Days Blind

by Reyemile

Summary

When an escaped Akuma leaves Ladybug blinded, Marinette turns to Kagami's expertise with blindness. Kagami may be an ice queen and a rival in love, but she's also Marinette's friend--so with a leap of faith, she'll put her life in her new friend's hands.

Notes

This is a sequel to Blind Days, the first fic in the series. Read that first!

- Inspired by Blindsided by SailorChibi
Chapter 1

“This is a tragedy!” wailed M. D’Argencourt. “One of you I could understand. You are children. You have your ups and downs, your good days and bad. But to see both of you in such poor form? Such lack of energy! Oh, my heart aches for the future of our academy! Finish your match on your own, children. I cannot watch!” With a dramatic flourish, the academy fencing master left his two prize students alone on the piste.

“Sorry, Kagami,” Adrien said. “A friend of mine is in trouble, and it’s eating at me.”

“As our teacher said, there is a lack of effort on both sides,” Kagami answered.

“Should we call it?”

*Yes, end this farce,* Kagami didn’t say. She was done dancing back and forth between the immovable lines of the fencing strip. She wanted to use a sword, not an electronic toy.

She wanted a battle.

And she was facing one of the few people who could give her one.

She disconnected the electronic lead from her back. “I’m sorry for your friend. And I’m sorry that I haven’t been enough of a threat to take your mind off it. I intend to remedy that. You still owe me a definitive match.” She sliced the air in a flourish that was, as Marinette had identified, borrowed from Kung Fu.

Adrien chuckled. “I do owe you that, don’t I,” he said. “I’m still worried about her. But with my pride and honor on the line, I think she’d want me to win.” His own lead dropped to the ground and he assumed a classic low fencing stance.

D’Argencourt was not there, so Kagami shouted “*Allez!*” herself. In a flash, the battle was joined.

She led with a sweeping slash towards Adrien’s head. He countered with an easy block, which Kagami expected, then charged towards her with his heavier body mass, which she did not. Their
foiled locked bell to bell as Adrien pushed her back three steps, but then Kagami moved sideways and redirected him with an Aikidoka’s grace. The two of them leapt backwards at right angles from the strip, both out of bounds.

Neither cared for boundaries.

Blood singing, Kagami launched herself over the strip and back at Adrien. He blocked her flurry thoroughly, though not easily, retreating through two other strips. The other fencers separated with exclamations of mixed anger and awe.

Kagami ignored them. They didn’t matter.

The duel had attracted an audience by the time Adrien had backed up to the third strip, and so a dozen students saw him make his move. Instead of going further backwards, he used the raised surface of the *piste* to launch himself over her lunge and into an overhead strike. She torqued her body so her chest faced the ceiling and blocked; he cartwheeled over her, and she somersaulted backwards. They found their feet simultaneously. Staring one another down, they each waited for the other to make a move, or to show weakness.

Then, in a blur of bamboo and the crack of a *shinai*, and the match ended.

“What is the meaning of this?” thundered Tomoe Tsurugi from where she’d struck the fencing mat.

“Mother--”

“Tsurugi-Sensei--”

“This is a fencing academy,” Mme. Tsurugi lectured, “not a playground. Olympic fencing awards no medals for showboating.

“It was my idea, Ma’am,” Adrien said. The white lie sparked a discomfiting flare-up of emotion in Kagami’s chest. “We were both in low spirits and I wanted to cheer Kagami up. It won’t happen again.
“See that it doesn’t,” replied Tomoe. She inverted her weapon and, using it as a cane, tapped back to a bench at the side of the gymnasium. “Take five minutes to rein yourselves in, then resume your match.”

“Do you need help, Ma’am?” Adrien asked, following behind her.

“I do not. Thank you for your kindness. Kagami, answer your phone.”

Kagami heard the ringing from her bag once she took off her fencing helmet. She walked to her bag, next to her mother’s seat, and checked the caller ID.

“Marinette?” she asked.

“Oh, I didn’t realize you two were friends!” Adrien said. “Put her on speaker!”

_Ugh_, thought Kagami.

Kagami liked Marinette. Kagami _liked_ Adrien. But Kagami absolutely, positively hated ‘Marinette and Adrien’. They brought out the worst in each other—Marinette’s insecure doubts and jealousies, and Adrien’s oblivious naivete.

Unfortunately, she had no polite way to decline.

“Hello, Marinette,” she answered. “I’m at the fencing academy. You are on speaker.”

“Hi, it’s Adrien! I’m here too!”

“A-a-adrien? I’m sad you’re there. Glad! Glad you’re there!”

_Ugh_, Kagami thought again.
“We have minutes before we resume training, Marinette. Do you need something?”

“Oh, right!” Marinette said. “That’s why I called. Not for Adrien! I really need your help, Kagami.”

“*My help?* She has so many friends. I’ll help her, of course, but what does she need from me in particular?

“Yeah,” said Marinette, slowly and nervously. “There was… an Akumatized victim got away from Ladybug earlier today. Her miraculous cure restored everything and everyone damaged by the supervillain, but with the villain still active, civilians who got directly zapped by the villain’s power are still under his influence. And you know me, klutzy Marinette, tripping into the line of fire! So--”

“Oh no,” Adrien gasped. “You’re blind?”

Tomoe’s head snapped up. “*What?*” she said, switching accidentally to Japanese.

“I… yeah, for a few days, until Ladybug can find the villain. I don’t think the story had hit the news networks.”

“Umm…” he scratched the back of his head. “A… friend of mine also got hit? No one you know. Someone I know from my job. My modeling job! Another model. That’s who I was worried about when we were training, Kagami. I didn’t want to say anything because Ladybug doesn’t want to cause a panic about the supervillain in hiding.”

“Oh. I hope your friend has someone to help her, Adrien. Kagami… I know you’re busy and I’ll ask my other friends if you can’t, but… for this problem, there’s no one I’d trust more than you. If there’s any way--”

The elder Tsurugi interrupted. “Are you with your parents right now?”

“Yes, they’re here, fussing over me.”
“Please place your phone on speaker.”

“Umm.” Marinette’s voice quieted as she moved away from the microphone. “Papa, can you put on the speaker?” The mic picked up some sounds of fumbling before Marinette’s voice returned to it’s previous volume. “Okay, we’re on speaker and they’re listening.”

“Madame and Monsieur Dupain-Cheng, I insist you allow Marinette to stay with us until this incident is resolved.”

Adrien’s lips made an ‘o’ of surprise, but Kagami was not affected. Her mother’s stern and unyielding exterior guarded a deeply human core.

“We couldn’t impose—” began M. Dupain, at the same time Mme. Cheng defensively objected: “We are perfectly capable of—”

“Don’t let emotions cloud your judgement,” Mme. Tsurugi asserted. “Monsieur, the education and assistance of the visually impaired is a personal mission of mine. It is no imposition. Madame, care for your daughter would involve cleaning house roof to cellar, staffing assistants and tutors until she is independent, and training yourself to aid her without interfering in her growth. Mlle. Dupain-Cheng, you expect this to pass in a few days?”

“I do.”

“Then you will be cured before your parents are halfway through the necessary preparations.”

“Maman, papa, she’s right,” said Marinette.

“One moment,” said Marinette’s mother. Their voiced switched to distant whispers, the speaker turned off.

Marinette’s father answered a bit later. “Okay. Where shall we take—”

“Our car will arrive at your home in forty-five minutes.”
“...Right. We’ll pack her for an overnight. Will she need anything special?”

“No,” said Tomoe.

“Yes,” Kagami corrected quickly. Her mother turned a blind gaze upon her. “She is not Japanese, mother. Shared baths are not part of her culture. Since she will need help showering, she will require swimwear.”

With a slow nod, Tomoe confirmed. “A wise suggestion, daughter.”


“Umm. Can mom do it? I don’t really… umm…”

Sabine took her turn at laughing. “Don’t really want your father going through your underthings? Tom, leave this one to the ladies. We’ll be back soon. Mme. Tsurugi, we hope to someday repay your generosity.”

“Goodbye, Marinette,” Kagami said.

“See you soon!” she answered, disconnecting.

