turned on his phone he realised he had a text. He’d gotten it a week ago, but had been so numbed he hadn’t noticed.

It was a reply.

**Sent: One Week Ago**

‘Had a little adventure today. I’m okay. Look up ‘Hawk Moth, Paris villain. Crazy, huh?’

**Reply: Six Days Ago**

**Self. Defence. Lessons. NOW.**

Izuku blinked.

Self defence lessons.

His therapist was adamant exercise was good for endorphin levels.

He opened up a list app and wrote it down.

It was a start.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Daijoubu - "Are you okay" or "I'm okay". This is a catch all word in Japanese

Alya-san ohanashi nasai - "I order you to let Alya go!" This is the 'polite command' way of saying it. If Izuku was a rougher, less polite character he'd have said it like 'Te o HANASE' which is considered a 'strident demand', ie 'let her $^&@#$ go!' (Bakugou would probably say it like this).

-san for Alya - Izuku doesn't know Alya very well. Marinette is family so she gets the familiar -chan suffix, but Alya gets a more formal -san; 'Miss'. I suspect once he gets to know her better he might start calling her 'senpai', a person who is superior in rank/experience to him, but not quite a teacher (-sensei) or a highly respected boss (-sama). A peer-superior. Younger students also use 'senpai' for older, higher grade students.

Nani - literally 'What'

Wakarimashita ka - 'Do you understand?' Marinette is still learning Japanese, so she keeps using the longest way to say certain things. When you learn Japanese you learn the long, formal way of speaking first (wakarimashita) and then you learn the contraction, short way (ie, 'wakkata' is essentially the same word). Sort of like cannot and can't.

Watashi! Ga! KIITA! - is, of course, All Might's signature phrase. It literally means 'I have arrived/I have come', but it's translated to 'I am Here!' which makes more sense in English. Interestingly he uses 'watashi' to refer to himself, which is considered the polite feminine version of 'I'.
Bonne Nuit/Oyasumi nasai - Goodnight in French/Japanese respectively

Tentomushi & kunoichi will be very obvious in context :)

French Bonus Round:
Manteau: Mantle. Also means 'coat', which is also a mantle in English. It's an amusing head canon of mine that a retiring French Hero has to ceremonially pass an actual coat to the next incoming hero bearing their name and they turn the whole act into something like giving a gag gift. It has to be the ugliest, most garish coat they can find and the newcomer has to wear it for the entire, otherwise solemn ceremony and in every official ceremony thereafter. Most French heroes actually take great care with these coats as they are a final parting gift from a beloved mentor.
Chapter Five: Lady Wifi Part I

Chapter Summary

If this is Marinette's morning, wait to see what her afternoon has in store. Also, Izuku explores his options and meets some very interesting people while doing so.

Chapter Notes

Back to this again. I'm sorry there's not a tonne of action this chapter, but I got stuck shoving in a bunch of Salient Plot Points before getting into the meat of the monster of the week. It's almost a slice-of-life chapter; almost. It's a bit wordy, but I had to get a bunch of stuff in, sorry.

Also, I'm going to try to get Izuku and Marinette into the same room more often; that can be tricky because the set up was initially designed in such a way as to let them slowly get used to one another. Don't worry, more adorable interactions will come as they grow closer.

As usual, I own nothing and make nothing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Picture, if you will, a household at breakfast. The toaster is still warm, the bread is ultra-fresh, the juice has an enticing sheen of condensation on the jug. The tiny dining nook seats three with space for four with a bit of reasonable shuffling. The father, still with flour on his elbows from the mornings baking rests for a brief half-hour before the bakery downstairs takes on the breakfast rush as they've already dealt with the early bread sales. He's looking over the days schedule and planning out special orders. He confers with his wife, who is pottering around the kitchen, putting in her ideas and suggesting maybe they do another pie week since fruit is coming into season. Huddled at one corner of the nook is a boy – also floured at the elbows, crunching down delicious toast with one hand and tapping away at a laptop with another. He doesn’t add anything to the conversation but listens in with some interest as the married couple debate on how best to construct and store a Princess Castle cake.

It's a winsome, domestic little slice of life.

It’s peaceful.

The thunder of a body half climbing, half falling down ladders and then stairs shatters it completely.

“Oh my god, oh my god!” Marinette lands in the room like a tornado. “I slept through my alarm again!”

She was a mess; her clothes were, at best, only half on and her hair was only half done. She was the centre a whirlwind of chaos; flying paper, pencils and textbooks spilling from an unfastened school
bag. One heavy book flipped out as she spun around to try to get her other pigtail right while still holding the bag strap. It landed on the edge of plate and flipped it into the air with oranges and rolls going straight for the ceiling.

Sabine pinned her daughter in place and let her fumble with her bag while Sabine mended her hair disaster in a trice, jammed missing pens and pencils back into their place and, while Marinette frantically dug into the bag, calmly unhooked Marinette’s phone from the kitchen charger and handed it to her, along with a croissant.

Tom, meanwhile, without actually looking up from his notes, absently grabbed the plate from midair, caught the flying food in it and set it all back down unharmed before flicking the ballistic textbook back to Sabine to put back in Marinette’s bag while the girl in question straightened her clothes, croissant hanging half out of her mouth.

This little stage show used to bewilder and scare Izuku. Now he just gave Tom a round of applause.

“Alya wants to meet before school starts so I can’t wait gotta go now byem abyep abyey Izzy!” Marinette flew towards the door.

“Marinette,” Sabine’s voice stopped her in her tracks.

“Ysmmrma?” Marinette manages past frantic croissant bites.

“You have a free period after lunch today, right?”
Marinette swallowed. “Yes?”

“Good,” Sabine nodded. “Come home for lunch, then.”

“There’s some stuff I need to get done in the art room...” Marinette tried, but stopped when Sabine shook her head.

“Family meeting today,” she told her daughter implacably. “Okay? We need you to come.”
Marinette sighed, but nodded. “Okay, mama. I’ll see you them. Eeek!” She looked at her phone clock. “I really gotta go now BYYYYYE!” Her voice faded as she went out the door.

They winced when they heard her half fall down the stairs to the outside door with a distant. “Don’t worry, I’m okay!” and a slamming door.

“Good work team,” Izuku gave another round of applause.

“Thank you, thank you,” Tom gestured like a grandiose troubadour. “Repeat shows at seven-thirty every morning.”

Sabine sighed fondly. “Izuku, are you ready to go?”
Izuku nodded. “Yes, Aunt Sabine.”

“You haven’t told me what you’re doing yet,” Tom fished.

“You’ll find out,” Sabine replied placidly while Izuku collected his stuff. “Family meeting at one. Laureline will be handling the register but I’ve asked her to give Dominic some training handling customers. I’ve told them to yell if they need you.”

Tom waved them off.
Marinette raced to school; thankfully not far away so the window of possible disasters was reassuringly small.

It’s didn’t stop her from nearly face planting onto the school steps after a misjudged turn done at unwise speeds, but still. Small.

“Honestly, girl,” Alya sighed from where she grasped Marinette’s backpack, keeping her face from become one with concrete risers. “Sometimes I think you should be wearing a helmet, or something.”

“Uh, thanks,” Marinette said sheepishly as she righted herself. “You wanted to meet up?” The delicious, masala spiced aroma wafted from the bag that Alya held. “Did your mama make sweet potato cakes again? I love those!”

“Yes,” Alya shook the bag temptingly. “Still mad at me?”

Marinette froze halfway to delicious Martinique-style potato goodness. “Alya,” Marinette was aghast. “I was never mad at you! Okay,” she amended to Alya’s sceptical eyebrow. “I was a little in the moment, but not after. You just scared me. You really scared me,” Marinette told her seriously. “I thought... I thought I might be going to your house and trying to explain to your family what happened to you. I hated even thinking about it. I mean, if I was in danger wouldn’t that scare you to death?”

Alya winced. “Okay, fair. So, still friends?”

“I don’t know. How many potato cakes have you got?”

“Very funny!” Alya thrust the bag at her giggling friend. “You’re an easy mark; you know that, right?”

“My price is totally cheap,” Marinette agreed, inhaling awesome, spicy-sweet potato cakes at speed. “Thanks for this, really. I didn’t have time for much breakfast.”

“I am the best, I agree,” Alya flipped her hair a la Chloe as they burst into the early morning school chaos. Classes hadn’t started yet, so it was a cheerful hubbub of students getting their stuff ready.

“What was the reaction to The Pharaoh on the blog?” Marinette asked mid-munch, handing her friend a cake. “I saw the new post go up but I didn’t check the hit counter this morning.”

Alya’s face fell. “I don’t know,” she replied. “I posted it but then my parents got home and let me have it. Even Nora rang up to yell at me. Nora! She literally has one of the most dangerous professional careers and she’s telling me to be more careful? Can you believe that hypocrite?”

“You know they’re only upset because they care about you,” Marinette felt bad for her friend. She knew Alya meant well.

“It’s not that,” Alya shook her head. “I expected them to yell. But now my parents are saying... I might have to give up the Ladyblog!” she blurted, genuinely upset.

“What? But you own the blog, don’t you?” Marinette wracked her brains for all of Alya’s gushing explanations about the Ladyblog. “You paid for it with your own money and manage it yourself.”

Alya blinked rapidly. “They don’t care! They keep saying it’s distracting from my school work.”
Marinette couldn’t possibly comment on Alya’s slipping grades due to Ladybug chasing without being a giant hypocrite herself. If she didn’t do well on the exams this year, she was sunk. “I’m sure they don’t mean it. They know how much it means to you.”

“No,” Alya sniffled as they hit the locker rooms to change for first period gym. “You don’t understand. They do mean it. Mom and dad want be to get a ‘practical’,” Alya made sarcastic air quotes. “Job. Like a chef or an animal handler. Or like perfect, do-no-wrong Nora, the *professional hero*. They don’t think freelance writing is a real job because the income isn’t steady.”

“You make money off subscriptions, though,” Marinette pointed out.

“More every day!” Alya agreed fiercely. “But they think Ladybug mania is just a fad that will fade eventually. They don’t understand that people can make good, steady money off blogs these days if they keep up with it and keep the content fresh. But now they say I can’t even look at the Ladyblog for a month. A whole month, Marinette!” Alya wailed. “The Ladyblog will die and get eaten by all the other Ladybug blogs if I leave it that long! They said it’s because it’s giving me too many opportunities to make bad choices,” Alya was bitter. “But *I* know it’s them trying to make me give up on my career path, just because *they* don’t understand it.”

Marinette dropped her gym clothes on the bench to give Alya a hug. “You know they’re not doing it because of that. You just scared them, that’s all. Give them a week to calm down and then sit down with them and explain your position. Tell them you’ll take on extra babysitting and extra credit assignments while you’re grounded instead of giving up the Ladyblog. You’ve argued them around to your point of view before, right? I’m sure the last thing they want to do is take away your ability to express yourself. Cooking is your mother’s thing and animals are your father’s. This is *your* thing. Tell them that.”

“Thanks Marinette,” Alya gave her a watery smile. “You’re the best. I just wish I could make them understand that. You’re right. This is my thing, my passion. Everybody needs one of those. I just wish I had a way to show them how worthwhile it is, not just some silly craze. Like, I just need one really big scoop, one which everyone in Paris will talk about. Then they’ll know how vital my hard work is.”

“Let them calm down first, Alya,” Marinette advised. “Just for a week. They’ll be a lot more willing to listen when they’re calmer.”

Alya sighed. “I guess. Come on, we’d better get changed.”

“Gym,” Marinette groaned dismally. “Why do they put it at the beginning of Mondays?”

“Look at it this way,” Alya squeezed her shoulder. “The rest of the week can only go up from there.”

“This is going to be a disaster,” Marinette promised darkly.

“Come on girl, it might not be. Positive attitude!”

Attitude didn’t help when their chosen torture for today was volleyball.

In theory, Marinette’s physical performance should have improved greatly after the last nine months of being Ladybug. After all, Ladybug could back flip her way across a cobweb and dance on the head of a pin. Marinette had always been a clumsy girl but she had found that Ladybug’s abilities did bleed back into ordinary Marinette even when not transformed.

The problem was they did so extremely erratically.
Like, one minute she could pitch a softball a solidly average distance for a thirteen (nearly fourteen!) year old non-athletic school girl, but the next she might break straight through the bat, nearly concuss a catcher and leave a crater in a brick wall hundreds of feet beyond that.

It was terrifying. Marinette spent the average gym class marinated in sweat, trying not to go too far overboard while still trying to maintain some sort of measurable progress. She seldom if ever hit the mark. What she ended up doing was usually flailing around like a spider having a seizure, missing every pass and flubbing every serve while her classmates waiting with bated breath to duck her latest misfire. Super reflexes didn’t even help her; she was either too lightning fast which sent the ball straight out of the courtyard or trying too hard to hold them back which meant she wasn’t watching where the ball was actually going.

SLAM!

Marinette found herself on the floor blinking at the ceiling and getting her daily dose of braying laughter courtesy of Chloe, while the Blond Brat herself bent double after watching Marinette get slammed in the face by her perfect spike over the net.

Chloe was weirdly, disgustingly athletic when she wanted to be. Usually when there was some opportunity to humiliate someone.

“Chloe, Chloe, I got the perfect shot!” Sabrina’s happy voice rang out as she went to show her best friend her phone. Whatever Chloe saw just made Chloe laugh harder, which couldn’t be good for Marinette.

Marinette rubbed her sore face, angrily swiping at the tears that were welling up. What a day.

She saw a hand reach down and absently grabbed at it to haul herself up.

She promptly froze solid when she looked up into the handsome, concerned features of Adrien Agreste.

“Are you okay Marinette? That looked like it hurt,” he was such a beautiful person. He’d been playing just as hard as anyone else and he looked like he’d just stepped out of a photoshoot. Even his hair was artfully distressed rather than messy.

Too bad that Marinette was now acutely aware that she was soaked in sweat, hair askew, red faced and just generally falling apart at the seams. Why did he pick right now to notice her? She opened her mouth to say something suave and funny, saw the concern in his perfect green eyes and said “Imfugilly.”

What? What the hell, brain? Marinette shrieked internally.

“What?” Adrien was perplexed. He even looked handsome doing that. He looked like a cute, bewildered kitten.

“Thanks, you’re a kitten,” Marinette started before immediately panic-correcting. “I mean, I’m not fine! I mean, I’m not fine! Eee, um, I’m okay totally. I’m okay!” she yelled just to get it out right. “I’m okay, totally, completely okay, thanks to you. Arg, thank you I mean!”

Alya came to her rescue like the damn hero she was. “You know what? I’m just going to take her over to sit down for a second. It looks like that rattled her head a bit,” she took Marinette by the arm and shot Adrien a winning smile that smoothed out some of the bewildered look in his eyes.

Marinette sat on the benches with her head in her hands while Alya hovered nearby. The class was
breaking up now anyway. Alya was right; statistically, the week could only go up from here.

“Hey, Dupain-Cheng, I need your opinion on something!” Chloe snickered as she came over.

Or not.

“Sabrina took this photo and I think it shows your very best side, don’t you?”

Marinette was appalled when Chloe’s designer phone was shoved under her nose and she saw it. It was her directly post ball hit. Her mouth was flapping open and half her face was caved in, one eye closed and the other almost cross eyed. She looked like a deformed fish.

“I know right?” Chloe smirked in satisfaction as Marinette glared at her in fury. “I think this is perfect for my @CFDgymfails instagram, don’t you? It really just captures your essence. Hey Adrikins, wanna come take a look?”

“Chloe, don’t you dare post another...” Marinette began furiously.

“Oops,” Chloe wasn’t an ounce of sorry. “Already posted. Don’t worry Dupain-Cheng, even bad exposure is still exposure and you need all the help you can get! See, I’m being helpful!” She let out a great laugh about it.

“You’re such a brat, Chloe,” Alya snarled at her while Marinette went redder. “I can’t wait to see the next compilation of Bourgeois Brat Blowouts posted on Youtube. Remember the last one, Marinette? They actually showed it on Kids+.”

Chloe scowled. “I’ll have you know my daddy is suing the creator of that stupid video and whoever made it will wish they’d never been born. Besides, you can hardly talk about anything being posted anywhere, what with your tacky little blog ‘on hiatus’ right now. I guess some people aren’t cut out to keep up with being a social influencer like other, better people; namely me.”

Alya glowered at her.

Marinette jumped up. “So you’re saying that you check the Ladyblog too. And recently too, because how else would you know that? It can’t be that tacky then, can it?”

“Ridiculous,” Chloe snapped, going red. “Utterly ridiculous! As if I be caught dead anywhere near Cesaire’s stalker fanpage.”

“Nice try ‘LadybugNo#1Fan’,” Alya told her, grinning viciously. “You forget, I can check IP addresses of people who donate.”

Chloe huffed. “It was a waste of money anyway. After all, there are way better sites already springing up, including my very own! Offline for a month? Good luck getting your grandma to subscribe, Cesaire. People only want new things. They’re not going to wait a day for news, let alone a month. Your tacky little blog will soon be as out-of-fashion as its creator.” Then she laughed in Alya’s infuriated face before swanning off to do...whatever Chloe did.

“Don’t listen to her,” Marinette urged her. “She doesn’t know a thing. Besides, I’ve seen her stupid site. You want to talk tacky? Ugh. It’s got nothing but pictures of her photoshopped with Ladybug. Badly!”

Alya laughed a little. “Sounds like Chloe. I bet she has about two subscribers.”

“And they’re both being paid by her father,” Marinette snorted.
They laughed about it as they headed for the locker rooms to get changed and ready for normal class stuff.

“So, lunch today?” Alya offered. “I’ve got a tonne of new material to go through for when the blog is back online. I know I can convince my parents.”

Marinette winced. “I’d love to, but mama called a family meeting at one so I probably won’t be back until class restarts. Home lunch today, sorry.”

Alya face fell a little, but she lifted it up a moment later. “No worries girl; I’ll see you this afternoon then.”

“Come on, we’d better get going so we can take the stupid history test,” Marinette sighed. “Oh, speaking of; I gave Izzy your number. He’s doing research on Ladybug and I told him you might be interested in putting it on the Ladyblog. He’s really smart, Alya, I bet he’ll get you lots of good stuff.”

“Oh,” Alya brightened. “Sure, I can take a look. I don’t think he’s sent any yet.”

“Yeah, I think he’s a bit intimidated since he’s trying to write it in French,” Marinette admitted. “It might need a bit of, you know, spellchecking. But it’s really interesting stuff, I promise. He showed me some last night.”

“I guess he can take his time,” Alya replied ruefully. “After all, I can’t actually post yet. Arg, this really sucks, you know? I’ve got dozens of ideas and I can’t do anything with them!”

“Patience,” Marinette told her. “Chloe’s wrong. People will wait for news, if it’s really good.”

“Yeah,” Alya sighed. “What’s the family meeting about, anyway?”

Marinette shrugged. “I don’t know. I know mama and Izzy are going somewhere today, but I have no idea what they’re up to.”

Alya opened her mouth to say something and froze. Marinette was taking her bag out of her locker and didn’t notice until she turned back around. “Alya? You okay?”

“Uh,” Alya replied absently. “Sure, yeah.”

Marinette turned to see what she was looking at and saw Chloe’s back as she strutted out of the locker room. She looked back at Alya who was staring after Chloe, seemingly fixated on her.

“Alya, what’s-“

“Can I borrow your phone real quick?” Alya blurted suddenly.

Baffled, Marinette dug in her bag for it. “...sure?”

Alya snatched it like it was the last glass of water in the desert and then completely checked out. Marinette steered her towards the classroom one handed while the redhead furiously surfed on the borrowed phone. Marinette was pretty sure Alya was getting around her parents surveillance on her own phone to check the Ladyblog on Marinette’s.

This status quo continued right up until the classroom; Alya only put down the phone in order to get out a pen and a notebook before going back to the phone and furiously scratching down what looked like a list of dates and times. She was so into it Mlle Bustier had to call her name twice to
get her to look up from it and give the phone back to Marinette.

Marinette didn’t get a chance to even ask after that until the test was over and the bell had rung for lunch. “Alya, what’s going on?”

The girl in question was on her own phone now, apparently no longer checking the forbidden Ladyblog. If fact, it looked like she was checking Chloe’s blog, given the sheer swamp of blonde selfies with each scroll. Their classmates were already piling out for lunch and Marinette had to get going to the bakery.

Alya abruptly sat back from her research frenzy. “What kind of person do you think Ladybug is?”

“Huh?” Marinette blinked at the out-of-nowhere demand. “Well, she’s... um, really brave and skilled and smart, I guess.”

“No, I mean,” Alya ran fingers through her hair, eyes staring a thousand miles away. “Out of the mask. When she’s just a civilian?”

“Oh, well,” Marinette dithered. What could she possibly say? “Like, the same? Maybe not quite so, uh, noticeable. That would make sense, wouldn’t it?”

“But would that be a good cover, though?” Alya argued. “Wouldn’t it be better to have an alter ego totally different from the superhero? Like, a total and complete division between mask persona and civilian persona. After all, that would guarantee no one would ever figure out her true identity. That’d be as useful as that thing, you know, where people can never seem to describe her even though they literally just talked to her?”

Marinette did indeed know that thing. She blessed that thing. “But by that logic,” Marinette replied slowly, still completely mystified by whatever idea had seized Alya’s brain. “Ladybug’s civilian personality would be...um cowardly? Or silly?”

“Or mean,” Alya shot to her feet in triumph. “Thanks Marinette! I gotta go check something on the school computers real quick. See you laaaater,” she yelled over her shoulder as she dashed out of the room, nearly knocking down Nino who was one of the last out.

