All The Time You Need

by The Curator of The Sands (GrimRevolution)

Summary

Three things happened that shouldn’t have: one, the butterfly miraculous was stolen, two, an ancient artefact from China was dug up from the ground, and three, a chosen had given up the Ladybug Miraculous to one Alya Césaire.

But the universe has a way of correcting itself even if it’s not completely what the people involved had in mind.

Notes

AU of Marinette giving up the Ladybug Miraculous and all the consequences that come with it.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Cracks

There was nothing utterly assuming about Marinette Dupain-Cheng; she went to school, did her homework, helped her parents out with their bakery, and designed her own clothes in her spare time. She was unique in the way that all people were unique, but not so much that people on the street would turn to stare at her.

In the end, young Marinette had given up something that she was always meant to be—something that had been written in stone, carved with her name, and one tiny motion, one unforgotten backpack...

And everything changed.

The truth is that, perhaps, had Alya not taken her backpack with her when chasing after the Akumatized Ivan events would have proceeded as they should. She was always meant to forget, to run off into danger, leaving Marinette no choice but to accept her destiny.

But something went wrong; a flaw in the plan, a tangled string in the woven tapestry of fate and suddenly Marinette was no longer Ladybug.

The universe has a way of correcting such things, though, even if it’s not fully what was written in stone.

Some things, you see, are simply fact.

oOo

One problem with making an orange outfit was that something wouldn’t fit quite right. Not many colours complimented pumpkin besides other varying shades, brown, black, white, and maybe the occasional splash of blue. It was a challenge, one that Marinette gladly accepted. It was easy, for her, to make designs flowery and pink. So many things went with pink.

Orange was an packed and locked problem, one that she wanted to figure out.

Leaning back from the manikin, blue eyes turned critical as they took in the beige of the knitted sweater, the white of the shirt it covered, and the bright orange of the pants they complimented. It was missing something—too much happening with the legs that there needed to be a balance between the top and the bottom. More orange, a little dabble of it like a splatter of paint from a flicked brush. There was a scarf she could use. A plaid black, brown, and orange thing she had made a while ago and Marinette draped it over the fake neck, eyeing the outfit with a frown.

It just... wasn’t enough. With a sigh, she grabbed her purse and fled down the stairs, waving at her parents before stepping out onto the streets of Paris. The sun was lowering and not much time was left in the day. Fall brushed across Marinette’s lips, filled with the taste of cinnamon, chocolate, and apples. Leaves fell from the trees and cluttered the streets and sidewalks with golds, browns, and yellows. A few reds sparked through, looking like tiny flames that made her smile quietly to herself.

There were other people walking about; a group of teenagers a few years older than her laughing and huddled close together, a man walking quickly, coffee cup in hand, eyes on his phone, some tourists with heavy, exhausted shoulders but broad smiles. She dodged around all of them, slipping through a thin side street that had plants curling up the sides of the buildings. A silver car was parked by a door and Marinette edged around it, trying not to knock over the pot holding a
towering rose bush. It caught on her shirt for a second, but no damage was done so she ignored it.

There was a ping from her phone, alerting her to some sort of notification and Marinette was about to dig the device out of her purse when a door opened to her left. The teenager ran into it, her forehead colliding painfully with the wooden frame, nose bashing against the hard surface and bringing tears automatically to her eyes as she cupped her face with both hands.

“Ow!”

“Ohmigosh—I’m so sorry!” Timid hands brushed over her shoulders and gently pulled her hands away. “Here, let me see—”

Marinette blinked past the water in her eyes to a pair of bright hazel ones that seemed to be golden underneath the fire red baseball cap. “N-Nino?”

The DJ looked stricken, his face pale—or as pale as it could be with his dark skin tone—hands wavering around her face as he tried to figure out what to do without hurting her again. The last time they had been well and truly alone was at the zoo when a worried Ladybug managed to lock them into the panther exhibit together. It had been a good day, really—the two of them had become pretty close friends afterwards.

“Marinette!” Nino blurted. “Oh, man, I am so sorry!”

“It’s okay,” she touched her nose and winced, brushing underneath it and pulling her hand away. There wasn’t any blood and it didn’t feel broken; just a bit battered.

“—Should have been watching where I was going and I’m so sorry, I swear I didn’t mean to hit you in the face—”

She giggled through the sharp sting that arched its way up to her forehead. “Nino,” Marinette started as the boy continued blabbering out apologies. “Nino, please calm down.” A gentle hand placed on his forearm stopped the stream of words for now. He stared at her with eyes that seemed impossibly wide behind his glasses. “It’s okay; neither of us were watching where we were going.” Before he could start saying how sorry he was again, the young woman nodded towards the bags in his hands. “What’s that?”

There was a moment as Nino eyed her critically, knowing that she was trying to change the subject, but as she stared at him with her most innocent expression, the DJ sighed with a small smile, shook his head, and held out the bag. “I got some new recording equipment,” he admitted. “And my headphones came in.”

He had been bragging about those for days. “Can I see?” Marinette leaned forward eagerly and Nino laughed, offering her the bag. She pulled out the box and looked over what she could see of the sleek, black design.

“They light up with the music,” the DJ admitted. “Which is one of the reasons I got them.”

Marinette smiled and handed them back. “They suit you,” she admitted. Nino was one of the brightest people she knew—both in attitude and appearance. The light-up headphones were something someone like her friend should have.

He grinned back at her before his eyes narrowed in concern. “Are you sure you’re okay?” For a second, it looked as if he was going to lean forward to check out her nose and forehead. “You hit that door pretty hard.”

“I’ll be alright,” she promised. “It doesn’t sting as much, anyways.”
“Well,” Nino said, hoisting his bags up over a shoulder. “I’ll walk you to wherever you were going anyway—it’s the least I could do.”

Opening her mouth to argue, Marinette paused before sighing. “There’s nothing I could say to stop you, is there?”

“Nope,” the P popped like a can opening.

“Nothing at all?”

Nino hummed in disagreement and Marinette gave a second, more dramatic sigh, placing the back of her hand against her forehead and sagging slightly to the side until she was leaning against the taller teen. “Company for my adventure! Whatever will I do?”

He laughed and followed her down the side street, keeping close and out of the way of the doors to the shops on either side. “Where are you heading, anyway?”

“The street market,” the young designer said. “I was hoping to find a jeweller to maybe commission or buy something from.”

“Gift? Or are you making something?” There was a car horn a couple blocks away and someone yelled something that wasn’t quite distinguishable with the echo across the alleyways.

Marinette shrugged. “Making something. I just need a necklace or the proper scarf. Something that can balance it out a bit.”

“Yeah,” Nino nodded wisely as if he designed his own clothes. “I hear you.” He moved to the side, out of the way of a cyclist. It was like walking through a different place—the hustle of the tourist scene was kept to the broader streets with the occasional Parisian headed past the two, slipping into shops that held old character with creaky wooden signs hand painted with names in twisting calligraphy. A small bookstore was lighting up, turning amber under the setting sun, little lights strung from building to building, flickering to life as if on a rush to beat the stars.

Paris at night was beautiful, but Paris at dusk was magical. Marinette breathed in the harsh bitterness of evening coffee and baked goods. The sweet tang of caramelized tarts and pies sneaking their way through and she was tempted but not distracted. Nino hummed next to her, leaning back and looking slightly up at the orange and blue that painted the sky.

When the buildings stopped and opened up to a wide courtyard filled with partial tents, Marinette nudged her friend to urge him to move just a little faster. “Come on,” she said with a wide smile. “Most of them will be closing soon.”

Some had already packed up—those with furniture and paintings. But a fruit stall was doggedly open, the owner sitting back in his chair with what was left of the days haul in front of him. Marinette bought a container of strawberries, offering some to Nino as they walked through the coordinated maze. One place had various light fixtures; one a beautifully carved fox that was lit up from the inside that gave Marinette ideas for later.

A man selling scarves held her attention for a bit and she took his card, impressed with his work but it was Nino who found the small little tent off to the side. A middle aged black woman wearing a sky blue shirt—the bottom right tied in a knot—and a pair of white shorts was packing up various sets of jewellery. Her hair was long, pulled into a high ponytail, and seemed like a waterfall of ink compared to the gold clasp that held it up. She didn’t hear them for a second, only realizing that people were waiting for her attention when she looked up.
And her smile was like the moon—mysterious and charming. “Good evening,” she said.

“Evening,” Marinette chirruped back. “Are you closed for the night?”

“Darling,” the woman stretched out her shoulders, the bones in her back popping. “I’m never closed.” She winked at them before motioning to the various pieces still waiting to be packed up. “Can I help you with anything in particular?”

The designer fully walked into the tent, Nino hovering just on the edge of the light. “I was wondering if you had anything orange.”

“Orange?” The jeweller hummed and looked over what was still on display. “You know, I think I packed it all up—just give me a second.” She rummaged through the boxes before muttering a quiet ‘ah-hah’ and hoisted a box up onto the counter. “Anything particularly orange or just orange?”

“Just orange and small,” Marinette said, paused, and corrected herself. “Medium size will also do. Something that won’t be overwhelming but not unnoticeable.”

Various hinged boxes were placed out on the counter, some of them no bigger than a match box, others about the size of Marinette’s fist. The first was an orange rose sitting beneath a pearl wrapped in golden ivy and the colour of the flower was fine, but the pearl didn’t fit all too well with the colours already in the outfit so the designer put it down. Next was a large stone with various black cracks running through it. Feathers fitted with small topaz-like gems cupped the side like peacock feathers, though the warmth was more like a phoenix.

There were some with leaves, some with apples, and others with swirling, flowing designs. Each of them was beautiful and Marinette was tempted to buy all if she could, but one—a simple orange gem carved like a gourd with a bird and a heart charm attaching it to the chain caught her attention. It was small, simple, and provided just enough of a splash.

“This one,” the designer said, holding up the box and the jeweller grinned back at her, placing the rest back in the box to ring up the purchase.

That was when she saw it—tucked away as it was, she probably wouldn’t have noticed had it not been for the darkness of the woman’s hair, but there was something orange and curved sitting behind the counter. “Wait,” Marinette urged and pointed. “What about that one?”

“Which...? Oh, no darling, it’s broken,” the woman reached over and picked up the necklace gently by its chain.

It was a fox tail, delicately twisted with the orange fading away to white at the tip. There were five black cracks cutting through what would have been a flawless smoothed surface but something about the necklace was different. Rather than be darkened by the misfortune, it seemed more charming—a splash of character to an otherwise flawless piece.

“It belonged to my grandmother and I’ve been trying to fix it,” the woman sighed, running her thumb over the cracks. “But some things are just too stubborn I suppose.”

“I’ll buy it,” Marinette blurted. “I’ll buy them both.”

Blinking, the jeweller stared down at the teenager. “Are you sure? I don’t even know if it would stay together—”

“That’s alright,” the designer grinned. “I’ll take both.”
The money that was asked for seemed less than what both necklaces could have possibly been worth, but Marinette didn’t argue even as the two were placed in hinged boxes and handed over in a small, paper bag with a black, vector fox in the middle. Thanking the woman, the teenagers left, Nino finishing off the rest of the strawberries as they walked under the dark sky.

“You look happy,” he observed and Marinette laughed, turning her nose up to the sky and the lights of the city that flowed over the building of Paris as if they were waves from the ocean. An autumn wind brushed the leaves, sending them spinning over the grey street.

“I am,” the designer said easily, her blue eyes shining with the fake stars hanging above their heads. “I’m happy.”

Marinette jerked awake, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. Urgency clawed at her stomach and howled in her ear but as she listened there was nothing in the usual night sounds that were unfamiliar. Turning over, she eyed her alarm clock and it was too early for even her parents to get up so a misplaced or fallen pan couldn’t have been it either (and she was so used to them that there was no way any sounds from the bakery would have woken her in the first place).

Yet, the feeling of urgency didn’t leave and the designer swallowed and sat up, taking careful catalogue of her room. Light pink spilled from her radio, mixing with the various shades coming from the screensaver on her computer as it changed between the summer Paris fashion show and photographs of various cities.

There was something wrong, her body told her with each throb in her ribs. Something bad.

Marinette’s hand twitched and closed around the fox-tail necklace until the end dug into her palm. Frowning, she looked down at it, examining the cracks across the surface and the way the light from the window glinted off the otherwise smooth surface.

Gently, she placed it down on the bed, untangling her fingers from the gold chain and stared at the unassuming bit of jewellery. Her heart had already calmed a bit, the panic having calmed down until she just felt more awake than anyone had the right to be at three in the morning. Carefully—her hand hesitating a few inches above her blankets—the teenager reached out and touched the necklace.

The panic didn’t return and she sighed, shaking her head. Perhaps it had been nothing but a stray sound outside, maybe a cat had knocked something over, or, even more likely, it could have been nothing more than a nightmare she couldn’t remember. Taking a deep breath, Marinette slid over the side of her loft, landing on the floor below in a cat-like crouch. Her feet made no sound as they hit the wood but she listened for the stirring of her parents anyway.

Nothing.

She hung the necklace up on the manikin and climbed back up the ladder to her bed, pulling the blankets back around her body.

Her heart had slowed but still pounded against her chest and there was something... different about it. Marinette had felt panic before, she had woken up after nightmares, too, but this... something must have happened in order for her body to jolt awake as it had but there was no sounds that could have invoked it. She grabbed her phone and checked the notifications just to be sure, but no one was reporting an akuma attack.

They had become more violent lately, but Chat Noir and Ladybug had always been able to take
Marinette swallowed. Alya... Alya was fine. She had seen her after the last Akuma attack, had even seen the Ladyblog post a couple of hours later with details about the fight. With a sigh, the teenager closed her hand around the cool metal of the fox-tail necklace.

Her eyes had started to drift closed when they snapped back open and she stared at the orange cut up between her fingers. Very slowly she sat up and placed the necklace on the bed, scooting until her back was up against the wall. The panic had returned, rushing back in all at once as her breath hitched in her throat.

Perhaps... perhaps it was cursed?

But then it would be doing something worse than just following her around. Marinette poked one of the cracks with a fingernail and held her breath.

Nothing happened.

She picked it up in her hands and turned it back and forth, examining the chain, the smooth surface, where the orange turned to white.

There was nothing unique about it except for the black lines.

“Okay,” she murmured to herself. “Okay.”

It couldn’t be cursed, right? There was no such things as curses.

(Yet there were things like superheroes but shut up that doesn’t matter.)

The panic that had awoken her hadn’t exactly returned either, but that didn’t mean that the necklace hadn’t caused it. Groaning, Marinette scooped the necklace up and scampered down to her computer. Its screen was unnaturally bright but she fought the urge to turn on a light and squinted instead.