Tomoe rapped her shinai on the ground. “Since the two of you are wasting today’s training on frivolity, we shall end the day here. Kagami, shower and change quickly. I will be in the car making arrangements with Sato.”

“Yes, mother.”

“And young Mister Agreste?”

“Yes, Tsurugi-sensei?”
“You are a terrible liar.”

Adrien’s jerked his head around, looking for exits. “I’m not sure what you mean?”

“Your model friend. What’s her name?”

“I… um…”

“Where’s she from? What shoots have you done with her? Were any of the photos published?”

“Err… that is…”


Tomoe stood and held her hand at shoulder height. Adrien guided it to his shoulder. “Young man,” the swordmistress said. “I have recently grappled with the futility of exercising absolute control over children. You will rebel. It is your nature. But thrillseeking by chasing down Akuma is too far. There are consequences to rash actions, as the fate of your friend Marinette so aptly demonstrates.”

Adrien swallowed. “Yes, ma’am.”

“I will not tell your father. Not this time. Nor will I waste my breath telling you not to sneak out and watch movies and ruin your diet with your friends. But this is the last time I will overlook anything so dangerous. If this becomes a pattern, I’ll be forced to inform M. Agreste.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Furthermore, I will have no choice but to consider you an unsafe influence on my daughter and restrict your contact with her.”
Adrien squeezed Kagami’s upper arm. “I would never allow that to happen, Ma’am.”

Tomoe dropped her grip on his shoulder and returned it to his staff. “Good.”

“You’re insightful, Tsurugi-sensei,” Adrien said with relief. “I guess you’re like those heroes in the comic books, whose blindness is a blessing in disguise--”

Kagami hissed. Tomoe moved. Her practice sword batted aside both his hand and its point settled under his chin before he could blink.

“Do not trivialize my disability, young brat. I have learned to cope with my blindness. On rare occasions, I benefit from it. But it is a curse, not a ‘blessing.’ Don’t dare quote your foolish comics at me ever again!” Then, she ducked and slashed at the back of his knees, sending Adrien ass-first onto the floor.

The disruption to classes escalated, and M. D’Argencourt could no longer ignore it. “Mme. Tsurugi, are you all right? I heard shouting, and see my students in disarray--”

“Armand, please see me to my car?” She sounded tired, Kagami thought. She offered her elbow, and D’Argencourt took it.

Adrien remained seated until the two adults had exited the building. “Okay, I know exactly why what I said was stupid.”

“Good,” Kagami said.

“I also understand if you have to kick my ass and explain why it was stupid, just to be sure.”

“Good,” Kagami repeated.

“But isn’t it weird that she’d tell me not to quote comic books and then go straight into kicking my ass with a bunch of comic book moves? Like, blind people can’t do that, right?”
“It is a closely guarded family secret.”

Adrien smiled. Two weeks ago, the smile would have melted her. Even today, it warmed her soul. “Can you give me a hint?”

“I cannot.” She turned her back on him, walking stiffly to the showers.

*I cannot because she guards her secrets even from me,* Kagami thought bitterly. She stripped off her fencing jacket and tossed it violently aside. *I cannot teach what I have been found unworthy of learning.*
Due to a family emergency, the bakery will be closed this afternoon. We will reopen at 0500 tomorrow morning. Thank you for your understanding!

The message was handwritten on plain white paper and taped to the door of the Dupain-Cheng residence. A second sheet below it displayed a string of Chinese characters. About half of them were also used in Japanese; Kagami deduced it conveyed similar meaning.

She knocked. A large mustachioed man appeared in the window, satisfying Kagami’s curiosity as to which half of Marinette’s ancestry was ‘Dupain’ and which was ‘Cheng.’ He opened the door. “Mlle. Tsurugi? Welcome, welcome! I’m Tom Dupain. Marinette has been waiting for you.” Her fingers couldn’t wrap around his palm when he shook her hand.

“Come, come. The girls are upstairs. Can I get you anything? We shut down as soon as Marinette got here, so we have plenty of unsold stock.”

Her mother would have expected her to say ‘no.’ But her mother would normally be leaving her at calligraphy lessons right now, so any criticism of a broken routine rested on shifting ground. She scanned the glass cases and white shelves for something small and crumbless. “Sesame buns?”

Tom grinned. “Sabine’s specialty. Help yourself!”

“One is plenty,” she answered with a small smile.

He split from her side, directing her to a small staircase behind the register while he hastily assembled a small pastry box. He used a thin tissue to grab two buns, set them in the box, and easily caught up to her with his great strides.

Kagami’s stomach rumbled slightly. She should have had a protein booster of nuts and cheese at 1600. It was now 1630. She swallowed the first bun nearly whole, then daintily nibbled at the second.

The living floor of the Dupain-Cheng house was well-cared for but showed obvious signs of age. To Kagami, this was logical; in a city such as Paris, such prime real estate could only be a bakery as part of a historic legacy. The dark hardwood floors were worn dull, and new paint covered old
divots and dents in the door frames.

“Marinette,” Tom bellowed. “Your friend is here!”

“Hi Kagami!” She was perched on the edge of her parents’ king bed next to her mother, who was rubbing her daughter’s hand between her own.

Kagami stopped dead. “Your eyes--”

Marinette clamped her eyelids shut, but Kagami had already seen the whole bedroom, including M. Dupain and herself, reflected in her perfectly silvered eyes. “Sorry that it looks so freaky. My room’s a mess and my parents couldn’t find my sunglasses.”

“We have plenty,” Kagami said. “And we should take a selfie once we get to my estate. You will want to see how you look once Ladybug fixes you. It’s fascinating.”

“Alya said the same thing,” said Marinette. “She made me video-chat her. I gave her permission to post stills to the Ladyblog after the Akuma is de-evilised.”

“I’d like to hear more about your friends. You can tell me about her on the way.” Kagami backed up out the door, clearing the path. “We have a lot to do.”

“Right.” Marinette inhaled through her nose. “Mom, will you please help me get downstairs? Dad, can you grab my bag?”

“Of course dear,” said Sabine.

Sabine rose to her feet still holding Marinette’s hand. Looking back and forth between her daughter and the door, she gently tugged the teen to her feet, standing in front of her to guide her towards the exit.

In other words, her technique was all wrong.
Kagami was moving before Marinette’s foot had clipped the corner of her suitcase, and had her back upright before she could finish saying “whoa!” Kagami frowned wordlessly at Sabine. Then she pressed her shoulder against Marinette’s, entwined their elbows, and guided her friend to the door. “We’re walking through the bedroom. There’s a raised jamb in the doorway in three, two, one. Right turn into the hall. Steady for a bit. Stairs ahead, rail on the right, waist height.”

Sabine had followed close behind them. “You’re good at this,” commented the downcast elder.

“I have had time to learn, Mme. Cheng. The stairs turn left in three steps, two, one. Three more steps to the bottom.”

Marinette stopped once she was on flat ground. “Maman, you don’t have to prove anything to me. I know that if this were permanent you’d learn as fast as humanly possible. But right now, you don’t know what you’re doing. Kagami does. There’s nothing wrong with getting help from experts, especially when they’re also friends.”

“Of course, dear,” her mother answered, wiping a tear from her eye. “Kagami, would you kindly pass on my apologies to your mother? Doubting her was foolishly prideful.”

“I shall,” she said.

The rest of their exit was thankfully drama-free, with tearful rote goodbyes at the patisserie door and again through the rolled-down window of their departing car. Marinette waved for a long time. Kagami had to tell her that her parents were no longer in eyeshot.

“Mme. Tsurugi,” Marinette said. “I can’t tell you how much this means to me.”

“Think nothing of it,” Tomoe said. “I have done this before. I will do it again. And your case is easier than most. You are noticeably more composed than most of my beneficiaries.”

“Last Tuesday I would have panicked.” Marinette slid her arm across the seat until she found Kagami’s knee. “But after last Wednesday, I can stop myself from screaming and flailing by asking myself ‘what would Kagami do.’”

“She is a Tsurugi,” Tomoe replied.
Unsure which compliment was more meaningful, Kagami let her cheeks burn.

“We have a cot made in Kagami’s room. To aid your navigation, her wing has been closed off except for your room, the bath, and an entertainment room with a sound system and a treadmill. My daughter and my staff will see you anywhere else in the house you need to go.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Marinette, instinctually deferring to Mme. Tsurugi’s commanding presence.