“What was all that about?” Nino asked.

Marinette threw up her hands. “No idea. Alya always gets like this when one of her wild theories hits her though. Hey, Nino?” Marinette looked at the door Alya had flown through. “Can you do me a favour? I have to go home for a little while. Can you keep an eye on her? She can get a little... overenthusiastic when she’s on the trail of a new story.”

“I’ll try,” Nino said dubiously. “But seriously, when have we ever managed to get Alya to calm down when she’s in scoop mode?”

Marinette sighed, conceding the point.

*

“Ready?” Sabine asked carefully.

Izuku squared his shoulders. The community hall was bustling and busy with people of all shapes and sizes. Izuku had a love/hate relationship with crowds. On one hand, anonymity. On the other... people.
But he needed to do this. If he was going to reach his goal of trying out various skills and career paths, the annual Club and Hobby Fair at the 21st Arrondissements Social and Cultural Hall was the perfect place.

He felt a lurch in his gut at the thought of going into that hubbub of inscrutable French, but forced himself to breathe calmly. Haane, who was nested in his inner jacket pocket, gave a reassuring little flutter. “I’m ready,” Izuku nodded. “Let’s do this.”

They dove in. It was a mess of noise and colour and sound at first. Every hobby, apprenticeship, club and interest group in Paris seemed to be crammed in, each with its own display booth. They were hawking their classes and courses loudly, some had audiovisual displays, some played music or offered demonstrations of skills or talents or Quirks. It was a mess.

Pamphlets, Izuku decided. He’d focus on collecting pamphlets.

Sabine was a godsend. She let Izuku go at his own pace through row after row of booths, collecting flyers and pamphlets for him as well, as well as asking questions for Izuku, who was far too intimidated to yell over the din.

Once this initial sensory overload passed though, Izuku began to feel stirrings of enthusiasm. He’d been such an outsider at his old school that he’d never joined any of the clubs, not even the Hero-themed ones. Some of these looked pretty interesting.

He took the time to scratch down notes on every pamphlet he collected. Cooking, handicrafts, DIY repairs, robotics, computer programming, painting, dance classes and more. It didn’t matter what your interest was, there was a club somewhere in the community that covered it.

After a while it just became a blur of information and subscription fees; he’d have to examine pamphlets back at the bakery in order to actually make choices that would suit his budget.

Sabine wasn’t completely just a mobile translating app for Izuku. She was a very community minded person in general and took a few flyers for her own sake as well. She seemed quite interested in a Community Culinary programme that was touting setting up a training restaurant to teach would-be chefs how to actually run a business. “Before I married Tom,” she confided in Izuku. “I was a chef training in restaurant management. I wish I’d had something like that!”

Izuku considered this. “Aunty Sabine, you should go and...” Izuku waved his hands. “Talk. I think they’d like to have a... a teacher with...history.”

Sabine smiled. “I’m too busy.”

“So am I,” Izuku insisted. “But, have to get out of the bakery sometime.”

Sabine narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re using my argument against me, young man.” Then she grinned. “Well done.”

Izuku beamed at her. “You go. I’ll go sit,” he pointed to a bench crammed in next to a tiny booth in a back corner. He ruefully shook his armfuls of pamphlets. “I need to put these in my bag anyway.”

“Alright,” Sabine nodded. “You have your phone, just in case? Okay, see you in a little bit.”

Izuku gratefully huddled on the bench. No one came close to this corner, really. The only company he had was a man staffing a small booth filled with books. He didn’t appear to have much interest; he was placidly reading a book, seemingly fully immersed and ignoring everything else.
Safe from prying eyes, Izuku sorted through his various pamphlets and got them into some sort of order before stuffing them in his bag. He also drew out a bag of honey roasted peanuts.

Despite being creatures of pure energy and immortal, kwami both ate and had favourite foods. As Haane had explained, they each had a kind of sustenance perfect for replenishing their energy. While anything would do in a pinch, some foodstuffs were the exact right combination of things for an individual kwami. Sometimes it was sugary snacks, she’s said, sometimes cheese or smoked sausage or berries or rice.

Haane was nuts about peanuts. Salted, smoked, chocolate coated, candied; she’d take then any way they came though she admitted she tended towards the sweet over the savoury. And she’d eat literally anything that had peanut butter in it. Izuku had rigged up a hanging birdfeeder with a huge bag of peanut butter M&Ms in his room at the bakery. If asked, he said it was a ‘study reward’ to just grab one or two from the little spout.

At least her favourite food was portable and non perishable; plus, they doubled as a snack for him too. He surreptitiously palmed a handful of nuts into his inner jacket pocket and took a mouthful for himself. He idly wondered if any of her previous Holders had had nut allergies.

His train of thought slalomed off the tracks as the man in the booth next to him jumped upwards with a yelp that nearly had Izuku falling off the bench. Books cascaded out of a teetering, misshapen looking shelf as the man in question, half doused in tea, frantically patted himself down with one hand and while the other grabbed the knocked bookshelf. He had been fast enough to keep it from falling over completely, but not quite fast enough to save the books from tumbling out. Books were literally everywhere across the floor.

Concerned, Izuku went over. “Are you... okay?”

The man blinked at him. He had the oddest face Izuku has ever seen. His nose was crooked and there was a scar pulling up one lip, making his mouth an odd shape. He had blonde hair that would be about shoulder length but it was knotted up messily in a clip. Behind incredibly thick glasses he also had vivid green eyes. They almost glowed, but that could be a Quirk of course. The whole effect was lopsided but very striking.


Izuku blinked. “How did you know I speak Japanese?”

The man reached out and tapped the strap of Izuku’s backpack. Specifically, one of the All Might pins he kept there. “Limited edition All Might certified MightCon wearable. They came out two years ago and were only available in Japan. Specifically, they were given as prizes for students who had submitted the best Hero Projects in the Kanagawa Prefecture.”

“You’re a fan of All Might?” Izuku grinned.

Here, the man grimaced slightly. “Not... All Might specifically. I’m a fan of knowledge. That’s why I work as a curator at Shakespeare & Co. I’m also the head of...” he gestured grandly to the rather plain looking banner on his tiny, book-crammed booth. It read: ‘Ontological Society; Shakespeare & Co Chapter’. “Do you know Shakespeare & Co?”

“Yes, I read about it in my guidebook,” Izuku replied. “It’s very famous. It even has beds for people to sleep in around the library!”

“That’s us,” the man stood up, dripping tea. Unfolded from the chair he was actually quite tall.
“I’m going to go clean up. Can you restack the books? Thank you!” he called over his shoulder as he hurried off.

Izuku stared after than man’s sloping shoulders, baffled.

Haane trilled from inside the jacket pocket. “I’ve never known a true scholar who wasn’t eccentric!”

Izuku shook his head, before peering over the crowd. Aunt Sabine seemed very engaged in a conversation with the hospitality training people. He shrugged and began picking up the books.

It was only when he’d stacked them all up on the small counter that he realised how odd the shelving of the bookcase was. The shelves weren’t straight lines, they were jagged. They seemed to be built to accommodate specific books in specific slots. A lot of the books were the same size vertically, so presumably they could go into any shelf slot the right height, but then you had to worry about the thickness of the book. If you didn’t put the book back into the exact right slot, none of them would fit neatly shelf-edge to shelf-edge.

This was going to take him forever.

“It’s like a puzzle, Izuku,” Haane told him cheerfully once she had spotted the problem. “Like Sudoku, or a crossword. I bet you there’s a key to how they go in.”

“Hmmm,” Izuku turned his mind to analysis. He liked puzzles.

Well, there was a huge tome of Greys Anatomy that could only belong in the bottom row middle, because it was a huge book and that was literally the only slot big enough vertically. But after that, unless he wanted to just try combinations until he fit them all, there didn’t seem to be any pattern.

He looked at the three other bookshelves, all jagged shelved like his one, so he might be able to assume they were organised the same way the little one had been.

He discarded alphabetical as the key immediately, based on the other shelves. They certainly weren’t in publish date order either and they didn’t seem to be grouped according to theme or subject, fiction or non-fiction.

But wait... colour seemed to be a theme of sorts. The colour of the spines seemed to huddle in clumps. Izuku squinted. No, it wasn’t just colour, the book spines set in the right order used their colours to spell out letters across the whole shelf.

Greek letters.

The first bookshelf showed a rho, R. The second an epsilon, E. The third showed an alpha, A.

The fourth was his tiny one.

“A code within a code,” Izuku muttered. “The letters must stand for something. Ontological Society...” he looked it up on his phone. He forced himself to try to parse out the French language site. “Ontology is the philosophical school dedicated to finding out what is real and not real... also the study of knowledge itself... so in order to solve the puzzle, I have to gain knowledge on the Society itself, right? That’s what they’re selling here, isn’t it?”

“Sounds logical,” Haane piped up from his pocket. “Is there a page which tells you what the Society is about?”

There was, but Izuku read through the brief paragraph without seeing any clues. He looked at the
Current Topics’ list and there was a wave of information; Artificial Intelligence, Metaphysics, Cultural Language Drift, Medical Advancement in the Age of Quirks, Art History in pre-Quirk Netherlands... it was a lot about a lot, but nothing that would indicate an answer.

“It can’t be what the Society is doing,” Izuku muttered to himself. “It has to be about what the Society is. Okay... assume it’s an acronym, not a word; rho, epsilon, alpha; R, E, A... wait, I got it!” Izuku jumped with glee. “Their motto is First Look, Then Listen, To Learn and Laugh Last; it’s all over their web page, but look, it’s nowhere on the booth banner. So... maybe the rho is equivalent to R for regarder, which means look; E is for ecouter, listen; A for apprendre, learn. So this one,” he patted the bookshelf. “Must be rho, R, again. Rire – laugh. Oh, and it’s double-pun too! Rire sounds the same as REAR, which is how the acronym sounds when it’s complete.”

“I think you cracked it!” Hanne cheered.

Okay... he could work with this. He sorted the books by size and colour of the spines. Most were leather brown, which were the contrast to the actual letter which was a darker red. If the brown ones were all uniform in height though, how was he supposed to know the right places for them?

A secondary key unfolded as he tried to build the rho. There was a sort of grouping by theme after all, just not an obvious one. Greys Anatomy had a book about bone structure immediately above and to the left of it and a book on muscle disease above and to the right. Subjects were grouped by radiating diagonals. Perfect! So the sorting algorithm was colour, then theme, then height, then width.

Izuku got quite involved in this process; cheerfully sorting through books by colour then by theme; human body, mathematics, astronomy, classic literature, picture books. Once you sorted out which key dictated the placement of which book, slotting them into their place was easy.

Izuku was just slotting the last few books when a voice at his elbow made him jump about half a mile into the air.

“Well done.”

Izuku shrieked, flailed and nearly brained the booth man with a book on Ancient Roman engineering.

The man wasn’t offended. He calmly took the final book from Izuku’s hands and slotted it neatly into place. “Not many people have managed to solve the puzzle in all the years I’ve come here.”

Izuku gaped at him. “That was a test?”

“Oh yes,” the man waved his hands. “We are a Society dedicated to knowledge. We can hardly take in anyone who doesn’t stop and think about what they’re doing.”

“Oh,” Izuku frowned. Come to think of it, he wasn’t sure how the man had managed to shove a heavy bookcase forwards while moving backwards from a spill, unless it was deliberate. “Well, I finished it, I guess,” he concluded lamely.

“Don’t sell yourself short,” the man drew out a business card. “That was pretty impressive. Would you be interested in the Ontological Society?”

“Um, maybe,” Izuku replied shyly. “I’m... trying out my options at the moment. What are your subscription fees?”

“Oh, no fees,” the man waved his hand. “You don’t join. You’re invited. We meet once a month at
Shakespeare & Co and we talk about... just about everything under the sun. All kinds of people are invited. Scientists, doctors, writers, artists; people from all walks of life. If you like knowing a lot about a lot, finding things out and sharing them is essentially what we do.”

Huh. It sounded interesting. Also, it seemed entirely non-Quirk specific and Izuku couldn’t deny a lot of the clubs on offer seemed to be about enhancing your Quirk, which was no good for him. This club was just about knowledge; the only advantage Izuku had ever claimed.

“So, are you inviting me?” Izuku asked, taking the card.

“No, no,” the man shook his head. “You are judged on your work. Write and publish an essay by the end of May. The topic can be whatever you want; fan essay on your favourite Hero, a history of trains, the lifecycle of mayflys, whatever. Send the link to that e-mail,” he tapped the back of the card. “The Society will read through your work. It doesn’t have to be perfect, but if it’s properly cited and shows promise, we’ll send you an invitation.”

“Anything,” Izuku mused. Well if he was going to delve into Proto-Quirk history anyway... “Okay. By the end of May, I can do that. Um... who am I sending it to?”

The odd man held out a hand. “Quentin Modelle.”

“Nice to meet you,” Izuku shook it. “Izuku Midoriya.”

“I shall await your entry with great interest, Izuku. Oh, here comes your Aunt.”

Izuku turned around to see Sabine hurrying towards him. “Sorry, Izuku, I got a bit distracted. Ready to keep going?”

Izuku looked around, but M. Modelle had retreated back to his booth and was placidly reading again. He shrugged and pocketed the card. “Yes, I’m ready.”

They went through the performing arts section and Haane pecked him through his shirt until he picked up a pamphlet for every singing class that was offered. He was dubious but she was adamant and it’s hard to argue with an adamant kwami. He guessed, as a Nightingale, she might have a certain bias towards singing. In the end he let it be. He did tell himself he would try everything and everything included singing.

Then they went to the martial arts section.

Disheartening didn’t even begin to cover it.

“It’s all... Quirks,” Sabine muttered, looking as disappointed as Izuku felt.

Enhance your Quirk. Hone your Quirk. Be a Hero. There didn’t seem to be anything that was just basic self defence, at least not geared towards teens. A lot of them seemed more focused on Hero-hopefuls than everyday citizens.

They watched a few demonstration matches glumly and listened to a few overloud spiels about training for championships and becoming the number one such-and-such in whatever art. Sabine didn’t have much luck asking about self defence courses. A few of them offered them for women and beginners, but they were depressingly Quirk-dependent. Izuku could see how people just switched off when Sabine tried to ask them about teaching a Quirkless student. Physical prowess and Quirks had become so intertwined that most didn’t bother to separate the two.

“Come on Izuku,” Sabine muttered as they turned away. “We might need to do a bit more internet
A sound best described as TWANG hit them at the exact moment the shockwave did. One of the Quirk demonstration matches had gone a little overboard and one of the fighters with a soundwave Quirk had overreached. People were knocked about like skittles in a wind tunnel. Paper, booth banners and various sports equipment were suddenly flung about in the hurricane. Sabine and Izuku were both knocked back, stumbling and flailing.

Worse, the shockwave had caused a mini-vacuum, so the next instant all the debris and people knocked outwards were suddenly sucked inwards. Izuku yelped as he was caught in the sudden reversal, slamming one hand down on his jacket pocket to keep Haane from getting lost as he was dragged back towards the centre.

Suddenly he and Sabine were both slammed up against a wall of muscle that did not yield to the rest of the chaos. It was a muscular, tattooed mountain of a man who had squatted in the aisle and braced with both massive arms outstretched, catching a hold of anyone caught in the tide that he could. Squinting through the air rushing past his face, Izuku looked down at the man’s feet. Around his odd looking boots there was a pair of concentric blue rings shining on the floor. A Quirk, Izuku guessed. It’s keeping his feet on the ground no matter what. Then he grunted as more people and debris slammed into the back of him. The man didn’t budge.

The tempest ended as abruptly as it began, leaving an entire section of the hall wrecked. People immediately started shouting at the demonstration match stage and the students fighting there. It was a mess of angry tones, but Izuku was able to pick out the words ‘idiot’, ‘disgraceful’ ‘fool’ and ‘what were you thinking?’ easily enough. He heard quite a few other words that he didn’t know but he suspected his mother wouldn’t want him to.

“Are you alright?” rumbled the mountain man as the rings around his feet vanished.

Sabine answered for both of them and a number of others he’d caught. “Yes, yes, we’re all fine. Thank you,” Sabine added sincerely.

The man nodded to her politely before striding towards the mob surrounding the fighting ring. He didn’t move fast, but something about his slow, deliberate movement made people jump out of his way.

Izuku and Sabine both turned towards helping people up and also helping them clean up some of the mess. They heard shouting from the ring but Izuku didn’t hear the big man’s voice among them. When he glanced over the man – easy to spot since he was head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd - was talking quietly to the students and their trainer. By the time Sabine and Izuku had done all they could to help anyone in the vicinity, the angry mob had dispersed and the drama appeared to be over.

“Well,” Sabine quipped. “That was a bit more excitement than we were hoping for, wasn’t it?”

Izuku nodded. Then he blinked as a shadow loomed over him. He turned around and craned his head up to look the mountain man in the face. The huge face was worringly expressionless. It also had some Asian distinctness around the eyes and cheeks. His eyes were an intense, intimidating dark colour. He was dressed in a tank top and training pants, along with his odd, flat soled, lace up boots.

He nodded to them again. “I was told you were looking for a self defence course?”
Izuku hesitated at the man’s stone-like countenance, but Sabine answered behind him. “Yes sir, we were.”

The man dipped his head exactly once. “Come with me.”

He led them to a different section of the martial arts area, to a booth away from the chaos and staffed by two youngish people. The man wordlessly jabbed a thumb over his shoulder at the chaos still ongoing from the shockwave; the two students nodded, apparently understanding him without words.

“Yes, Professeur.” “No problem, Professeur.” They murmured as they left to go help.

The Professeur levered his big frame around the booth counter and gestured for them to take a seat. “Why do you want to learn self defence?”

“It’s not really for me,” Sabine started. “I learnt it myself when I was in my teens in China and it served me very well. There doesn’t seem to be any schools in France which aren’t... extremely Quirk orientated though.”

“That’s the folly of the current system,” The Professeur folded his hands in front of his chest. “People stopped teaching most forms of physical defence when they came to the conclusion kicking and grappling wouldn’t do much good against a villains Quirk. They’re wrong, of course,” he added dryly. “But the money moved out nevertheless. Nowadays the only way for a dojo to make ends meet is to tout strong students in tournaments for prize money, or extracurricular training for Hero hopefuls. So, they focus on Quirk enhancement.”

Sabine looked up at the booth banner, which had both kanji and roman letters. “Aikivate,” she read slowly. “Are you saying your school does not?”

“The Aiki kanji are the same ones they use for aikido,” Izuku added. “The ha... I guess that’s to fill in for va,” Izuku muttered. Japanese had no v sounds. “The kanji used means... correct? And Te means hand, of course. Aikido-based corrected hands style?”

“Close,” the big man rumbled. “It’s actually a portmanteau. Aikido – the traditional art of immobilising without harm to an opponent; and Savate, the traditional French kickboxing. Aikivate. Our motto is ‘maximum efficiency takedown’ using Savate kick styles, then ‘minimum harm keep down’ using aikido.”

Izuku nodded.

“Why just self defence?” The Professeur asked idly. “You have no interest in tournaments? In being a hero? Most young men do.”

Izuku flinched. “I’m Quirkless,” he blurted out. “I can’t be a hero.” He added flatly looking at the floor.

The Professeurs eyebrows twitched slightly, but for the first time in about half an hour, someone actually seemed more interested in him than less upon hearing he was Quirkless. “So, you want revenge on your bullies?”

“What?” Izuku’s head came up, genuinely surprised. “No! Not at all. I... I got akumatised. I just,” he clenched his fists in his lap, two fingers on his right hand still not bending with the rest. “I just want to feel better. A... a friend recommended I take self defence classes. I don’t know that it will help against akuma but I want.... I want to do better. I want to be better.”
“Hm,” The Professeur mused. “Your friend might be on to something. Good martial arts is rooted deeply in firm emotional and mental discipline. It demands you deal with negative emotions rationally and constructively; otherwise, you won’t win. Fighters who flail wildly or in anger never do. I think my school of training might be good for you. I’m not training my students for tournaments or Hero work. I merely train them to make discipline and peace a part of their lives. I lived a very violent life once. I took up aikido as a way of bringing peace to my heart. I kept the Savate because sometimes I still needed a hard takedown in a Quirk fight. Hence, Aikivate.”

Izuku looked him in the eye and nodded. “That sounds... okay. But my hands... they are not very good,” he held them up, let the tremor be visible.

“That’s okay,” The Professeur assured him. “I teach a course for disabled people and veterans too. We find workarounds for all sorts of physical limitations.”

“Do you have a pamphlet or an information packet?” Sabine broke in. “We’ll need to go home and discuss this first before we make any decisions, but I have to say this is by far the most suitable one we’ve come across yet.”

The Professeur gave them the necessary paperwork – his name, according to the sheets was Morihei Chausson – and basic information on this year’s beginner’s course and avenues for advancement.

As they left, Izuku quietly sent a text with the dojo’s website attached, adding I think I found one.

*

Even with a run up, Marinette just made it in time for the family meeting. It wasn’t exactly her fault; a bunch of her classmates had hit her in a cascading wave on her way out the door and she wouldn’t be Marinette if she didn’t tell Rose where the spare scent bags were stored or squee over Ivan’s latest song writing attempt or flag down Alix to tell her she hoped her brother was okay after his akumatization. Class life rarely stayed in the classroom for Marinette.

In an almost perfect echo of her morning, Marinette sprinted back down the road, bounced off two pedestrians and a lamp post before skidding gracelessly into the bakery. There were quite a few customers within; the lunch rush must have properly started by now. She was somewhat relieved that her father was still manning the counter and clapped a hand to his forehead as she went past.

Ha! At least she’d remembered it.