Nothing came up on Google about cursed fox necklaces. Nor fox necklaces in general. The teenager rubbed a hand across her face and breathed in, held it for five seconds, and let the air deflate out of her like a released balloon. It sat beside her mouse, seemingly glowing under the light of her computer and, before she could talk herself out of it, Marinette lifted it up and held it in her hands.

Before she could lose her nerve, the teenager slipped it over her head.

Marinette didn’t know what she was expecting, but the fox-tail flashing and a ball of bright neon orange was not it. Covering her eyes from the glow, the only thing the teenager could think at the moment was ‘Again?’. When the light finally subsided, she was blinking spots out of her vision and lowered her arm from her face.

A kwami floated in front of her and part of Marinette was somehow expecting to see Tikki again even though she knew the small creature was currently with Alya. The being in front of her was just as small with just as big of a head except he—and the kwami was a he—had large, triangular ears tipped with black, narrowed, warm eyes the colour of her dad’s best chocolate eclairs, and a silky thick tail. His whole body was a dark beige that turned to white on his underbelly, and two dark marks that started at the inner corners of his eyes and almost arched down to connect to the edges of his lips.

“You,” he said, and there was a tired sort of grogginess to his voice. “Who are you?” When he
spoke, she saw a flash of two long canines.

“M-Marinette, uh,” the teenager gripped the arm rests of her chair, nails digging into the leather. “W-who are you?”

He stared at her for a long moment, eyes flickering back and forth between hers before going down to the necklace resting on her chest. “Huuxi,” the kwami said curtly.

This was familiar, Marinette told herself, forcing her body to relax and looking over the kwami with a more critical eye. His ears were drooping no matter how much he seemed to want to look alert and there was a sagginess to his limbs that hadn’t quite been there when she had first met Tikki. Absently, the teenager ran her fingers over the cracks in the miraculous and watched his eyes sharpen like a leopard stalking its prey.

He didn’t look at all like Tikki. Minus the more furry appearance, he seemed... in disarray and Marinette forced herself to swallow the words that tried to claw their way out of her throat—ones that were focused on how she didn’t want to be a hero, that whoever was persistent with this was just wasting both of their time. Huuxi—the teen rolled the name around in her mind for a second—looked like a stray breeze would knock him out of the sky if it so much as touched him.

“Are you hungry?” She blurted and just about slapped her hand over her mouth at the noise, listening frantically for any sign her parents had heard her. There didn’t seem to be any reaction, so Marinette relaxed again and turned her curious gaze to the blinking Huuxi.

“I suppose,” he said nonchalantly, shrugging his small shoulders.

Tikki had liked cookies, Marinette remembered, but this kwami... “What do you like to eat?” She offered softly.

His eyes widened a slight fraction before narrowing. “I’m fine with anything.”

The teen was already shaking her head. “No, what do you like?” Marinette pushed gently.

Huuxi stared at her and she couldn’t quite read his face—maybe it was the canine feature or, perhaps, he was simply that good at hiding what he was feeling. “Eggs,” he said at last. “I like to eat eggs.”

“Any type of eggs?”

He seemed to want to curl in on himself before stopping just in time. “All types are fine.”

“Okay,” Marinette stood up from her chair and grabbed the desk when her legs hadn’t quite caught up to her brain. They seemed to still be in shock and the teenager didn’t quite blame them. The only thing to keep her from freaking out (for the second time) was most likely the fact that it was three in the morning and she was simply too tired to do so.

Once her knees decided they were strong enough to tackle the ladder, Marinette pulled open the trapdoor and headed down, tip toeing her way to the kitchen. Her mom had made some hard boiled eggs earlier for her salad tomorrow, but two going missing wasn’t that big of a deal, right?

Treats in hand, the teen scrambled back up to her room and settled in her chair. Placing one egg on her desk, she set to peeling the shell off the other, frowning slightly to herself as she flicked bits into her trashcan. The naked egg was given to the kwami who seemed torn between staring at her and tearing into the food before sitting down on her monitor and digging his little, pointed teeth into his treat.
Marinette got to peeling the second egg, finishing it before Huuxi polished off his own and the kwami frowned at it. “One is fine,” he said, mouth full.

“Eat it,” the teen said, managing to balance the egg next to him.

He started to shake his head but paused as Marinette frowned. The objections stopped after that, leaving them in silence as the designer flicked through pictures on the internet and the kwami finished eating. The night was growing late, though, and the teenager felt her eyes start to close. She ignored Huuxi’s eyes on her as she made a small, makeshift bed out of leftover fabric for him and climbed back under her covers.

“Goodnight,” Marinette called, rolling over on her side.

There was a moment of silence before a soft, “Goodnight,” was echoed back.

_In the morning_, she thought as her eyes drifted shut. She would deal with everything in the morning.
To be fair, it was not forgetfulness that plagued Marinette in the mornings but, rather, brain function. She didn’t think when she climbed down the ladder, brushed her teeth, or even ate breakfast. Thinking was for school and she hadn’t quite reached the building yet.

Staring at the outfit sitting on the manikin and the small, fox-like creature curled up between the shoulder and the neck certainly connected the wires though. The events of the night came back like a rubber band snapping against a wrist and Marinette breathed deeply through her nose. “Huuxi,” She said quietly to the sleeping kwami—he looked a little better from last night; some food and sleep doing some good, at least. “Wake up, Huuxi.”

One gold eye fluttered open and turned to stare up at her before the tiny creature raised his head and yawned, showing off those pointed canines. He floated upwards and watched the teenager shed her pyjamas and trade them for the newly made outfit. The fox-tail necklace had changed—though that, Marinette supposed, made sense because the Ladybug earrings had become black when Tikki wasn’t inside them—becoming a simple, amber coloured twist of metal. It was the same shape, but the bright orange and white tip wasn’t there anymore.

_Nino_ had seen her buy it though. Looking in the mirror, Marinette sighed, shoved it under the collar of her sweatshirt, and took the other necklace she had bought and latched it around her neck. The scarf covered the chain, but only just brushed the gem and little brass charms. Eyeing everything critically one more time and satisfied with the results, the teenager dumped her school work into her bag and turned to the kwami.

“I have to go to school,” she told him. “I don’t have much for entertainment, though.”

He huffed and eyed the bag. It was small, compact, and not very comfortable. “I could sleep,” The kwami muttered.

Rubbing the back of forearm, the teen bit her lip, trying to think of something to do that wouldn’t be _too_ intrusive. Her phone had some games on it, but they drained the battery pretty quickly if you weren’t too careful. Looking around her room, the designer scrambled for some sort of inspiration.
Her eyes landed on the radio.

Marinette frowned for a second before rummaging around in the drawers besides her computer. There was a pair of pink ear buds she had bought a while ago before they got replaced by some that Nino had ‘retired’. “Will these work?”

“What are those?” The kwami ran the wire through his hands as Marinette plugged the end into her phone.

“You put them in your ears,” she offered. “Like tiny stereos but... private.”

Huuxi fumbled with them for a second before the teen reached out to gently place them in his large (and unbearably soft) ears. Making sure the volume was all the way down, Marinette turned on the music.

The kwami reacted instantly; his eyes half lidding, body sagging in the air. If anything, he looked like a cat after eating a nice, full meal and getting ready for a nap. Guiding him to her bag, Marinette made sure he was comfortable before heading back down the stairs where her lunch was packed and waiting for her. Checking for the eggs (there were two), the teen kissed her mom on the cheek, gave her father a hug, and ran out the doors of the bakery.

Sometime during the early morning, the leaves had been swept up. A brisk breeze brushed against Marinette’s cheeks and a few fluttered down into her hair. She wiped them away, catching one by the stem that was blood red before it passed her chest and twirled it around in her fingers.

“Does it hold the answer to world peace?”

Yelping, Marinette jerked away from the voice and spun around, about to smack whoever had snuck up on her only to freeze as shining hazel eyes stared at her. “Nino!” She gasped. “Don’t scare me like that!”

He laughed and gave her a wink. “You make it so easy,” his thumbs hooking into the belt loops on his jeans, the DJ leaned back on his heels and glanced over at the entrance to the school. “I’m mostly surprised that you made it on time today.”

“Me too,” Marinette muttered and, at Nino’s tilted head and curious eyes, she sighed and explained. “Something woke me up pretty late and I couldn’t go back to bed,” with a small shrug of her shoulders, the teen paid more attention to the stairs they headed up, not wanting to trip over the stone this early in the morning. “I just had a really bad feeling.”

“ Weird,” the DJ mused. “Was there an akuma attack last night?”

Marinette froze, her foot hovering in the air for a second, before she frowned and shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she murmured and almost reached into her bag to pull out her phone before remembering the reason she couldn’t. If there was an attack, someone is class was sure to mention it. “Wouldn’t it have been on the news?”

Opening his mouth to respond, Nino was cut off as something bubblegum pink shoved past him. “Alix!” He shouted after the girl but she stormed up the stairs towards their homeroom, stomping her feet against the iron, shoulders up by her ears. “Huh,” rubbing the back of his neck, the DJ frowned. “What’s up with her?”

Only able to shrug, Marinette walked the same path the other girl had gone—only much quieter and at a more subdued volume. Nino trailed behind her, fiddling with his phone even as they walked through the door to the class. Some people were already there; Rose and Juleka, Ivan and Mylène. Alix was hunched in her seat, arms crossed, but the rest were chatting quietly.
The designer was about to walk up to the second row when someone tugged on the strap of her bag. “Why don’t you sit here?” Nino said, motioning to the seat beside him. “I’m sure Adrien wouldn’t mind.”

“Alright,” Marinette said quietly, sitting down beside her friend with a small smile. She wasn’t quite sure what the blond would think, though he and Alya had gotten pretty chummy with each other over the past couple of months. She was sure they wouldn’t mind sitting next to each other.

And, if Adrien wanted his seat back, she could always move.

“You said you got new recording equipment yesterday,” the designer started, carefully pulling her sketchbook out of her bag. “Any plans on what to do with it?”

Nino grinned, his smile wide and bright. “Oh, yeah,” he said. “I got a new microphone so I’m planning on recording some new music over the month and hopefully get my own album out.”

“What—Nino!” Marinette let out a surprised laugh. “That’s awesome! I didn’t know you wrote your own music!”

“I don’t,” he admitted bashfully. “But I figured, hey, maybe it’s time to try something new, right?”

Pride welled up in the designer’s chest and she reached forward, pulling the boy into a hug (ignoring his small yelp of surprise). “That’s amazing, Nino, I can’t wait to hear it!”

When she pulled back, his cheeks were slightly dark and his hazel eyes didn’t quite meet hers, but there was a smile on his face. “Thanks,” he said, and it was as sincere as he’s ever sounded. It was weird seeing him so bashful but, Marinette figured, Nino hadn’t always been incredibly outgoing. He was generally the ‘back of the class keep his head down’ kind of kid.

“Let me know if you need anything,” Marinette promised, the words spilling from her mouth without permission. “Even if it’s just someone to help you move around equipment, okay?”

“I might take you up on that,” Nino said, the flush from his face gone as he poked her bicep. “Miss ‘I can carry twenty-two kilograms of flour’.”

Marinette grunted as manly as she could and flexed her arms, scowling at him. “Baking is serious business,” she said with the straightest face she could muster even as he started laughing just as the door opened and Mme. Bustier walked in.

She smiled at the two giggling in the front, a couple of thick folders filled with papers in her arms, and looked over the rest of the class. “Good morning,” she called and the class returned the greeting with a quiet one of their own. Everyone was mostly there except for (unsurprisingly) Adrien and Alya. “I know some of you have a Chemistry quiz to study for, so you may ask for the pass to the library if you need it. The rest of you are expected to do something quietly and, if you need to ask any questions, I will be up here grading papers.” There was motion to the back of the room and the redhead smiled. “Yes, Nathaniel?”

“I, um, forgot my pencils in the art room—”

Mme. Bustier waved him on to go get them. “Anyone else need to go get something before we start?”

There was a negative murmur through the students and, with that, homeroom started. Marinette opened her sketchbook, not too worried about the exam later on as she had studied as much as she could and the only thing left was to just have faith that she would, at least, do her best.
“By the way,” Nino murmured, leaning over. His eyes never lifted from his own notebook as he spoke, but there was a curl to his lips as he smiled. “The outfit looks nice.”

Marinette beamed.

oOo

By lunch, Alya still hadn’t appeared and Marinette didn’t realize how much she had depended on fiddling with her phone until it was no longer an option. Finding a quiet spot in the park to eat, the designer opened her bag to pull out her lunch and froze at the sight of the kwami still curled up in her bag.

After a second to make sure they were truly alone, Marinette sighed softly and offered him a small smile. “Are you hungry?”

He had to pull the headphones from his ears and tilted his head, so she repeated the question. “What do you have?”

“More eggs,” She offered, holding up one. “Is that alright?”

Huuxi nodded and the designer set to peeling off the shell. That morning had distracted her from the night before but, faced with the kwami, she was forced to think about how, exactly, she was supposed to handle the situation. There was no way she could return the necklace to the woman she had bought it from—there was a high probability that the jeweller hadn’t even known what she had been selling.

“You don’t have a lot of questions,” Huuxi spoke up suddenly and Marinette gasped, almost flinging the egg up in the air. Gold met blue and they stared at each other for a second. “Most have questions.”

“I—” The designer swallowed. “You aren’t the first kwami I’ve met,” she admitted and picked at the egg, the shell fragments suddenly becoming the most interesting thing she’s ever seen. Then, the peeling was done and she had nothing to keep her hands occupied.

Huuxi accepted the egg that was almost as big as him and started nibbling on the top. His eyes kept watching her, though. “You were a chosen?” He murmured to himself.

The pain wasn’t supposed to be there, and it wasn’t supposed to sting as much as it had. “It was a mistake,” she said sharply, ignoring the old haunts that rose up and made her throat close. “I was a mistake.”

“No,” the kwami snapped and Marinette realized with a fresh wave of horror that her sight was getting blurry. “No,” he repeated, his tone softer. “That’s not what I meant.”

Turning her eyes up to the sky, the teenager hoped that the sunlight would, somehow, dry her tears before they became noticeable. “What did you mean, then?”

There was a moment of contemplative silence, broken by the sounds of cars beyond the large, stone wall blocking the courtyard and birds fluttering in the trees. “I meant,” Huuxi started, his voice soft and thoughtful. “That those who first find a kwami rarely give them up.” There was something bitter there, something that went past this conversation.

Marinette didn’t ask. Huuxi didn’t offer to explain.

“So why did someone who was chosen give it up?”
Her nails cut into her palm and the designer took in a deep, shaky breath. “I wasn’t the right one for the job,” she said.

“Were you told that or do you tell yourself that?”

Marinette bit her lip and closed her eyes. “Does it matter?” she whispered.

“Of course it does,” Huuxi said.