“Kagami, I have cancelled your afternoon and evening classes. See to it that your friend acclimates to her surroundings. Dinner is at 1830. You and I will have our evening practice at 2030.”

“Yes, mother.”

“I will make allowances for the first time you have a friend stay overnight, but I expect silence by no later than 2230.”

“Yes mother.”

“And remember, she is your guest. Do whatever it takes to make her comfortable.”

From how Marinette had shrunk down in her seat, Kagami judged that the best way to keep Marinette comfortable would be for her mother to shut up. She gave that thought no voice.

Tatsu, the car’s automated navigator, languorously turned a curve. Tomoe inserted an earbud and readied the other.

“Mother, may I tell you something?” said Kagami.

Tomoe removed the earpiece. “Daughter?”

“I am no longer interested in…”
She choked.

Marinette squeezed her knee. It was an offer of strength. Yet, the strength she lent was insufficient.

Kagami had countless excuses at her fingertips. Subjecting Marinette to mother’s explosion would be wrong. Giving up fencing could cost her the lessons she did value. Adrien alone was worth the Olympic facade.

But ultimately, no excuse would free her from the shame of her own weakness.

Marinette squeezed again.

*I can’t say it now, Kagami thought. But I can lay groundwork. A fight is won or lost from the stance. First, find footing. Strike only when balanced and sure.*

“I’m no longer interested in calligraphy,” she said.

Marinette’s silvered eyes fluttered in confusion.

“I’m glad you told me,” Tomoe said. She was weighing her words carefully. She’d forgotten her time as Ikari Gozen, but she had not forgotten getting lost in anger. “You’re old enough now to make your own choices. However, I will see you versed in our ancient heritage. Perhaps *koto* would suit you better? Or *ikebana*?”

“May I have time to consider my options?”

“Give your decision by dinner tomorrow.” Tomoe replaced her earbuds, settled in her chair, and was lost to the world.

“What’s *koto*?” Marinette asked.
“A stringed instrument.” Kagami didn’t whisper, but she kept her voice low. “A reasonable suggestion. *Ikebana* is flower arrangement.”

“Flowers? That doesn’t seem very… you.”

Laughter came easier every day to Kagami. “It is not.”

Marinette joined the laughter, though with less energy and more restraint. She touched her right eye with her finger. “This is… this is going to work out, right?”

“Yes,” said Kagami. “Ladybug will hunt down the Akuma. Until she does, you will live comfortably and independently. Blindness is limiting, but not crippling.”

“Thanks. For everything.”

“I’m sorry I can’t do more.”

“You’re taking me into your home. What else could you be doing?”

“Ryuuko could be hunting down the villain that did this to you.”

Marinette turned to look at Kagami on reflex. But her mirrored eyes saw nothing, so she closed then and leaned her head back on the headrest. “Being a hero affected you deeply, didn’t it?”

“It did,” Kagami sighed. “I… I may ask mother if I can study Japanese mysticism in place of calligraphy. Our folklore is filled with demon hunters and exorcists.”

“And blind wizards?” Marinette offered weakly.

“Those too. My eyes will not keep me from my goal.”
“Oh, god,” Marinette said, burying her face in her hands. “It’s terrifying enough having one friend chasing akuma through the streets.”

“Alya, yes? The friend of yours that you mentioned. She was on the news recently?” Kagami asked.

“Yeah,” Marinette said. “I’m so proud of her even though she drives me crazy. The things she does for the Ladyblog--its insane!”

“Tell me about her,” Kagami said. She settled into her chair and listened. For the whole ride home, Marinette talked, at ease with her new friend.
Chapter 3

“So. Now what?” Marinette asked.

The tour of their living space was over quickly. Kagami’s room was sparsely decorated, and the “entertainment room” consisted of a voice-controlled television, two armchairs, and a treadmill. The longest part of the tour was the bathroom, where Marinette had almost broken down when she’d needed help to use the facilities. Kagami had barely talked her off the precipice of tears.

So now, they idled listlessly in Kagami’s room. They had an hour and a quarter until dinner. And Kagami was not good at ‘hanging out.’

“What would you normally be doing at this time of day?’

“Homework,” Marinette said. “But I can’t read or write. Or work on my next design project, but I can’t draw or sew.”

“And if you had no commitments?” Kagami asked.

“Go for a walk. But I’m too clumsy to leave the house like this.”

The situation was spiralling out of Kagami’s control. It made her feel helpless—not that her helpless feelings compared to Marinette’s—but ‘comfort’ and ‘sympathy’ weren’t her strong suits. Her only relief was that with an Akuma still possessing whoever had blinded Marinette, the blue-haired girl wouldn’t attract a butterfly herself.

“I’d play video games, but I can’t see the screen, obviously. Maybe I’d bake, if the ovens were free, but I can’t--”

An opening! “You can,” Kagami said. “Come with me to the kitchens.”

“Kagami.” Marinette was splayed across her cot, limp and lifeless. A pair of sunglasses, borrowed from Kagami’s mother, hid whether her eyes were open or closed. “I’m imposing on you enough without destroying your cookware and setting your house on fire. It’s sweet of you to offer, but--”
“Marinette, I think I was not clear,” Kagami said. “I was not offering. I’m breaking this cycle of despair, whether you like it or not. Walk with me to the kitchens or be carried. Your choice.”

“Eep!”

-----

Marinette was in an unfamiliar home surrounded by unfamiliar people, and she began the achingly slow journey to the kitchens with a painful grip on Kagami’s arm. But once she’d made it the whole way down the stairs without tripping, thanks in part to a pair of hideous orange rubber-soled socks, the fires of her self-confidence began to rekindle. The circulation in Kagami’s fingers was restored by the time they got to the kitchens.

Kitchens, plural, was the correct descriptor. The first of the two was the personal kitchen, appearing not unlike what one would see in a modern apartment. It was small, almost cozy, featuring white tile and white cupboards topped by gray marble. A selection of pots and pans hung from ceiling racks, and a sleek modern oven gleamed under harsh white lighting.

The personal kitchen was almost unused, because the real work was done through the swinging double doors that led to the staff kitchen. The dingy steel room wouldn’t have been out of place in a small restaurant, with four ranges and four ovens waiting for an army of chefs to prepare for social gatherings.

But no army was present today. M. Mori-Thibodeau, the Tsurugi personal chef and sole occupant of the staff kitchen, stuck his white-hatted head through the doors.

“Mlle. Tsurugi,” he said, chubby cheeks and pencil mustache wobbling. “You know your mother does not allow you in the kitchen. Shoo, shoo! I cannot supervise you and prepare suitable supper for your guest!”

“You can be a good host anywhere else in the house, my lady, but not in my kitchen! Mme. Tsurugi has laid down the rules. As her loyal chef, I follow them. Go, go!” He gestured dismissively with fat fingers.
Doubt creased the smooth skin of Marinette’s face.

“I’m still beside you,” Kagami said softly. Having alerted Marinette to her presence again, she draped an arm over her shoulders. “I apologize. I thought that--”

Marinette’s lips tightened into a line of steel. “Play along,” she whispered.

Then she collapsed, wailing.

“I… I just wanted to make mom’s cookies!” she sobbed. “I miss home already, and I might not be able to see my mom for months! But I can’t even have that, can I?”

Kagami’s quick reaction time lagged behind this sudden turn of events, and Marinette silenced the chef’s first round of objections with a loud, wordless cry. Fortunately, Kagami was no fool, and she got on board before Mori-Thibodeau could speak again.

“It will be okay, Marinette,” she soothed. To her own ears, she sounded terribly artificial. The chef seemed not to notice. “I’ll lie you back in your bed. Dinner is coming up soon. Another hour of dark, lonely silence won’t hurt.”

“No,” Marinette sobbed overdramatically. “Don’t wake me for dinner. Just let me waste away in silent darkness until I wither and decay!”

“Mademoiselles!” begged the overwhelmed cook. “Please, please! I’d help if I could, but if your mother knew I permitted you in the kitchen--”

“You are preparing dinner, an exacting task requiring your full attention,” Kagami said with as straight a face as she could. “How could anyone require you to notice two girls sneaking behind your back?”