“Mama! Izzy! I’m heeraaaaaah!” Her scrambling feet hit a sheet of paper and she nearly skidded into the living room, coming within a hairsbreadth of destroying the home shrine. “Whew! Made it!” she breathed before pausing. “Did it snow while I was gone?”

The living room was covered in sheets of paper. Izuku was sitting at ground zero of the paper explosion, waving to her cheerfully. Sabine had taken a chair and was scribbling in a notebook.

“Oh good,” Sabine smiled. “Just in time. Your father will be up shortly, he’s probably stuck doing handover in the middle of the rush.”

“Izuku and I went to the Club and Hobby Fair at the Culture Hall,” Sabine explained. “He wanted to try out some hobbies and clubs.”
“All of these?” Marinette’s eyes bugged out. She’d heard Japanese students were diligent, but this was a bit much!

“I’m not sure what to try,” Izuku explained slowly. He could just about hold a conversation in French now as long as he could speak slowly and was spoken to the same. His accent still needed some work. “I never really had any... interests. Other than...” he waved a hand.

Heroes, Marinette filled in. Okay, she thought she understood. He was trying to branch out.

“I’m not sure what talent I have so I thought try everything. I don’t know if I’ll be any good,” he admitted shyly.

“Well, that’s okay,” Marinette told him. “If you’re not, you can keep trying other things. Have you found anything you’d like to try first?”

“We’ve narrowed it down a little bit,” Sabine consulted her list. “I’ve told him to start with three classes because it’s no good overloading all at once. We can always change it later, like you said Marinette. Now, DIY building, robotics, gymnastics, embroidery and beading are a bit too much for his hands right now.”

Izuku nodded, grimacing.

“No ballet or ballroom dance,” Sabine continued.


“We’re trying to narrow it down by figuring out why he wants to try something,” Sabine nodded. “Based on that... you said you wanted to take a cooking class just to help your mother, right?”

“She takes care of me all the time,” Izuku nodded. “I’m nearly fourteen. I should be helping more now.”

“Well, if that’s the only reason we can teach you to cook right here. I’m a trained chef,” Sabine offered.

“I know how to cook too!” Marinette volunteered.

“So we can teach you that. You don’t need to pay for a course to learn that,” Sabine finished.

Tom piped in from where he’d secreted himself in the doorway, unnoticed by the others. “You’re already learning baking at a terrific rate. I can show you lots more of that too.”

“Are you sure?” Izuku asked. “My hands... I won’t be able to, uh, decorate anything very nicely.”

“Most of the complicated icing and decoration are for special orders,” Tom assured him. “The day-to-day stuff is usually really simple.”

“It has to be,” Marinette added. “Because we have to make so many of them. Macarons and éclairs and cupcakes are all really super simple to decorate. I’ll show you.”

“How about it, Izuku?” Tom asked eagerly. “You can be like the bakery intern. I’ve never had one of those before! Plus, you’ll get some experience into how a professional bakery is run, if you ever decide to make that a career. I’ll even teach you confectionary making, free of charge.”

Izuku smiled. “I can try that.”
“Great!”

“Okay, so that’s cooking and baking taken care of,” Sabine scratched it off her list. “Next?”

“Um... I thought maybe an art class?” Izuku said tentatively. “I can’t really... draw anymore. I thought about painting, but the equipment is...uh, a lot of money?”

“Expensive,” Marinette prompted.

“Expensive, yes,” Izuku nodded. “But, um, my hands might not be so good for that either. So I thought maybe...” he handed a flyer to Marinette.

“Cellphone photography class,” Marinette read off the sheet. “A phone camera is far more versatile than just selfies; come learn filter, lighting, shade and framing techniques to make every picture in your gallery as good as a professional’s shots. We also teach photoshopping as well as various photo app applications to further enhance your personal shots’. That sounds like fun.”

“It’s only a short course,” Izuku admitted. “But it’s cheap. I already have a phone, so no equipment. If it’s good, the company has other photography courses as well.”

“Okay,” Sabine checked the flyer. “The classroom is in the business centre, that’s close to here. That looks fine to me. Next?”

“Uh, a... a friend,” Izuku began tentatively. “Said I should find a hobby where I can... express my feelings?” Izuku’s face screwed up. “Like acting or music or singing. My therapist said so too. I don’t want to do acting. I don’t speak well enough. Music is...” he waved his hands. “Probably too hard for me.”

“So, singing, then?” Marinette asked cheerfully. “I think you’d make a good singer. You’ve got a clear voice.”

“Well...” Izuku mumbled. “I guess I could try it.”

“You don’t have to Izzy.”

“No,” Izuku’s eyes flashed with steely resolution. “I... I need to try things. If I’m no good, then... okay,” Izuku shrugged. “But I should try at least. It’s important that I check all my options. Singing doesn’t require hands, so is logical.”

“I think I’ve found the only really reputable one in the area,” Sabine dug through a stack. “Tom, you’ll like this one,” she flourished a pamphlet as he came forward. “You remember Harmonie Merle?”

“The Blackbird of Paris?” Tom took the flyer from her. “I sure do. I think we slow danced to her greatest hits back in the day. Madam Merle’s Songbird Academy; well I’ll be! I didn’t know she was even in France still.”

“I know, right?” Sabine grinned.

“This Madam Merle was a big deal then?” Marinette asked, looking from parent to parent.

“She was pretty big about twenty or thirty years ago,” Tom agreed. “She had this amazing Quirk called Mimic; she could copy exactly the voice of any other singer, male or female. She did a whole bunch of cover songs; you should hear her renditions of Edith Piaf and Ella Fitzgerald. It was like they’d come back to life. She didn’t sell so well when it was her own voice, apparently.
She had a huge falling out with her record label over it. I don’t think she ever got back into the business after.”

“Maybe she just started teaching instead,” Sabine shrugged. “Not everyone likes fame once they have it.”

“I can’t go to that one,” Izuku protested. “It’s too expensive!”

“We can help with that,” Tom offered.

Izuku shook his head stubbornly. “No, no help please. My clubs, my money. The self defence class takes most of my budget and I have to do that one. No choice.”

“Self defence?” Marinette echoed.

“For safety,” Izuku told her. “And... it’s good for, um, strength. Like,” he tapped his chest. “Heart strength. Too many akuma in Paris,” he finished gloomily.

Oh. Marinette thought that over. Taking on a martial art was a way to improve physical confidence, which Izuku did need sorely. It might also help him with emotional downturns as well. When put like that, learning a martial art did make a lot of sense.

“I think you should still sign up for Merle’s Academy, Izuku,” Sabine told him. “It’s reputable and it’s right nearby. All the others are halfway out of the city and I think that’s too far for you to be wandering alone. You can pay for that, we’ll handle the self defence. The Aikivate dojo offers a half price deal for two signing students, and I was planning on using that anyway.”

“You’re taking up self-defence?” Marinette asked. Why? She already was fully accredited Wushu practitioner.

“Not me, Marinette,” Sabine replied. “You.”


Sabine held up a finger. “One, your Heroics Studies course will start in the next school year and it’s mandatory. The school insists students take up a supplemental exercise program in addition to that to help you reach the best level of fitness for the course. They’ve been asking for reports on this for the last two years."

“But I do that!” Marinette protested. "Dad teaches me wrestling in autumn and you’ve taught me some Wushu as well. You’ve both signed the forms off before!"

“That was before,” Sabine continued implacably.

“We can still do all the other stuff sweetie, but your mother’s right. This will be better; more systematic. And more regular,” Tom pointed out.

In other words, it would take up time she didn’t have. Her life was busy enough as a civilian but Ladybug stuff overloade it past the point of sanity. “But I don’t need that stuff. I’m already pretty fit, thank you!”

“Two,” Sabine held up another finger. “This will help you with your focus and fine motor control. I hate to point this out, honey, but you’re very clumsy and you have trouble focusing when you’re on the move. This will really help with that.”
“I’m going through growth spurts,” Marinette grumbled mutinously, because that was part of the reason. The other part was, of course, Ladybug’s fabulously unpredictable strength and reflexes coming and going at they pleased, but it’s not like she could mention that.

“You don’t go through growth spurts every day, Marinette,” Sabine told her recalcitrant daughter patiently. “Or even every month. And besides, this will help you with those too, so that’s even more reason to go.”

Marinette opened her mouth.

“Three,” Sabine held up a third finger before Marinette could get a word in edgewise. “You are a young, petite, Quirkless soon-to-be woman living in a major metropolis. Even if Hawk Moth never existed, there’s still plenty of villains out there who dream of a target like that. Not knowing how to defend yourself wouldn’t just be reckless, it would be ridiculously stupid.”

Marinette closed her mouth again. What could she say to that? It was all true. It was galling, though, that she couldn’t explain that she had a plan that covered that called Ladybug.

“She doesn’t... have to,” Izuku broke in quietly. “With me. If she really doesn’t want to.”

Marinette felt her heart plummet. She didn’t want Izuku to think the problem was with him. All her arguments about being too busy dried up in her throat.

“She does,” Sabine insisted. “Izuku, I promise this has nothing to do with you. Even if you’d never come to stay with us, I would have insisted on this; this year in particular. For your own safety, Marinette, you should be learning to defend yourself. It’s not a punishment or a commentary. It’s just plain old common sense.”

Marinette sighed. “I hate it when you use mama-logic on me,” she reached for the flyer. “You don’t play fair.”

“I’m your mother,” Sabine replied to this cheerfully. “Where is it written that I have to play fair?”

“She doesn’t know this Izzy,” Marinette whisper-shouted to her cousin, who was slowly relaxing again. “But when she’s old I’m going to get terrible vengeance on her for all this.”

Izuku shrugged. “My kaasan is the same. It’s a mother power, I think. Look, I highlighted the beginners course on the schedule.”

Marinette looked at it and nearly fainted.

Just when you thought it couldn’t get any worse, the Beginners course started at six in the morning.

* *

“Six in the morning,” Marinette moaned, banging her head against the desk. “Why, Tikki? Why? I thought I was supposed to have good luck!”

“We-ell,” Tikki giggled. “Technically it is a very fortunate time. Hawk Moth rarely attacks between midnight and seven, if you think about it. I guess even evil needs to sleep.”

“Wait, that’s lucky?” Marinette exclaimed. “How?”

“Because if you were going to go to an extra class anyway – you heard your mother, she said she
would have regardless – then as terrible as getting up that early might seem, at least you don’t have to make a bunch of excuses about missing classes. You’re kind of in enough trouble for doing that at your ordinary school,” Tikki pointed out.

Marinette moaned again. “This is completely unfair. I don’t have time for any of this! And I can’t tell people I don’t have time for it! It’s not my fault!”

“Ladybug is more a duty than a privilege,” Tikki nodded sagely. “But no worthy thing ever became worthy without some struggle and sacrifice, Marinette. And besides! The Ladybugs of the past who were the best fighters knew how to fight out of the mask too. I think this will be very beneficial for you. It will certainly make you stronger. It will help you pass gym class too; Chloe can’t hit you if you’re too skilled to be hit!”

Marinette thought about that. She imagined Marinette Dupain-Cheng, super kung fu master, dodging volleyballs with ease and maybe sending one into Chloe’s face too with one well timed flying kick – accidentally of course! Adrien praising her obvious physical prowess. Him talking about his fencing which leads to them both opening up a line of the communication, which leads to coffee, which leads to a movie date, which obviously led to a wedding chapel, three kids and a hamster.....

Okay, it was all ridiculous. But she could hope, right?

“I guess it would be helpful,” Marinette mumbled, still lost in a dream of Adrien and Marinette Agreste, battle couple. She sighed though. “Six in the morning, though. Six am. That’s inhumane.”

She got out her phone. She’d tell Alya; Alya trained with her sister who was an actual accredited fighter on the road to becoming a Pro Hero. She’d either commiserate or have some tips with dealing with early morning torture sessions.

Only, she couldn’t call anyone.

“Hang on a minute,” she muttered, climbing out of the skylight and holding up her phone to the sky. No reception? In the middle of Paris?

Speak of the devil, there was a maintenance man working on one of the neighbourhood network boxes. “Sorry miss,” he called over when he saw her waving her phone about. “We’re doing maintenance on the network grid right now. The whole area will be down this afternoon.”

“Oh,” Marinette deflated. “Okay, thanks.”

She pulled herself back into her room. It was fine. She’d see Alya in school later.

“Rin-chan!” Izuku voice came from beneath her trapdoor. “Does your phone work?”

“No,” Marinette stuck her head through the door upside down to where her cousin was frowning at his phone. “They’re doing maintenance this afternoon. No reception, no internet either.”

“Oh,” Izuku slumped, looking exactly like she felt. “Guess I’ll go read, then.”

“I know,” Marinette sighed. “It’s like the Dark Ages around here.”

That made him chuckle as he went back to potter in his room. Marinette decided to use whatever time she had left to get in at least a little study; after all, she thought gloomily, her schedule was about to become very crowded. “Ladybug saves Paris,” she muttered to herself. “Who’s going to save Marinette?”
She crawled through maths and science for a while but without tablet assistance the textbook was a big slab of dull. She eventually gave in to despair and put her head down for just a minute...

“Marinette!”

Marinette head shot up. “Okay, okay, I wasn’t actually going to sleep.”

“You did sleep!” Tikki insisted. “You’ve got to get back to school!”

“Don’t be silly, Tikki,” Marinette reached for her phone. “The afternoon class doesn’t start until half an hour ago?! Aaaaarg! I’m late! I’m so, so late!”

Hurricane Marinette whirled through the living room past a startled Izuku, down the steps past her rueful mother at the counter and down the street to school as fast as she could go.

Of course she bounced off obstacles left, right and centre like a pachinko ball but getting there was main thing. Catching her breath outside the classroom, Marinette opened the door and attempted to sneak in like a ninja warrior while Mlle Bustier was writing something on the blackboard. It worked, she made it to her seat...

... but Alya wasn’t next to her. Looking around, Alya wasn’t anywhere.

Concerned, she reached over to the desk in front and poked Nino in the back of the head. “Hey,” she whispered. “Where’s Alya?”

“She got suspended from school,” Nino whispered back. Adrien, who was sitting next to him, appeared to be writing something down, but he tilted his head just slightly to listen in.

“What?!”

“Marinette!” Mlle Bustier frowned at her. “If you’re going to come in late, at least try to be quiet about it.”

“Sorry, Mlle Bustier,” Marinette mumbled, red faced.

She waited for the teacher to turn back to what she was doing before leaning over to Nino again. “What happened?” she whispered furiously.

“She tried to steal Chloe’s phone from her locker,” Nino whispered back. “Kim caught her doing it and then Chloe went nuts, threatened to call her dad-the-Mayor in, the usual. Damocles suspended Alya; I think mostly to shut Chloe up.”

That sounded like Chloe. “But why would she even be interested in Chloe’s phone? I thought you were keeping an eye on her?”

“Hey, I told her she was crazy,” Nino retorted quietly. “Like asylum levels of cray-cray. I mean, think about it, she literally saved her from Stoneheart the first day we met her. It was on camera and everything. And also, she’s like, the most selfish person ever to exist; she’s literally never considered another person’s wellbeing in her entire life, right?”

Marinette had completely lost the context of the situation. “Who saved who, what? Are you talking about Chloe?”

“Ladybug,” Nino replied. “Ladybug saved Chloe right, when she debuted?”

“Right...? And?”
“Well, that’s it,” Nino replied. “I don’t know how she could possibly come to that conclusion given that, but Alya got it into her head that it’s Chloe.”

Marinette was ready to tear her hair out. “Chloe is what, Nino?”

“Chloe is Ladybug.”

Adrien dropped his pen, but no one noticed because Marinette was on her feet.

“WHAAAAT?!”

“Marinette, that’s enough!” Mlle Bustier broke into their conversation. “Please report to M. Damocles office right now.”

“I... yes, Mlle Bustier,” Marinette slumped.

She heard Chloe sniggering with Sabrina on her way out, saying in a whisper shout. “Where did Cesaire learn her delinquent ways, I wonder?” Which was just the icing on the cake.

Marinette took her bag with her. She dug out her phone but there was still no reception. What if Alya had tried to reach her and couldn’t? She must be devastated. The Principal would likely call a conference with her parents and once they found out why she’d done it, that was it for the Ladyblog. Otis and Marlena Cesaire weren’t super strict like Gabriel Agreste, but they did enforce good behaviour pretty rigidly and wouldn’t let that kind of behaviour slide. Alya would know that.

Marinette felt heartbroken for her. She didn’t necessarily condone what Alya had done – stealing from lockers was not okay and Alya should know that – but she absolutely understood how much the Ladyblog meant to Alya. She could clearly see how her friends tendency to jump to conclusions too fast and her desperation to save the Ladyblog would have massed together into a perfect storm of awful decision making. She knew her friend had messed up, but she’d done it for understandable reasons.

Marinette should have been paying more attention. Alya had clearly been fixated on getting a big scoop for the Ladyblog to save it. Marinette had been too distracted to realise just how bad Alya felt about losing it. If she’d invited Alya back to the bakery for lunch or something... but it was too late to fix it now.

“There must be a way to do damage control,” Marinette muttered as she knocked on the door on the Principal’s office. Maybe she could talk with Alya’s parents?

There was no answer. The Principal was usually in his office most of the day.

Tentatively opening the door, Marinette peered in. “Uh... M. Damocles?”

The man was clearly in the office.

There was also something clearly wrong.

He was still as a statue, frozen in a rictus of surprise, one arm out at if to stop someone.


Marinette’s mouth dropped open as she went further into the room. “M. Damocles?” she asked, her voice going high with stress. This was truly creepy.

Then she saw it.
A glowing pink Stop symbol floating above the Principals chest.

Akuma, Marinette thought as she raced forward. She waved her hands in front of the man’s face. Nothing. He was... well, stopped.

Before she could even begin to deal with this, the computer screen lit up. An akuma, masked and red haired had taken the stage.

“I’m Lady WiFi, revealer of the truth!”

Oh no, Marinette thought. Please no.

But what more fertile soil for an akuma than an angry, isolated, humiliated teen?

“For my first scoop, your Principal has something he wants to share.”

The video went through a quick back and forth as Lady Wifi grilled Damocles about Alya being wrongly suspended and Damocles caving to pressure rather than being fair. Damocles admitted it on film, which apparently was all the akuma wanted.

“For my next scoop I’ll be taking you to the person behind the Ladybug mask,” Lady Wifi smirked and Stopped Damocles with her powers. “Stay connected.”

Marinette breathed out. “Tikki.”

“Marinette,” Tikki popped out of her purse. “You’re going to have to fight your best friend!”

“No,” Marinette’s fists were white knuckled at her sides. “I’m going to save my best friend.”

Chapter End Notes

Daijoubu - I’m okay

That's about it for this chapter. The four French words are translated immediately within the story.

I might dedicate this section to explaining characters Quirks, since explaining them all within the story is going to get really old, really fast. Lets start with the Big Daddy:

Tom Dupain
Quirk: Hot Hands
Just what it sounds like. He can raise the temperature of his hands to a respectable 350 degrees (C). His hands glow a lovely orange colour when he uses it and his fingertips have really odd looking brown calluses; his fingertips specifically can go as high as 700 degrees. It's a directly inherited Quirk from his father Rolland, who got it from his father, who got it from his father.... you get the picture. The line can be traced almost to the beginning of the Age of Quirks. The Quirk's gene dominance is off the charts; but unfortunately for Marinette, strictly related to the Y-Chromosome. No woman in the Dupain line ever got it.

Tom keeps a lot of (very old and inherited) heavy copper and silver baking bowls and tools, because they're are perfect heat conductors. It's an urban legend that a Dupain baker can bake a loaf just by putting his hands on the loaf tin for a minute - the actual
Dupains know this is nonsense. It's pretty useful for raising dough before kneading, though. There's also the famous Dupain-Brand pie, made only in certain seasons, where Tom presses his hot hand or hot fingertip to the top of an already cooked fruit pie, leaving a perfectly rendered handprint or fingerprint - ie, he leaves the Dupain Brand on it. These pies are quite well known and much sought after in the brief time they're made.
Chapter Six: Lady Wifi Part II

Chapter Summary

Ladybug and Chat Noir go akuma hunting, Izuku ponders the limits of magic and they all have a crack at unorthodox solutions...

Chapter Notes

Who would have thought that hard bit of writing this would be the episode recaps? Not me!

Nevertheless, the course has been charted from start to finish and we are on the water, so onwards. Enjoy!

Oh and I don't really believe in character bashing, so I do think Chloe will improve with time. But to be fair, for a lot of the show she's been the most egregious brat. She'll go on her journey at some point but for now... brat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sabine was somewhat right about Marinette’s clumsiness – it was down to focus. Frazzled Marinette getting to school late was a storm of worries, half thought out excuses and terrified visions of futures with detentions in it.

Marinette fully focused moved like a shark with a hyperdrive engine attached.

No hesitation, no tripping, no stopping. Just point A to point B in the shortest possible time, flicking past obstacles like they were smoke.

She hit the bakery door and was up the stairs to the apartment in a literal blink. Her mother was there, frowning over a laptop with Izuku. It showed the Ladyblog.

“Marinette, did school let out early because of the akuma we all just saw?” Sabine asked her anxiously. “Apparently it was broadcast everywhere in Paris.”

“It’s Alya.”

She dropped the words like a bomb. The apartment went cold and silent.

“The akuma is Alya,” Marinette bit the words out, hoping that it came off as upset, not white-hot furious. “She got into trouble at school today and...” Marinette waved a hand.

There was no blank to fill after that that couldn’t be explained as Hawk Moth.

“Oh,” Sabine came forward to give her a hug. “Oh honey, she’s going to be okay.”