Taking a few shuddering breaths, the teenager tried to steady her voice before even trying to talk. “I made a mistake,” she admitted finally, her voice cracking. “I messed up and I...” Marinette swallowed. “It was better,” the words came out in a breath, soft and quiet.

Huuxi hummed around a mouthful of boiled egg. It was the type of sound someone would make when they knew someone was lying to themselves, but were too polite to point it out—or couldn’t exactly speak because their cheeks were stuffed. Picking at her own food, the teenager tried to swallow the lump in her throat so, maybe, she might be able to eat without feeling nauseous.

“The fact that you found me,” the kwami spoke up after swallowing a large clump of egg, licking his paws clean and not bothering to look at her as he talked. “Says that the universe didn’t think you were a mistake at all.”

“I don’t want to be a hero,” Marinette muttered.

Huuxi’s gold eyes were sharp. “Good thing foxes aren’t heroes,” he said.

oOo

The akuma attacked halfway through Marinette’s math class, a rumble and roar from the street the only sign something was wrong before something crashed against the school. Already out of her seat, the designer followed the rest of the students out of the classroom and down the stairs, prepared to get as far away from whatever was happening outside.

Pushing out the front doors, Marinette took in the thick claw marks on the street, the toppled street lamps, and the crashed cars.

A flash of red and black, and there was Ladybug. Alya. She looked... she looked tired, Marinette settled on finally. Tired but determined. Beside her and looking much the same, Chat Noir launched himself over a battered bus with a snarl, his eyes flashing and looking wild even under the midday sun.

Fingers curled around her arm and Marinette grunted, tugged away down the stairs. She tried to regain her footing before smashing her nose against the pavement, and it was only the momentum of being yanked forward that kept her from crashing into the ground. Glancing up, she saw a black t-shirt before she was shoved around the side of the building.

“I-Ivan?! What—”

“Better him than me,” Alix said, skidding to a halt beside her. “You were just standing there.”

Marinette opened her mouth to respond when the ground shook. They were fighting out in front of the school and her house was on the other side of the building.

So she was stuck.

Sighing, the designer rubbed at her forehead. “Is everyone alright, at least?”
“Think so,” Alix shrugged and eyed the other girl for a moment. There was a glint in her eye, one that Marinette couldn’t quite read until she tore her gaze away. “In any case, school is clearly over for the day.”

“Clearly,” Ivan muttered in a way that sounded more like ‘no really’. There was some quiet snorts from the other students around them and, gradually, people began to peel off.

The attack was so common place, now, that it was just... normal.

Normal for people to get out and then just head home to watch whatever the akuma of the week was face off against Ladybug and Chat Noir. A tourist attraction more than actual danger.

“The bakery’s on the other side of the school, isn’t it?” Alix said, her arms crossed over her chest, a slight frown darkening her otherwise bright features. “You have someplace to go?”

Marinette frowned and shifted back on her heels. “I—” There was another rumble and she swallowed. “I’ll be fine,” she said. The bakery had a back door and she could sneak around the back of the school with ease. “It’ll be alright.”

Alix eyed her then grunted. “You better be,” she said, nudging the other girl with her shoulder before taking off, heading in the direction of the Louvre. Ivan didn’t bother saying a goodbye and, instead, lumbered off to go find Mylène to hang out with for the rest of the day.

Standing there, tucked behind the side of the school, Marinette sighed. She was alone—well, not really. Her hand drifted down to her bag as she leaned around the corner, peeking in on the fight that was happening not too far away. There wasn’t all that much to see; most hidden by crushed cars that had been piled up one on top of the other.

“You said you didn’t want to be a hero.”

Yelping, Marinette spun around, slamming her back against the stone wall as Huuxi hovered in front of her, not caring whether or not he was seen. “I don’t,” she hissed. “I just... worried, was probably the best way to say it. She’s my friend.”

“Who?” Huuxi darted out from behind the building, peering out over the ruined street. “Ah, Ladybug.”

The teenager snatched him and pulled the kwami back to her chest, looking around to make sure he hadn’t been seen.

“You know her, then?”

Marinette just about shoved him back into her bag then decided against it, letting him go. It had been Tikki who had mentioned not telling anyone about the small little creatures. Perhaps Huuxi just didn’t care (and if he didn’t care, why should she?). “Yes.”

“Then you know Tikki as well.”

The teenager gritted her teeth. “Yes.”

Huuxi hummed under his breath and settled in the collar of her sweater, hidden beneath one pig-tail. “So I have the honour of being with the Ladybug chosen, do I not?”

A bright pink flush—from anger and a tiny bit of embarrassment—spread across Marinette’s cheeks. She didn’t bother responding to him, stomping her way around the school to get to the street on the other side. “I’m not her, anymore,” the teenager said, her voice hushed and harsh. “I
gave up the miraculous, I should have never been Ladybug.”

Tiny paws settled against the side of her neck. “I think that’s a lie,” Huuxi whispered, one of his large ears brushing against her skin. The fur was like her mother’s old silk dress that she had brought with her from China. His tail settled against her nape, hidden beneath the thick fabric of her sweater. “Why are you lying to yourself?”

“B—because,” Marinette swallowed. “Because I—”

Something black and large was flying at her and the designer shrieked and scrambled out of the way. Chat Noir landed on his feet, claws digging into the ground as he skidded across the street, carving several deep gouges into the asphalt. Palm pressed against her chest, breathing uneven, Marinette watched as he got to his feet and shook out his hair. Huuxi pressed against her neck, ducking even further into her sweatshirt even as the designer felt her nails dig further into the wool.

Green met blue in a single heartbeat, the slit pupils dilating for a second—and then Chat was racing off again, his belt of a tail streaming out behind him. She watched him go with wide eyes, mouth dropped open as he flung himself at—was that a dragon? Taking the last couple of meters between her and the back door to the bakery at a sprint, Marinette flung the door open, slammed it behind her, and rushed upstairs to her room where maybe (just maybe) she could drown out the fight outside with music.

Huuxi left her as soon as the trap door was shoved open, hovering around like a bee as Marinette plugged her phone into her radio and turned the volume halfway up. The kwami looked amused as she pressed the play button, and the expression never left his smug little face as the floor pulsed with a drum and the walls thrummed from a guitar. Soon there was no difference from the fight outside and the vibration of her room.

Doggedly, the designer ignored Huuxi as he watched her.

*You haven’t escaped this conversation*, his look said. *Not yet.*

*Just watch me*, Marinette dared.

ooO

Without an excuse to keep the music up as loud as it was, the designer was forced to turn it down once the fight outside had finished. Her sketchbook had found its way to her lap during that time and she was sketching a couple absentminded designs that would probably never see the daylight unless she truly liked one of them. The sound of the pencil against heavy paper filled the silence; a strange, rhythmic scratching.

Huuxi had curled up in the angle of her left elbow, his chin resting on her forearm, limbs curled up underneath his body, and fluffy tail wrapping around his body like a blanket-pillow hybrid. It was the arm that was holding paper down, so Marinette didn’t move it quite as much, though the large ears flicked with every press of her pencil.

He was cute when he wasn’t asking strangely invasive questions. The designer hesitated for a second before reaching over and gently brushing the tip of her pinkie from the rise of his forehead, between his ears, and down over the curl of his back. A deep rumble came from the kwami—one that vibrated through her arm—that disappeared as quickly as it had risen once she returned to her sketches.

Now that Huuxi wasn’t hiding in her book bag or buried under her collar, she saw the effect of
three good meals and some sleep. His fur was no longer as ruffled or ratty, and his body didn’t seem overly small. Perhaps it was just a way that kwamis were and how their bodies processed nutrients, but he looked much better than he had the night before.

A buzz interrupted her thoughts and Marinette turned to her phone where it sat on her desk, plugged into the charger. She put the pencil between her teeth and reached for it, careful not to jolt her arm or knock the small creature to the floor.

‘Okay,’ the text message said, ‘this is heavier than I thought please help.’

Marinette laughed to herself and unlocked the phone to type something back to Nino and the poor pouting emoji he had added on to the little, grey bubble. ‘Now?’

The was a minute or so where he was typing out a response and the designer giggled to herself. He probably hadn’t even realized that the sun had set, much less how late it was.

‘Of course not, who do you think I am?’ There was a second pause and then her phone was vibrating again. ‘Please help my poor, weak masculine body to move various boxes on Saturday you bread Goddess.’

Shaking her head, the teenager sighed fondly. ‘Only because you asked so nicely,’ the winking smiling face was easily added on and she grinned at his ‘THANK YOU’ before looking back over the dresses and suits she had drawn over the past few hours. Huuxi slumbered on and Marinette hummed some absent tune as she turned the page of her sketchbook and started drawing once more. Various outfits filled the pages, some partially done before they were abandoned and left for new, but similar ideas that grew from the old.

She was drawing a truly large sweater that hung off one shoulder but made of thick wool when small paws padded against her skin. Huuxi braced himself on her knuckles and watched her work, tilting his head back and forth as she added jeans with holes at the knees. “Where would I stay?” He asked, his voice breaking through the rhythm of the pencil and Marinette paused.

“Probably in a purse,” the designer said, sketching a large one hanging from the covered, face-less woman’s shoulder. “See? Safe and warm.”

The kwami grunted and looked up at her, his eyes narrowing in thought. “I liked the sweater,” he spoke up. “It was easy to hide in and warm.”

“Oh,” Marinette murmured and she frowned, looking down at the outfit in thought. “I liked the sweater,” he spoke up. “It was easy to hide in and warm.”

“Oh,” Marinette murmured and she frowned, looking down at the outfit in thought. There really wasn’t a place he could hide that was easily accessible and the collar hung a bit too far down for anything besides her phone to hide anywhere in it. The scarf she had worn that day hadn’t been too large—in fact, it was one of the thinnest she owned, but it was an idea, at least. “I think I have something you will like.”

She stood up, ignoring the little voice in the back of her head that she hadn’t wanted the kwami to stay with her for too long, so why was she thinking about his comfort? He’ll be with me until he looks recovered, Marinette tried to convince herself, going to her closet and fishing through the contents as Huuxi settled on her shoulder like some oddly furred bird. Pulling out a thick circular scarf, the designer pulled it over her head and sighed. “How about this?”

The kwami shot into the fabric, the tips of his ears tickling her skin as he ducked low and covered himself with the wool. “I like it,” Huuxi confirmed and wiggled around for a second before settling. “Are all fabric necklaces like this?”

“Fabric...? Oh,” Marinette sat down in her chair. “They’re called scarves, and no, they’re not all
like this.”

“Hmm,” Huuxi poked his head out from the folds, his fur blending into the camel wool remarkably well. “Shame,” he said, as if the fashion industry that focused on scarves should be catering to kwamis and keeping them warm.

Marinette picked up her pencil and smiled to herself. “You can’t listen to music in there, either.”

“Useless bit of garbage—”

A startled laugh escaped the designers lips as the kwami buried himself into the wool, muttering curses at the scarf he was currently snuggled into.

Okay, she could admit to herself that he was cute in a grumpy kind of way. Like how cats got when they were old.

She wasn’t going to keep him though, Marinette promised to herself. A good wielder, someone who could use the miraculous was out there, waiting. All she had to do was nurse him back to health and find that person.

Liar, a small voice whispered in her head.

Marinette sat in Adrien’s seat the next morning, slid her bag (gently, because Huuxi had settled in it again) under her seat with her heel, and gave Nino a bright smile as he took his headphones off. “So,” she said, leaning on the table in front of her with her elbow, holding up her head with her palm. “I heard you need someone tough and strong to move some things for you.”

“What?” Nino sounded scandalous and placed one hand over his heart. “Where did you hear a crazy thing like that?” He grinned, then, and held up one fist. “Seriously, though, thanks for helping me out with this—I didn’t realize how heavy everything actually was until I tried moving it yesterday.”

The designer glanced at his fist for a second before smiling back and placing hers against it. “It’s no problem,” she said. “I’m just glad I can help.”

“We’re moving it upstairs,” the DJ leaned back in his seat, rocking the chair so it tipped back on the legs. “It’s only a flight, though, that okay?”

“Fine,” Marinette waved away his worries. “I’m guessing your dad is finally letting you make room of that old office space?”

Nino’s teeth were bright as he smiled. “Yeah,” he said. “I still can’t believe he let me borrow it; I always thought he would keep it open in case my brother needed to move back in.” The door to the classroom opened and Adrien Agreste stumbled in, his hair combed as it always was, but, somehow, his clothes seemed to be in a bit more of a disarray. There were no bags under his eyes — no doubt hidden by makeup—but the slouching of his shoulders and the downward tilt to his eyes said everything.

“Morning,” Marinette greeted softly.

Green flashed and hovered on her face for a second. “Hey,” the model returned before he walked past her and headed up to her old seat.

Sighing softly, the designer slouched in her chair, folded her hands on the table, and rested her
chin on them. Wood scraped against the floor as Nino scooted closer, laying his own head on the table.

“What?” The DJ kept his voice low as he spoke, easily letting the sound of other students chatting to keep it from reaching other ears. His grin was softer now, eyes smooth around the edges in something that, on anyone else, Marinette would have mistaken as pity. “No more stutter?”

She shrugged her shoulders and sighed. It had been a while ago, sometime after her uncle had visited that she had come to the conclusion that Adrien wasn’t going to notice someone like her. There were some shining moments where he had—the hat competition for one—but that quickly went down the drain once she realized just how filled his schedule was.

The last time they had truly spoke was in the rain as he handed her his umbrella and, even then, he had done most of the talking.

“He’s so busy,” Marinette settled for saying instead. “And I can’t even manage to become friends with him.”

Nino looked like he had swallowed a lemon for a second before he let out a gust of air and drummed his fingers against the table. “You know what? We haven’t ever hung out with them.”

“Them...?”

“Adrien and Alya,” The DJ jerked and pointed a thumb over his shoulder at the two chairs behind them. “You girls were pretty tight during the first couple of weeks, so maybe it’s time we all reconnected, you know?”

Marinette hummed, but the more she thought about it, the more she started to smile. “You’re right,” she said and Nino buffed his nails against his shirt, looking a little too proud of himself. “I’ll ask them before lunch to see if they can join us this weekend.” Her look turned sly. “Especially after I finish helping you move your stuff.”

Laughing, the DJ stood up. “No need to make it sound so suggestive,” he said with a wink before turning to the teacher. “Mme Bustier, may I go to the bathroom before class starts?”

The redhead glanced up from the papers on her desk and nodded, waving the teenager on as the door opened, letting in a frazzled Alya. Nino slid by her and Marinette straightened in the wooden chair. Asking them to hang out on Saturday or Sunday. That was fine, she could do that.

Opening her literature book to finish reading the selections of poems Mme. Bustier had assigned for the reading that day, the designer didn’t mean to tune into the conversation behind her.