“I--”
“Please,” said Marinette, moving for the kill. She removed her sunglasses, and the sight of her mirrored eyes blanched the ruddiness from the chef’s fat cheeks. He gasped, and Marinette pressed on. “I… I want to remember what it’s like to be home. Please, Monsieur Chef?”

Her acting was skilled enough to include real tears. They, too, were quicksilver, leaving metallic trails down to her chin.

“I…” He stopped, then sighed and pinched his nose. “I’m going to go simmer reductions to prepare a few days’ meals. I take it on faith that you two girls will listen to your mother, and not take advantage of my work to do something behind my back. And I’m sure, since you two are leaving as soon as I close this door, that I won’t find a speck out of place when I return from serving dinner. Yes?”

“Of course, Monsieur,” Kagami said with a straight face.

He disappeared into his kitchen. The girls stayed quiet, waiting for the roar of flames and the hiss of simmering liquids to grant the chef his plausible deniability.

Then, they broke down laughing.

“I… I’m totally amazed that that worked!” Marinette said between chuckles.

“‘Wither and decay’ was poetic,” laughed Kagami. “I can’t believe I did that. Disobedience shouldn’t be this fun.”

“Yeah.” Marinette let out a final, wistful ‘ha,’ then rested her chin on her hands. “I have no clue how you think I’m going to do this, though.”

Kagami’s answer was to hunt through several drawers until she found a kitchen scale. She placed the device, black plastic with a silver disc, on the marble in front of Marinette. “Let me move your hand,” she said. She extended Marinette’s index finger and put its tip on a button. “Three dots down the left, one on the bottom right. This is ‘V,’ for ‘Voice.’ Press.”

Marinette did so, and the scale spoke. “Zero Grams.”
Kagami moved Marinette’s finger one step over. “A square of four dots. ‘G,’ for grams. Top and bottom on the right, and middle left. ‘O,’ for English ounces.”

“I’m completely lost.” Marinette took her finger back and hugged herself, hiding her hands under her arms. “The whole dots thing. I can barely feel anything. I don’t think this is going to work.”

“They’re quite pronounced,” Kagami said. “Even a novice should be able to feel them.”

“I guess I’m worse than a novice, then. You’re giving me too much credit.”

“Maybe. Or… hold your hands out. Both of them, palm up.”

With a heaving sigh, Marinette complied. “Here.”

In seconds, Kagami realized her mistake. “In fact, I gave you too little credit,” she said.

Marinette tilted her head curiously. “Huh?”

“The worth of a woman can be measured by her calluses,” Kagami explained. She was not one for emoting wildly, but she tried to let her respect come through in her voice. “How many times have you sewn your fingers bloody?”

“I lost count years ago,” Marinette said.

“Of course you can’t read with that hand.” Kagami scraped her own rough right fingers across Marinette’s palm. “Like me, you should read with your left.”

“That makes sense.” To Kagami’s ears, Marinette was unconvinced. But she also heard an undercurrent of hope. Marinette wanted was searching for a way out of the fog of low self-esteem. But she needed a guide.

Kagami guided her left hand to the buttons and held it there.
“Four dots,” Said Marinette. “Shaped like an L, but you said that’s ‘V’?”

“Zero grams,” said the scale.

“Good,” Kagami said. “I’m smiling at you.”

“Wish I could see it,” said Marinette, smiling herself. “Okay. Okay. Let’s make this work. Have you baked before?”

“Never,” Kagami answered.

“And I’ve never done Braille before, so let’s keep this simple. Chocolate chip cookies. I’ll tell you what to get, and start measuring things out while you fetch?”

Success, Kagami thought. “Do you need me to find you a recipe?”

“My parents would disown me if I had to use a cookbook for cookies. Can you get me a glass measuring cup, a scoop, and the all-purpose flour? I’ll measure that and you can hunt down the granulated sugar.”

The improvised system worked, somehow. Various powders covered the counter and Marinette, but more ingredients landed in the bowl than were wasted. Marinette even had the wherewithal to show off a little, perfectly cracking two eggs without dropping a sliver of shell. Then Kagami blended the dough, while Marinette walked unassisted across the floor to wash her hands in the sink.

“What are we doing with all the cookies, once they’re baked?” Marinette asked.

“Ruin Adrien’s diet?” Kagami suggested.

Marinette dropped her soap. “Ack! Oh no, where’d--OW!”
Kagami dropped the bowl on the counter and rushed to her side. “Marinette--”

“I’m okay, I’m okay! I just turned the water all the way hot. I’m fine.” Marinette leaned into Kagami and puffed air into her cheeks. “Come on, stupid. You’re cooking! Yes, Adrien’s dreamy, but you can’t lose focus on him while you’re cooking, especially when you’re cooking with Kagami. Okay? Okay. Hey Kagami?”

“Yes?” Kagami said nervously.

“We both like him, but… not now. I’m clumsy enough without him making me stupid.”

It was the smallest she’d ever seen Marinette. The pigtailed girl was staring blindly at her feet, arms tight at her sides, silver liquid glimmering at the corners of her eyes.

“I’m… surprised,” she said.

“At how pathetic I am?” said Marinette.

“At how self-aware you are,” Kagami answered. “I know…” don’t say his name “that boy makes you behave erratically. However, I didn’t know that you knew.”

Marinette chuckled. Kagami accepted it as progress; a self-deprecating smile was still, technically, a smile. “One time, he called me for help on a school project. We talked for five minutes, and when I got off the phone, I’d sewn pant legs to a shirt where the sleeves were meant to go.”

Kagami patted the small of Marinette’s back. “That sounds foolish.”

“And another time, he stopped by the bakery for a croissant while I was baking. I somehow used vinegar instead of water. In a recipe with baking soda. Made my own little volcano right in my mixing bowl.”

“Messy.”
“Yeah.” Marinette’s jaw dropped in horror. “Oh no. The dough! Please tell me you didn’t drop it when you saved me from being a doofus.”

That made Kagami laugh. “Our cookies are safe. Unlike you, I can do two things at once.”

“Okay. Phew. Great. Can you help me back to my seat? Then get a baking pan. You’ll need to do the next part, but I can walk you through it.”

Twenty-five minutes later, Kagami and Marinette took their first bites of the first cookies Kagami had ever made. Marinette was grinning when she explained all the things she would do better next time. They were too crispy on the edges, she said. A little doughy in the middle, and had a bit too much flour and not enough vanilla.

Her blindness, her clumsiness, her crush. In that moment, forgotten.

Eyes closed, Kagami swallowed another mouthful. All of Marinette’s criticisms of the final product were valid. Yet Kagami believed that her first time baking couldn’t possibly have ended any better.
At Tomoe Tsurugi’s request, Chef Mori-Thibodeau had kept dinner simple. Stir-fried beef, tofu, and greens steamed enticingly on three silver platters. Kagami piled a mixture of the three into a bowl of white rice. Marinette held the bowl to her face and shoveled the food towards her mouth with chopsticks. Kagami knew well that this method was much easier on the sightless than fork and knife.

Kagami was assembling Marinette’s third bowl, when the houseguest decided to speak up.

“Mme. Tsurugi? There’s something I’d like to ask you. Forgive me if it comes across as rude,” she said.

“Yes?” Tomoe answered. Her voice was the one she used to patronize young children asking about her cane and sunglasses. But Kagami thought her mother was rushing to judgment--any stupid questions about blindness, Marinette would have asked Kagami directly.

“What do you--or your family, I guess--do? I know you’re a champion fencer, but all this?” She gestured indistinctly at the spacious room. Kagami got her water glass out of the way in the nick of time. “Olympic money doesn’t buy mansions and personal chefs.”

“It does not,” Mme. Tsurugi said, faintly amused. “Kagami?” she said, gesturing to her bowl.

“Yes, mother,” Kagami said, putting Marinette’s hands on her bowl before preparing another one for her parent.

Tomoe waited for the scrape of porcelain on wood, then cupped the bowl in her palm without eating. “The seeds of our wealth were planted ages ago. The Tsurugi aristocratic line passed down its wealth for generations, even through the War. But wealth is like a garden--it requires tending to grow, and will rot if left unattended. Our current luxury, we owe to Toshiro.”