“Of course she is,” Marinette replied matter-of-factly. “Ladybug will save her. Can I go to A- uh,
the Cesaire’s apartment? I think her parents might feel better if there’s someone there with them.”

Her mother’s permission was an empty formality; Marinette would be going out tonight. It did appease her conscience slightly when Sabine said yes, though.

She went up to her room for forms sake, to put down her bag and Alya’s, which the other girl had left behind when she’d run out of the school after being suspended. She patted the bag gently when she put it down.

Her computer was on. It showed the Ladyblog. Trying to click onto any other site showed the Ladyblog too.

“It’s all the same site,” Izuku said quietly behind her.

Marinette turned around to look at her cousin’s worried face. “Alya’s going to be fine, Izzy. Ladybug will save her,” Marinette promised.

“I know,” Izuku nodded, clenching his hands over his chest. “She’s a Hero like All Might. She never stops until she wins.”

Marinette nodded. “You said it!”

“Rin-chan, do you need any help?” Izuku shifted. “Alya is your best friend. If I can help, tell me what to do.”

_Oh Izuku_, Marinette thought. He meant every word. Struck with a sudden inspiration, Marinette beckoned him forward and sat him in the desk chair. “I’m going out to see if I can help Alya’s parents,” she explained. “If anything changes on the site, can you text me? Don’t call,” she added hurriedly. “I might not be able to answer. Just text what’s happening. So I can stay updated.”

Izuku brightened slightly. “Okay! I can do that.”

Marinette kissed the top of his head. “Thanks Izzy!” she told him gratefully as he went bright red. “And don’t worry. Ladybug _will not_ let this stand.” Her voice rang with conviction.

He nodded faithfully and she left him tapping away at her computer.

Then she was down the ladder, into the apartment, transforming in the living room and yo-yoing her way across Paris in the next blink.

Akumas were pretty strange as villains go. An akuma not a whole person, in a sense; it was a part of a person made manifest, a grain of darkness with a personality. They weren’t intuitive, multilayered beings like actual people were. They were powerful, but also incapable of handling multiple levels of emotion and reason. They thought in straight lines.

If Alya had gotten it into her head that Chloe was Ladybug and Lady Wi-Fi’s fixation was revealing the truth, then Chloe was Lady Wi-Fi’s next stop. The time it had taken Marinette to get home and go straight back out was long enough for Chloe to have gotten back home.

And who should she meet on a rooftop across from the Grand Paris Hotel but the world’s most pun-cracking, persistent pussycat, peering through the zoom function on his Staff-Of-All-Uses with an increasingly consternated expression on his face. When she squinted, she could see Chloe dressed in a full Ladybug cosplay and trying out yo-yo moves, which was both surreal and hilarious.
“No way,” Chat Noir muttered. “It can’t be...”

Oh, Ladybug grinned. He’d heard the rumour then. “Now who’s being a sneaky kitty?”


She smirked at him and his obvious relief. For all his terrible sense of humour, Chat Noir wasn’t devoid of taste, it seemed. “You didn’t seriously think she could be me, did you?” She took out her yo-yo and flipped the screen to zoom in herself, showing Chloe getting tangled in her string and then ending in spectacular pratfall that Ladybug, if she had been a lesser person, would have felt tempted to record for posterity.

“Of course not,” Chat Noir replied a shade too hastily.

“Chloe Bourgeois,” Ladybug raised an eyebrow.

There was a beat of silence.

“She’s not that bad!” Chat Noir protested.

She let him sit with that for a moment.

“Okay,” he conceded. “She’s not the most naturally heroic person in all the land. But we’re so different when we transform Milady; we don’t know what kind of people we both are out of the masks.”

“Regardless of who or what else Chloe is, with or without a mask,” Ladybug replied. “She’s clearly just a diehard fan when it comes to Ladybug. You know,” Ladybug smirked. “A copycat?”

“Right,” Chat Noir replied sheepishly.

Ladybug sobered. “How would you like to do this?”

That is to say, did they try to hide Chloe away or did they risk using her as bait? Ladybug had personal issues with Chloe for sure, but she had no interest whatsoever in putting the girl in danger because of them.

“Unless you include the entire internet turning into the Ladyblog, I haven’t seen a sign of Lady Wi-Fi yet,” Chat Noir said seriously. “We might not have any choice but to wait for her to show.”

Ladybug nodded grimly. “Be careful with this one, Chat. Get Chloe to safety if it looks like trouble is coming. And watch out because if Lady Wi-Fi’s plan includes unmasking us, she might have an actual power that lets her do that.”

“That would be a tiny bit catastrophic,” Chat Noir agreed. For all the silly punning she could tell he took her words to heart. Having their identities revealed would only be a hairsbreadth close second to losing their Miraculous in terms of ruining their lives.

“No kidding,” Ladybug refocused on Chloe who was making a clumsy attempt to try a grapple throw. Two much wrist flick, Ladybug decided, not nearly enough shoulder and hip power behind it.

“Have you ever considered,” Chat Noir asked slowly. “That maybe we should know each others secret identities?”

Ladybug was so caught up in Chloe’s over exaggerated Hero posing that the question took a
moment to penetrate. When it did it hit like a stray bullet. “What? Where did that come from?”

“Well,” Chat Noir was pretty doggedly determined for a cat. “I never would have even considered Chloe as a potential Ladybug if I knew anything about you in your non-mask life. We’re partners. Shouldn’t we know stuff about each other? I mean,” Chat Noir talked over her opening mouth. “We could cover for each other in our civilian lives if we knew. We could strategise, swap intelligence. What if that helps?”

“Chat,” Ladybug retorted. “Our identities must remain a secret. It’s not up for negotiation!”

“But what if Hawk Moth grabs some random person and puts a knife to her throat and demands my Miraculous to save ‘Ladybug’? How am I supposed to know if he’s lying?”

“Don’t give up your Miraculous for any reason,” Ladybug told him flatly. “Even then. You’d just be making matters a thousand times worse and it would guarantee nobody gets saved anyway. You say Hawk Moth might use our ignorance against us? What if he uses our knowledge? What if one of us gets akumatized, in or out of the masks. We could potentially just tell Hawk Moth everything he wants to know. What would we do about that, smart guy?”

“There’s potential benefits-“ Chat Noir started.

“None that outweigh the safety anonymity gets us,” Ladybug cut him off. “And in any case, now probably isn’t the time for a debate.” Her yo-yo beeped a message. “Update on the Ladyblog, a new message has been added. ‘Watch This Space’. “

They turned back to the business at hand.

Chloe was still tangled, but apparently had managed to hop to her purse to get her phone.

The whole room vanished in a haze of light.

“Looks like we’ve got Wi-Fi,” Chat spun his staff and they were off.

Ladybug cursed herself as they swung and vaulted across, because while Chat Noir’s chosen vantage point had given them a good sightline on Chloe, they had to swing around the building to get to an entrance that didn’t require them to smash through windows. They could do that easily, of course, but they tended to try to minimise property damage by their own hands if they could avoid it. They may be vigilantes, but they tried to live by French Hero field procedures.

By the time they’d gotten around to the terrace doors the akuma had hit Chloe with a glowing ‘pause’ and had unmasked ‘Ladybug’ in front of a camera icon to her audience – which was probably everyone with a screen in their vicinity. It was fine, because she hadn’t gotten the real one.

It was really, really not fine if she ever managed to get the real one.

“What?” Lady Wi-Fi snapped in surprise as they came through the window. “That’s not possible! Who are you?”

Ladybug and Chat Noir looked at each other. “Chat Noir,” Ladybug pointed to her partner.


“But,” Lady Wi-Fi turned to Chloe, who was still unmasked and frozen as a statue. “I thought you
“You should really check your facts before posting the *mews*,” Chat Noir grinned as the akuma stared at the real Ladybug. “Otherwise you might get *fuzzy* on the details.”

“Any time you want to put a mute button on him,” Ladybug told the akuma flatly. “Feel free.”

Their banter did what it was supposed to do; cover their slow and careful slide into the room. If they could converge on the akuma in a straight-up pincer and entangle her well... sometimes, rarely, it could be that simple.

The akuma’s eyes glowed purple. Otherwise she was fully, frighteningly Alya in a black and white body suit.

*Please let this be a simple one,* Ladybug pleaded to whatever deity might be sitting at the screens. It didn’t matter that Alya wouldn’t remember her best friend punching her in the face. The burden of the memory would leave a mark on Marinette.

Lady Wi-Fi’s face contorted in rage. “You’ll be sorry!”

She cancelled the symbols glowing around Chloe, leaving the girl flailing into a stumble as momentum caught up with her.

“‘Alya?” Ladybug had to try, for her conscience if nothing else.

“Alya’s been disconnected,” the akuma’s lips peeled back fiercely. “I’m Lady Wi-Fi. Let’s find out who you really are under that mask!”

She flicked the phone towards the duo and the room was a shooting gallery as they ducked and dove glowing pause symbols flying out of the phone.

*She has no other weapons,* Ladybug thought as they flipped and jumped with ease. They had to get out of this room which still had a potential hostage in Chloe. “Follow me,” she ordered her partner. They both leapt and danced around Lady Wi-Fi, who was faster than human baseline but was stuck with a weapon she needed two hands to use and a limited aiming field. They managed to get around her and out the door, glowing symbols flying after them. Thankfully, the akuma had lost interest in Chloe; if the girl had any sense, she’d make her escape now that Lady Wi-Fi was fixated on them.

"What's the plan, milady?" Chat while after they ran down the stairs.

Ladybug panted out as she hit corners at speed. "Her powers come from her phone," she explained. "If we go down to the basement she won't have any reception."

Chat Noir grinned fiercely. "No service, no cell phone, no powers. Got it!"

* 

Izuku stared at the computer solemnly, waiting for any new activity. It was weird that people could still post to the Ladyblog; the comments section was full of messages from the watching and frightened people across Paris and the world, all asking what was going on. They had briefly witnessed the video of Chloe's unmasking, but the stream had abruptly dropped out when Ladybug arrived on the scene and now they were staring at a rotating pink circle in a media player awaiting further news. Izuku watched the screen like a hawk, phone at the ready by his side. He wondered if there was anything else he could do.
Suddenly the feed became active again. Lady Wi-Fi seemed to be streaming in via the Grand Hotel again but the things she was sending were random flashes of video. It showed stairwells mostly, with glowing lock signs on doors.

Izuku had bad feeling about this.

It looked like Lady Wi-Fi had set an ambush for the two heroes of Paris trying to stop her. The people commenting in the comment section seem to agree. But what could they do? They were reduced to the role of audience, unable to affect events. The frustration and fear were palpable in the comments.

Paris loved their Heroes.

Aside from this, plenty of people were posting about being evacuated from the Grand Paris Hotel. Izuku noted with some curiosity that there were several reports echoed throughout the comments section that some people had lost their phones; far too many to be random incidents.

Izuku wondered about this. He wondered if that was a part of Lady Wi-Fi had planned. Struck with inspiration, he added a comment to the comment section and asked people to list how many phones had been taken and when they had been lost.

It didn't take long for replies to come in. After all there was literally nothing else to do on the Internet. He carefully counted the missing phones as best as he could. Some of the information overlapped as people reported them twice but he had a rough idea of how much weaponry Lady Wi-Fi had. While he was tabulating this he texted Marinette to tell her what he was doing and what was going on in the comment section for lack of anything else to send. He didn't know if she would find it interesting or not but she had asked him to let her know what was happening on it. Perhaps she was listening in with Alya's parents at the Cesaire apartment.

Suddenly, the feed changed. A video screen popped out showing what was probably the dining room of the Grand Paris Hotel. Lady Wi-Fi appeared on the video with a smirking face and winked at the camera. Then she vanished into a phone that was sitting on one of the dining tables. Izuku saw with horror that all the dining tables had phones lying on them. If Lady Wi-Fi could use phones to travel, he thought, she had the rule of the room. Ladybug and Chat Noir would not be able to tell what angle she was coming from. All those locked doors on the stairwells earlier flashed in Izuku's memory.

One point of entry into the enemy’s ground. It was a trap.

The heroes of Paris burst into the dining room seemingly ready for a fight. Izuku could see the surprise on their faces when they came into the room and didn't see Lady Wi-Fi anywhere. Izuku was on the edge of his seat watching this unfold. They were going to walk into the dining room, Lady Wi-Fi would strike, and there was no way they would be fast enough to avoid her coming at them at all angles. After all, the akuma would be moving at the speed of Wi-Fi; it would be roughly the same as travelling at the speed of light.

Izuku blinked.

Speed! Speed was the key, Izuku thought.

He bolted downstairs, grabbed his laptop and scurried back up to Marinette's room. The whole Internet was now the Ladyblog but Izuku had plenty of research and coursework and e-books all downloaded onto his laptop as well as games and all other things he could think of. If all of her streaming energy was being channelled by a one site then it was a perfect bottleneck. Maybe they
could slow her down!

He hit the capslock on Marinette's keyboard and sent out a message on the Ladyblog message board imploring everyone who had access to their downloaded material to start uploading it to the Ladyblog. *This will slow her down*, he wrote fiercely. *We can help Ladybug and Chat Noir stop her.* He then set the message to repeat and repeat and repeat so it wouldn't get lost in the constant stream of comments coming to the Ladyblog. The comments themselves would help but they need a mass of information; every little bit of it they could find. Even as he uploaded the contents of his laptop he began to see people responding. They signal boosted his message across the Ladyblog. Most seemed eager to help.

Izuku threw everything and the kitchen sink into the Ladyblog. All of it; and he had very little compared to some other people. People start uploading the works of Shakespeare, line after line of code, and every other thing they could possibly think of flooded and the Ladyblog within seconds.

*"I've got you now Ladybug!"* Lady Wi-Fi smirked in triumph she flashed up out of the phone on the nearest dining table then immediately vanished and uploaded to another phone, then another, disappearing and reappearing like a hologram. She fired her weapons at the pair and missed them; but only by hairsbreadth. Nevertheless she managed to herd them deeper into the trap where they were surrounded by tables and phones.

“How now brown cow!” Chat Noir ducked and dove towards the booth lining the room edge and flicked up a table to use as a shield. To his credit, it did work. The Pause symbols Lady Wi-Fi shot at them both from her phone did appear to be line-of-sight only; they worked only on what they hit, not what they were aimed for.

The catch was that they still packed a punch; the force of one hitting the table was punched through it and hit Chat Noir, flinging him back against a wall.

Ladybug’s yo-yo flew for the akuma but she vanished and reappeared in a blink of light, forcing Ladybug to duck this way and that, under attack from all sides. She couldn’t strike fast enough to stop Lady Wi-Fi downloading into a new phone, gaining a new, clean angle from which to strike where Ladybug was stuck having to try to keep up physically.

Ladybug gritted her teeth; she was fast and just about breaking even, but that was no good. One slip and Lady Wi-Fi had her. The akuma could just whip off her Miraculous while she was Paused and helpless.

Ladybug tried one last scything spin of her yo-yo, trying to reach a full three-sixty degrees of strike radius but Lady Wi-Fi just zapped away from wherever the yo-yo was as fast as a blink.

“I am Lady Wi-Fi!” the akuma cackled at her as she blinked across the room in multiple steps, too fast for Ladybug to follow. “You can’t stop me!”

Lady Wi-Fi is triumph did not last long however. Ladybug could see after a few moments that the villain was getting frustrated. Her flash up and then away movement started to become a jagged, glitchy, pixelated action like a really old video game.

"What is this?" Lady Wi-Fi cried as she switched again but started to blur as she tried to jump from phone to phone.

Ladybug could see she was having great difficulty and couldn’t, as first, understand what was
going on. Lady Wi-Fi had control of the entire Internet, didn’t she? She shouldn't have any trouble uploading and downloading. Then she flipped up the screen of her yo-yo and grinned at what she saw. Izuku had sent her a message describing what he was doing. And it seemed to be working!

"That's the problem with having only one service provider," Ladybug taunted the villain. "You only get one kind of service."

"No!" Lady Wi-Fi screamed as her once lightning quick jump from phone to phone turned into something approaching swimming through treacle. Every time she tried to catch them in a blind spot, a bright, visible holding circle would announce her intended jump point long before she arrived in it.

"Buffering," Chat Noir laughed when he finally dragged himself upright. "Don't you just hate that? It's so frustrating."

The immense slowdown suffered by Lady Wi-Fi ruined her trap completely.

“I can’t stop you? I think you’ll find I can,” Ladybug spun her yo-yo into the labyrinth of phones and then began destroying them left right and centre, giving the villain no opportunity to use them at all. By the time she destroyed the last of them, Lady Wi-Fi had been driven out completely and was forced to fall back into the kitchens.

Ladybug was closer than Chat Noir; she darted after the villain, through the doors and then dropped and rolled as the akuma fired on her as she came through.

No, not her; at the doors. A glowing lock symbol immobilised them.

Ladybug grimaced While there were certain advantages to having Lady Wi-Fi confined to the relatively small space of the kitchens Ladybug was also well aware that animals were their most dangerous when cornered. She grabbed the first object she could to shield herself as more lock symbols began to fly.

Pots, pans, chopping boards, she had a lot of potential shields… until she didn’t. Lady Wi-Fi may not have her teleportation trick anymore, but she was fast. She only had to be lucky once.

Ladybug hit a wall and found her arm pinned by a lock. Before she could find a way to deal with that another one had gotten her other arm. She couldn’t squirm out from behind them; they wouldn’t let her move.

“Ha!” Lady Wi-Fi grinned in triumph. “I have you now!” She flicked a camera symbol up over them both, no doubt broadcasting this worldwide. “Ladies and gentlemen, get ready for the story of a lifetime! Who is Ladybug?” she came closer, Ladybug glaring at her. “Is she a superhero or a super weirdo? How are we supposed to trust her if we don’t know who she is? We have a right to know!”

Lady Wi-Fi seized the mask, yanked…

“Yeouch,” Ladybug winced as she felt her skin stretch. “Watch it! You’re not showing my best side!”

“What,” Lady Wi-Fi pulled harder. “Why won’t it come off?”

“Because I’m a professional,” Ladybug replied. “Come on, did you actually think I went out in a mask without checking if it would suddenly come off and not making sure it never would? Did you think I’d be that stupid?”
“What?!”

The service elevator banged open. Chat Noir unfolded himself from the dumbwaiter and stepped out. “You’re out of minutes, Lady Wi-Fi.”

“Oh how cute,” Lady Wi-Fi smirked. “Catanova has come to rescue his lovebug.”

“Hey!” Ladybug protested. “I am not his lovebug!”

Chat Noir winked at her. “We’ll come back to that later.”

Ladybug rolled her eyes. Then she shouted. “Look out!” as Chat Noir went for the akuma, only to be driven back into the walk-in freezer and locked in.

“Chat Noir!” Ladybug yelled.

“Hmmm,” Lady Wi-Fi mused. “You’d better move quickly, or your crush is going to be slush.” She cancelled the locks holding Ladybug to the wall, leaving her to flail forwards. “I’ve got better news to cover.” Then she vanished in a pink haze of light.

“Somehow I doubt you’ve dropped this scoop yet, Lady Wi-Fi,” Ladybug growled. The camera sign was still recording them; a glance at Izuku’s latest message confirmed the video of them was still streaming. But right now, she had a larger issue to deal with. “Chat!” she pounded on the locked freezer doors. “Chat Noir, are you okay?”

“F-fine,” came his voice, distorted by a wall of steel. “P-p-peachy keen. G-go up the s-s-service elevator and s-s-stop her!”

“I can’t do that,” Ladybug snapped. “Who knows how long that will take? You could freeze to death. I’m going to get you out of there!”

“T-t-take your t-time,” he stuttered. It sounded like his voice was coming from the floor.

Of all the time to make stupid jokes!

No choice; despite knowing that Lady Wi-Fi was planning to force her hand, she had to use her best weapon. “Lucky Charm!”

She got a box.

“This better be some lucky box,” she muttered.

She looked around the kitchen, grabbed the tray cart and hauled the microwave onto it. She shoved the box inside and then slammed the whole parade into the walk-in freezer doors.

Then she plugged the microwave in and set it going.

“Come on,” she muttered as she listened to sparks start striking off the box. “Come on, fry it!”

The microwave blew.

The lock symbol was zapped into oblivion.

Ladybug threw the whole mess to the side and clawed open the freezer door, just in time for Chat Noir to collapse on top of her in a shivering huddle.
“M-m-milady,” he managed through chattering teeth. “You m-m-make me warm a-a-all over. S-s-sorry, I k-k-kind of m-m-messed up your r-r-rescue back there.”

“You might what to think about growing in your winter coat, kitty,” Ladybug gently brushed icicles out of his hair. “You know, considering.”

He hacked out a laugh before sobering. “You u-used your Lucky Charm,” he noted as her earring gave their first warning chime. “W-we don’t have much time. I’m good,” he heaved himself to his feet. “I’m good. Can we get out?”

“Doors are locked,” Ladybug told him grimly. “And the cameras are rolling.”

Chat Noir gave a sarcastic if shivery little wave to the camera. “Can we fry it like you did last time?”

Ladybug shook her head. “Microwave’s busted. But speaking of fry...” she leaned in to whisper in his ears. “If we kill the network, she’s got nowhere to go. Do you know where the network box in the hotel is?”

“No problem Milady,” Chat Noir winked.

“I’ll stay here and mug for the cameras so she’s got to keep eyes on two fronts,” Ladybug told him. “Of you go, Chat Noir.”

“You got it,” Chat Noir grinned. “But first...” he grabbed a pan and shoved it over the camera signal. “Just to get her attention.” Then he shimmied up the service elevator and was gone.