It was just... they were talking and not really bothering to cover their voices.

Not to mention; it wasn’t anything private.

“—don’t have anything until Monday,” Adrien was saying. “If anything, we can at least try to find it.”

Alya sighed. “Look, why don’t we just wait? Something will be bound to happen eventually; we’re just tiring ourselves by looking.”

Marinette blinked and focused back on the words in front of her. It wasn’t the most confusing conversation she had ever heard, but there was some good news. Smiling, she redoubled her efforts to finish the poetry.
Adrien and Alya were free that weekend.

oOo

Casimir Cavey, sixteen, wasn’t an unpopular boy. He had his friends, the people he knew and didn’t mind socializing with, and the people he hated. His looks came from classic money; dirty blond hair that never missed a salon date, green eyes that future lovers could compare to emeralds, and straight, white teeth.

The cookie cutter European boy. Perhaps that was why Marinette never quite noticed him until he was blocking her way down the stairs. Oh, she knew of him; everyone knew of everyone, but she couldn’t name anything beyond the fact that he never remembered his physics textbook, the bright orange backpack had been with him for three years, and his father was a doctor.

It was not a coincidence that those were the three facts everyone knew about him.

Looking up at him—and feeling frustrated about her lack of height for the tenth-billionth time in her very young life—Marinette frowned slightly and glanced past to where Alya and Adrien were making their way down to the courtyard. “Excuse me,” she tried, stepping to the left.

He moved to block her way and coughed awkwardly into a fist. “Sorry,” Casimir said and there was red blooming across his cheeks. “I just... can I talk to you for a minute?”

“It won’t take long, I promise.”

The designer took a deep breath and dug up the well of patience that was slightly rustled. She could catch up to the two before they managed to fully disappear, right? “Okay,” Marinette said. “But please make it quick.”

He seemed to take his sweet time, shifting back and forth on his heels and the small teenager was quickly losing her nerve. For a second she thought about simply asking him to wait until later and tell her then, but he opened his mouth.

The words, if they were words, came out garbled and funny as if they were being wrung through a juicer and she had to separate the bits from the actual liquid before using it in baking. When they were clear, however, Marinette paled.

“I know we’re not in the same grade or anything, but I’ve known of you for a long time—that sounds really bad actually—but I think you’re really cool and I just wanted to know if you... if you might want to go on a date?”

His bag moved and Marinette grasped the top, keeping it closed before a certain someone could stick his head out and be seen. “I,” the designer started and Casimir looked so hopeful. She knew what that was like, getting enough courage to talk to his crush. He was a lot braver than her.

“I’m sorry,” Marinette said softly, wishing he had done this some place a bit more private. “I’m
honoured by your feelings—I really am—but we don’t know each other all that well and—”

“We could,” Casimir tried desperately, she could feel it in his tone, vibrating through him with such heartfelt hope. “Just—just a date, Marinette. Please.”

Perhaps it was better that she had never asked Adrien out—he would probably respond with the same rejection. “I’m sorry, Casimir,” her nails dug into the fabric of her bag forgetting for a second why she had placed her hand there in the first place until something soft brushed her fingers and patted them encouragingly enough for the designer to take a deep breath and force the rest of the words out. Thank you, she thought to the little kwami. “I’m not... I don’t have feelings with you in that way.”

She felt it when his desperation turned to anger, felt it when he straightened, body tensing. Marinette swallowed down the urge to run, to shove him aside and make her way down to the courtyard below and sprint all the way home like there were rabid dogs on her heels. She would have, too, had a heavy hand not rested on her shoulder.

“Everything cool?” Nino said and the designer felt every bit of tension drain from her body as she leaned against his taller form and glanced up at the Spaniard’s face. The DJ wasn’t looking at her; he only had eyes for the upperclassman.

“Yeah,” Casimir said, his voice hard and emotionless. Something heavy dropped in the pit of Marinette’s stomach. “Everything’s fine.”

A pleased hum rose from Nino’s throat. “Good,” he said, gently, but firmly, pushing Marinette past the sixteen year old and guiding her to the top of the stairs. “We’ll just be going, then.”

Green eyes drilled into Marinette’s back all the way down, but she never dropped her shoulders or looked back up the stairs.

Nino sighed once they had reached the bottom. “You okay?” he slung an arm around her shoulder, bright eyes pensively moving over her face. “You got that look,” his hand tapped a beat into her sleeve. “Like a hunted rabbit.”

“Are you calling me a rabbit?”

“Eh,” he shrugged and grinned. “You’re right; you’re more like a mouse.”

Laughing, Marinette shoved the DJ away, shaking her head. Gradually, their chuckles died to nothing more than the occasional giggle. “Thank you,” she said after a while.

Nino said nothing, turning his head away and nodding towards two people who were waiting on the sidewalk. “Look who it is,” he said instead and the designer felt an odd sort of affection well up for this boy who was too kind for his own good sometimes before she turned to see Alya and Adrien by the curb of the street.

Side by side, their slouched shoulders and slumped frames were almost identical, exhaustion seeping out from both like waves. They turned when Nino called for them, blinking dazedly in the half noon sun.

And, like the traitor he was, the DJ shoved Marinette forward. “Oh,” she said softly and cleared her throat, dragging up the courage that sometimes buried itself so low it might as well have been in the centre of the earth. “I was—I mean, we. We were wondering if you two would like to hang out this weekend.” Was it too formal? It sounded too formal. “There’s some good movies out, or we could just go to a park or something—”
Friends, Marinette tried to convince herself. They were all just friends and there was no reason to react otherwise.

“Marinette and I were going to move some stuff on Saturday, but if you want we could all go do something afterwards,” Nino added on, swooping in to save the day. “We can always plan around your guys’ schedules; we know you’re busy.”

Adrien’s eyes shifted between the two of them and he sighed, smiling apologetically. “Sorry,” he said kindly. “My father wants me to do a couple more shoots for the summer line this weekend and I don’t know when I’ll be done.”

A stone, heavy and sharp slammed into Marinette’s chest as, for a second, she simply forgot to breathe. Mouth opening with no true words actually thought of, the designer barely heard Alya’s response.

But she still heard it.

“—dates, you know? So they want me to watch my brothers and sisters—”

Karma. Was this karma? Marinette had half a mind to run back to Casimir and apologize for everything she had said because clearly, clearly something was wrong.

They had said they were free. Was it a lie to each other? Was it a lie to her?

“Maybe on Wednesday?” Adrien was offering. “I know I have nothing planned.”

“Sure,” Nino said, his voice bright, if slightly disappointed. “See you guys tomorrow, then!”

Marinette mumbled something that sounded like a goodbye, but she wasn’t quite sure with the sudden roar of rushing water in her ears. A hand settled on the small of her back and the designer let it guide her to where ever it wanted.

“I-I don’t get it,” she whispered. “Is it me?”

“What?” Nino spun her around until there was nothing left to look at but bright, golden eyes and the deep red of his hat. “Where did this come from?”

The designer swallowed and opened her mouth, only to close it again as something sharp took its place in her chest.

“They were busy, they’re always busy, Marinette. It’s not you—”

“I overheard them,” she cut him off, her voice soft and yet still managing to slice through his words. “This morning. They said they were free—”

Nino stilled and there was something frightening about it; like a jaguar waiting in the bushes for its prey to step just a little bit closer. “Marinette,” His hands landed on her shoulders as he leaned over, forcing her to look at him. “No matter what you think—even though they said they were free this morning—none of this has to do with you.”

“Then why,” she hissed, “have we never hung out? Why do they never sit with us when we have lunch in the park? Why do they never talk to us outside of class?” The designer shoved his hands away as months and months of self doubt finally crashed down from the unsteady tower it had been building. “There has to be a reason, Nino! Why else would they have lied?!?”

He didn’t have an answer. She could see it on his face.
Perhaps, had Marinette been thinking clearer, it was because she was asking questions that were impossible for him to answer. It was unfair, she would realize later.

But now was not later and they were sitting in the middle of the present.

“Marinette...” Nino started and she started shaking her head. She would have to repair her backpack, the designer thought absently, with the amount of strength she had been holding onto the fabric.

“Marinette!” The cry had come from across the courtyard and the girl tore her attention away from her friend almost gladly. Alix was waving her hand, running towards them. “Oh man,” the skater said, completely oblivious, it seemed, to the tension that had been about to erupt. “I’m so glad I caught you—look, can we head to your house? My dad, he’s working late again, and I wanted to see if it was cool with your parents if I could pick up some pastries after closing to take to him.”

The world, it seemed, decided to crash through their private little party to remind them that it still existed. Licking her lips, Marinette took a deep breath and glanced back towards Nino. He shrugged, knowing that they weren’t going to be able to finish this conversation here.

“Meet you in the park?” Her voice was soft.

“Course,” the DJ said, giving her a small smile. They weren’t done, not by a long shot, but they could take the time to cool off and think.

“Wait,” Marinette said as she fully turned to their classmate, following Alix out of the building as Nino watched on. “Why is your dad staying so late?”

oOo

Nino saw Adrien before the other boy saw him and took a couple of deep breaths to stop himself from grabbing the model and dragging him into one of the classrooms. Chloé was there, her perfectly manicured hands curled in a way that was probably supposed to be seductive as she bat her eyelashes.

If anything, she looked like a vulture with something stuck in her eye.

Calming down enough that his stomps became normal steps, Nino straightened his shoulders and approached the two blonds.

“—And I know that you’ve been so busy this week,” Chloé was saying, waving her hand and rolling her eyes. “So I figured you’d want to get out this weekend; maybe go shopping or go to a nice place to eat, just to relax.”

Her tone didn’t sound like ‘relaxing’ was what was on her mind.

Before Adrien could answer, though, Nino slid up beside him and gave Chloé a smile that was more wolf-ish than human. “Excuse me,” the DJ said through gritted teeth, trying but not succeeding in keeping his anger leashed. “I need to talk to Adrien for a moment.”

As Chloé sat there, sputtering, Nino pulled the model away towards the courtyard and through students preparing to take their lunch break.

“N-Nino? What—”

“We need to talk,” the shorter teen said, voice hard as he shoved open a door. It hit the opposite wall with a slam. At any other time, he would have felt guilty startling the blond. But not now, not
when his anger snarled underneath the surface. He spun Adrien around so he was the one facing the door and abruptly let go.

The model opened his mouth to speak and swallowed the words as Nino lifted a finger, asking silently for Adrien to keep his mouth shut.

“Answer me honestly,” the DJ started, his hazel eyes burning as if lit by the very electricity that powered his music. “A simple yes or no will do.” Taking a deep breath, Nino steeled his stomach and searched the other boy’s bright gaze. “Do you consider Marinette an acquaintance?” It might be easier to start small, work his way up and get his answers gradually.

Adrien blinked a couple of times looking honestly surprised at the question. “Yes!” He managed, his voice loud before softening it a bit. “Yes, o-of course I do!”

“Do you think of her as a friend?”

“What is going on—"

Nino slapped an open palm against the nearest table, the sound like a gunshot in the empty room. “Answer the question,” he snapped.

There was a second where Adrien actually look afraid before he nodded his head frantically enough to make his bangs bounce up and down. “Y-yes!”

“Then why,” Nino’s eyes narrowed behind his glasses looking like razorblades of gold. “Do you keep lying to her?” He didn’t wait for the model’s answer and, instead, started pacing. Three steps to the left, stop, turn, three to the right. Each movement was quick, jerking, and yet seemed to be perfectly controlled. “If you didn’t want to hang out with us this weekend because you finally have time to yourself, that would be fine but, instead, you and Alya talk about having ‘free time’,” Air quotes were included and the DJ couldn’t stop the bitter sarcasm that slipped through, but he couldn’t stop, not now. “And then blatantly lie to our faces when we ask if you want to actually try to be friends.”

Sometime during his words, Adrien’s face had gone shockingly white, his mouth open as if to say something but no words had managed to escape.

Halting his pacing, Nino pushed a finger into the model’s chest. It didn’t matter that he was a couple of inches shorter than the other teen, his anger had swollen to the size of a mountain. “You owe Marinette an apology,” he told Adrien bluntly. “And she’ll forgive you and try again because she’s nice like that.”

“Nino..."

The DJ shook his head and took a step back. “No,” he said. “No, I’m tired of excuses, I’m tired of lies—I’m going to go eat lunch with Marinette and you,” there was almost a snarl to his voice as he fought the urge to get back into the blond’s personal space. “You are going to spend the next two hours thinking about what you’re going to say to her.” Turning on his heel, Nino headed back towards the door.

Adrien’s hand tightened around the strap of his backpack and he had to swallow a couple of times before he opened his mouth and actual words came out. “Nino,” his voice was still slightly ragged.

Hand on the doorknob, the DJ paused, but didn’t look back.

“I’m sorry.”
Taking a deep breath, Nino rested his head against the cold wood of the door and sighed. “I won’t say it’s okay,” he said, not turning around. “Because it’s not. And I can’t forgive you, not today.” Finally, finally the DJ looked over his shoulder. “Ask me again tomorrow.”

He was through the door before the other teen could say something. Straightening his backpack, Nino rolled his shoulders as if something heavy had settled on them. There was something squeezing around his chest but, unlike earlier, it had lessened somewhat. He had done all he could, now it was just up to Adrien to do something.

Lost as he was in thought, Nino didn’t see Alix until she had rammed into him, knocking them both to the ground. “Wha—”

“Nino! Thank God—” Her hair was out of place more than usual, blue eyes wide and wild. “You have to help—”

“Wait, wait, Alix, what happened?”

“He took her!” The skater blurted, pointing out past the doors.

Shaking his head, the DJ frowned. “Who took who?”

“The akuma!” The word was enough to make Nino start, his eyes widening. “The akuma took Marinette!”

_Oh_, he thought. _Oh shit._

oOo

Ten Minutes Prior

“It’s not exactly public knowledge yet,” Alix started after a moment of walking. “But something was stolen from the museum a couple of nights ago.” She shoved her hands into her jacket pockets, looking up at the cloudy sky. “It was an akuma,” her voice was so certain, “there was no way it could be anything _but_ an akuma but my dad doesn’t want people to panic so they’re trying to keep it on the down-low until Ladybug and Chat Noir can find them.”

Marinette frowned. “An akuma...? But Papillon sent out one yesterday and last night...” The designer trailed off as Alix kicked a rock down the street.

“Why do you think the police want to keep it a secret?” The skater said, her face as serious as the designer had ever seen it. “Could you imagine the panic that would sweep Paris if the people found out he can have more than one akuma, now?”

Knuckles turned white and Marinette took a deep, shuddering breath, eyes turned towards the red lights signalling them to keep waiting. “What... what kind of Akuma were they?” Because if nobody had _caught_ it...