“Toshiro?” asked Marinette.

“My late father,” whispered Kagami.
“Oh,” Marinette said, lowering her own voice in kind. “I’m so sorry.”

“All good things pass,” intoned Tomoe. “Sorrow bends us…”

Kagami completed the ritual. “...but we do not break.”

Marinette hid behind her rice bowl, pretending to eat.

“When we married, Toshiro took my family name and bade good riddance to his ne'er-do-well parents.” Tomoe place her chopsticks across the rim of her bowl. “But he refused to use our name and connections to create his business, and relied on our wealth only when the banks failed him. He wanted his company to be his own.”

“His company?” asked Marinette.

“Raito Commercial Lighting. World-renowned in corporate circles.” Tomoe found her waterglass easily with her well-developed spatial memory, and let the cool liquid soothe her throat. “Not a name that an average consumer would recognize, but you've seen Raito’s work. From the very first days of his fashion house, Gabriel Agreste trusted none but Toshi-chan to shine the perfect light on his runways.”

“I see,” Marinette said. She could no longer pretend to be eating, so she put her still-full bowl back down. “Umm… I… How...”

“The answer to your next question is ‘five years,’ my child.” Tomoe’s sad smile was wasted, as Kagami didn’t need it and Marinette could not see it. “We burnt incense in his name three weeks ago, on the anniversary of his passing.”

“Oh.”

Kagami dabbed her eyes with a napkin, then pressed Marinette’s napkin into her palm so she could do the same.

Having had enough of the morose atmosphere, Tomoe changed topic. “Are you adjusting,
“I am.” Her whole body loosened with relief. “This is scary. It’s one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. But with the support of your family, I’m barely limited at all. Kagami wouldn’t let me quit until I’d succeeded.”

“Succeeded at what?” Tomoe asked.

Marinette’s lips flapped in horror.

“Braille,” Kagami filled in. But her timing was off, and she ended up speaking over Marinette’s own excuse.

“Walking alone!” Marinette said. “...while reading. Braille. Two things at once! Very hard to focus, you know.”

Tomoe picked up her bowl and then thumped it back down.

Marinette’s mouth clicked shut.

“My tolerance for youthful indiscretion has increased. But it is not infinite,” Tomoe said sternly. “Kagami?”

“...we baked cookies, mother,” Kagami admitted.

“You say ‘we.’ Mlle. Dupain-Cheng was an active participant?”

Marinette flinched at Tomoe’s switch to a formal address.

“She was, mother.”
“Mlle. Dupain-Cheng. Explain to me the process?”

Marinette’s furrowed eyebrows sunk below the rims of her dark sunglasses. “The… process?”

“The steps of baking,” Tomoe answered impatiently. “What parts did you do, and what did my daughter do for you?”

Slowly, with a few probing questions from her mother and a few prompts from Kagami, Marinette walked through the recipe. When she finished, Kagami’s mother let the silence linger, for what Kagami thought was the express purpose of making them uncomfortable.

“Kagami,” she said.

“Mother.”

“It is not better to ask forgiveness than permission.”

“Yes, mother.”

“But had you asked permission, I would have said yes. What you did for your friend was spectacular. You helped her accomplish a task that many would have needed weeks of practice to do.”

Marinette collapsed into her seat, inhaling like she’d been holding her breath. “Please don’t be harsh with her, Mme. Tsurugi. She was only thinking of me.”

“The only punishment will be what is necessary to repair her diet,” said Tomoe. “Daughter. How many?”

“Only two cookies, mother.”

“Then we will begin our evening duel thirty minutes early.”
“Yes, mother.”

“And next time, ask.”

“Mme. Tsurugi?” interrupted Marinette. “On that topic. Assuming Ladybug stays on schedule, I’ll have my sight back in time for Kagami’s next blind day. Can I… repay the favor, and help her in the kitchen? If you want to, of course, Kagami.”

Marinette wanted to bake more cookies with her. Sweet, but mundane. It shouldn’t have made Kagami’s heart leap up into her throat. “I’d be… honored.”

“I approve,” Tomoe said. “Send the recipe in advance so her dietician can determine an acceptable serving size.”

For reasons Kagami couldn’t fathom, the perfectly rational request drained Marinette’s spirits. The three finished dinner without another word.

-------

After dinner, Kagami helped Marinette with an early shower. The endeavor went without awkwardness, since Marinette had a swimsuit as requested. As Marinette scrubbed herself down, the pair had a shallow conversation on shampoos and hair care. It was relaxing, if free of substance. The high point was when Kagami’s compliment of Marinette’s unbound hair made her cheeks flush light pink.

By the time Marinette was finished and dry, it was close to the early starting time of Kagami’s evening duel. “Will you be okay on your own for the next hour?” Kagami asked, wrapping an elastic around a fistful of locks to remake Marinette’s pigtail.

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “This hall is easy to navigate in the dark. I can get myself to the rec room. I’ll take a slow walk on the treadmill and listen to a story.”

“Without impugning your competence,” Kagami said, “I advise you have me or Sato handle the treadmill’s speed setting.”
Marinette rubbed her cheek. “Heh. Yeah, I’d probably catapult myself through a wall. Also, I’m going to listen to *Les Trois Mousquetaires.* You were reading it earlier, right?”

“It’s among my favorites,” Kagami admitted.

Marinette’s face lit up. “I figured. From what you said about Ryuuko, I knew that swordfighting heroes battling for justice was perfect for you.”

“Almost perfect,” Kagami answered. “I’ve yet to find any good French stories about female swashbucklers, save for one. And La Maupin is not a suitable role model.”

“Ha!”

Marinette got up and felt her way to the wall, which she followed to the door. Before she left, she turned her head over her shoulder. “Thanks for looking out for me. Are you going to be okay?”

Kagami quickly gave up on untangling the meaning behind the question. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I dunno,” answered Marinette. “No reason, I guess. I’m used to A-- to that boy we like, and how sad he is when he interacts with his father. Your mother is just as strict about rules and schedules. Though I supposed she showed more concern for you over dinner than I’ve seen in the whole time I’ve known the Agrestes.”

“She my *sensei* as well as my mother.”

Several thoughts died stillborn on Marinette’s slowly moving lips, before she answered, “Your mother has a vision of the future that you share. Or you did, before this fencing thing.”

“I don’t care about gold,” Kagami nodded. “But mother and I both see me growing into a worthy grandmistress of the Tsurugi name. And *both* of my parents raised me to envision a goal, to push towards it, and to drive through any obstacles in my path.”
“Oh.”

Kagami thought her statement had been matter-of-fact, but Marinette drew away. The fighter considered her choice of words, and what might have set Marinette off.

“Driving through obstacles… like me?” she asked weakly.

I see.

Marinette extended her arm back into the room before Kagami had figured out how to answer. “Can I have your hand back? If it’s not too weird. Is it normal to be extra touchy-feely to make up for not looking people in the eye?”

“Perfectly normal.” Kagami granted Marinette’s request, pressing their palms together once again.

Marinette mumbled to herself, something about bravery and courage and friendship. Then, she spoke audibly. “Kagami, we’ve hung out something like three times, and you’re already one of my closest friends. I don’t… I don’t know if that’s mutual--”

“It is.” Kagami blinked when she realized she had opened her mouth. She hadn’t meant to say anything.

“Oh thank god, I thought I was gonna sound like a freak.” Marinette leaned against the door frame for support. “I form attachments quickly. In the first week of school, I met my BFF and the l-- the crush of my life. And that’s how I’m feeling right now. And I don’t want to waste that moment. I said my stupid klutz brain and my temporary blindness make this a terrible time to talk about Adrien, but… I was wrong. Now is the best time to talk about it, while we’re riding high on newly-forged friendship. Once you’re back from training, let’s solve this. I don’t want to argue about him as rivals. Let’s lay out our feelings as friends.”

What even are my feelings? Kagami thought.

She felt every bit as strongly about Adrien as Marinette did, though she was smarter about how she showed it. He was gorgeous, kind, intelligent, and formidable. Moreover, he was a logically perfect match for her as well, offering the status, wealth, and genetics to ensure success for her family for generations to come.
But he didn’t reciprocate.