“Hurry Chat Noir,” Ladybug pleaded to the silent kitchen.

Her earrings gave another chime.

*

Nadja Chamack @nadjachamackofficial

Don’t be bemused, it’s just the news! This is Nadja Chamack reporting live via the Ladyblog message board as the latest akuma send by Paris’ number one Most Wanted supervillain Hawk Moth has taken over the internet. The akuma has called herself Lady Wi-Fi and we’ve had confirmed reports that Ladybug and Chat Noir are on the scene. Stay on the boards for more updates as the situation unfolds!

> L.R. Jenkins @thefortknight

Come on LB & CN; all the gaming sites are down! Hurry it up!

>>> **Sparkles**@chattyfan

Right, because that’s clearly the main issue here! There’s an akuma on the loose!

>>> UsernameNOThere @usernamenothere

Chattys right; did the Bourgeois Brat escape? Can we look forward to more tantrum compilations or not?

>>>> I’m gonna win @streakblurgone
She made it out. I don’t know if I’d count that as a win, though.

>>>>>> Right Behind You @ shadefade

Darn.

>>>>>> Nate Draws @natedraws

Darn.

>>>>>> Concert 19th Tickets on Sale! @bloodboneandstone

Darn.

>>>>>>>> I’m gonna win @streakblurgone

Maybe if we leave a trail of diamond encrusted phone accessories, she can be lured back into the hot zone?

>>>>>>>>> Nate Draws @natedraws

Just throw some limited edition Ladybug merch in there and tell her Ladybug is there for a signing. She’ll go for it. Plus, there’s another video for the next compilation when she figures it out.

>>>>>>>>>> No 1 Ladybug Fan The Fabulous Stylish Chloe Bourgeois @thefabulousstylishchloebourgeois

Ridiculous! Utterly ridiculous! I’ll sue you for slander!

> Nadja Chamack @nadjachamackofficial

Don’t be bemused, it’s just the news! This just in ladies and gentlemen, there are witness reports that Chat Noir is on the rooftop of the Grand Paris and is currently in close combat with Lady Wi-Fi. There’s no sign yet of Ladybug. Stay on the boards for more updates!

Izuku watched the message boards, white knuckled. This bit he couldn’t really help with, except for texting Marinette updates. Still, the irrepressible need to know, to take a thing down to it’s components and understand it, rose again in his brain.

“I don’t understand the limitations of akumas,” he muttered half to himself. “Lady Wi-Fi has taken over the entire internet and made it into the Ladyblog. If she has that much power she could, in theory, take command of any system connected to the internet. Defence, satellite surveillance, everything. She should be able to threaten to turn Paris into a smoking crater... or any city really. Not that I want that, but why have all that power but then only choose to channel it in such a limited way?”

“This is not science, Izuku,” Haane told him from her position on the desk. “This is magic. The two have a great deal in common, but one key difference – magic, unlike science, is affected by will. Will is not about logic. You cannot wish a result in science; the universe cannot heed you. Magic is different. It can heed you... it must heed you. It is nothing but formless energy until the correctly applied will gives it a shape and a name.”

“A shape,” Izuku repeated. “And a name?”
“The giver of a name has power over the thing that is named,” Haane nodded. “It’s a very meaningful act. A name conveys power; but, and this is the key thing to remember, it also conveys limitations. You are human; your species has a name. Humans have the power of sentience but must live within certain constraints to survive; breathable air, potable water, regular food. They must live under the rules of gravity, physics and a limited life span. To be human is to accept those constraints. You, Izuku, have a name. That name constrains your genetics, your history and the time and space you occupy that can be filled by no one else. Names are powerful.”

“So, when an akuma is ‘named’,” Izuku said slowly, dragging out his ever present Ladybug notebook. “They are conveyed both powers and constraints. Lady Wi-Fi took over the internet, but her constraint is that she can only make it into the Ladyblog?”

“Remember, magic is shaped by will,” Hanne repeated. “And her form was chosen because the girl you described wants to find out who Ladybug is. The magic is granting that wish, but only that wish. It cannot change once it has been granted. Wishes can be nonsensical; they are rarely thought out properly in terms of consequences.”

“Constraint,” Izuku wrote this down. “So they’re powerful but only under very specific conditions. Hmmm...”

“Remember, you were able to slow her down with the downloading trick,” Hanne reminded him. “It wasn’t within her power to shut down the Ladyblog, because the magic had already been shaped in such a way that Lady Wi-Fi couldn’t change it. Akuma are dangerous, but they are not omnipotent.”

“You’d think Hawk Moth would give them more power, really,” Izuku commented.

“That would be dangerous,” Haane explained. “Remember, all the power of a transformation doesn’t just come from a kwami, it comes from the Holder too. Hawk Moth has to offer up his own power as well. Giving too much might severely weaken him; maybe to the point where he couldn’t control the Champion he gifted. Also, remember, Nooroo is likely an unwilling partner to this. If magic is shaped by will and his will is not fervent...”

“His reluctance might manifest in akuma who are less powerful than they could be.”

“A true partnership takes trust on both sides,” Haane shook her head.

“Isn’t there any way for him to get out of this?” Izuku asked. “He can’t just leave?”

“We have our own constraints; the only way for us to interact with the physical plane at all without deleting it entirely is to accept the will of a mortal over our own. We are compliant in this for the sake of all life. However grandiose the plan of any sentient mortal, Izuku, trust me when I say that compared to how we see time and space, their scope is extremely limited.”

Izuku turned to her and blinked. “Deleting?”

“We are very powerful, Izuku. Even if Hawk Moth wipes out the human race, that’s still a better outcome than the alternative. Hawk Moth is mortal. All mortals die eventually,” Haane sighed. “We are immortal. We are blessed, and cursed, to go on.”

Izuku would have paused to chew on that, but there was no time.

The Ladyblog went down entirely. Normal service resumed.

Izuku grinned. “Chat Noir must have taken out the tower!”
The takedown at the end was a lot easier than the ordeal before it. Freed when Lady Wi-Fi’s powers were cancelled, Ladybug raced to the rooftop to see Lady Wi-Fi and Chat Noir grappling, the akuma apparently reduced to hand-to-hand combat.

It wasn’t even a fight; Ladybug spooled up her yo-yo and reeled it around Lady Wi-Fi’s arm as Chat Noir kept her busy. The phone spun out of the akuma’s grip and smashed against the rooftop, releasing the akuma and ending the fight once and for all.

Her earrings gave a final warning chime even as the cure washed over the damage done and restored normal service to Paris. All the dark energy bubbled out of Lady Wi-Fi leaving a confused and disoriented Alya behind.

*Thank goodness*, Ladybug felt a knot of tension inside her finally release for the first time since this whole fiasco started.

“Ladybug?” Alya was bewildered. “Chat Noir? Holy smoke, hang on...” she fumbled around for her now-repaired phone.

Ladybug shared a look with her partner, who winked and tilted his head. They both took off into the night before Alya could get her bearings.

“That was close one,” Chat called over as he pole vaulted over the buildings. “We made it by a whisker!”

“It’s too close for me!” Ladybug called back, dropping into a dark alley. “Night Chat! Stay cool!”

She heard a laugh from above as Chat Noir vaulted away, probably to get back home.

Ugh, she swore she was going to donate to one of those ‘keep Paris clean’ organisations. She’d had to make use of more than one alleyway for transformation purposes and some of them were revolting.

“Marinette,” Tikki squealed once she was free again. “You did it!”

Marinette slumped, tired to the bone. “Yeah. Here’s hoping I never, ever do it again. Come on, there’re cookies in my purse. You eat, I’ve got to make some calls.”

First, she called the Cesaires and told them that she was going to find Alya because she was in the vicinity of the Grand Paris. Marlena thanked her profusely and told her that she was on her way. Alya had apparently already called them.

Then she called Izuku. “Izzy, hi! Could you tell my parents that I’m going to the Grand to get Alya? Her mother is going to meet me there and she’ll drive me home.”

“Izzy,” Izuku replied. “I will let them know. Is Alya okay?”

“She complained to her mother that the heroes left before she could interview them,” Marinette told him dryly. “She’s fine.”

Izuku laughed with her.

“Hey, Izzy?” Marinette added. “Thanks for... you know, keeping me updated. It was very helpful.”

She could practically feel him blush over the phone. “No problem. See you soon.”
“Bye bye.”

Marinette hung up, took a deep breath, then raced to give her best friend the hug she deserved.

* 

If only all problems could be washed away with a Miraculous cure. The day after the whole mess, the dreaded conference between students, parents and Principal Damocles finally happened.

Marinette had wanted to go in straight away, but Tikki had advised her to proceed more slowly. Most ambushes, the kwami had told her Holder succinctly, are a matter of timing.

Marinette was hesitant to classify her plan as an ambush, but lurking outside the principal’s office door had a certain waiting-to-pounce element to it. She had thought long and hard about how to help Alya out of this mess. Alya was her best friend and Marinette depended on her for so much; her time, her strident support, her patience with Marinette foibles and chronic absenteeism. Alya had saved Marinette a hundred times over but Marinette herself was seldom called upon to do likewise.

She couldn’t mess this up.

She could hear Otis and Marlena Cesaire talking normally and she could kind of make out the gruff undertones of M. Damocles. They didn’t talk loud enough to make out the words.

The Bourgeois’ were a different story. Chloe had a voice than could drill through solid diamond when she really got going and Mayor Bourgeois was used to projecting to the back of a crowd so he tended to talk loud as a default.

“Unacceptable! Completely unacceptable!” Chloe’s voice rattled the door pane. “Suspension is not enough! She was stealing MY personal property from my own PERSONAL locker! She’s nothing but a thief! She should be arrested for that!”

She could hear Alya say something in protest but her normally verbose friend was being surprisingly quiet through the whole thing.

“Oh as if we’re going to believe ANYTHING you say! You had the gall to think you had the right to touch anything that belongs to ME?! Who do you think you are you-?”

“Now, now, Chloe,” there came the Mayor’s voice. “Try to calm down, you know what stress does to your delicate constitution.”

“It’s awful!” Chloe’s sobbing wail would have been a solid plea for sympathy if it had been shrill enough to break glass. “She violated my space! I can barely sleep at night because of it! I think I might have PTSD!”

“Well young lady?” the Mayor added sternly. “What could you possibly have to say for yourself after traumatising my daughter so? I don’t see any reason why your expulsion shouldn’t be permanent after such an act of delinquency.

M Damocles added something, voice muffled because he spoke like a normal human being.

“Oh school policy, pish tosh, Damocles. Are you saying my daughter’s obvious trauma is not worth acting upon? That will not look good to the school board, which I am also on! The young lady has yet to even explain her actions, let alone apologise, which I think is the least that my daughter is owed for such an egregious violation of her school mandated personal locker.”
“Oh everyone knows why she did it,” Chloe voice was no longer a traumatised mess; she was clearly marinated in relish at the thought of Alya’s coming humiliation. “It was the stupidest reason ever. Really, I’m surprised she even passed elementary school with a level of intelligence that made her think of it! You see, Alya Cesaire – you’re going to laugh when you hear this – Alya Cesaire-“

Tikki nodded to Marinette from her place in Marinette’s purse. “Now!” she whispered.

Marinette burst into the principal’s office, panting like she’d run to get there rather than paced outside for fifteen minutes. “Did it for me. She broke into Chloe’s locker for me.

M. Damocles had the most amazing set of eyebrows the world had ever known. When they disappeared into his hairline, it looked like he had rabbit ears. “I beg your pardon?”

“Marinette!” Alya had been staring mutely at the ground for most of the meeting, but now jumped to her feet. “What are you doing?”

“What exactly do you mean by that, Marinette?” Marlena asked.

Chloe was slightly faster to recover from the shock than her father, who was still trying to bluster out a demand for information. “Oh puh-lease. Cesaire and Dupain-Cheng have always been thick as thieves. She obviously lying,” Chloe tossed her golden head. “And if she isn’t, then she deserves the same punishment as Cesaire. She’s Cesaire’s delinquency enabler!”

Marinette ignored Chloe entirely and focused on the principal. “Chloe took embarrassing photos of me in gym class,” Marinette explained. “Alya was just trying to delete them before she posted them in the internet,” she turned and shot Chloe a glare. “Again.”

Chloe burst out laughing. “Oh come on, who’s supposed to believe that? That dirty little thief stood in this very office and said she took it because she thought that I was Ladybug,” Chloe examined her nails while Alya squirmed in embarrassment. “I mean, I am stunning enough to pull it off, so maybe she has good taste. For a thief.”

“Oh puh-lease,” Marinette mocked her. “As if she would tell you why she actually wanted it. That would be like Mylene asking you not to take photos of her new haircut because she didn’t like it; five seconds later it was all over your CFD Fashion Fails instagram. If you know it will upset someone, that just makes you post it faster.”

“CFD Fashion Fails?” Otis echoed. “CFD meaning College Francoise Dupont, this school?”

“She has a bunch of them,” Marinette sighed wearily. “CFD Fashion Fails, CFD Loser Alert, CFD Butterfaces. The one dedicated to me is CFD Gym Fails.”

Marlena frowned and reached for her phone. “Hold on, just let me...”

Marinette could see the exact second they found the hated page.

“Marinette, these are all you! Have you told your parents about this?” Otis demanded, looking over his wife’s shoulder.

Marinette shrugged. “I did once or twice in the beginning. I think they complained to her father. Chloe just didn’t post for maybe a week, but then she got right back to it. It didn’t make any difference; nothing ever did. Eventually I just gave up. I’m not the only one, either.”

“How long has this been going on?” Marlena asked, aghast.
“I’d actually quite like to that too,” M. Damocles added.

“Long before I came to this school,” Alya spoke up. She pointed a furious, accusing finger at Chloe. “I’ve checked her timeline. She’s been doing this to Marinette over four years. She does it to Nino, too, and Mylene, and Max. She gives out their full names and social media info on them too! She wants to talk about violations, how about we start with her continued violation of the schools Safe E-Space policy?”

“Oh, what does that even matter?” Chloe waved this away like a harmless fly. “It’s not illegal to have instagram accounts! Unlike actually stealing property! You can’t turn this around on me! That’s ridiculous!”

“Cyber bullying,” M. Damocles intoned flatly. “Is just as illegal as stealing in Paris, Mlle Bourgeois. School policy dictates that you get ten days suspension for every provable infraction.”

All the righteous fury drained out of Chloe. She hadn’t exactly been discreet about the accounts and who owned and ran them.

“And if the abuse has been ongoing for more than six months, the school is legally obligated to inform the Police Cyber Task Force.”

Mayor Bourgeois went pale. “Now, now, now, let’s not come in all guns firing!” He stood up and lay a paternal hand on Chloe’s shoulder, who was proving to the room she’d had a tonsillectomy at some point. “I’m sure this is a misunderstanding. Chloe has a very vibrant sense of humour, she probably just wanted to give her classmates something to laugh over. Chloe must have added some less-than-flattering shots of herself too somewhere on there. Why, my school friends and I used to live to post pictures of ourselves doing the silliest things when we were thirteen. It’s all in good fun!”

Marlena’s expression of frank scepticism, Otis’ glower and Alya and Marinette’s snorts of disdain were his only reply to that. Chloe went red with anger.

“You work for my daddy,” she jabbed a finger at Marlena. “You can’t bring charges against me! You’d be fired!”

“I’m an eight star Michelin chef,” Marlena replied to this composedly. “Paris is full of places for me to work that isn’t a hotel kitchen. If I resign my job I will be very sad, but I’ll hardly be destitute. And before you wave your threats around again, young lady,” Marlena added. “The Dupain-Chengs don’t work for your father at all, and they’d have more of a case than us.”

Chloe appeared to have no reply to this.

“Everybody please calm down,” the Mayor gave Chloe’s shoulder a little shake. “I’m hardly going to fire the Grand Paris’ best chef,” he shot his daughter a look as Chloe sucked in a breath like a furious jet engine. “Any more than we need to go to the frankly overreactive step of bringing the police into any of this! Let’s just solve this amicably, here and now, shall we? Since it all came to naught and nothing was actually done to the phone, Chloe will accept an apology from your daughter and the school will uphold the policy mandated two day suspension. I’m sure that, given that time on which to reflect on her actions, Mlle Alya will come out of the experience prepared to be an upstanding citizen and obey the laws. Perhaps she can do an extra credit assignment on why stealing is wrong, or some such. I’ll leave it to her teacher to work out the details. Is that acceptable?”

“No! It’s absolutely not acceptable. It’s totally unacceptable!” Chloe shouted furiously.
“But princess,” the Mayor reasoned, sweat on his brow. “We won’t have time,” he stressed the word. “In the coming months to deal with pressing charges! And besides, think of how you can tell all your followers how good forgiveness can feel! About how magnanimous you can be when someone makes a mistake. I’ll bet Mme Chamack will want to hear all about it.”

Chloe still looked furious, but Marinette could see her doing the math. It was an election year and Mayor Bourgeois had not come off particularly well after his dithering non-response to the threat Hawk Moth posed. Most of Chloe’s clout came from being the Mayor’s daughter, not wealth. Most of the people who could afford to live in the 21st Arrondissement and go to school there weren’t hurting for cash. Rich kids were a franc a dozen. Marinette was a rare exception.

It was fascinating to see her weigh up her choices between eliminating an enemy absolutely – something Chloe lived to do – and risking not being the biggest fish in the small pond anymore.

In the end, reason prevailed over sentiment. “Fine,” she muttered, pouting. “But just remember, I’m only doing this because I am superior in compassion than most other people.”

Alya sighed, but stepped over to face Chloe willingly enough. “I’m deeply, truly sorry I ever opened your locker, touched your phone, or indeed anything of yours, Chloe. I promise you it will never, ever happen again.”

Chloe glared at her. “See that it doesn’t.”

“Good,” the Mayor beamed. “You see? It’s all settled.”

“No quite,” Otis growled. He waved the phone. “What about these accounts?”

“Oh, well,” the Mayor stammered. Otis had a glare like an augur. “I t-thought we agreed they were nothing but a joke account. Something for the students to play around on! They’re not serious.”

Chloe stuck her nose in the air. “Exactly. Some people just don’t have a sense of humour. That’s hardly my fault.”

Marinette felt a truly evil smile slide across her face. “Well,” she said idly. “I mean, it is all a joke, right?”

“Right!” Chloe nodded.

“Some of the pictures are pretty funny,” Marinette continued. Alya was watching her, eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

“I get tonnes of lol comments,” Chloe agreed smugly.

“And we should all get to laugh at ourselves once in a while,” Marinette nodded. “In Hawk Moth’s Paris, it doesn’t really pay to take yourself too seriously.”

“Ex-actly,” Chloe agreed. “You shouldn’t be so sensitive about it, you know. By letting people laugh at you, you perform a vital service to the community. Maybe it’s because you’re Quirkless; you just to get humour on some level.”

Alya opened her mouth to shout Chloe out of solar system for that little gem, but Marinette talked before she could. “A service, that’s exactly right. And since making people laugh and be happy is absolutely vital to getting by while Hawk Moth is on the rampage; which was a great idea, by the way...”
“I’m only doing my part,” Chloe nodded, glowing with virtue.

“You won’t mind making the passwords public to the rest of the school,” Marinette finished. “We all have funny pictures on ours phones. I have tonnes of goofy pictures with me and Alya, right Alya?”

“Are you kidding?” Alya’s teeth gleamed. “I’ve got a gallery of our stupid-face photos on my phone. CFD Butterface would be a perfect place to showcase them!”

“Whaaaat?!” Chloe howled, appalled. “But that’s... I didn’t...”

“After all, it’s only a joke if everyone gets to laugh, right?” Marinette dropped this into the room, widening her eyes for maximum innocence effect.

The Mayor understood her parting shot perfectly. Right now those Instagram accounts linked only to his Chloe were a terabyte of legally actionable cannon fire aimed squarely at his family-friendly re-election hopes. “That sounds like fun, doesn’t it darling? All your classmates contributing to the positivity in Paris! Well, I’m glad we have come to such an amicable arrangement and I’m very thankful to you all for coming, but I’m afraid we really must fly!” The mayor hustled his furious, red faced, spluttering daughter out of the door before she could mess up a perfectly set up escape from legal charges. “We’ll post the passwords by Monday!”

The door slammed behind them both.

It didn’t quite manage to block out the furious tirade of abuse coming from Chloe’s mouth, but in light of such an unexpectedly easy resolution, the people still in the room were prepared to ignore it.

“Well,” M. Damocles spoke gamely across the muffled outrage slowly fading from the outer office. “Now that’s been settled, I think we can bring matters to a close. Alya Cesaire,” he intoned sternly. “You are suspended from school for two days and this event will become a part of your record here. Any more infractions for the next six months will be noted and dealt with with very little clemency. It is my hope that, however objectionable you find Mlle Bourgeois’ behaviour and... general demeanour, you know that it isn’t an excuse to go rifling around in her locker. I shouldn’t think, after all, you’d be very pleased if she did that to you.”

Alya bit her lip, chastened. “Yes, Principal Damocles,” she said softly. “I know it was a stupid thing to do. I meant what I said. It won’t happen again.”

“Very well. Then the court is adjourned. Thank you all for coming. And Mlle Dupain-Cheng?” M. Damocles added.

“Yes, sir?”

“Next time if a student is harassing you on social media, please let the teachers know. I know it doesn’t always feel like it, but we are here to help you, even with things like that.”

“Yes sir,” Marinette nodded. “I will.”

The Cesaires thanked the principal for his time and they left as a group.

“Good grief,” Marlena muttered. “That girl is headed for all sorts of trouble if she can’t learn to stop exploding at every little disappointment.”