“Her,” Alix corrected. “The akuma was a woman with the power to sing people to sleep.” Blue eyes sharpened and focused on the designer’s face. “We don’t know how powerful she is—_was_—” the skater frowned. “For all we know she can sing the entire city to sleep.”

“What makes you say that?” Marinette frowned.

Black and green clad shoulders shrugged up to brush the strands of pink hair that wildly escaped the other girl’s black cap. “It happened at three in the morning,” Alix said. “Most of the city was
already asleep.”

Something tickled the back of the designer’s brain, something important but it evaded her grasp every time she tried to catch it. The red figure flashed, turning into a walking green person and Marinette started forward automatically. She opened her mouth to say something when words floated back to her from that morning.

*We’re just tiring ourselves out looking.*

The designer jolted to a stop, staring blankly at the white paint on the street. Alya was Ladybug and there hadn’t been a multitude of akuma attacks so she looked tired because she was out looking for whoever had stolen from the museum.

And that ‘we’ she had said to *Adrien* of all people.

“*Mon Dieu,*” Marinette whispered, her hands cupping her cheeks, fingers partially covering her eyes as they looked at nothing at all on the surface and yet, *yet,* were as open as they had ever been. “*Mon Dieu.*”

Green eyes, blond hair, his and Alya’s close friendship and how they always looked tired and coming in on the same days being absent the other.

*I’m so blind. I’m so, so blind.*

“Marinette? Marinette!” Alix was shaking her shoulder and the other teen turned to look at her, mouth opening and closing with no sounds or purpose. “Are you okay?”

“I—I—”

The pink haired teen was staring at her with wide, concerned blue eyes. They flickered, glancing past Marinette to something beyond the designer, focused and then, if it was even possible, got bigger. A gloved hand wrapped around the motionless girl’s arm and yanked her forward—

Something stopped Marinette from slamming face first into the asphalt even as she tripped over her own shoes. “Alix, wh-what—”

A car honked and the designer was ripped from her thoughts as the world continued to spin. Her eyes focused on the skater with her bared teeth and clenched fists before registering that someone was holding onto her—and it was not someone Alix particularly *liked.*

“Let go of her,” she snapped.

There was a second and Marinette wished she could turn fully around, but her scarf was biting into her neck. She spared a split moment to be thankful that Huuxi was still in her bag from the classes otherwise the world would have gotten a bit more uncomfortable for him.

“I think,” a voice said behind her, soft and wondering. There was something cold to it, a haunting quality that made her skin itch and ping as she shuddered. “That you should get to your feet, *Alix,* and walk into the traffic right,” whoever it was snapped his fingers and must have pointed. “Over *there.*”

Marinette scowled and almost ripped herself free of whoever was holding her—damn the bruises that would be on her neck later—but froze as her classmate gritted her teeth and shakily got to her feet. Each limb seemed forced into place like an action figure being played with by some child with a sick sense of humour. “A-Alix?”
The skater took a step towards the street.

“Alix,” The designer watched, her eyes wide as her friend started walking towards the edge of the sidewalk. “Alix, Alix—” Marinette didn’t think, she couldn’t, as she slipped through her scarf ignoring the way wool scraped across her face and lunged for the pink haired girl as she raised her foot over the curb.

Wrapping one arm around the other teen’s collar, Marinette yanked her backwards, stumbling a bit then falling back on her butt with Alix above her, breathing as if she had just finished racing Kim to the top of the Eiffel Tower. Something popped like bubblegum and there was a strange smell in the air—like wet dirt or freshly cut grass. The other girl buried her face in the designer’s shoulder, body shaking with each ragged inhale.

A hand grabbed the back of her sweater and Marinette was yanked out from underneath Alix and flung across the sidewalk. She slammed painfully on her side, rolling across cement once before sliding, her palms scraping across concrete. Fabric ripped and the designer wasn’t quite sure if it was her bag, her jacket, or her pants as she breathed in through her nose, trying to regain her bearings.

Her head ached but she couldn’t fully remember hitting it.

*Just a second,* Marinette told her body as it twitched painfully. *Just give me a second.*

Once the world stopped trying to throw her off its surface, the designer was able to gather her arms beneath her body. With a groan, she forced herself up to her hands and knees, biceps shaking with the effort and vision swimming as she tried to find the blotch of pink that was Alix.

“A Marinette!”

There was a dark blur approaching her and the designer swallowed. Her head was too heavy and she let it drop, forehead almost brushing the sidewalk while she panted over the street. Something red dripped down, creating ladybug spots on the grey world spinning around under her hands.

She caught sight of dark green eyes and only hoped that Alix had been able to run before darkness rose like a wave and swallowed her into its depths.

Chapter End Notes

Again, please point out any mistakes I've made with my English. I am so grateful for the help! This chapter is probably going to be the standard length of the rest of them, but hopefully I'll be able to get them up faster than this one took.

Thank you for reading!
“Marinette,” a voice broke through the shadowed teeth that had swallowed her and the teenager groaned, trying to ignore the words as they sent prickles of pain through her head. “Wake up, Marinette.”

She didn’t want to; a pounding rising up through her neck and scrambling every thought in her brain. Each breath smelled like dirt and old metal that had been rusted and eaten through by time. A numbness had smothered her shoulder, ribs, and hip—like she had been laying in the same place for far too long and her body had simply accepted it rather than trying to move.

Paws pressed against her cheek, patting the skin gently and with a subtle tension that could have only belonged to urgency. “Up,” the voice said again.

A low moan left her mouth and, just to get rid of the uncomfortable tingles running down her side, Marinette turned onto her back.

Fire blazed down her spine and she gasped, arching against the hard, uneven ground. The throbbing in her neck made its way down to her ribs until every breath felt like it had been filled with needles.

“No, no, shhh, hush,” Frantic whispers filled her ears and those small paws touched her lips and chin. “Quiet now, or he’ll hear you.”

Marinette wanted to ask who, but the words couldn’t seem to form so she tried opening her eyes instead. They felt like they heavy weights were attached to them and even just prying her eyelids apart was an effort. But she opened them—she could feel skin press against skin as she blinked, the strangely humid air that brushed against the fragile flesh.

All that greeted her was darkness.

“I can’t see,” she choked out, trying desperately to stamp down on the panic that was welling up
in her stomach and threatened to spill her breakfast out of her mouth. “I-I—”

“It’s okay,” Huuxi said frantically, his voice still quiet. “It’s alright.”

Something scratched against the ground—like plastic against rock—and Marinette’s fingers closed around something vaguely rectangular in shape. The rounded corners gave way to small buttons and the designer pressed one. Light spilled like water, flooding the dark and brightening the world too fast for her eyes to keep up. The sudden change was almost painful and, with her arms aching too much to lift them over her face, she could only close her eyes for a moment until the transition was no longer making dots dance in her vision.

Huuxi stayed just out of the main stream of light and his pupils turned red, reflecting the light and making the small, tiny creature look bloodthirsty—until she fully processed the slight frown to his lips and the furrowing of his brows.

“Where,” Marinette swallowed and tried to sit up, groaning when her head swam. Deep breaths managed to ease the feeling of being on a boat, but there wasn’t much else she could do. “Where are we?”

“I don’t know,” the kwami mused. “He carried you a long way.”

Her jacket was missing; the simple brown one she had worn that morning. It didn’t matter too much—she had another just like it—but it left her in the thin long sleeve white button up that didn’t do too much to keep out the weather. The scarf was long gone, probably left on the street when she had slipped out of it to grab Alix.

Where ever she was got darker as the light from her phone dimmed and Marinette turned on the flashlight app. Old brick, dark from dust and dirt, surrounded her on all sides. There was paint on them, faded graffiti that could have been left there days, weeks, or even years ago. She didn’t pay all that much attention to them, though, her eyes on the large iron door.

It was reddened with rust and was shut tightly, closing her off from whatever was on the other side. Marinette got to her feet with a groan, using the wall as a crutch before approaching the door. Metal creaked when she put her weight against it and the iron moved just slightly before stopping, hitting something and refusing to budge. Taking a step back, the teenager rammed the side of her body against it—but a petite French girl was nothing compared to the slab of iron keeping her caged.

It might even weigh more than her, to be honest, and Marinette sighed, rubbed her aching shoulder, and looked around the room.

Spray paint shone under the light, turning the ordinary walls various colours as her phone lit them up, but there wasn’t anything else interesting about the place. It was tight, cramped, as if it was created to hold only a couple of people at a time (and not all that comfortably).

She had a little bit more than half a battery left on her phone, but Marinette shut off the flashlight anyway, sitting down against one of the walls. A darkness surrounded her that was cold and absolute. There was no sign of the walls, of her hands, or even of Huuxi as he settled against her shoulder. Silence except for her and his breathing pierced through and sounded thunderous merely because there was nothing else—no birds, no trains, no sound of the river or tourists. None of the sounds that the designer had ever attributed to the city or had taken for granted.

The akuma must have taken her far out of Paris, because there was nothing.

oOo
Time passed differently in the dark. Every second felt like an eternity and eternity could have only been an hour. Marinette fought the urge to check her phone and, instead, closed her eyes and tried to rest as much as she could.

It was hard when there were no other sounds than breathing and her thoughts, so she didn’t seem to sleep at all, really.

Huuxi twitched against her shoulder, his ears brushing against the side of her neck. “Someone’s coming,” he whispered.

The teenager turned on her phone long enough for him to dart into her schoolbag as heavy boots walked across stone. Something clanged—like metal being dropped roughly on rock—and then the door was opening, hinges screeching angrily at whoever had disturbed them.

Light spilled through and Marinette covered her face as the black was washed away. She blinked the small explosions away, breathing in sharply and narrowing her eyes so they might adjust a bit faster. A battery operated lantern was set on the ground—obnoxiously bright and illuminating every inch of space that her phone could not.

For the first time, though, Marinette got a good look at the akuma.

She remembered the Bubbler with the splash of colours, Reflekta and the pink, even Stormy Weather with her purple and white.

This akuma was dressed in a three piece suit dark enough to seem black (probably a blue or green), the vest a light brown that glittered in the light of the lantern, and white tie that seemed to glow in the dim light. A classic domino mask covered sharp, green eyes—black and painted in the faint shape of a butterfly.

She recognized his face, though—the slight curl to his lips, the way his hair was swept off to the side.

“Casimir,” Marinette whispered and sudden, aching guilt hit her in the ribs. She had done this to him. She had been the one to upset him enough to turn him into this. He was a victim, as were all those taken over by Papillon, but something about causing someone to become so upset that they were taken over by the dark butterflies...

The designer fisted her hands in her shirt, fighting the urge to wrap them around her chest and press back against the wall.

“That’s not my name,” he responded in the same way most akuma’s did, voice confident in a way she hadn’t heard when he was confessing to her earlier. His eyes were on her face and felt like razors stripping away her skin bit by bit to get through to her bones. “I am Charmer.”

This wasn’t the same boy she had talked to before and Marinette slowly got up to her feet, not wanted to be left defenceless sitting on the ground. “Charmer,” she said softly, trying the word on her tongue. Something felt off about it, like tasting a bit of fruit that was overly ripe. Whoever Casimir had been before, he wasn’t that person now.

The akuma grinned at the sound of his name, looking pleased, almost. He walked towards her slowly and she was reminded of a leopard in a documentary, padding through wild grass with her eyes on an injured wildebeest. Marinette didn’t bother fighting the urge that told her to back away and she stumbled over her feet, hitting the wall behind her as he came closer.

Charmer leaned over her, smelling of dust and old earth. His hand was cold as it touched her cheek, as if all the warmth had been sucked out of him. “Now,” he said, his voice low as his
Marinette felt her mouth go dry and a fist closed around her lungs, making it difficult to breathe or think. Alone. She didn’t want to be alone with him. “Casimir—” she started and swallowed at the sudden shadow that took over his features. “Charmer,” the designer corrected, “Wh-where are we?”

“It’s okay,” he whispered, leaning down. His fingers ran down her neck, hovering over her fluttering pulse. “No one will bother us here.” The akuma’s breath was hot against her skin as he leaned in. There was a strange tint to his eyes as they fell away from the light of the lantern—something almost hungry. “And you’ll love me as I love you.”

Something was odd in the way he said it. Like Charmer was expectant in that she would. But I don’t, Marinette wanted to say as she fought the urge to grab the suddenly warm miraculous pressing into her skin, because she didn’t. She didn’t love him. “You,” the designer started and swallowed, dragging the courage to speak up from somewhere deep in her stomach. “You can’t just ask someone to love you.”

“Why not?” he sounded bitter, like a child that had asked for a piece of candy and was told he would have to wait after dinner. “Wouldn’t that make everything easier? Better?”

“No,” She shook her head almost frantically. “No, it wouldn’t, people...” Marinette flinched as his fingers brushed the collar of her shirt, pushing it out of the way. “People sh-should h-have the right t-to choose—stop touching me.”

Charmer wrenched his hand back as if he was burned and sweet, terrible relief swept through the designer as he took a step back. Her skin felt itchy where he had touched her, like a trail of spider bites trailing from her jaw down to the edge of her collar bone. Marinette relaxed ever so slightly and reached up to pull the fabric back over her skin.

Stinging, fiery pain erupted across her cheek as her head slammed back into the wall, stars dancing across her vision. Stumbling to the side for half a step, the teenager lifted her hand up to her cheek and felt something warm touch her fingers. In the cold light of the lantern, the blood on her fingers looked like the kind that could be bought during the late weeks of October.

Marinette felt her cheekbone throb as she opened her mouth, stretching the broken skin farther than it was comfortable. He had slapped her, she realized in a daze, feeling hands grab her shoulders almost distantly, like they existed in a dream.

The wall Charmer shoved her back up against wasn’t a part of a dream and the edges of the brick dug into her back, sticking to her shirt and pulling the cotton up over her hip. One hand fisted in her clothing, holding the designer still as warm lips pressed against hers.

Teeth clacked together and the kiss was harsh and demanding. Marinette braced her hands against the akuma’s shoulders and shoved him back as hard as she could, nails biting into the rough fabric of his suit jacket. He came back, then, leaving her shoulders for her wrists and slamming them above her head.

True, unbridled terror swept through her and she kicked out at his knees, his ankles, his groin—

Marinette felt her heel connect with something that made Charmer grunt and she pulled her leg back to hit whatever it was again when he pulled back and held her face in a bruising grip. Wide, blue eyes stared into narrowed green as the designer panted in fear.

“Stop,” the akuma snapped and Marinette almost choked on the overwhelming stent of citrus that
settled in the air. A heaviness settled upon her, making her blink drowsily, arms relaxing in his
tight hold, knees trembling as they struggled to keep her body upright.

*Is this what drunk feels like?* She wondered, as he leaned in again.