She usually amended a *yet* to that statement. He was sheltered and naive, and if he could miss *Marinette’s* crush, he’d have no hope of understanding Kagami’s more reserved affections without someone guiding him through it step by step. However, she could not deny that he’d been oblivious to, or distracted from, every advance she’d made.

*Change targets,* Marinette had said to Kagami.

*Change targets,* Kagami said to Adrien.

Was it time to take her own advice? Was she capable of it, if she wanted to?

Kagami squeezed Marinette’s hand. “Yes. We'll figure it out,” she said. “As friends.”
Kagami and her mother glided across the *tatami* floor of the dojo. They fought at half speed, muting the clack of their shinai and the pain when Kagami’s guard failed to protect her shoulder. Again.

“Another point to you, mother,” she said in Japanese. They both preferred their native tongue during *kendo* practice. “I apologize for my performance.”

“Do not apologize,” said Tomoe. The swordmistress settled again into a basic *kendo* stance: one foot in front, one foot behind, sword in both hands facing forward. She waited with marble stillness for her daughter to follow suit. “You are fighting admirably against a foe with greater reach, strength, and experience. Much better than your lackluster performance against young M. Agreste this afternoon.”

Fencing. And Adrien.

There was a sword in her hand and an opponent at the ready. She brushed aside the distractions and struck. Her overhead chop and her mother’s counter-parry were both textbook. Kagami’s follow-through was not. She made a sideways lunge with her body, shifting her center of balance to redirect the vector of her swing and overpowers her mother’s gentle misdirection.

It was good enough for a draw. Her sword hit her mother’s shoulder simultaneously with her mother’s weapon impacting her thigh.

“Unorthodox,” said Tomoe.

“Effective.”

“A suicide.”

“When facing a superior opponent, one must be prepared to die.”

“I approve of your choice of friends.”
Kagami took the change of subject in stride. She readied herself again, and they clashed. This time, no improvisation saved her, and she was struck on the shoulder. “I don’t need your approval to make friends, mother.”

“I deserve the rebuke,” Tomoe said. “But you’re mistaken. I’m not giving you permission. I’m giving you advice. You may listen, or you may reject it and learn the hard way.”

Kagami thrust the tip of her shinai towards her mother’s chest. Tomoe tapped the side of the blade, taking advantage of Kagami’s shaky lunge, but Kagami flexed backwards under the counter-swing like it was a limbo bar. They passed by without a point scored, then turned again.

“Then advise me, mother,” Kagami said. She waited for the older woman to make a move that never came. “What does she have that I should be seeking in other friends?”

“She is your friend,” Tomoe tutted. “You should know the answer.”

“I know my answer. What’s yours?”

Tomoe sidestepped slightly, and Kagami reciprocated. The two began a wary orbit around an invisible point in the center of the dojo.

“Her adaptability,” Tomoe replied. “Among other things. She is also a child of successful parents with a history of her own victories. M. Agreste himself recognized his work. But most impressive of all is the quickness with which she adapted to unforeseen circumstances. Not just her blindness. Yours as well. She had arrived prepared to share her passion, but upon finding you in need, she turned the activity into a useful lesson.”

“I see,” began Kagami. Unfortunately, Marinette distracted her where Adrien had not. Any thought of her new friend was postponed, as her mother had seen an opening. Kagami defended, high, then low, then high again, before she faltered and was hit.

“Yes, Your focus has returned.” Tomoe said, despite having handily won. “What was distracting you this afternoon, daughter?”
My distaste for using a flick of the wrist to light up an electronic scoreboard, thought Kagami. “I was concerned about your reaction to me quitting calligraphy.”

“Another rebuke that I deserve,” Tomoe said. Despite her words, neither her tone nor her face displayed regret. “I have been… imperious. I demand the best in all things, including my family, but there is room for flexibility. If I can aid in choosing a replacement, please ask.”

They exchanged a scoreless flurry of blows, then leapt backwards by unspoken agreement.

“I’ve decided already,” Kagami said. “I’d like to study the mythos of our heritage. In ancient legend, the Tsurugi line included ghost-hunters and demon-slayers--”

Kagami felt a sharp pain in her palms as her sword was battered from her grip. Her mother’s bamboo sword blazed past her forehead, brushing her bangs without touching flesh.

“Mother?”


Nine-year-old Kagami scrambled on her hands and knees to comply. It was nearly as tall as she was, but she knew she would grow into it--if she survived the night.

“Mother, I’m sorry!” she said. “I’ll see father tomorrow. But we’ve gone every day this week, and the hospital is so dreary and gloomy!”

She wasn’t in her rudimentary stance for more than a second before her mother again ripped the weapon from her hands. The sword-cane rocketed towards her head, and she closed her eyes and cringed, but it never made contact; when she at last found the courage to look, she saw it hovering an inch from her scalp.

She picked the sword up. She was disarmed. A sword swished over her head. “You lied. You faked illness. You left your father alone in his hospital room. Pick. Up. Your. Sword.”

“I’m sorry!” She picked the sword up. She was disarmed. A sword came to rest gently on her shoulder. “I’ve learned my lesson!”

“You have not. Pick. Up. Your. Sword.” She picked the sword up. She was disarmed. A sword swept out the back of her knees, but she was caught and lowered gently before she struck the mat. “I swore to your father I would not hit you. He is wise. Family should not strike family in anger, and I am very angry. Pick. Up. Your. Sword.”

Kagami did not obey. Rolling to her hands and knees, she buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Her mother grabbed her wrist and planted her palm on the hilt of her discarded weapon. “No. No self-pity. I will not hit you, but you will learn your lesson through blood, sweat, and tears. You will defend yourself until you cannot move. You will fight me until your soul aches. You will learn what happens to those who betray the trust of their family. Now, do as I say--”

“--and pick. Up. Your. Sword!”

Kagami dove into a somersault, rising to her knees just in time to batter aside the first of her mother’s swings. She was older, stronger, and infinitely more skilled. She kept her grip on her weapon for twelve seconds. Then her mother’s blade froze millimeters from her thigh.


“I do not understand this, mother. What have I done wrong?” She grabbed her weapon and her mother was on her instantaneously.

“You have asked me to let you throw away your sight,” her mother hissed. She spoke steadily, as if she were expending no effort, while Kagami gasped for air between parries. “I wanted to believe you were smarter than this, but I feared this outcome from the moment you told me about Ryuuko.” She landed a powerful blow that shattered Kagami’s guard, but the girl kept her grip on her weapon. Kagami glared defiantly down the length of her mother’s weapon, which was pointed straight at her chest. “Ready. Your. Sword.”
“How am I throwing anything away, mother?” Kagami asked. Then she charged, trying to regain the initiative. It bought her perhaps five seconds before her mother reversed the momentum and drove her back towards the wall.

“Because you will…” Tomoe began, but she growled and refused to finish the thought. Five blows later, she’d found a new answer. “Hunting down ancient ghosts? What do you expect to find?”

Kagami was unsure what to make of the pause, so she focused on the enemy in front of her. Shouting to be heard over the clatter of bamboo, Kagami riposted at once physically and verbally. “In a world of miraculous and demons? I don’t know, mother, but I’ll find something!”

It was the wrong response, and her attempted reverse-blade parry was the wrong defense. Her blade went flying, and her mother loomed as she scrambled to recover it.

“Pick. Up. Your. Sword. If there is anything to find, it will be a needle in a haystack of fables and rumors. But supposing you do find something. Then what? What will you accomplish once you’ve wasted your seeing days on simple mysticism? What use is a demonslayer in a world of computers? What use is a ghost-hunter in a world of Ladybugs?”

That was a question she had no answer to. It was an attack against which she could not defend. Yet as she’d told her mother, when faced with a superior opponent, one must be prepared to die. “Perhaps I will learn enough magic to compensate for my blindness,” she answered, braced for the inevitable result. “As you did.”

Her mother bared her teeth. “You know nothing!” she roared, and charged.

"I cannot know what you will not teach!" High, low, left, right, the assault came from all angles, fueled by rage that Kagami could not fathom. What she could grasp was this: the battle Kagami now fought was about more than just ghost stories. Whatever her mother was thinking, whatever she was hiding, it would not be revealed through weakness.

The world slowed.