“You are the place that raised you,” Oris muttered back. “Though I don’t know what that says
about us at the moment.” He shot a glower at his own daughter, who winced.

“I know I messed up badly, papa,” Alya mumbled.

“It’s not that you messed up, renardeau. It’s that you keep messing up.”

“Otis, it’s okay,” Marlena sighed. “We’ll talk it through at home. Though before that, I would like to stop by and see Marinette’s parents,” she looked over at Marinette. “I think they should know about the photos, Marinette. I think they’ll want to know.”

Marinette sighed internally at the thought of their reactions, but decided it was only fair. She led the way out of the school. School had finished for the day but it was still light out. Summer was coming soon.

“I don’t understand why they don’t upset you, Marinette,” Marlena continued as they went.

“I just don’t look at them anymore,” Marinette shrugged. “And if anyone else sees them? I honestly don’t care what a bunch of strangers think. If it really bugs me like it did yesterday, I just look at the Ladyblog.”

Marlena gave her a thin smile. “You are a good friend to defend Alya, Marinette. But the Ladyblog is one of the causes of her recent behaviour issues, even if this particular incident was caused by something else. The Ladyblog sucks up too much time and inspires too little sense. We will have to have a serious talk with Alya about ending it; for her own safety if nothing else.”

“I’m not just saying... well, okay, I am recommending it because Alya’s my friend,” Marinette plumped for honestly. “But I’m also dead serious. She’s got a bunch of tutorials on there about breathing techniques and meditation, strategies for dealing with bad days and disappointments. I go there all the time if I feel really bad. Haven’t you ever actually read it before?”

From the way they both gave her surprised looks, she guessed they hadn’t.

“Alya showed us the homepage when she made it,” Otis admitted gruffly. “But it’s not out kind of news site.”

“It’s more than just news!” Alya protested. “Did you actually think I was running some cut price tabloid this whole time?”

“Well, given your propensity to run headlong into danger whenever an akuma shows up,” Marlena pointed out. “I think you were quite glad we did not visit it often.”

“Okay, fair,” Alya grimaced. “But seriously, I don’t spend hours a day and most of the weekend just waiting for akumas to show up!”

Marinette dragged out her phone. “Look, see? Here’s the mental health section. All of this is free, by the way; you don’t have to pay to access this part of the site.”

She showed them the tutorials, online articles about dealing with anxiety, depression and stress, the copious links for free mental health services, various crisis hotlines, volunteers that gave out hugs, free financial advice for people worried about money or bills, various social clubs for people who needed positive interaction and, when all else failed, a Youtube library of cute animals to watch.

Even her parents couldn’t deny that Alya had been extremely thoughtful, thorough and meticulous.

“But what gave you the idea to do something like this?” Marlena asked. “That’s a lot of extra work
for no pay.”

Alya shrugged. “No one else was doing it. All the news sites talk about are akumas, they don’t really care about the poor people who get turned into them and why. I’m mean, don’t get me wrong, Ladybug is the best…”

Marinette blushed.

“But she’s just one person. If I could help her, even just a little bit, even just maybe making one less akuma, then it has to be worth the effort.”

Marinette wanted to hug Alya. It was very seldom Marinette felt validated by the idea that Ladybug inspired people. There was no feeling like it.

By the time they reached the bakery, there was a tiny spark of hope in Alya’s eyes that the Ladyblog wouldn’t be wiped from existence. Who knows how the discussion at home would go, but now at least she had a fighting chance.

Marinette’s parents were closing up for the day. The Cesaire’s opted to stay downstairs while they talked, leaving Marinette to wisely retreat with Alya to the apartment above to avoid any possible furore.

The second Marinette’s feet hit the top of the stairs, she was engulfed in the biggest, tightest hug in the world, courtesy of Alya.

“Thanks Marinette,” Alya squeezed tighter. “You’re the best. Not even Ladybug is better.”

Marinette could only smile at this. “What are friends for?”

“Oh…” a new voice intruded unexpectedly. “I can leave?”

“Izzy,” Marinette beamed at her cousin who was sitting bemusedly on the sofa, surrounded by books and his laptop. “Oh, don’t go anywhere. We’re all done with icky girl stuff, I promise.”

She wasn’t sure how well that translated judging by her cousin’s bemused look, but he nodded.

“Still working on your Japanese Ladybug essay?” Marinette asked as they flopped down next to him.

Izuku nodded again. He darted a couple of curious looks at Alya.


“Izzy found… go on, show her, Izzy…. Izzy found a Ladybug that existed in feudal Japan.”

“What?!” Alya nearly sent Izuku flying off the couch as she lunged for the laptop, which had brought up the ancient silk screen print. “That’s Ladybug! Marinette, that’s Ladybug!”

“Ladybug is Ladybug,” Marinette informed her loftily from her superior wisdom. “That’s Tentomushi. Totally different thing. She…” Marinette leaned forward dramatically. “Was a ninja.”

“Oh my god,” Alya gushed. “That is so cool! I need to put that on the blog! Wait, you’re writing an essay on her, right?”

Izuku leaned back a bit from Alya burning bright enthusiasm. “Um, yes. I’m trying to. My French is,” he wobbled a hand. “Not very good.” He held out some printed sheets with paragraph drafts on
them. “See? Not good.”

“Hmm,” Alya squinted at them. “I think... like, you’re words are fine, you’ve got a good vocabulary. You’re grammar is a bit off, though. I can proofread it for you, if you like.”

They waited while Izuku looked up ‘proofread’ on his translating app. “Oh... would you?” Izuku blushed a little. “That would really help! But you have to explain it; that way I can learn.”

“Sure, no problem,” Alya beamed. “I’ve helped my sisters learn to read and write all their lives, I could teach you. Plus, you could post it on my website. This is exactly the kind of thing my readers will want to know about. Show me what you have to far.”

Marinette grinned as she watched her best friend and cousin bend together over a stack of research. Alya was good at drawing people out; after all, hadn’t she done the same for Marinette?

This could be the start of a beautiful friendship.

“Marinette!” her father called from the bottom of the stairs. “Can you come down here for a minute please?”

“Coming!”

Marinette turned and went for the stairs, leaving the two Ladybug nerds to their nerding.

She doubted they even realized she was gone.

*

Two good things came out of Lady Wi-Fi.

One, Alya turned up at the bakery with a stack of French grammar primers, a box of old elementary level workbooks and a triumphant gleam in her eye. Not only had Alya successfully defended the Ladyblog’s right to exist, she’d also wrangled her way into being Izuku’s French tutor as part of her ‘punishment’. She had the look of someone impatient to take the world by storm.

Two, in gym class a volleyball was fumbled by Mylene, knocked upwards by a desperate Max and dropped into the vicinity of Ivan who was so startled that he batted it hard right into Chloe’s stomach, knocking her down like a skittle.

While she was laying spread eagled on the floor, red faced, sweaty and heaving like a blowfish, everyone in the class got out their phones.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary

Renardeau - 'Fox Cub'. Otis Cesaire has a Quirk that helps him work with animals, so he calls his kids cutesy animal nicknames in his gruff, grumpy way. Nora is 'Lionceau' - Lion Cub, Etta is 'Ourson' - Bear Cub, Ella is 'Louveteau' - Wolf Cub

Quirk File:
Sabine Cheng
Quirk: Bloom

She can make any bud or plant she touches bloom in seconds and the blooms last for weeks - without water or other means of sustenance. It's a wild Quirk that emerged from nowhere out of her family line, but Sabine was considered to be a child of 'good fortune' when it manifested. Because the Quirk was manifested from what had to be pretty recessive genes, they weren't passed along to Marinette.

Fun side fact: Before moving to France to train in French cuisine, she considered a career in wedding planning. That dream shriveled and died absolutely after she'd dealt with her first Bridezilla. Her Uncle was the one to suggest she try for the food industry instead, as he noted that her Quirk had the side effect of giving her an excellent sense of aromas and flavours. The only lingering piece of her initial dream career these days is the bakery's extremely lucrative but rare forays into making wedding cakes. Sabine uses her Quirk to add decorations to the cakes and will occasionally gift an everlasting bouquet to a bride who is very polite.
Chapter Summary

Izzy has a downturn and Marinette has an upswing. Then things start going fantastically awry.

Chapter Notes

Here we are again. I can't deny the Gamer wasn't my favourite episode because the creators are on shaky ground when it comes to the moral of the story. I know they were going for 'Marinette makes a questionable decision for her own personal gain and must deal with the consequences', but the moral of the story seemed to be 'a girl should pretend she's not as good at something as a boy so said boys feelings don't get hurt'. It's a lesson made even worse by the fact that it is a) set up to be explored via the medium of gaming, a sphere already fraught with bad gender politics and b) a weird and backwards affirmation for a show aimed at pre-teen girls. I slipped in a couple of extra bits to make it less... that, but that still bothers me a lot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marinette was walking to school when she realised the stars had suddenly come out, speckling sweetly across a glowing wash of twilight colours, textured softly with the fluffiest clouds imaginable. She stopped to admire it. It was a beautiful sight that a mere frame couldn’t hope to capture.

“Pretty, isn’t it,” Adrien murmured next to her ear.

She shivered and turned towards him. “Yeah.”

He smiled and lead her towards a staircase into the clouds, winding up towards a castle in the sky, lined with people who cheered and threw confetti.

“I’m so happy you’re here,” Marinette told him without a stutter.

“Oh, I know,” Adrien leaned close. “Are you awake yet, Marinette?”

Marinette screamed at the sound of her mother’s voice coming out of Adrien’s mouth and flailed out of bed with a thump. “Ouuuch,” Marinette moaned, brought down to earth literally as well as figuratively. “‘Wha’? Wassat? Mama?”

“Marinette!” Sabine stuck her head through Marinette’s trap door, looking wholly unsurprised to see her daughter in a pretzeled heap on the floor. “Good, you’re up. Come on, get into your gym clothes, your first Aikivate lesson is today.”

“What? It can’t be time yet,” Marinette muzzily squinted at the clock but, alas, it showed three past five.
In the morning.

“It’s not even light out yet, maman,” Marinette groaned. “There must be some other class. An afternoon class!”

Sabine shook her head. “No, there isn’t and no, we aren’t going to look for one. It’s better to exercise in the morning anyway. Come on, Izuku’s been up since four.”

“Izuku,” Marinette muttered resentfully as her mother’s head disappeared. “Is a little suck up who works in the bakery.”

“I heard that, Marinette,” Sabine called up, making her daughter wince. “Stop being a brat. You said you’d try it and really, if you’re going to stay up half the night playing video games or designing something, then your lack of sleep is your own fault.”

Marinette bit her tongue to keep from muttering something about patrols.

Then she took a breath and resolved to be philosophical about this. It was only twice a week. The Saturday class was at a rather less devastating nine in the morning. It was only an hour of her time, two on Saturdays. She could fight akumas and get her homework in on time. Surely, she could do this.

She wasn’t so sure once exposed to the rest of the incurable morning people in the house. “Good morning!” Izuku chirped, way too cheerful.

“Morning,” she yawned back, fumbling for some coffee.

“Caffeine tenses the muscles,” Izuku warned her.

“Yes, but it also keeps me from killing people in my semi-conscious state of rage,” Marinette downed a mug and then hefted the pot to pour another.

Izuku wasn’t prepared to die on that hill silently and let her be. He was smart.

After she’d downed her second coffee and had a slice of toast, Marinette felt more ready to face the day with more equanimity. Izuku was plugging away at his laptop as was his wont. “How’s the Tentomushi essay going?”


“I’m sure people will love it,” Marinette told him. “People who get on the Ladyblog are really into this sort of thing.”

Izuku shook himself. “Ready?”

Marinette shrugged. “As I’ll ever be.”

They yelled a goodbye to Tom and Sabine, who were both hard at work with their apprentices doing the daily bread and headed out into dawn-brushed Paris. At least, Marinette mused, it was warm. This would be a dismal walk in the height of winter but May in France promised to be at least pleasant.

“I made croissants today,” Izuku said enthusiastically. “Trays of them. All by myself.”
“Awesome,” Marinette grinned at him. Croissants were pretty low on the difficulty scale but Marinette felt a rush of nostalgia nevertheless. She had fond memories of learning to do that with papa before she was tall enough to see over the counter. “I was so proud of my first croissants, you know. So proud. I mean, they were all wonky and lumpy but people bought them I thought I had to be the worlds best baker when I heard that,” Marinette screwed up her nose ruefully. “I only found out later that papa sold mine at half price because they looked so deformed.”

“Yeah,” Izuku chuckled. “I think he might be doing that to a few of mine. I tried to be neat but you have to keep to the baking schedule or everything goes wrong. He does it so fast!” Izuku became more animated. “His hands were invisible!”

“Papa can make a hundred croissants in less than two minutes,” Marinette said proudly. “Even I can only manage fifty. But he’s been doing this forever. Maman says his first toy was a rolling pin and I don’t think she’s making that up.”

“Fifty,” Izuku was sheepish. “I think I managed about ten. Maybe less.”

“Everyone starts somewhere, Izzy,” Marinette shrugged. “Papa always told me – precision first, then speed. Did he teach you anything else?”

“How to fire the ovens,” Izuku warmed to the topic. “How and why the baking schedule works. He showed me the online booking system too. It’s all planning and strategy to run a bakery. I like it! Plus he showed me how they use the big kneading machine.”

“Old Marcel,” Marinette nodded. “Everybody likes Old Marcel. Papa always says he’ll get a new one eventually but we know he’d never get rid of that old thing. Do you think you’d like being a baker?”

Izuku gave this due consideration. “Maybe. I do like doing it. Japanese people like French food. It’s very exotic to them.”

Personally Marinette couldn’t see anything less exotic that a plain old everyday croissant, but she totally got that everyday for one was an amazing adventure for another. Izuku was slowly but surely beginning to peek out from the tiny crack in his shell. Marinette was hopeful the trend would continue.

Of course, the very next instant a body came flying more-or-less horizontally out of the wooden door at the end of the narrow alley they’d turned onto, landing in a heap at their feet.

He…it was possibly a he. Whoever it was had some kind of lizard mutation Quirk, because incandescent scales rippled all over his exposed skin, briefly turning the colour of the paved road beneath him.

He didn’t seem to notice them. He just grinned, exposing an impressive set of needle-sharp teeth and bounced upright in one sinewy move. “That’s it Chantelle, you are deeeead!” he yelled as he charged back in.

The door swung back after him, waving idly. The sign beside the door proclaimed to the Chausson Company Aikigate Dojo.

The cousins looked at each other, then wordlessly took each other’s hands. “Ready?” Marinette tried for brave but wildly missed the target. Her hand was as clammy as Izuku’s.

Izuku looked too intimidated to speak so he swallowed and nodded.
They girded themselves and went in.

It was a surprisingly long room. It stretched further into the distance than the outside seemed to promise it had. It was shot through with wood stanchions and regular intervals, but the centre space was clear of any impediment. It was also, Marinette noted as she looked around, a working gym. Around the edges of the room were weight machines and other equipment. Even as she looked she was startled by a pack of runners jogging past Izuku and her at a steady pace. When she looked at the floor, Marinette could see someone had painted the dark wood floorboards a bright red colour, clearly delineating a running track.

“There, see him?” Izuku discreetly pointed to a huge, tattooed man who was standing before the lizard student and another girl and silently staring at them while they looked ashamed. “That’s Professeur Chausson.”

“That’s our teacher?” Marinette goggled. He was huge. Marinette kind of hated to think it but with all the tatts and muscles he looked like a villain. “Maybe he just runs the dojo?” she theorised hopefully. “Maybe beginners get a different teacher.”

“Nope!” a bright cheery voice near her elbow made her nearly hit the ceiling. A skinny, golden haired woman with amazing swirly eyes beamed wider when they faced her. “The Professeur always takes on the newbies. He says he wants them to learn right from day one. He shows such faith in his students,” she snorted wryly, but it clearly didn’t upset her. She waved the clipboard she was holding. “Have you been signed up or have you just come to watch today?”

“We’re signed up,” Marinette said resignedly.

“Names?” Swirly Girl clicked a pen.

“Marinette Dupain-Cheng and Izuku Midoriya,” Marinette answered for both of them.

“Ah, right, got you here,” she ticked them off the list. “The Rue class is just finishing now. The students will do a bit of a sweep up and then the Novice class will begin. Feel free to wander around until then. If you have any questions, come find me. My name is Abby.”

They thanked her and crossed the running track so they could watch what was going on. The last class was indeed industriously sweeping and mopping the dojo floor, though it didn’t look particularly messy. Even the mats gleamed.

With nothing else to do but people watch until the finishing students had all gone, Marinette indulged in a spot of people watching. The tight knot of anxiety in her stomach loosened a bit when she surveyed the others standing around waiting. There weren’t just kids here; there were all sorts and all ages of people. Between them they showed a pretty broad cross section of the anxiety to eagerness spectrum. They looked like a pretty ragtag bunch but none of them looked like professional fighters. Marinette felt a surging confidence that they wouldn’t judge her for being a flailing mess.

Eventually, it was time to find out.

“Welcome,” Professeur Chausson bowed as he faced his assembled class. “This is the Aikivate Novice Class. You have come here because you have no wish to learn to fight for a fight’s sake, but for the betterment of your lives as a whole. It is my hope that we can teach you the benefits of discipline and the wisdom of peace. While you are in this room, I am the Professeur. Also while you are in this room, you are never to attack a teacher or fellow student unless as a part of the instruction process. You are learning together; you are being forged together. We do not fight here;
we grow. As long at everyone understands this,” his dark eyes bored into them, indicated they’d better understand that. “Then you will always be welcome here. Now, let’s start.”

Starting was, apparently, doing eight laps around the hall. The Professeur instructed them to go at their own pace, whatever they could manage, but they had to do all eight. Marinette acquitted herself fairly well at a slow jog, though she was a ball of sweat by the end. Izuku, who was less fit than her, fell back to a slower pace after the second lap, but he doggedly kept at a jog for all eight laps, even though he was wheezing like an asthmatic when he collapsed next to Marinette to wait out the stragglers. There were some beginners who were clearly doing this for health reasons; they were some of the last around.

“Keep going!” Izuku yelled at a… lets call him portly man heaving and limping his way around his last lap. He was one of the final stragglers. “You can do it!”

“That was nice,” Marinette smiled at him.

Izuku shrugged. “I was always last in sports. It’s awful getting to the finish and have all those… those eyes on you. It was not fun,” Izuku said sombrelly. “Not at all. I wish someone had done that for me.”

Marinette stared at him, before turning to the man and yelling. “Just a bit more! You’re doing great!” she shot him a huge thumbs up as he looked their way.

The duo’s actions started to trend. People started shouting encouragement for the sidelines as the final few rounded the last corner. There was even a spontaneous round of applause.

“Good,” it was hard to tell because the Professeur’s face was naturally carved of stone, but he looked pleased. “That is a good first lesson. It does not matter how long it takes to learn something here. You’re not being fitted for a belt or prepared for a tournament. As long as you get there in the end, the length of the journey is irrelevant.”

After the cardio workout was done, there wasn’t very much time to do anything else but go through some very basic forms – simple stuff like holding your thumb over your knuckles when punching and simple stretching routines they would be expected to do every time before a workout.

Izuku and Marinette were both sweaty but weirdly elated when they left the dojo. “Exercise,” Izuku sagely tapped the side of his head. “It’s good for brain chemistry.”

Okay, Marinette conceded, maybe this wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

* 

“Oh, Marinette, before you go!” Sabine waved her back from leaving for school. Marinette and Izuku had gotten back shortly before, giving the pair enough time to shower off all the sweat and get dressed for the day. Marinette would actually get to school nicely on time for a change.

Izuku was studying on his laptop at the kitchen table. His exams were coming up; they were a little bit earlier than Marinette’s school, so he would be busy cramming for the next few days.

“Can you take this,” Sabine handed her a sheaf of forms to her daughter. “To your teacher? I told her I’d get them to her by today.”

Marinette looked them over. They looked like insurance and enrolment forms, as well as copies of what looked like school records. Some were written in Japanese, with translated copies. “Izuku’s going to enrol in school?” she asked excitedly, before pausing. “Isn’t it a bit late in the year for
Izuku’s head shot up to stare at them. “What?”

“His mother and I were thinking about enrolling him for next year,” Sabine nodded. “But if we get the forms in now, Principal Damocles said he’s free to come in and just audit the class for a day or two, just so he can get a feel for what it’s like.”

“Great!” Marinette cheered. “I can introduce you to everyone, Izzy!”

Izuku had a tentative smile. “That sounds okay. You’re right,” his voice firmed. “I should try it out. Aren’t there, uh, tests I have to do?”

“Not yet. Not until after the school year is finished,” Sabine reassured him. “And they won’t be pass or fail tests, they’ll just be general tests to see where your schooling is at, so they’ll know if there’s any areas you’ll need help catching up on. Alright?”

Izuku nodded.

“Eek, I should probably get going. Bye Izzy! Have fun at photography class!”

Izuku waved at her. “Bye Rin!”

*

Izuku was deep in study for the rest of the day. Truthfully though, there wasn’t very much more prep he could do. One good thing about having nothing but study time was that Izuku had the kind of mind that could expand very quickly under those conditions. He had a near-photographic memory and plenty of things to put in it. When he ran out of study he read his Tentomushi Project aloud while Haane gently corrected punctuation and grammar. Between her and Alya, his mastery of French – **including** proper pronunciation, thank you – was becoming a foregone conclusion. Haane was very helpful with this; she understood sound very well indeed.

“You’re very pensive,” Hanne commented as Izuku went over the printed pages with a red pen.

Izuku paused. “Am I? Sorry, did you need something?”