Heat washed through her. A burning, violent heat that was like soup before it had cooled down
long enough to be eaten. The teenager jerked and gasped, coming up for air after being pulled
down into a well filled with oil. She lifted her foot and brought the heel smashing down on his
kneecap.

It wasn’t enough to break bone, but Charmer lurched away with a strangled howl, hissing and
spitting like a cat. “You,” he snarled, hesitant to put his weight on his left leg. “You *bitch.*”

*Good,* Marinette thought viciously.

He lunged towards her and the teenager scrambled out of his way, using her small stature to duck
under his arm and run back further into the dark. Her foot hit a rock and she stumbled into the
wall, yelping when her ribs and shoulder demanded that she not do it again.

An arm wrapped around her neck, pulling her back from the stone. His lips were against her ear,
hand tightening against her waist. “I guess I just have to think of you as a challenge,” Charmer
said, his voice half hysterical in something that could be glee and could just be manic anger. His
hips were pressed into her butt and Marinette clawed at his arm, unable to scratch him under the
heavy fabric.

“Let me go,” she bucked like a horse and he laughed breathlessly against her, dragging his hand
slowly up her side, fingers touching sore spots on her skin as if her small gasps of pain were a
delight. “*Let me go—*”

Purple that was almost pink fluttered and brightened—a shadow of a line on the outskirts of
Marinette’s vision and she didn’t dare to breathe, standing as still as she could. Charmer grunted
and tightened his hold, fingers digging into what the teen was sure was a bruise on her side.

“No,” the akuma snarled. “No, you promised that I could *have* her.”

Papillon. He was talking to Papillon.

Marinette stared at the graffiti on the far wall, tracing the red paint with her eyes, trying to
determine what the picture was supposed to have been before the maker left it to rot here, alone.

She didn’t want to think about what ‘have her’ meant. She didn’t want to think about anything.

A harsh shove brought the teen to her knees, the rough stone slicing into the denim of her pants.
She scrambled up to her feet as quickly as she could, Charmer walking back towards the open
door, past the lantern on the floor as if it was nothing but a mosquito and not worth his time.

“No!” Marinette lunged towards iron as it was closing, tripping over her own feet and cursing her
clumsiness. She reached the door as it slammed shut, her open palms slapping against rusted metal
as something slammed into it from the outside causing a teeth grinding screech.

“No! *No!*” Her hands pounded against the metal. “Let me out! Charmer!” The designer screamed
and rattled the door with the palms of her hands. “*Casimir!*”

Pulling back, she lifted her leg, turned her body, and gave the iron a side kick that sent an ache up
through her heel that rattled all the way to her hip. The following clang rattled her teeth and
Marinette took a deep breath, spread her legs, bent her knees, and prepared to do it again.
“Marinette!” Huuxi cried, flying out of her bag. “He’s gone, Marinette, he’s gone!”

She howled and spun on her heel, kicking out with every ounce of strength in her body—and the door rattled forward and settled without budging even a millimetre. Panting in the white light of the lantern, the designer clenched and relaxed her hands.

The sudden urge to vomit hit her like lightning and she lurched forward, hands on her knees, staring at the ground as her stomach rebelled against her body. In the end, the teenager didn’t throw up—something she was grateful for—but the feeling never fully left even as she stumbled to the side, hit the wall, and slid to the floor.

Legs folded, Marinette pressed her forehead to her knees and curled into the smallest ball she could. She didn’t cry, her shuddering, aching gasps the only thing to break the silence as seconds ticked by. Only when her stomach had calmed and her body stopped trembling did she hear it—the subtle sound of something being dragged across rock.

Lifting her head, the designer glanced around the small stone room and saw Huuxi, the strap of her bag in his small hands as he tried to drag it over to her. A choked giggle passed her lips and Marinette leaned over, gently taking it from him and pulling it close. “Thank you,” she said.

He settled on her knee, looking over her face. “You should eat your lunch,” the kwami said after a moment. “Keep your strength up.”

Opening her bag, Marinette pulled out the plastic container that held her salad. Even the sight of food made her nauseous, though, and she placed it by her feet. “I’m not very hungry,” the teen admitted.

“It doesn’t matter,” Huuxi scolded gently. “Some food might help your stomach to settle.”

There were some hard boiled eggs in her bag, she knew that, so Marinette set about finding them, digging the small container out, and distracted herself by delicately peeling the shell away from one. It was a slow, methodical process, but Huuxi didn’t interrupt her and chose to stretch out in her lap.

He took the offered food when she was done, but his gold eyes watched the teenager as she opened her own lunch and breathed in. A few bites later, a hunger awoke in Marinette and the designer wolfed down what she could with the tiny fork that didn’t seem to ever hold enough food. The tomatoes and tuna settled nicely in her stomach with the potatoes, beans, and lettuce filling enough to stop her stomach from growling.

It wasn’t much, but it was good and that was what mattered. A little slice of home in the cold and dark.

Huuxi polished off his egg, licking the last bits of it from his paws before he sighed. “You could get out of here, you know,” the kwami said. “You were a chosen, you know the words.”

*Transform me.*

Marinette dug her fingers into her calves and focused diligently on counting the bricks in the walls. Her heart thudded against her chest, each beat counting off the seconds.

“Why?” He said softly. *Why would you rather stay then leave? Why are you so against this?*

She wrapped one hand around the jewellery hanging from her neck, holding tightly to the sharp curve even as it dug into her hand. The white cotton of her shirt kept her from feeling the metal,
but it was there, pressing against her.

“I—” Marinette swallowed and closed her eyes. Black butterflies flew across her vision, people turned to stone because of her mistake. A fleeting moment of victory that crashed the moment she hadn’t done one thing.

*Catch the akuma, don’t let it fly away.*

People had been hurt, buildings destroyed. *Blood on the streets of Paris*—

“Marinette!” Huuxi’s voice split through her thoughts and she focused on the kwami. “Breathe,” he urged gently.

Her ribs had frozen, diaphragm twitching. The designer took in a deep breath and held it before letting it out. Ten-five-ten. In-out-in again.

“There you go,” the little fox murmured. “It’s alright, just breathe.”

“S-sorry—”

“Don’t,” Huuxi said sharply before he took a deep breath himself to soften his words. “Don’t apologize for something like this.”

Marinette shrugged and looked away, swallowing the second ‘sorry’ that was trying to escape. They sat there, human and kwami, before the designer opened her mouth. “I’m afraid,” she admitted and covered her mouth as the words broke on her tongue.

“Afraid of what?” He curled up on her thigh, sitting like a sphinx with his back legs curled under his body and front ones laid underneath his head. The tall, pointed ears were directed towards her, standing at attention.

She shook her head, unable to say the words that hovered in the back of her mind.

“Are you afraid you’ll make another mistake?”

The designer rested the side of her head against the wall and heaved a great, shuddering breath. “Y-yes.”

Huuxi hummed in that way that old people do; like they had gone through the same thing and were about to say something wise. But he didn’t say anything, he simply waited.

Marinette lifted her hand and slowly brought it towards him, pausing and giving him time to move away. With a sigh, the kwami leaned across the space separating them and pressed his forehead against her palm. She rubbed between his ears, petting the soft, thin fur that covered his little body.

For a long time they sat there, her nails taking care of his itches and his soft little rumbles making her giggle. But even the most lightened of atmosphere could become heavy, and they both felt it when the darkness started to weigh down their thoughts once more.

“W-why,” the designer cleared her throat and settled for a moment, making sure her voice wouldn’t jump. “Why are there cracks?”

“Cracks?”

“In the miraculous,” the designer wasn’t quite looking at him, but she felt his eyes on her just the same. “W-when I got it, there were cracks.” Marinette traced them across the hidden necklace.
With the unbearable silence that was a part of the place and the dark, Huuxi’s pause to answer seemed longer than it actually was, but the kwami still answered. “I will tell you,” the kwami murmured. “Because I stole a secret and because it was a Truth—no matter how unwilling.”

Unable to do anything but nod, Marinette did so and watched the small creature.

“Sometimes,” he said, “People who should never have a miraculous find one and they use it for their own gain.” His ears twitched against her fingers. “It isn’t all together rare, but it isn’t very common either. Guardians are supposed to look after us and make sure that the human who is chosen is one that is good and just.”

Marinette looked down at her lap. She had been chosen by a guardian. How else could Tikki have come into her possession?

“I,” Huuxi paused and frowned before continuing. “I was stolen from my wielder,” he said softly. “A man killed her in the night and took the miraculous as his prize. Once he found out what sort of ‘necklace’ he had stolen, he used the power of the fox to take whatever he wanted.”

The designer turned her eyes back to him and saw the kwami staring past her shoulder at something only he could see.

“He was a very good thief,” Huuxi admitted. “His daughter was even better.”

“You were passed down,” Marinette murmured.

His gold eyes flashed as they turned to look at her. “Yes,” he said. “A family of thieves passed down from one to the other. Generation after generation, years after years and the fox,” he turned away then. “The fox lost what it had once been.” Huuxi sighed. “A thief, a murderer, and a man who liked to cause pain.”

Marinette scooped the kwami up in her hands and pressed him against her cheek. It was the only kind of hug she knew how to give him and, after a long moment, he sighed and pressed against her.

“Sometimes the miraculous shows the hurt on the inside,” Huuxi said against her skin. “Sometimes we are a little bit broken.”

The teenager sighed softly and closed her eyes. “Are you ever afraid—” The words were quiet, as if she was frightened of him hearing them—or of his answer—and she cut them off before they could finish.

“Afraid of what?”

Marinette swallowed. “Afraid that I might be one of them?”

The silence settled around them and, slowly, Huuxi pulled away to float in front of her, his eyes solemn but burning with something fierce. “I would be proud,” he said, his voice strong as he spoke, “if you were to be my bearer.” The words rang with truth that settled down around them like stardust.

“Why?” Marinette choked out.

He smiled suddenly, pointed teeth sticking out cutely from his lips. “Because you are clever,” the kwami said. “Because you are smart, because you are kind.”

“I’m not brave,” she murmured.
“Don’t be ridiculous,” Huuxi said simply. “Kindness is the greatest bravery there is.”

The smile that bloomed across Marinette’s face was small and sweet and no less as heartfelt as his words. She didn’t say ‘thank you’ because there didn’t seem to be any need for it.

oOo

Using her backpack as a pillow, Marinette dozed off. The ground was bumpy and hardly comfortable, she never seemed warm enough, but time passed faster until Huuxi was patting her cheeks and whispering for her to wake up. She recognized Charmer’s boots now—the way the toe slightly scuffed on the floor and his heel padding across the rock. He lifted whatever was blocking the door from the outside and entered, closing the iron behind him.

There was something splattered across his cheek and it looked like large freckles for a moment before the lantern lit up his scowl.

Blood.

Marinette got up to her feet as slow as she could without making it seem like she was making an effort to take her time. She fought the urge to run, to scramble back into the far corner, grab her bag, and try using it as a shield.

Just at the sight of him, the designer became achingly aware of the cut on her cheek, the bruises on her sides, and the throbbing in her knees.

“Your heroes are off licking their wounds,” Charmer said and Marinette froze, her eyes widening in recognition as they focused on the blood across his cheek. “So it seems like we have some time to ourselves before they have the courage to face me again.”

It wasn’t his, there was no wound it could have come from.

Alya, she thought and felt her heart thump heavily in her chest, Adrien. She hoped they were okay, she hoped they were better off than her.

“They kept asking about you,” he got some sort of sick happiness from that, grinning broadly at her, eyes bright. “Like they might even care.”

He probably was trying to get a rise out of her, try to stand up and declare that they could do just fine without her. The classic superhero girlfriend trope that was overused and overdone like a heavily burnt steak. Marinette felt some strange sense of relief flow through her. They were alright for now and Papillon had been foiled once more.

Charmer backed her up against one of the walls, not touching just yet, but getting too close for her comfort. “Are they friends of yours?”

“W-we know each other,” Marinette leaned away from him as much as she could. “B-but I don’t know them personally.” Truth, as much as it could be. Not the complete story, but perhaps it was truth enough that he wouldn’t question her anymore.

In any case, he forwent the curiosity of Chat Noir and Ladybug and, instead, used an index finger to tilt her head to the side. He brushed his knuckles against her hair and, before the teenager could say anything, removed one of the hair ties. Her hair was warm against the back of her neck, blocking the cold that had unnoticeably seeped into the bared skin. The band was snapped someplace off to the side, launched carelessly into the dark.

Marinette had more, of course. She had hundreds of them at home. But dark possessiveness
welled up in her stomach even as he reached for the other one. Those were hers.

The second went flying off to join the first.

Charmer buried one hand in her hair, running his fingers through it like a child roughly petting a cat. Wincing as they caught in a small knot and forcibly tugged it loose, Marinette stepped out of his grasp, moving to the side. “Stop,” she told him, holding her hands out in front of her as if to ward him off from coming any closer. “D—don’t—just, just stop.”

The designer should have expected him to hit her again—he did it the first time, after all—but the hand catching her lip and ripping the skin there was still a surprise in the worst of ways. Marinette gasped and touched the fragile skin, wincing when the cut stung. She caught sight of something glinting in the light of the lantern, something metallic on his finger.

A ring.

“You don’t get to make demands of me,” Charmer hissed, his eyes narrowed until they were nothing but thin slivers of green. “You’re mine—”

“No!” Marinette shouted and the akuma froze. “I’m not yours! I’m not anyone’s!”

His hands gripped the front of her shirt, wrenching the designer forward roughly. She stumbled over her own feet at the sudden action and cursed her inherent clumsiness as one knee hit the ground. “You are mine,” Charmer snarled. “You belong—”

There was that strange warmth again from the fox miraculous, but this time the designer didn’t notice the heat against her skin.

In retrospect, Marinette probably shouldn’t have used the one foot braced against the ground to push herself forward, she probably shouldn’t have used that momentum to drive her fist into his stomach, and she definitely shouldn’t have tried to do it again.

The first punch made Charmer take a step back and grunt, leaning over slightly from the force.

The second punch was caught, his fingers curling over her hand and holding it tightly. Marinette stared at her fist as if she wasn’t quite sure why it had stopped. A second of pause gave the akuma long enough to wrench her arm back, turn her around, hold her wrist against the small of her back, and slam the girl face first into the nearest, vertical surface. Managing to turn just enough so her shoulder hit the brick instead of her nose or forehead, the teenager grunted as the length of her arm exploded with pain.

It was the one that had hit the cement first, the one that she had an unfortunate habit of landing on when she fell.

“Why doesn’t it work on you?” Charmer snarled and his hot breath touched Marinette’s cheek, making her flinch away. A hand gripped her hair, forcing her head back and baring her neck as she shook. He used his grip to force the designer to look him in the eyes. They blazed like a wildfire; bright and terrifying. “He promised that my voice would work on you.”