Kagami parried a left slash and responded with a jab. The weak thrust couldn’t hope to hit, but occupied the space her mother would need to be in for her follow-up thrust be dangerous. The next attack was dangerous, but it was also predictable, a brutish attack meant to exploit Kagami’s
smaller mass. Kagami met it head-on, and her wrists ached from the strain, but she pushed it back and left herself open the the waist-height slash she knew was coming.

She leapt. With every iota of strength in her legs, she sprung into the air, kicking her legs into a straddle the cleared the attack by inches. Her mother overbalanced. She was open. Kagami had a clear shot, a solid blow straight to the top of the head.

And then, an instant of clarity.

Pulling the blow in mid-air was almost impossible, but she succeeded at the cost of a terrible landing. She tumbled gracelessly to the ground, grunting and grasping the hip she’d landed on.

“Fool girl!” her mother cried. Distress had shattered her rage. A small victory. “What were you thinking?”

Rolling to a sitting position and rubbing her injury, she answered. “I was thinking, mother, that I was raised not to strike my family in anger.”

Tomoe Tsurugi took three deep, heavy breaths. Then she flicked her bamboo aside, a ritual gesture that would have cleansed the blood from a real blade. “Are you injured?”

Kagami prodded her flesh firmly with her fingers, then stretched and bent her joints at various angles. “Bruised. Nothing a hot shower and a night’s sleep can’t fix.”

“Then you will do what’s needed to heal,” she said. She began tapping her way out of the dojo, as though she were truly helpless as her glasses and cane made her seem. “You will have free periods in the absence of your calligraphy lessons. Use them well. In two weeks, you being to play koto. I expect you to excel in your lessons. Good night, daughter.”

“Good night, mother,” Kagami said to her back.

Once her mother was gone, Kagami stood and limped to the showers, fists clenched the whole while.
“What’s wrong?” Marinette asked.

Kagami had been raised to cultivate reserve. Her class’s whispers of ‘Ice Queen’ and ‘Automaton’ were meant to be insulting, but Kagami took them as marks of pride.

Right now, she was so upset that a blind girl could detect it before she’d even spoken a word.

“A private matter between me and mother. Please do not mistake my desire for privacy for a slight against our friendship,” she said.

The Japanese girl walked her slightly lopsided gait to her dresser. She dropped her towel, unconcerned with nudity in the presence of the unseeing, and donned a pair of red silk pajamas. After stowing the damp towel in a hamper to eliminate the tripping hazard, she hobbled back to her bed.

Marinette’s cot was caddy-corner to hers. She and Marinette lay at right angles to one another, heads adjacent. Marinette’s hair was still in her trademark pigtails. Kagami’s hair was damp and soaked the pillow case. She hadn’t the patience to dry it properly.

“Do you still want to talk?” Marinette asked.

“I don’t think I can bear more heartbreak.”

Kagami frowned slightly at her own words. She had never been this open with anyone. Not her mother, not Adrien. When Marinette wasn’t lost in anxious mania, she had an unparalleled gift for putting Kagami at ease. It would have been wonderful if Kagami had been anyone else. But as the scion of the Tsurugi, Kagami was exposed without her armor of cool poise.

She shifted to her side to look at her temporary roommate. Marinette had removed her sunglasses. Her eyes stayed mostly closed, but she sometimes flickered them open long enough for Kagami to see the reflected ceiling. It was Marinette’s mouth, however, that drew Kagami’s attention.
Marinette was chewing on her lower lip, struggling with some thought that she wasn’t ready to say.

Then, at last, she said it. “If…” she choked. “If this conversation goes how I think it will… you won’t be the one heartbroken.”

Kagami’s frown deepened. “Marinette,” she said, “This is not a time for you to humor me to make me feel better.”

“I’m not!” she protested. “He likes you.”

“He thinks I’m pretty,” Kagami said. “And he thinks I’m a friend. Do you remember our skating date? After the akuma and the lesson, we stood outside holding hand. I told him he was special. I was inches away from my face. And Adrien? He turned aside to looked at you.”

Normally, a smidgen of attention from Adrien would reduce Marinette to a babbling heap. This time, however, her response was thin and reedy. “He… he did?”

“He did,” Kagami continued. “You still hesitate. I still persevere. I have avenues that lead to victory. But at this precise time, he does not feel for me the way I want him to.”

“No,” Marinette said. No longer hiding emotion, she let her tears slip out. “I know he loves you. He told me so.”

Kagami’s heart thundered. She wanted it. Badly. Badly enough to leave her vulnerable to Hawkmoth, once. But want was not reality. “That can’t be true,” she said, and painfully, she meant it.

Marinette wailed her response. “It’s true! I screwed up, and I almost told him I loved him and then had to play it off as a joke—”

“Why would you do that?” Kagami’s disgust was visceral. All day long, Marinette had been amazing. The person she’d just described was a sad, pathetic wreck. It was like Adrien’s presence suppressed every single one of her redeeming features.
Marinette rolled over and buried her face in her pillow. Kagami could hardly hear her speaking. “Kagami, if you’re really my friend, you’ll just accept that I’m a moron and won’t make me recount the single most embarrassing moment of my life.”

*At least she’s self-aware.* Sighing, Kagami said, “very well. You told him you loved him, ha ha, just kidding. And then?”

“We… we agreed to stop playing pranks on each other and… he told me that the girl he’s in love with doesn’t like his jokes, either.”

A stinging pain of loss thrust into the Ice Queen’s chest.

“And… you’re actually funny, when you let yourself loose, but I know that you like to be in control. Cool, collected. I’m sure whatever prank he played on you went badly--”

“Marinette.”

“…and he just mentioned loving her… you… so casually, so easily, that I knew I never really stood a chance--”

“Marinette!” Words and tears flowed freely from Kagami. “Adrien has never played a prank on me. When we duel, his puns are awful, but I encourage them. I want him to find himself from underneath the perfect image the world wants.”

Marinette’s mirrored eyes opened wide. “Kagami, what are you--”

“ *He loves someone else,*” she hissed.

“Oh. Oh. Oh, no no no no,” Marinette rambled. “But who? I know his schedule. You’d know if it was a fencing girl and I’d know if it were at school--it’s *not* Lila, I know that much--and his Chinese classes and piano lessons are all private tutoring, so that means it has to be from one of his photo shoots. Oh God, it’s got to be a model. We’re competing against a model, and I’m plain and you’re sporty-pretty but neither of us can beat someone whose job it is to look pretty and--”
“Marinette!” Kagami screeched.

Screeched. Why was this hurting so bad? He was just a boy!

And then Marinette was holding her, rocking her, soothing. “It’ll be okay. We’ll fix this, somehow, Kagami. I promise.”

*Strength. Strength, poise, and focus. When you fail to strike, it’s not your technique, it’s your target. Change target.*

She used Marinette’s pink tank top to dry the dampness from the corners of her eyes. “There’s nothing to fix,” Kagami said. “He loves someone else, and hasn’t seen fit to tell either of us who she is. I… I feel for him. Intensely. But I will not fight a battle I’m destined to lose.”

Marinette looked down to try to meet her eyes, an instinct she had yet to shake in only eight hours of blindness. “…how can you do that?” she whispered. “How can you just decide to let him go?”

“You think I’m an Ice Queen,” Kagami said.

This time it was Marinette wetting Kagami’s sleepwear with tears. “I wish I were an Ice Queen! I wish I could let him go! But I’m so weak and clingy and wishy-washy--”

“You don’t wish that,” Kagami said.

“Yes I do! Please, Kagami, tell me how you do it!”

Kagami sighed. The girl in her arms was coaxing another admission, another deeply held secret, from where Kagami had kept it buried. “I have a list of things I want to see before I go blind. The paintings of the Louvre, Niagara Falls. The Aurora Borealis. And… my wedding dress.”

Slowly, Marinette said, “You told me you might be blind as young as twenty.”

Kagami moved one of Marinette’s hands to her face. “Be grateful that you have that luxury of
dancing around your emotions, of keeping them at a distance until you are ready for them. I don’t have that option. I must let him go, because I do not have time to waste.”

A wordless squeeze was Marinette’s answer. They stayed together, just breathing, for minutes.