“No, no,” Haane fluttered up to him. “I simply observed because if you want to talk about something, I will listen. That’s what I’m here for.”

“Oh,” Izuku was still getting the hang of talking to people – and beings, he supposed. Even his therapist pointed out to him that for all he rambled and muttered, he didn’t really open up about himself much.

Izuku told her that he wasn’t very interesting. She replied that he might be more interesting than he thought, but he had to communicate in order to find out. He knew this, but it was still very hard. The idea that Izuku Midoriya could be **special** in any sense but a bad one was still alien mathematics to him.

“Did the martial arts class not work out?” Haane prompted him gently.

“Oh, no, it went fine,” Izuku shook his head. “It was mostly just running and some stretches and basic katas and things. It was kind of fun, actually. It… feels manageable to me, like it’s something I can really do well at.” That was kind of a new concept for him too, but a welcome one. “Aunty Sabine is organising for me to sit in Marinette’s class. You know, so I can get used to it? Western
schools are very different from Japan schools, so it’s… logical to do that, I guess.” There was a wobbly wavelength sitting in his throat when he said it, though.

“You don’t want to go to school?” Haane asked. “You love learning.”

“Ye-es,” Izuku replied. “I do. I mean, I do want to go to school but… well,” Izuku rubbed the back of his neck. “The last day I attended my old school, um…. It wasn’t a very good day. And when Aunty Sabine mentioned me going again, that day was the only thing that came to mind.”

Haane nodded sagely. “You are frightened this new school might be just like your old school?”

“But it can’t be,” Izuku replied hastily. “Literally, it can’t be, right? It’s in a completely different country and everything.”

“I think,” Haane said slowly. “I see the problem. In your head, the idea of ‘school’ is locked together with the concept of ‘bad’. It doesn’t matter where you are; your brain equates ‘school’ with ‘bad’.”

“I guess,” Izuku sighed. “But it’s irrational, Haane. I’ve never even been there, I don’t know at all what it’s actually like.”

“Not knowing is even scarier than knowing, Izuku,” Haane replied to this. “You know you don’t actually have to go, right? You can still be home schooled. That kind of learning doesn’t seem to have done you any harm.”

“No,” Izuku shook his head stubbornly. “I don’t want to sit and learn off a screen in a dark room. I want… I want friends, Haane,” Izuku voice was rough with yearning. “I… I haven’t had friends for a long time. Marinette is the first person in years who ever even claimed I was a friend out loud. And Alya-chan is really nice to me too. Marinette goes to that school and she’s Quirkless and she has all these friends there and you know what? Her Quirklessness doesn’t matter to them. I want that. Going to Rin’s school might be my last chance to make any friends at all.”

“There’s always going to be time to make friends, Izuku,” Haane offered. “You don’t have to force yourself to do something that makes you this uncomfortable.”

“It feels like it’d be uncomfortable no matter what,” Izuku retorted. “But if I do this now, if I get past the block, then starting the new school year is going to be a lot easier. That’s logical, right?”

Haane dropped the issue, but between then was the lingering acknowledgement that feelings had nothing whatsoever to do with logic.

Still, the burr of disquiet still nagged at him in quiet moments. He went to his first photography class in the afternoon and gave it his unwavering, full attention, trying to bury his anxiety.

The disquiet got worse when Marinette reported that the forms were all in order and that Mlle Bustier was looking forward to meeting Izuku tomorrow. His mother had been so excited for him on their nightly video chat that he couldn’t do anything but smile and nod.

There was nothing for it. Izuku was committed to his path, and once committed Izuku stuck to a decision like a barnacle. He was certain that once he was in the school, once he was in the classroom and he saw how different it was, most of his anxiety would go. It was just the unknown that was scary, that’s all.

He was surprised but pleased to find out there was no school uniform at Marinette’s school. At least, he’d thought in fervent relief, he wouldn’t stick out too much. Marinette assured him jeans
and things like that were perfectly fine.

With no Aikivate class to take some of the edge off the next day, Izuku spent his early morning hours trying to attend to bakery matters while internally agonising about what he should wear and what he should say when he met other kids. Once released from his internship, he raced back to his room, feverishly pulling out this and that, desperate to find some sort of combination that would bolster his frail confidence.

With only middling success, he went into the apartment to choke down some toast and fruit juice while Marinette went through her whirlwind morning routine. All too soon after that, it was time.

“Ready?” Marinette beamed at him encouragingly.

“Yes. We should go,” Izuku nodded, cramming as much enthusiasm as he could into the words and forcing himself to rise and walk purposefully towards the stairs and out towards the school. He tripped slightly on his way there and then had to run back up the stairs for his bag, but he decided that moving was the main thing.

Marinette was chattering away next to him. “You’ll really like it, Izzy. Alya will be there, and I can introduce you to Nino, he’s really nice. Don’t be intimidated by Ivan, he’s huge but he’s the biggest softie in Paris. Oh, and don’t be embarrassed if you run into nothing and realise there’s a girl there, that’s just Juleka, that’s kind of how her Quirk is. Oh, and don’t worry about anything that Chloe says; just ignore her, we all do.”

Izuku managed to grasp the tail end of that stream of words as the school came into view, wide doors open and students flocking in. “Chloe?” he repeated, looking at the doors intensely. It didn’t look anything at all like his old school, which had had the usual brutal Japanese aesthetic. The thought should have made him feel better; instead, he felt breakfast turn over in his stomach. There were a lot of kids here.

“Chloe Bourgeois,” Marinette made a face as they went in through the door, Izuku’s feet dragging. “She’s a girl in my class. She’s a total pain and she can be kind of nasty but we all just ignore her and she goes away eventually.”

Izuku wasn’t taking any of this in. He was frozen in the doorway, rigid as a statue, sweat pouring off his face.

They were all staring at him. He could feel the pressure of their gazes like knives on his skin. He saw a bunch at the back break into laughter and the next instant all he could hear was the jeering laughter of classmates from before, for Japan, how they’d laughed and laughed and laughed whenever Izuku stuck his head up, whenever he put himself out there. He was suddenly, acutely hyperaware of his ugly, bagging clothes, his big, clashing red boots, his wild curly hair that puffed out like a dandelion now it was getting so long. He was ugly and insignificant, they could see it, he could see it in their eyes.

It was too bright, too hot in here. The edges of Izuku’s vision blurred as he tried to breathe past the rock lodged in his chest but it wouldn’t pass, the air would pass. He choked on it, feeling like he was trying to breathe razors.

And on a constant loop, that awful, jeering laughter rang in his ears.

“Izzy?” Marinette coalesced out of the chaos of cross crossing signals like a signal in static. “Are you okay?”
Izuku threw up on her shoes.

*

Marinette spent the rest of the day stewing in secondhand embarrassment for Izuku’s sake. She’d gotten him back to the bakery and handed him off to the warm listening ears of Sabine, but all she’d been able to do was stand there, fidgeting awkwardly so she’d just gone back to school.

The feeling of helplessness gnawed at her.

“I don’t know why she’s so upset,” Chloe whispered in a way that could be heard in the next province. “I mean, her shoes have never looked better than that!”

Marinette scowled at her notebook, ignoring the other girl lest she end up doing something that she doubted she’d regret. To make matters all the worse, Izuku’s panic attack had happened in front of a bunch of people he’d have been in class with. She had no idea where his head was right now, but if that had been her, she’d certainly never want to show her face in public ever again.

“Hey, at least a stomach bug will get better,” Alya told Chloe snidely. “There’s no cure for what’s wrong with you.”

Chloe scoffed at her but was spared the effort of having to retort by the lunch bell ringing.

“Thanks Alya,” Marinette murmured as she followed her friends out of the classroom. “It’s probably better that everyone thinks it’s a stomach bug, really.”

“Yeah, okay,” Nino came up on her other side. “But what actually did happen back there? I’ve never seen anyone go that colour before.”

Marinette slumped. “Izuku didn’t have a great time of it at his old school. There were bullies and stuff.”

Nino’s face shut down. “Oh. You mean like…” he waved a hand.

“Yeah,” Marinette nodded, eyes dark. “Like that.”

Alya looked between the two of them. “Uh… did I just miss an entire part of that conversation?”

Marinette shook her head to clear it. “We knew he’d had a hard time. We shouldn’t have rushed him! Why did we think it would help?” she despaired.

“He didn’t want to come?” Alya asked.

“No, he wanted to,” Marinette replied. “He said he did.”

“Where, there you go then,” Alya said sensibly. “You weren’t dragging him in here, girl. He had a bad reaction and that’s awful, but you didn’t force him. It’s not your fault. Heck, it’s not his fault either. The Izuku I’ve been teaching is, like, super duper enthused about learning everything. Of course he’d want to come to school. Maybe he thought he was ready but just overreached a bit.”

“But that’s the thing, Alya,” Marinette lamented. “I think he was forcing himself to want to. And we all swallowed it because it meant he’d be out in the bakery, doing normal stuff. We all worry about him hiding in his room all the time, stuck inside his head. We were so glad he looked like he was in recovery that we just took it all at face value, and now look,” Marinette waved her hands, nearly knocking a drink off Alix’s tray as the other girl barrelled past. “He’ll never want to come
“It’s not that bad,” Alya said soothingly.

“Alya, Chloe saw what happened to him,” Marinette hissed, glaring at the oblivious girl in question. “She’s going to bring it up every time she sees him now. You know how vicious she is. I can barely stand her and Izuku… Izuku’s fragile.”

“Izuku,” Alya poked her. “Is a lot more together than you think. Once he gets over his nerves, nothing phases him. It took him a week with me to master correct pronunciation. All we had to do was stop making him so shy about speaking. You should bring him back to try again. I’m sure if we get him over the hump, he’ll love being here. He thrives when he’s learning. We can protect him from the likes of Chloe.”

But Marinette shook her head. She didn’t know a lot about what happened at his old school but the little, sketchy details she did know were bad enough. She had a lot of evidence that it was, unbelievably, even worse than she’d feared. While her experiences couldn’t compare, Marinette did know a little bit what it was like to go to school in a toxic environment and she knew how hard it was to shake that off, especially when you Quirkless. When you were forever hampered by the tiny, nagging thought that you were nothing special.

“I doubt whether he’ll want to try again, Alya,” she said dully. “I wouldn’t blame him for it. This was his chance to make a fresh start, but now he’s probably scared it’s just going to be more of the same. I mean, would you want to come back if it was you?”

Alya grimaced. “I wouldn’t want to, I guess.”

“Right, and that’s you. Izuku is not very confident around people as it is.”

Nino had been silent up to this point, but now he slowly spoke up. “You know my little brother has autism, right?”

Both girls turned on him. “Yeah?” Alya asked, puzzled.

“Well, he has anxiety attacks sometimes too,” Nino explained. “Like, he has sensory issues, he likes routine. He struggles when things change too much too quickly.”

Marinette nodded. “Yeah, but I don’t think Izuku’s autistic,” she said, then added. “Well, maybe not. He does fixate a lot but Chris has problems understanding emotions.” She knew this from all the times she babysat the kid. He was only on the very mild end of the spectrum, but it had led to some really interesting temper tantrums. “Izuku seems to understand what he feels just fine.”

“I’m not saying he’s autistic,” Nino replied. “I’m saying that he’s having anxiety attacks and sensory overload, like Chris. When Chris needs to be introduced to something big and new, we kind of have to,” Nino made a chopping motion. “Break it up into manageable little bits. Like when he started preschool. We didn’t just take him there on the first day. He took him there before school even started, so we could get used to the building and the classroom. Then we had his therapist give him, like, fake lessons and assignments while in the classroom, so he got used to the routine of it. Then we started introducing other students into it. Like, we got him into class bit by bit, not all at once. You can’t force someone to get over an anxiety barrier, Alya. You kind of have to… inch over it slowly.”

Marinette was thoughtful. “So… maybe if we bought Izzy here while the school was empty, say…?”
“Yeah, like that,” Nino grinned. “Like first building, then classrooms, then classmates. Go **slowly**, and each time give him some sort of… positive reinforcement to go with each step. It worked for Chris. The little guy can’t get enough of school now.”

Well, it was an idea, at least.

*

Marinette wisely decided not to bring it up that night. In fact, she left it alone for three whole days, though the idea nibbled way at her attention constantly. She wasn’t sure what she could say or when she should say it. She lived in mortal terror of making Izuku feel worse.

On Thursday they had Aikivate class again and they made their way to the dojo. This was really the first chance they’d had to really talk since the school incident. Izuku had withdrawn again, though not as bad as the last time. Marinette was beginning to get a grip on the scale that Izuku’s moods bounced up and down on. At least he was still showering this time.

“I’m really sorry,” Izuku mumbled as they went, red as Ladybug’s suit. “About your shoes.”

“Oh Izzy,” Marinette said. “I told you, I don’t give a single speck of dust for my shoes. I’ve got too many already, just ask my dad!”

“Yes, I know,” Izuku replied. “I’m still sorry. I thought I could handle it.”

Marinette felt a well of guilt open up inside her. “I’m sorry too,” she murmured, making Izuku look up. “We shouldn’t have pushed so hard. You didn’t have to go that day if you didn’t feel like it.”

“No!” the snapped response startled her. “You can’t… you shouldn’t treat me like that!”

“Like what?” Marinette replied, baffled by the sudden mood swing.

“Like… like I’m **useless**!” Izuku burst out. “Like I’m not capable, like it’s inevitable that I’ll mess up! I’m **sick** of hearing it!” He ran ahead then, leaving Marinette gaping after him.

Feeling her chest crimp inwards, Marinette opened her purse. “Oh Tikki,” she moaned. “I think I just made everything worse!”

“Izuku is struggling Marinette. He’s in pain,” Tikki assured her. “People in pain lash out. It rarely has to do with what they **claim** the problem is. There’s always a deeper layer underneath that. Besides, you know what he’s talking about, right?”

Marinette blinked. “…No?”

“Oh Marinette,” Tikki had this look she got when Marinette was being silly. “Of course you do. Haven’t people made you feel that way too because you’re Quirkless? That you’re incapable?”

Tikki was right, Marinette decided as she walked the rest of the way to the dojo. Hadn’t an entire parade of teachers and sports coaches and random adults always heaped praise on her, which had all been fine until they uttered the killing words ‘…in spite of your disadvantage?’ She laughed it off now but there had been days when she’d felt like the most talentless, burdensome kid on earth because it felt like they were praising a toddler for existing. She never felt disadvantaged until people made a big song and dance about how she was to them.

Marinette winced. Yeah, she could see how Izuku might be sick of people telling him it was okay to be fragile when he was working so hard at being strong. It seemed to imply what he was doing
Izuku was anxiously waiting outside the dojo, looking very upset. “I’m sorry,” he said tearfully. “I’m really, really sorry, I-"

“It’s okay,” Marinette cut him off. “Everyone one used to do that to me too and I hated it. I should have remembered.”

Izuku nodded, damp and miserable.

His shrivelled up body language stayed through their warm up jog though, where he tripped and stumbled and had a far worse finishing time than last time. A ray of sunshine poked through the clouds, though, when he was helped through the last lap by a portly, extremely sweaty gentlemen who stuck by him the whole way.

“Thanks,” Marinette said fervently when the man delivered a wheezing Izuku back to her. “For helping him.”

“Oh, it was the least I could do,” the man replied cheerfully, face almost purple with exertion and wearing, even in Marinette’s very generous opinion, the most garishly ugly workout suit in existence. It was mostly blazing, fluorescent yellow. “He was so helpful on my first day here, you know.”

“Oh, it’s you!” Izuku exclaimed once he could draw breath.

Marinette recognised him now. He was the straggler they’d ended up yelling encouragement to on Monday.

“It meant a lot to me that you did that, kid,” the man wheezed. “It made me feel welcome here. Laredo Rance, at your service.”

Izuku had looked stunned for a second, before cracking a tentative smile. “I’m Izuku.”

“Marinette,” Marinette added when he offered his meaty ham hand to her.

“We gotta stick to it, right?” Laredo grinned. “Helps that we’re sticking to it together.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Izuku nodded shyly.

The Professeur called them over for stretches before taking them through katas and practice moves. He then split the class into small groups so they could try out their punching technique; his teaching aides all took over a group and they rolled out funny looking punching dummies with digital screens for heads, so students could measure their starting punch force.

Izuku and Marinette ended up in the Professeur’s group and Marinette had to admit their results were pretty dismal. Marinette was terrified of breaking the dummy so she was flailing wildly and getting pretty low scores as a result. Izuku, whom their sensei had instructed to do an open handed strike with his palm, wasn’t faring much better.

Half an hour of gentle instruction meant that the students were showing some progress by the end, but the cousins were not a part of the trend. In the end, the Professeur shooed off the other students in their group to go and join the rest doing cool-down katas and looked over the sheepish pair sternly.

“Sit.”
They sat. Something about the way the huge man said things, even mildly, made defiance impossible.

The Professeur sat two, long legs folded neatly into a lotus while he regarded them with his penetrating, dark gaze. “Do you know what the philosophy of this dojo is?”

“Um…” Izuku spoke up. “Discipline and peace?”

“Correct,” the Professeur nodded. “One of the first and most important lessons you will learn here is to make this space and time a place of peace. In order to find that peace, you must show the mental and emotional discipline of being in this place and in this moment, and not bring any of your troubles outside into it. You two are not focusing today. You are not showing discipline.”

“It’s only our second lesson!” Marinette protested.

“Peace is not a rank you obtain,” the Professeur replied. “You start in that state and then learn to maintain it. Tell me what is making you struggle to focus; I will help you to correct your application of discipline.”

Did he want an alphabetical list? Marinette worried about school, about the next akuma attack, about her love for Adrien never being reciprocated, Izuku’s mental health and dozens upon dozens of other things. She was practically fuelled by worry.

“When you strike the dummy,” the Professeur continued. “What are you thinking of instead of the strike?”

Marinette said. “Breaking it,” the same instant that Izuku said “Yelling at Rin.”

They looked at each other.

“Hn,” the Professeur turned a look in Izuku, who flinched. “You yelled at her. Why?”

“Um… I tried to go to school a couple of days ago,” Izuku admitted in a small voice. “I thought I could handle it but I vomited all over Rin-chan instead.”

“And so you yelled at her?”

“I…” Izuku faltered.

Marinette opened her mouth to defend him but the Professeur held up a hand. Let him speak.

“Everyone was being so nice about it,” Izuku stared at his hands. “It felt like…”

“They were showing compassion?” the Professeur finished for him. “Which you might have mistook for pity. That is your error in discipline; allowing your negative memories to affect your judgement. If she has told you that she does not think badly of you, then perhaps instead of flagellating yourself, you should believe her. I’m sure if your roles were reversed, you wouldn’t lower your expectations of her.”

Izuku gaped at him. “Y-Yes. I suppose so.”

“You should not show people who do you a kindness disrespect, Midoriya,” the Professeur told him sternly. “Kindness is worthy and should be treated as such. I’m sure in forgiving you, Dupain-Cheng has forgotten it. She has chosen to make peace. You should show her the same courtesy. You must not cling to negative things so much. Learn from them and then let them go. Holding on
to them is holding you back.”

Chastened, Izuku bowed. “Yes, sensei.”

“He’s allowed to feel what he feels,” Marinette defended him.

“He may do that but still control what he does with those feelings, Dupain-Cheng. In fact,” the Professuer raised an eyebrow at her. “I think he is here because he wants that. If he wishes to learn to deal with failure in a healthy way, then what else is anyone around him supposed to do but tell him when he is not doing so?”

Izuku shrugged and nodded when she looked at him. Well, okay. Marinette might not like the Professuer singling Izzy out like this but she could see the point he was trying to make.

“And you,” the Professuer turned his gaze on Marinette. “Are afraid of breaking the dummy? Why? It is there to be broken.”

Marinette sighed. She was afraid she’d break it in ways that couldn’t be explained by Quirkless genes. “I’m really clumsy.” She said instead.

“So?” the Professuer challenged her. “I say again, it is there to be broken. You are here to learn how to trust your body, to map it’s limits, to control it. You won’t do that by being too afraid to move. If it breaks, it breaks. Then I will teach you how not to break it.”

Marinette nodded. “Alright. I’ll try.”

They rose again and faced the dummy.

“Remember,” the Professuer said as Izuku lined up. “You are here and nowhere else. There are no other problems for you to solve right this minute but striking the dummy as hard as you can. Before you start, close you eyes and take a deep breath. When you open them, the dummy should be the only thing that exists in the world.”

The teachers bass rumble was hypnotic. Izuku closed his eyes, chest swelling up with air, then opened them and…

SLAM!

“Wow, look at that score!” Marinette crowed. “Good job, Izzy!”

It had been very impressive and very meticulously aimed. Izuku shook off the sting in his hand and beamed. The Professuer’s expression didn’t change, but he waved Izuku aside which meant he was happy with the result.

Next, Marinette lined up her shot. She did what Izuku had done, closed her eyes and took a breath. If it breaks, it breaks, she told herself. She may not even have to explain it. It may not even be questioned.

She opened her eyes and…

SLAM!

The dummy when down like a tree, knocked off it’s stand but the digital head still pulled up an impressive score. The rest of the class broke out into spontaneous applause at spectacle, Mr Rance adding a loud. “Good one, Marinette!” to the din.
Marinette felt elated. She hadn’t broken it! For once, her body had done exactly what she wanted it to do.

“Discipline,” the Professeur nodded. “And peace.”

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“Izzy,” Marinette spoke up quietly while they walked back from the dojo. They were euphoric from the exercise and their first real measurable progress, so this was probably the best time. “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

Izuku looked at her strangely. “Yes?”

“Anything, Izzy,” Marinette persisted. “If you had told me you felt nervous about going to school, we could have tried something different. I wouldn’t have thought less of you.”