Her mouth opened but the only sound that escaped was a gasp as fingernails dug into her shoulders, digging in like the talons of a great bird of prey. The Akuma slammed her back into the stone wall and Marinette grunted, ribs rattling with the pressure growing against her sternum. For a second, bones felt as flimsy as tooth picks.
“It doesn’t matter,” he giggled hysterically. “It doesn’t matter when I can just *take* what I want—” the akuma’s hips pressed up against her butt, grinding slowly as thick, animalistic terror settled on Marinette like a bucket of oil. “Who needs powers when I’m so much *stronger* than you?”

His hand tightened around the designer’s wrist and pulled her arm up higher against her back, forcing her to arch and push herself against him. She kicked back, trying to hit his knee, his calf, *anything* really, but his thighs pressed against hers, keeping her legs pinned to the wall.

Marinette’s voice had abandoned her, drying up with her mouth.

So she kicked, she pulled, she wiggled. She did everything she could to make it harder even if it pulled on the bruises covering her arms and sides, even though her cheek and lip stung.

Charmer grunted and hissed before letting go of her arm. “Enough,” he snarled and pulled her around, grabbing her wrists and pinning them above her head with a single hand. Before she could even think about kicking him, the akuma had pressed his body between her legs, forcing her thighs to cradle his.

And his lips were against hers. The suddenness of the kiss knocked Marinette’s head back against rock and her vision swam, dark and light stars bursting across her vision. So many things were happening at once and she couldn’t keep up with it—the hand against her chest, the lips pressed to hers, stone digging into her back, and the sudden warmth spreading across the back of her skull.

Dragging his palm down her torso, Charmer brushed her collar, her sternum, her stomach, and settled on the edge of her shirt, fingering a button. He pulled his lips away from Marinette’s and dragged them across her jaw, kissing down her neck.

The designer felt vomit rise up in the back of her throat as his tongue dragged from the curve of where her neck met her shoulder all the way up to her ear lobe. “*Stop,*” she jerked away from the touch of his mouth as he trailed lower, pushing down the collar of her shirt. “*Stop! Stop!*”

“*Shut up,*” he bit the skin just above her breast hard enough to make her jerk and tug her hands at the grip he had on them. Charmer pushed a hand underneath Marinette’s shirt, his fingers brushing against her soft belly as the skin tried to twitch away. A drum beat pounded in her ears, rushing in as a bird fluttered in her chest, wings beating rapidly against the cage under the teenager’s skin.

“No, no,” Marinette shook her head, closing her eyes as the akuma pressed against her, dragging his hips so that the bones seemed to grind. She felt his arousal and hoped that her stomach would empty itself, that she would throw up all over his nice, fancy suit. “*Stop, please! Casimir this isn’t you—*”

The akuma howled, letting go of her wrists and shoving his forearm against her neck. Marinette’s eyes snapped open, unshed tears blurring the sight of the figure so close to her. “*How would you know?*” He snarled and she clawed at the arm pressing against the underside of her chin. Each breath was a chore, coming in too little and giving too much. “*You know *nothing* about me!*”

Charmer let go of her neck and Marinette wheezed, gasping in air like a drowning man. She didn’t notice his hands gripping her shirt until he was already ripping it apart, buttons splattering across the ground like raindrops, clattering as they rolled in various directions. Her bra was a pale little thing, but his hands let it alone to grip her hips.

She grunted as his fingers dug into the skin, holding on tightly as he forced her to press and grind against him.

“That’s it,” the akuma murmured, pressing up against her and dragging his lips up her neck. The
fabric of his suit scratched the bare skin of her stomach and caught on the sharp point of the fox miraculous. “Get on your knees,” Charmer purred and the magic slammed into Marinette like a ball kicked by an elephant. It drove the rest of the air from her lungs, pushed down at her shoulders. Heat spread from metal pressing against her chest and she gritted her teeth to stop the pains yelp from escaping.

Unable to say anything, the designer could only shake her head. No no no, she thought frantically. No, no, no I won’t I won’t I won’t I won’t I won’t—Fingers curled in her hair and yanked, stretching her neck and tilting her chin up until she was forced to meet the Akuma’s eyes. They were thunderous, burning like a tiger’s in the dark and there was nothing left for her to do but swallow and shiver against the bricks digging into her spine.

“Marinette,” his voice was harsher, sharper, and felt like needles digging into everywhere he touched. Somewhere in the back of her mind she remembered that names had power, that perhaps him knowing her name was enough to give him that power he desired so much. “Get on your knees.”

Metal seared into skin and she lurched, limbs jerking as if they were tied to strings yanked by a puppet master. Her throat wasn’t working quite well, but she swallowed the strange dryness that had gathered there. No sound slid through her lips for a couple of seconds so the designer wet her lips and tried—

“N-no,” she choked out, the word broken and shattered before she lifted her chin, eyes bright and blazing like dying stars as she met the Akuma’s eyes on her own, free will. “No.”

The roar that left his throat was more animalistic than human and the charming, handsome vision the Akuma had given Casimir was stripped away to something shadowed with hunched shoulders and wide, glimmering eyes. He threw her like she was nothing but a flimsy paperback book and Marinette hit the wall with a shoulder blade, lightning arching along her arm and over her back with sudden, aching bursts. The ground was rough and covered in dust and dirt and stuff she didn’t question that stuck to her hands and pants.

“You,” he snarled, prowling back and forth like a tiger trapped in a cage. “Why are you different? Why don’t they work on you?” He snarled as if to remind himself, to convince himself that he didn’t need the abilities Papillon had given him.

Her heart shuddered and panic welled up like a serpent, ready to strike or flee—

Iron crashed against stone, deafening like a gunshot in the darkness beyond the door. Charmer turned his head with inhuman quickness, eyes narrowing as they focused on the shadows. He slipped through the opening, disappearing between one second to the next and leaving Marinette to gasp in stale air and stare blankly at the far wall.

“Marinette,” a soft voice broke through her dazed thoughtless existence and the designer turned her head towards the kwami floating inches above the floor. Huuxi’s wide, golden eyes shone in the dim light of the lantern. “Get up, Marinette.”

Her body ached and even just moving her arms so that they were underneath her felt like it would take an eternity. But she tried; placing her palms against the floor and pushing. It was old strength that helped her up, long days of working at the bakery that gave endurance to her muscles that wouldn’t have been there otherwise. The wall was necessary to get to her feet but then Marinette was standing—swaying, but standing.

“I don’t know how to get out,” she told the tiny god, swallowing sharply and breathing out through her nose to relieve the sandpaper feeling that ached in the back of her throat. It didn’t
work. “I don’t know where we are.”

Huuxi ignored the words and floated over to the single source of light. “Take it,” he ordered.

It wasn’t like the Charmer where magic crashed into her with the desire to make her obey. The fox kwami’s voice held power, but it was different; sweeter and strong, like a hug from her father or a warm, spring day after the last of the snow had melted. Marinette picked up the two lanterns and reached for her abandoned school bag, sliding it over the shoulder that hurt the least. Each movement was mechanical, as if she wasn’t fully aware of what she was doing.

Perhaps she wasn’t, perhaps Marinette wasn’t the one in control. But she turned her eyes to Huuxi and stared at him, still and silent like a herding dog looking at their shepherd, waiting to be saved.

The kwami didn’t smile, but there was something in his eyes—a brightness she had never seen before. “Come,” he said softly and she did; following him past the heavy door into the unknown.

There was more graffiti covering the walls, painting and splatters of paint. White signs with black German were here and there, faded from time. There were other doors like the one she had been locked behind—rusted with round handles to be locked. All of those she passed were open and empty, hers having been the only one with an occupant.

“Hurry,” Huuxi whispered, guiding her around corners and away from the cage she had been kept. She almost didn’t see the iron bars on the ground—remnants of the past—and she caught them in time to keep from tripping over them.

It was too late, though, to stop her shoe from hitting the end with her toe. Metal clattered, thunderous in the dark and she froze like a rabbit, holding her breath and listening.

“MARINETTE!” The howl echoed through the space, bouncing off the rock.

“Run!” Huuxi snapped, “RUN!”

The designer scrambled to obey, but her legs were sore, her ribs throbbed, and just moving her shoulder sent bursts of agony down her arm.

Charmer slammed into her before she went around the next corner and she managed to turn just in time to let his hands claw uselessly at her arm. The strap of her backpack fell down her arm and she grabbed it, wrenching the whole thing around like a ball on a chain.

It hit the akuma in the face with a satisfying whack. Fierce, hot adrenaline hit her like a drug rush and she slammed back into the boy, hands clawed and scratching at his face, aiming for his eyes, forcing him to lurch away.

He didn’t stay away for long, leaning back on his heels before diving forward, driving his shoulder into her collar and knocking them both against the ground. Charmer’s hands wrapped around her neck, thumbs pushing into the soft, squishy centre as he snarled above her. “You can’t leave,” the akuma’s eyes were wide, his voice hysterical. “You can’t—”

Marinette choked and lurched underneath him, one hand clawing frantically on the ground for the strap she had dropped when he had hit her, the other pushing against his face, fingernails catching on his teeth as he snarled.

Her hand touched something rough and edged, something that dug uncomfortably into her skin as she grabbed it.

The angle was bad—there was only so much force she could use when laying flat on her back—
so she shoved the iron bar into his face, imagining it going through his eye and out the back of his skull.

It didn’t, of course; she wasn’t nearly that strong, but he reeled back with a howl, letting go of her neck and giving the designer time to scramble away, get up to her feet. So many martial arts features odd screams and yells to go along with their kicks and punches. A part of her had always winced away, thinking they were stupid.

As Marinette raised the bar, the sound that came out of her throat seemed to come from the very depths of her anger.

It didn’t sound stupid at all.

She swung the iron like Babe Ruth hitting a ball out of Yankee’s stadium and it smashed against Charmer’s head with all the strength a petite baker’s daughter could put into it.

The akuma hit the ground, unconscious, and Marinette dropped the bar. She ignored the clatter and turned, falling her knees, palms scratching up as she braced them against the dirty stone of the ground, and emptied her stomach across the ground.

Heaving until her miniscule lunch was gone, the teenager avoided looking at the figure laying on the ground and the mess in front of her. She breathed through her mouth, arms trembling as they held her up.

“Marinette,” Huuxi’s voice was soft and the designer turned her head to look at him. “It’s time to go.”

There was hard, sweat earned effort to get herself up on her legs, but the pain seemed to settle to a dull throb, numbness settling over the teenager’s body as she grabbed her backpack and the lantern. The kwami’s pace was brisk as he led her through the closed tunnels, pausing only occasionally to twitch his ears and sniff at the air before leading her to the left or right.

When they reached a hole in a wall that was barely wide enough to hold a grown man, Marinette crawled through it with minimal fuss.

It was only when she fell out the other side that she realized where, exactly, Charmer had taken her.

She had been so wrong, Marinette realized in horror. So, so wrong.

The Akuma hadn’t taken her out of Paris at all.

He had taken her beneath it.

Down here in the dark where the maze of tunnels swallowed up people and locked them in its caverns, keeping them like the dead it already held. She heard the warnings; everyone knew the warnings about delving into the underground of Paris.

Charmer had more than just trapped her in a room, he had trapped her in a way that there was no hope of her ever being truly free.

Marinette clapped her hand over her mouth to keep the rushed, garbled gasp from escaping, but the sob came anyway, crashing through the wall of her throat like a battering ram and leading the others out into the open. Tears started at a slow trickle, touching her wrist and slinking down until her lips tasted of saltwater.
They were the kind of sobs that ripped themselves from the diaphragm and let every single organ in your body know that they were coming. Back hitting the side of the tunnel, Marinette tried to draw air in around them but couldn’t, left to feel the tremors and fear drag her down to the dirty floor of the catacombs.

“Oh,” Huuxi said somewhere above her and the designer buried her face in her knees, her back aching already from the position she was in, ribs digging into her stomach with every hiccup and choking swallow.

There were more tears no matter how many she wiped away, stubborn and refusing to stop as they stung the cuts on her cheeks and the tear in her lip. Marinette dug her fingers into her hair, nails piercing her scalp but still they continued until she had to straighten her torso if just to breathe. “I—” She tried to speak, tried to explain to herself, maybe, why she was suddenly a mess on the ground.

“Hush now,” a small paw brushed her forehead and a soft ear tickled her skin. “You humans always confused me—crying when you are already safe.”

A wet chuckle managed to escape before another hiccup forced the designer to hide her face again. She couldn’t seem to get the words out, to tell him where they were.

“And you are safe, Marinette,” the kwami whispered. “I promise you this.”

The words brought a new wave of tears and the teenager curled up like a small child, tucking herself further against the rock as she let every bit of anger, terror, and disgust she had felt be purified. Something beyond the catacombs drove her tears and Marinette could do nothing but let them come.

So she cried until her eyes ached and her throat felt like it had been torn by sandpaper. But the tears stopped eventually and the teenager looked up at the kwami waiting patiently for her to finish, no judgement on his foxy features.

“Shall we go?” He said, motioning to the dark.

There was nothing left to do but stand up, grab the lantern, and follow Huuxi into the maze. So that’s what she did.

“oOo

“If you have me,” Marinette started, her voice kept quiet as she walked through the tunnel stretching before them. The lantern was held up slightly to light Huuxi’s way as the kwami floated forward. Sometime after leaving the hole-in-the-wall behind, the small creature had started sharing riddles. Now it had turned into a fully fledged game where they would trade them back and forth, earning a point when the other person couldn’t answer. To her own surprise, the designer was only behind the little immortal by a few points. “You want to share me. If you share me, you haven’t got me. What am I?”

He hummed in thought, frowning slightly and glancing back at her. “Can I have a hint?”

She repeated the riddle with a deadpan voice and the kwami laughed. The designer left him to his thoughts as she played with the ends of her shirt. At one point, Marinette had tied the ends together, closing the fabric as much as she could to keep a little bit of her dignity intact. The catacombs were neither warm nor cool, but she shivered occasionally and tried to ignore the worried glances Huuxi shot back at her.
“Do I get two guesses?”

“No,” Marinette shot back grumpily. He was winning for crying out loud.

The little snot laughed and she rolled her eyes.

They paused at a crossroad and the fox glanced down every option thoughtfully, his ears twitching, and sniffing the air. “This way,” he said, pointing to the left and she followed his instructions dutifully. “Is the answer, per chance, a secret?”

The designer groaned and slouched. “Yes,” she grumbled and he patted her uninjured cheek gently.

“Given to all men then taken away, you can beg for more time but I never stay,” Huuxi pointed to an overhang and Marinette carefully ducked her head. “What am I?”