Marinette’s fingers had slipped down to Kagami’s neck, but she moved them back to her cheek. It was intensely personal. Only in Hollywood did the blind go about rubbing their fingers across the faces of everyone they met. In reality, the gesture was reserved for close friends, family, and lovers.

Kagami accepted Marinette’s touch without complaint.

Marinette broke the silence. “So you let him go. And then even though you’re in agony, you just go right back to back to looking for your dream boy?”

As Kagami had feared, the ease and familiarity radiating from Marinette lulled her into a fatal mistake. “Or dream girl,” she said, then instantly turned ashen. In principle, she had no fear of this conversation. However, there was a time and a place and a state of mind for it and she was in none of those, and Marinette was right there, clinging to her in a tank top.

Marinette, poor sweet Marinette, completely missed the implication. Thank the kami, Kagami thought.

“Oh. I didn’t think… but it’s good that you can be open! As for me, I… I don’t know about…”

Kagami’s relief was short-lived. Something tremulous and shaky and fundamentally broken crept into Marinette’s voice.

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” Marinette said softly. “I never thought about it. I should know. Shouldn’t I? It’s part of who I am but I never thought about it.”

Marinette was hugging Kagami, and her tight grip was no longer comfortable. Fortunately, the bear hug implied that whatever was devastating Marinette wasn’t directly Kagami’s fault. But beyond that, she had no idea where to begin diagnosing the cause of this breakdown. “There, there,” Kagami said, and she was sure that she sounded as forced as her fake ‘small-talk smiles’ but she didn’t know what else to do.

“Marinette?” whispered Kagami. Marinette didn’t hear.

“I guess I looked at Luka? But I was comparing him to A--A--Adrien. I didn’t look at other boys ‘cause of him. I didn’t look at girls ‘cause of him. Him, him, him. I love him so much that he’s blinding me. Ka--Kagami?”

“Yes?” she answered, grasping at the last threads of her composure.

“I’ve been so obsessed with liking one person that I never once thought about the kinds of people I like,” Marinette said with a thick voice. “In class, we learned that orientation is part of who you are, even if you never act on it. The means I never once thought about an important part of my own identity. And if I missed that… what else has my crush made me miss?”

The pieces of the puzzle fell in place. It wasn’t a revelation that Kagami could have predicted, but in hindsight, it made sense. Kagami moved a palm to Marinette’s shoulder. “I have no answer. But I commend you for beginning to ask the right questions.”

Marinette just cried.

-------

Some time later, Marinette untangled herself from Kagami and the two lay side-by-side on the bed. Kagami briefly entertained the idea that Marinette had fallen asleep, but her voice dispelled that notion.

“You should talk to him, before you cut ties,” she said. “I know you have a deadline. You have to move forward. But you shouldn’t make your decision based on a second-hand account. Like Alya says, check your sources.”

“I will not ‘cut ties’ no matter what,” said Kagami. “He’s my friend. And my rival. Unless he confesses to being willfully callous with my emotions, I refuse to lose his companionship over
something as petty as a broken heart.”

“But if we’re right? If there’s another girl?”

“Then, in your wise words, I change targets.”

“Have you figured out to whom?”

And there was the question. Her tongue was in knots. Perhaps I should have more sympathy and less pity towards Marinette’s lovestruck rambling, she thought.

“I have not,” she said at last. “Because the girl I might be interested in needs to sort out her orientation, so neither of us know whether she’s capable of returning my affections.”

“I hope she figures it out soon,” said Marinette. She was lost in cluelessness. And yet, her next comment was profoundly wise. “For me, I could cling forever to the faintest sliver of hope. Anything is better than ‘no’. But with your...deadline... endless ‘maybes’ must be more painful that a ‘no’ could ever be.”

Emboldened by Marinette’s kindness, Kagami pushed forwards. “She’s emotionally entangled with a boy who does not return her affections,” Kagami said. She considered herself better than these kind of word games games, but with her soul laid bare and raw, the situation’s humor was a much-needed balm. “I’m not sure if she will continue to pursue him or give up entirely, but either way, she will need time to free herself from those shackles.”

“Oh,” said Marinette. “That sounds a lot like my situation.”

Kagami said nothing.

“That sounds… exactly like my situation.”

Silence.
“Muh-muh-me?”

“Yes,” said Kagami, nodding unseen.

“Oh. Oh… I… shouldn’t be clinging to you! Oh my god, I made everything so awkward and I was just grabbing you like a friend and I didn’t know you thought of me as more than a friend—”

Running out of patience, Kagami grabbed a pillow from Marinette’s cot, sat the two of them up, and put it at the foot of her own bed. Then she laid Marinette down 180 degrees from her initial position, so the pair lay with heads on opposite sides.

Close enough to warm each other with their presence. Far enough to be unmistakably platonic.


“Thank you, Marinette.”

Marinette swallowed. “So… me?”

“I am unused to being open with my feelings,” said Kagami. “And I am unused to having these feelings. Boys, and girls, are still new to me. I believe that I love Adrien. I know that if it’s not love, it remains unbearably intense. I know I don’t feel that strongly about you. Yet. But I know that I feel more for you than friendship. And I know that you could heal the wounds caused by leaving him.”

Then Kagami sneered at her own words. “That sounded awful. I’m implying you’re a compromise, a substitute for my first choice. That behavior falls short of my own standards for treating my friends. I apologize.”

“Kagami,” said Marinette, reaching for and eventually finding her ankle. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” said Kagami. “No one should treat you like a silver medal, Marinette. You are golden.”
Marinette’s mouth opened and closed like a landed fish. Kagami felt a pinch of heat rising in her cheeks, but also a shimmer of hope. *If I can fluster her... then maybe,* she thought.

But her train of thought ended sharply. “I don’t know what else to say,” Kagami admitted.

“I do,” Marinette said. “I want to figure this ‘girls’ thing out. *Soon.* For me, not just for you. I’ll do research. I’ll talk with my gay friends at school. If I’m still not sure, I’ll even look at p--po--por--videos, once I get my sight back.”

“It’s not something you can rush,” Kagami said placatingly.

“It has to be!” Marinette insisted. “I can’t promise you what the result will be. The answer might be ‘not yet,’ or ‘never.’ But I promise you, I *swear,* that I won’t make you squander an unnecessary second of your vision. You’ll know the answer as soon as I do.”

The next part was so quiet that Kagami didn’t know if she’d been meant to hear it. “Whatever you end up becoming to me, it won’t be another Adrien.”

*I guess Marinette hates ‘Marinette and Adrien’ as much as I do,* thought Kagami.

“Your candor is appreciated,” Kagami said, *and please let that be the end of it.* The confrontation with her mother was still fresh on her mind, and with this stacked on top of it she was on the fraying edge of a mental collapse. She wanted to go back to the light banter they’d shared while baking, to have another moment of simple friendship to lift the oppressive weight of emotional exposure that saturated the room. *How to get back to that, just for a few minutes until we sleep,* she wondered.

The answer came suddenly.

“I am very proud of my Japanese heritage in almost all respects,” said Kagami.

Marinette took the bait. “Almost all?”
“Almost all,” she said. “If we were sharing recommendations for food, for music, for art, some or all of my recommendations would be from my homeland. But you mentioned that, as part of your research, you might explore… explicit imagery.” Marinette blushed red, Kagami a slight pink.

“Did I really say that? I can’t believe I said that,” Marinette whispered.

“You did. And to return to my point…” Kagami paused. “Please. For the love of all that’s holy. Stay away from Japanese porn. You will be scarred for life.”

Marinette burst into laughter and it felt like Kagami burst from the surface of the lake that had been drowning her. “Come on, it can’t be that bad,” Marinette asked in the scant moments she had air.

“It is that bad,” said Kagami. “In fact, it’s even worse.”

“Do I want to know?”

“No.”

They laughed for much longer than the joke was funny.

“I should get back to my cot,” said Marinette, once the last of the giggles had faded out into the faint sounds of night.

“In time,” Kagami said. “Can we stay here for a few more minutes? Having you here is… soothing.”

“Okay,” Marinette said. “A few more minutes.”

A few minutes later, they were both asleep.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks for reading! Please follow/subscribe to the series--Kagami and Marinette's tale will be continued in the next story!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!