Izuku flushed. “I didn’t tell anyone because I was trying to convince myself I could do it. It was like if I said it, then I’d be admitting I’d never get there. I want to get there. I want to go to school again, Rin.”

“Hey, even if you said you were scared to do it, we still would’ve tried,” Marinette pointed out. “But at least that way I would have known what to look for if it went, you know, sideways. I know it’s hard to admit you need help, especially when you’re Quirkless. I know, Izzy, better than anyone. When I say I want to help you, you know I’m not saying it because I think you’re incapable. I know exactly how capable and creative a Quirkless person can be. What I’m trying to say is,” Marinette ran her hands through her hair, feeling clumsy and ineloquent. “Even if you don’t want to talk to anyone else about it, you can always come to me. I won’t – I can’t – judge you because you’re Quirkless. Okay?”

Izuku looked surprised, then his face turned thoughtful. “Alright,” he said finally. “I promise I’ll talk. But Rin, you can’t be afraid to tell me things you think I can’t handle hearing. Maybe I can’t, but that’s how I’ll learn, won’t I? If I can be honest with you, then I have to trust that you will be honest back. And if I’m being nasty and snapping at you, don’t just tell me that’s okay. It’s not okay, and I should know that.”

“Fine,” Marinette poked him in the forehead then shook an admonishing finger at him. “You were rude, don’t do it again! Okay?”

Izuku cracked a smile. “I won’t.”

“Great! Now let’s go to the bakery and talk with my parents,” Marinette lead the way to the shop. “My friend Nino had a great idea for getting you in the door.”

* 

Which is how they ended up at Marinette’s school on a Saturday, when it was mostly empty.

The school was kind of open on a Saturday. Sometimes there was an extracurricular class on and the library was open for any local students that wanted to study, but teenagers generally treated the weekend as a sacred, school free zone so it was nice and empty.

This was the third weekend in a row they’d done this. Every Saturday, after their two hour Aikivate class, Marinette and Izuku would head for the school. Keeping to Nino’s carefully dictated strategy, the first time they didn’t even enter the building; they sat on the entrance steps and went through that days Aikivate lesson and what Izuku was learning in his photography course.
The next Saturday they had ventured as far as the courtyard, where Izuku was amazed at the fact that the sports area was in the interior of the school. They’d sat on the benches and done mutual exam cramming together, since Izuku’s exams would be next week and Marinette’s wouldn’t be much later than that. Izuku had even felt comfortable enough to brave the library at the very end of that session where there were actual students also studying. Thanks to exam season, any other kids had been far too involved in their books to notice a stranger. It had gone very well, better than Marinette had hoped.

Today was another milestone. Izuku was going to brave the classroom. Currently empty, of course, but Izuku and the rest of the family – his and Marinette’s – had agreed that if he just sat in there and studied for a while, he could get used to the atmosphere.

Next week would be a big week. Mlle Bustier had agreed to come down to the school to actually meet Izuku. But for now, they’d baby step their way to the classroom.

“It’s really different,” Izuku looked around him with interest.

“Yeah? How?” Marinette perched on the teachers desk, heartened by Izuku’s progress.

“In my old school, everyone had their own little desk,” Izuku ran his hands along the long, two person tables. “You can’t really sit with friends like you would here.”

Marinette wrinkled her nose. In years past she might have seen the benefits of that, but now she loved being able to sit near her friends. “This is just the homeroom, remember. We also learn history and literature in here, because that’s what Mlle Bustier teaches. For math and science we go to Mme Mendeliev’s classroom, for English and Social Studies we go to M. Haprele’s and for art we for to M. Vernet’s room.”

“We don’t do that, either,” Izuku added, sitting down. “Unless we need special equipment, we stay in the room, the teacher is the one who leaves and the new subject’s teacher comes in. And we’re in charge of cleaning the room, too. Mopping and everything.”

“So weird,” Marinette wrinkled her nose. She had a hard enough time cleaning her room.

Izuku chuckled as he set up his laptop. “Yours in weirder. But,” he added thoughtfully. “It’s nice too. My old classroom was very… white. Boring.”

“Well I can promise you this Izzy,” Marinette assured him. “We are never boring around here. Are you sure you’ll be okay? I can check out some books and then come back.”

Izuku waved her off. “I’m okay. It’s peaceful in here. I’m just going to be staring at a screen, it’ll he boring to just sit around and watch me.”

“Okay, well, I’m going to get what I need for the term paper,” Marinette shook her phone at him. “I’m meeting Alya too. When we’re done, we’ll all go get ice cream or something. Or… no, it’s going to rain isn’t it? Cupcakes at the bakery then. See you at two?”

“Two o’clock,” Izuku affirmed, already absently tapping away.

Seeing that he was fine, Marinette left the room and headed for the courtyard.

“Izuku seems a lot more relaxed about being in school now, Marinette,” Tikki called from her purse. “Your strategy is working!”

“It’s people I’m worried about, Tikki,” Marinette sighed as she went down the stairs. “I can make a
“building and a classroom less scary but I can’t make people be nice to Izzy.”

“Most of your classmates are perfectly fine,” Tikki assured her. “You just need to remind him that the few that might not be aren’t worth bothering with. Chloe may be mean, but she does get bored easily. I doubt whether she’ll consider Izuku worth her time.”

“You noticed that too, huh?” Marinette grinned. “You’re probably right. Besides, there’s no one else I’m really worried about. One out of twelve isn’t bad odds.” Suddenly Marinette frowned, hearing laughter and cheering coming from above her.

“What is that noise?” Tikki asked her curiously.

Marinette decided to go and find out.

There were a bunch of people in the library, but none of them were hitting the books. They were gathered around the media area, watching a pair of gamers take on… Mecha Strike III? One of Marinette’s favourite time sinks.

“Alya?” she spotted her friend filming the proceedings. “What’s going on?”

Alya was so into it she didn’t hear Marinette’s question. To be fair, the gameplay looked like it had hit a really intense, life or death place.

“Marinette!” Rose came over, overflowing with enthusiasm. “Isn’t it great? It’s the finals for the Paris Ultimate Mecha Strike III Championship tryouts! They’ve been at this for weeks. I’m surprised you never stopped in before! They’re about to pick the final pair that get to go to the actual tournament.”

Marinette listened with only half an ear. She’d just realised that one of the participants was Adrien and it looked like he was doing really well. _There’s nothing he can’t do_, Marinette thought dreamily.

“It’s actually a tryout to see who get’s to be Max’s partner in the tournament,” Kim loomed up behind them, feathery wings half unfolded with excitement. “No one’s going to beat Max. He’s been grinding away all year to be ready for this.”

But events proved Kim’s prediction false; Adrien was apparently just that good. He took an excellent gamble on low tech Mech with a high resistance rating and wore Max’s superior weaponry down with grit and well placed strikes. He made it under the wire by a thousand points, the rest their class cheering them on.

Max seemed put out by the last minute trounce, but rallied gracefully. “Excellent game. We are sure to be top contenders in the actual tournament.”

“Yeah,” Adrien grinned sheepishly. “Sorry about, you know. I play by myself. A lot. I actually dream in Mecha Strike sometimes, if you can believe that.”

“Oh, I know that feeling,” Max replied. “If there are no other contenders, I think we can apply online for a slot today.”

Marinette felt a surge of adrenaline. Adrien was playing in the tournament. Adrien was the top scoring player at the moment. “So, if anyone beats Max’s score, they’ll go to the tournament with Adrien?” she asked breathlessly.

_Yoink._
Marinette flailed as Alya yanked her sternly into the stacks.

“I see what you’re up to, little miss!” Alya glared at her sternly. “This is a chance for the school to represented at a championship tournament, not a means for you to hook your crush!”

“But Alya!” Marinette hissed. “I could be partnered up with Adrien. When am I ever going to get a chance like that again?”

“Every other school day of the year?” Alya suggested dryly. “It’s not like you haven’t had the chance before, you just,” she waved her hands wildly. “Flail your way out of it.”

“Hey!”

“Sorry, but it is kind of true,” Alya pointed out. “And also? Max has worked super hard on this. Do you think it’s right to just take it away at the last second?”

Marinette was stung by this. “Look, even if I went through with it, whose to say I’d win? If Max is better, then he’ll be the winner, won’t he?”

Alya frowned. “Still, he’s put in the time. You didn’t even know this was happening until ten minutes ago.”

That was true, Marinette couldn’t deny it. She guessed she should resign herself to letting the opportunity go. “Relax Alya. I wouldn’t actually go through with it.”

But as she looked over at the media area, Adrien face alight with triumph in the glow of the screen, looking unearthly and beautiful, the adrenaline hit Marinette again. It felt like she was on fire.

There was no guarantee that she’d win. So there was no harm in trying, right?

Right?

*

Izuku packed up his laptop and workbooks into his shoulder bag. He was studied out.

Haane, who’d been snoozing in his jacket pocket, stirred as he moved. “Ready to do your breathing exercises?”

“Yeah, we should,” Izuku nodded.

The breathing exercises were Haane’s idea. She cajoled him into doing them as part of his routine every time he started something and every time he finished it. She maintained that if he made it a habit, he would start to do them instantly whenever circumstances around him changed, thereby giving him a means with which to handle sudden shifts in his environment when they inevitably cropped up.

“Close your eyes and take three deep breaths,” Haane nodded.

Izuku did so.

“Where are you now?”

“Rin-chan’s classroom.”

“And how did you get here?”
“I walked across and down the street from the bakery, through two wooden doors, through a courtyard, up a flight of stairs and two doors along the mezzanine,” Izuku recited, and took another three breaths.

“And how will you leave?”

“I’ll go through the door and close it behind me. I’ll walk past two doors and down eighteen steps into the courtyard. I’ll wait for Rin-chan there.” Three deep breaths.

“Is there anything dangerous you should be aware of?”

Izuku thought about it and replied. “Nothing I can’t handle.” Three deep breaths.

“Good. The let’s go!” Haane chirped cheerfully, settling back into his pocket.

“You know, we could just claim you’re a bird with a Quirk,” Izuku offered as they left the classroom and shut the door behind them. “You wouldn’t have to hide in my pockets all the time. Or nest in my hair.”

“That,” Haane replied. “Would be dangerous. After all, Hawk Moth knows what a kwami looks like and when humans find power they seldom stop when they see more to take.”

Izuku nodded as they walked down the mezzanine. “You’re right. That would be a huge risk. I wonder if...arg!”

His shoulder bag slipped from his shoulder and tumbled onto the stairs. When Izuku tried to grab it, the strap tangled around the bag and flipped it upside down.

A rain of pens, pencils and notebooks spilled out.

Izuku hastily snatched his laptop before it went, almost flailing himself into headlong fall down the stairs in the process. Cursing, he shoved the laptop back in and then scrabbled for various other items that now littered the stairs. Pens, textbooks and notes were all hastily shoved back into place, as well as his phone. He took inventory and then started scanning the staircase again. His Ladybug notebook was missing.

Oh, there it was! Izuku spotted it hiding in the shadows under the stairs. It must have slipped through a gap in the floating risers.

Sighing, he went down to collect it. Honestly, he hoped the Aikivate could do something about his brain going twenty directions at once at any given time, Marinette claimed that’s what her body did to her and that’s why Aunt Sabine signed her up.

He hopped down the last few risers and swung around towards his notebook, laying askew in the under-stair dust and shadows. “Got you!” Izuku scooped it up triumphantly, turned and then shrieked at the top of his lungs.

The boy who had been huddled under the stairs with earphones in, scribbling in his own notebook, gave an answering shriek as he spotted Izuku in the same moment.

There was a frozen moment where they stared at each other, white eyed and equally petrified.

Then the boy huddled against the stairs backpedalled, slamming hard against the risers, which sent him stumbling forwards into Izuku, who was flailing his hands in panic. They crashed into each other, each losing a bag and a notebook in the collision, the unknown boy landing on his knees and
Izuku falling unceremoniously onto his behind.

Still mid-panic, the strange boy scrabbled for his bag and notebook, snatching them up from the ground and fleeing at speed, leaving Izuku open mouthed and staring after his receding back.

“Izuku? Are you alright?” Haane stuck her head out of the jacket.

“Fine,” Izuku replied, panting madly. “I’m fine. I… I wasn’t expecting to see anyone down here, that’s all.” He bent to retrieve his things, his much abused bag and his- “AAAAHHHH!”

“What? What?”

“My notebook!” Izuku wailed. “This isn’t my notebook! Oh no, I think that other boy has it!”

Izuku looked around frantically for any sign of the mystery boy, but he was already well over the horizon. He slumped.

“He must have grabbed mine by mistake,” Izuku sighed. They were the same brand and about the same size. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Leave it here?” Haane suggested. “I’m sure he’ll come back for it.”

Izuku looked up at the sky. Despite them heading into summer, there was a humid tang to the air. It looked like they would be getting a late spring shower soon. “I can’t do that,” Izuku replied. “If I leave it, it’ll get wet. It’s not under full cover here.” He wondered if there was a lost property office, but then realised it probably wouldn’t be open on a Saturday. He quietly agonised over what he should do.

“Maybe Rin will know who he is,” Izuku muttered. “Or she can find out. There can’t be that many students here with glowing green eyes. She could return it for me.” Anything to avoid the trial of returning it himself.

But what if he was already heading back here? Izuku checked his watch and knew he couldn’t stay. He had to go meet Marinette. She’d be wondering where he was by now.

With no other recourse, Izuku dug a small writing pad out of his bag and a marker. His hands still couldn’t manage lettering very well and he doubted whether anyone who didn’t know him would be able to read anything he wrote. Instead he drew a black rectangle with little lines to show the ring binding, a circular shaped arrow and then, carefully and clearly as he could, two crude hands linked at the pinky fingers.

Book. Return. Promise.

He left it face down, where the plastic backing of the pad would protect it and then went to find Marinette.

He found her by, in fact, slamming into her as she raced down the stairs, out of the library, making a mad break for the exit.

“Izzy, come on, we’ve gotta go!” She seized him and took off in cloud of dust with a bewildered Izuku in tow.

“Hey Marinette, wait!” Alya called behind them.

“Uh, Rin, Alya-chan is-“ Izuku tried.
“No time!” Marinette yelled. “I’ve got to get home and clean my room!”

What?

“What?” Izuku yelped as he was summarily dragged along for the entire wild ride back to the bakery doors until Marinette was forced to stop, panting, before she body slammed the doors.

“Rin-chan, what are you doing?” Izuku demanded when he was sure he could see straight.


Then she was through the bakery doors and up into the apartment.

Izuku sighed. Then he looked down at the notebook he’d unwittingly stolen. “I guess I’ll ask about this later.”

He opened the book. Maybe there was a name on it somewhere.

He blinked as the words Journal of the Ladybug looked back at him.

*  

“This is a disaster!” Marinette frantically ripped photos and magazine covers off her walls while trying to change her screensaver at the same time. “I mean, it’s fantastic, as well as a disaster. It’s a fantastic disaster, Tikki!”

“Marinette,” Tikki soft voice halted her frantic eradication of Adrien’s entire photo history pinned to her walls. “Was it right to do what you did? If you wanted to spend time with Adrien, there were other ways you could have done it.”

“But…” Marinette sat down, hands full of Adrien. “I’ll get to partner with him in the tournament. I have something in common with him. What if he comes over to play more because of this? Can you imagine it? Adrien…” Marinette trailed off dreamily.

“Yes, but,” Tikki persisted. “You don’t care about the tournament itself.”

“Well, no, but I-“

“But Max did care,” Tikki cut in gently. “He cared a lot. He worked hard for it.”

Marinette opened her mouth, then closed it. Then she said slowly “I know that. I’m sorry he lost… but if the tryouts were to find the best player, then he would have won if he was the best, wouldn’t he? I mean, I didn’t cheat. He said I’d won fair and square.”

“You have an advantage that he didn’t,” Tikki pointed out.

“What advantage?” Marinette blinked. “Max’s Quirk is Cypher. He’s literally a codemaker. I don’t have that.”

“You have me.”

Marinette stared at her. Then she looked down at her hands. “But it wasn’t strength-“ she stopped. Ladybug’s powers weren’t just strength. They were reflexes. Marinette felt her heart plummet.

The reflexes came and went like the strength. She could argue that she didn’t know that she’d used
them in the match but she couldn’t prove she hadn’t either. She couldn’t always tell.

“It’s probably not as bad as you’re thinking,” Tikki assured at her Holders stricken look. “Just because you may have that, doesn’t mean your knowledge of the game wasn’t a factor too. It was still, all things added up, a fair match.”

“But you’re right,” Marinette sighed. “I didn’t care. I didn’t even know about it until today.” Marinette suddenly felt pulled in different directions. On one side, there was the opportunity to get some alone time with Adrien, but on the other there was a gnawing guilty thought that she might not have won fairly. What should she do? They’d decided she was going to the tournament; if she forfeited she’d let everybody down. And what about…

“Marinette, there’s someone here to see you!” Sabine called from downstairs.

Marinette and Tikki looked at each other in panic.

“Uh! Ah! Just a minute!” Marinette called back down, her voice shrill. “I’ll… be… right… down!”

She wasn’t just right down. She was ten minutes of sheer panic attack first as her walls were stripped bare and pictures shoved anywhere they’d fit.

She would have taken longer but she could hear murmuring coming from the apartment downstairs and felt an icy spike of dread and what her parents might be telling him. What if they were swapping embarrassing stories? Oh god, what if they brought out Marinette’s baby pictures?!

Marinette flew down to the living room.

“I’m here!” she announced, then winced. That was way too loud. “Uh, sorry, I just had to bit up a clean.” That was much worse. “Clean up! I just had to clean up a bit.”

The situation was deteriorating rapidly, especially when her mother said, with some amusement. “I already like this new friend if he’s actually made you clean your room for a change.”

Oh, holy little gods, kill her. Kill her now.

Adrien was either unaffected or ignoring Marinette’s steaming embarrassment. “Hey Marinette! You ready to get some gaming practice in?”

“T-totally,” Marinette did her best to smile and hoped it wasn’t coming off as stiffly terrified as it felt. Her parents were both looking at her, and him. Marinette didn’t like the speculative look in their eyes. “W-we’ve got a lot of doings to p-uh, practice to do. Let’s just go up to my r-r,” Marinette couldn’t even choke the word out past her blush. “Upstairs,” she finished lamely.

Adrien frowned, causing Marinette to nearly have a heart attack. Had she said something wrong?

“Uh, Marinette?”

“Y-yeah?”

Adrien reached out to her face, causing Marinette’s heart to go off like a triphammer. “You’ve got something stuck here.”

Marinette felt a slight tug of her hair as the sticky tape came off.

It was attached to a picture.
Oh god, Marinette wailed inside as she fell into a black pit of despair and humiliation. Oh god, oh god, oh god oh god ohgodohgodohgodohgod that is not happening. This can’t be happening! Adrien Agreste saw me with a picture of him STUCK TO MY HEAD. And now he’s looking at me weird, oh my god, this is soooo embarrassing. I’ll have to leave school. I’ll have to leave Paris! I’ll have to leave EARTH! I’m going to have to move to Mars and find a rock to live under!

Marinette was surprised there wasn’t steam coming out of her ears, her head felt so hot. She felt like she was going to explode. She hoped she would explode. Exploding would be a merciful fate compared with this!

Then, from out of the pit of despair, her salvation appeared in the form of Izuku. He’d been quietly huddled over his notebook on the sofa when he’d looked up at the long, awkward silence, seen his cousin’s face, and then moved without thinking.

“Oh, good, you found it!” he said loudly and slowly, plucking the photo from Adrien’s hands. “Um… Marinette was going to ask for me because… um, I was embarrassed.” Izuku felt himself going red as well under the group stare he was getting. “Um… could you uh… sign this for me?” he held it out to a bemused but faintly smiling Adrien. “Uh… Choco-Choco was my favourite drink growing up!”

There was a frozen moment before Adrien’s face split into a huge grin. “Wow, I can’t believe anyone even remembers that campaign! That was years ago!”

Izuku gave a wobbly smile. “It was very popular in Japan. Still is,” he added hastily lest their esteemed guest get the impression that he was a has-been.

“Kawaii culture, right?” Adrien said dryly as he signed it. “Choco-Choco Oiishisou! Choco-Choco-“

“Nomimasho!” Izuku finished.

They laughed softly.

Marinette meanwhile had nearly fallen to her knees in relief. Saved by a true hero in true hero fashion; at the very last second.

_I don’t care what it takes_, Marinette swore to the heavens. _Or who I have to bribe, beg to or kill. Izzy gets the moon._

* 

On the other side of the arrondissement, people started fleeing in terror from a floating black pyramid.

Gamer had started to play.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary:
Oiishisou - "Looks delicious"
Nomimasho - "Let's drink!" (literally. If you want the 'cheers' equivalent, the word is 'kanpai!')

Quirk File:

Mylene Haprele
Quirk: Hair Blade

Mylene's multicoloured hair is a mutation quirk. Her hair is actually made of threads of brightly coloured bio-metals woven together. She can grow them up to six feet at will and can also, if she focuses, make them go rigid, turning them into a razor edged slicing weapon that even functions when cut off from her head. Mylene is the only one in the class with the actual, active, combat ready Quirk; somewhat ironically considering her personality. She inherited a mix from her parents; her father can wilfully create a rigidity effect in his bones and muscles using the metals and minerals in his body, allowing him to hold a pose for days without ill effect, and her mother could grow her hair at will. Somehow, they made Mylene.

Mylene almost never uses her Quirk. Also, getting her hair cut is an interesting exercise that involves tin shears and a hairdresser with immensely strong hands.

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