Biting her lip, the teenager hissed, remembering the cut there a bit too late. She ran her tongue over the sore flesh and winced when she tasted blood. The words rolled over in her head and her blue eyes narrowed. “Does this riddle hold the same truths for kwami?”

Huuxi smiled like she had said something particularly clever. “Yes and no,” he confirmed.

“That’s utterly useless,” Marinette fought the urge to cross her arms over her chest and kicked out at a stray rock instead. It skipped a couple of paces before rolling to a stop and she sighed. They went around a few more turns, always with smaller sections branching off, and the sight of towering stone arches stopped the designer in her tracks. Most of the tunnels had been almost Egyptian like—stacked limestone creating the walls or even just carved out by hand-held tools.

These though. These looked professional. They moved on after a few moments, past the remnants of Paris’ history and onward to older and newer things.

“Life,” Marinette said quietly as they slipped back into the graffiti covered tunnels. “The answer is life.”

“It is,” Huuxi said and they continued on, travelling for who knows how long and how far in the dark. Charmer could have woken up some time ago, or they could have merely been travelling in circles for thirty minutes or so. The designer couldn’t tell and she didn’t want to dig out her phone to check the time or date because she would tempted to look at it constantly.

No, the kwami looked like he knew where he was going, and three hundred kilometres of tunnels was nothing to scoff at.

She just had to trust Huuxi to get them both out safely or to find someone that could help them. Her legs were getting tired though, the numbness that had settled was fading and her knees stung with every step, torn fabric clinging to the cut and broken skin. Blood stuck them together and each bend opened the fresh scabs. Dust hugged to her skin and clothing, white dirt that was as hard to get rid of as glitter.

A rock grabbed at her feet and Marinette barely caught herself before her head had smashed into the wall.

“You’re okay,” Huuxi murmured, his voice fluttering across her ear. “It’s alright, just breathe.”

Hand pressed against the stone, the teenager obeyed and stood there, still and quiet, to just take long gulps of air. Once her heart had calmed and her arm no longer shook, Marinette straightened. “I’m tired,” she said, her voice soft.
"I know," the kwami settled gently on her shoulder.

She didn’t ask him how far they were because she wasn’t quite sure she could handle the answer. Instead, the designer took a deep breath and started putting one foot in front of the other. Step by step by step by step. Huuxi hummed softly and it sounded familiar—probably a song on her phone that he had been listening to. It was a good distraction and she tried to figure out the lyrics as he pointed which way she needed to go.

Until there was a wall with a hole in it. She could see only darkness, but the kwami urged her on so, making sure her backpack was secure, Marinette placed the lantern as far as she could in the opening and pulled herself up.

It was a tight fit—low overhang and a bumpy ground smoothed over by people dragging themselves through. There wasn’t enough room to crawl, and she didn’t trust the dirt above her to try, so the designer was stuck on pulling her body through the shaft army-style. Her knees ached, her shoulder burned, but it wasn’t too long before the lantern illuminated a wide cavern on the other side.

Huuxi flew out first, taking the lantern and setting it upon something that looked like the seat of a hot tub—that hugged the walls. She had to turn around in order not to slide down the dirt, and grunted when her flat soled shoes slipped a bit. A single, straight passageway led to a circular area with a cave-man style table made of stone. It looked like it had been a part of what could have been the original floor before someone had dug their way around to create the odd seating.

It was easy to see that it was a place numerous people could lounge around, though. A few more candles and it was kind of living room-like. If she ignored the faces staring down, that was.

Carved grotesques had been set on the walls, heads of goblins, monstrous women, and something with teeth made from what looked to be tile. There was a stone column in the middle, a ram’s head carved onto the centre facing the tunnel she had just crawled through, and the naked thighs, stomach, and breasts of a woman above it.

A lady forever stuck in stone, really. Her back was to a part of the stone seating that had a couple of more rocks placed around it so it looked kind of like a throne and the light of her lantern made the tiles of another art piece shine. She kept moving though, unable to pause and fully appreciate the delicate curves of a bird’s wing and walked through an opening that wasn’t just a hole in a wall.

Pillars. Stone, square pillars dotted around and every single one of them was covered in paint. It was an underground art gallery visited by the likes of Spongebob Squarepants holding a lit candle, the making of a pirate flag, and a pale Tim Burton like man with small, white eyes that stared directly at a painting that spanned over three full walls.

It was a recreation of Hokusai’s “The Great Wave”, with the massive tidal wave in the middle of the wall, swallowing an untied empty boat. On the left there was a white crane flying towards the cliff sides boarding the beach, a smoking volcano in the background. Opposite of it was the rest of the island, trees hiding what could have been a village, but the paint was old and fading, and another large, grey volcano.

She had heard of this place, of this painting. It was just as famous as the one of the naked woman.

La Plage, the beach. Marinette kicked at the sandy floor beneath her and turned new eyes to the art. She was under the old brewery, inside the old brewery. Cataphiles (people who spent most their time down in the catacombs) had spent days down here painting. This wasn’t graffiti at all; it
was art. Untouchable art.

“We have to go,” Huuxi said and he was right. She had no food, no water, she couldn’t stay to find the other paintings and recreations *La Plage* was so famous for.

The designer followed the little creature past crude statue of a man holding up the ceiling and followed her friend to another, small hole, half a meter wide and a full meter across, with a familiar circular pattern around the sides from people carving through. She scrambled up the brick, careful of her head and knees, and managed to get in the tunnel without cracking her head open.

And then she was crawling again, pulling herself along the rocks. Huuxi was moving the lantern out in front so she could be careful of the rocks, but that shaft ended and she was back in the tunnels she could walk through.

It didn’t last long, the ceiling getting lower, the ground covered in a thick layer of sand that had footprints, long drag marks, and other marks she couldn’t quite figure out. But Marinette kept going, following Huuxi’s paw as he pointed out which way to go. Each swallow was becoming almost painful and her stomach rumbled uncomfortably, but she had to keep going or risk being stuck.

She felt the kwami’s eyes on her with every stumble and sway. Even when she could do nothing but crawl, the designer felt his concern. So Marinette pushed on, picked up the pace. She wanted fresh air again, she wanted water, she wanted *food*—

Something cold seeped into her shoe and the teenager yelped, pulling back. Water. It sloshed against the sides of the walls before stilling again, undisturbed except for her. “That way?” Marinette pointed down the cavern, holding the lantern up to see.

There was no end to it, but Huuxi patted her shoulder. “Yes,” he said, “That way.”

Marinette took a deep breath and stepped forward, ignoring the way that the water lapped against her ankles and the bottoms of her pants. She kept going, toeing forward nervously the first couple of steps before gaining confidence. The ground was surprisingly smooth underneath the faint beige of the liquid, but there was something unnerving about not being able to see where her foot was being placed down.

Gradually, the water started rising, reaching up past her ankles to the middle of her calves, her knees, and, finally, the centre of her thighs. The first sting against the cuts on her knees forced her to pause—who knew what, exactly, could be in it—but sheer determination kept her going forward (as well as a light prayer against infection). Marinette tied her backpack up a little higher so it pressed against the middle of her back rather than her butt, but her arm was growing tired from holing the lantern up so high.

The designer didn’t want to think about what she would have done if she had been an inch or so shorter.

Half expecting to come out in a sewer system, Marinette was almost surprised when, instead, the water started going down again. It was gradual, but as her legs could move easier, the teenager started to speed up again, hoping to get out of the wet as quickly as possible.

She didn’t factor in the dirt that would cling to every sopping surface of her body. Grains dug into her knees and were caught in her shoes. The once pale pants were quickly becoming dark with filth as it just stuck to her.

A shower was added to her list of needs. Food, water, shower. It wasn’t hot enough to dry out her
pants so she had to deal with the denim clinging to her skin. Huuxi directed her through a hole in the wall—not a tunnel, thankfully—and she dropped her (thankfully) dry backpack down on the other side before crawling through. She almost fell flat on her face if it wasn’t for the impromptu handstand the teenager managed to complete, but there was still something disconcerting about almost crashing onto her face after doing gymnastics through a broken wall.

And there were still more tunnels, more walking, more crawling. She had to duck her head down and they only seemed to get lower as she stumbled around fallen pieces of the walls and ceilings. When she was back on her hands and knees, Marinette wiped her face and grimaced at the sweat that clung there.

“How far,” she finally asked.

Huuxi froze in front of her. “Marinette,” he said softly.

Her arms were shaking, the stone was blurring around the edges of her vision, and she was so, so tired. They had been going for hours, she knew. Hours upon hours. Her body hurt. “I’m tired,” the teenager whispered. “I’m so tired.”

“You’ve made it this far,” the kwami said softly. “Are you going to give up now?”

Resting her forehead on her arms, the designer shuddered. “I—I—” she swallowed roughly and coughed from the dryness in her throat. Marinette pushed herself back up and ignored the way her arms trembled.

A bit longer. She could go a bit longer.

Huuxi smiled at her and went slower, helping her around a corner, turning right. She was able to get up onto her feet eventually, and was crouched over, stepping on a mess of rocks. These tunnels felt different; older, more broken. Tiny cave ins were apparent and she almost slipped on a bunch of smaller rocks on the floor.

When she turned into a long, straight passageway with a bunch of rocks in the middle, Marinette sat back and watched the kwami dart out in front of her. His ears were twitching, eyes roaming the walls before he motioned her forward.

“This way!” He called, excitement flooding his voice.

And then he darted up through a hole almost invisible from where she was sitting.

Another tunnel, Marinette thought and forced herself up, half crawling, half walking under the low ceiling until she got to where Huuxi had vanished. Placing the lantern up on the surface, she began to pull herself up bit by bit. The rock bit into her stomach, but that wasn’t new, and she managed to crawl up out of the hole like a kit coming out of the den for the first time.

It wasn’t the sight of more catacombs that greeted her, though.

There was still stone, but it was far, arching over her head in a different type of tunnel. The light of the lantern shone off a set of train tracks and she held her breath, stepping onto the old wood. It clunked under her feet as she walked towards dim, pink light.

Marinette stepped out of the shadow of the train tunnel and looked up at the darkening sky, as her fingers went limp.

The lantern clattered as it landed on the ground but, for the first time in a long while, she didn’t need it.
Because the moon was out and lit the path before her.

Chapter End Notes

Another thank you to the people who reviewed. I'm sorry I got to a couple of them later; most of my time this week was spent underground doing research for this fic, so I hope this 11,000 word monster makes up for it!

Every place mentioned in the catacombs are very real and pictures of them can be found on Google Images. Artistic liberty was taken with the Nazi Bunker because, well, there's actually not all that much left in them.

Again, criticism is always welcomed so if you see something please mention it, I really appreciate it.

Thank you for reading!
The Leap

Chapter Summary

There's always a calm before the storm.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*La Petite Ceinture*, the Little Belt, was a railway that had been built in 1852 and was used to transport troops around the fortified Paris city. Since the 1930’s it lay abandoned, left to the mercy of the elements, street artists, drug addicts, urban explorers, and the occasional curious individual. Marinette walked between the tracks, old wood creaking underneath her feet with every step. She was limping slightly, her hip stinging with every step and knees complaining every time they bent, but she kept going, searching for a way to get above the high walls without trying to scramble up the cement and risk falling again.

Her phone had given her location, pinging it out on a map before it died, so the teenager was stuck to try and figure a way out as she passed through old tunnels. The sounds of Paris echoed in the distance, though; cars on the streets, people talking, the clatter of life that had been so absent from the hallways of rock. Marinette soaked it in, breathing in the fresh air as deeply as she could.

Hanging above her head, the moon illuminated what it could. Marinette still used the lantern, setting it on the dimmest settings, to keep herself from tripping over tricky rocks and sticks left laying about, but the walk itself passed by faster than even a section of the catacombs.

Perhaps it had been the timelessness of the place.

Perhaps it was merely the fresh air and hope.

Whatever it was, Marinette stumbled upon an old, abandoned station and used the cracked cement stairs to get up to the surface level. After climbing over a stone wall, she was back on the streets of Paris. A woman in high heeled boots that clacked against the ground gave her a funny look but didn’t bother her. With her yearly pass to the metro still in her backpack, the teenager set off to find a different set of tracks.

Huuxi, having hidden himself beneath her hair, patted her skin encouragingly as she stumbled, almost tripping down the steps of the station.

The ride itself was a blur as Marinette leaned her head against the plastic of the train car and dozed in and out. Each stop jolted her awake, forcing her blink wearily at the sign announcing where they were. Someone sat down a couple of seats from her, but the teenager kept her head down and doggedly ignored them. Perfectly placed stone was outside her window, stacked on top of each other and cleaner than those that had been covered in dust and dirt in the catacombs. Darkness stretched ahead in the tunnel, broken only by the dim light of the train that shook on its wheels.

Her hand gripped the strap of her backpack and each breath seemed more and more smothering—

Brakes squealed as the train came to a stop and Marinette shot out of it, climbing out of the underground and back up to the streets, leaned over her knees and fought the urge to throw up.
You’re okay, she urged. You’re okay.

“Marinette?”

“I got off too early,” the designer murmured, not bothering to look up. “I—I—”

Huuxi hushed her softly. “Do you know of a safe place?” He pressed his cheek against her neck and, at last, Marinette glanced at the street signs. People were staring and she ignored them to the best of her ability, having to read the words a couple of times before they actually registered in her mind.

The first step was the hardest she had taken that night, the second was even more-so, but Marinette began to walk, ducking her head and keeping her body close to the buildings. A wind picked up and she shivered, her bare skin erupting in goose bumps.

One block, she promised herself. Just one more block.

Each step came down faster and faster until the teenager was sprinting down the street. Her bag bounced against her hip, telling her to slow down with every smack against the bruises that were there, but Marinette didn’t listen. Instead, she rounded the corner and focused on the pale, blue door at the end of the street. It probably wasn’t alone, but it was the only thing she could focus on until her fist was wrapping urgently against the wood.

The designer took no notice of how late it probably was—there were lights on in one of the windows, and movement behind a curtain.

When the door swung open, wide, brown eyes hidden slightly behind wireframe glasses took her in.

“Nino,” Marinette breathed and her knees finally gave out.

Arms wrapped around her, holding her on her feet as she buried her face in the DJ’s chest. “Oh my god,” her friend whispered, before his voice rose. “Marinette? Marinette!”

She shuddered at her name and didn’t have the energy to look up, her cheek resting against his shoulder. The warmth radiating from his body soothed the chill of her skin, stripping away the cold she hadn’t even realized had settled. Her fingers curled in his shirt and the designer breathed in the smell of watermelon and spices that seemed embedded in his very being. Nino’s hand flittered across her shoulders before gently pushing her back, eyes moving across her face and down the open front of her shirt to where it was tied above her midriff. They went lower and he swallowed, hesitating on her legs.

Just the sight of him drove Marinette to tears and she blinked away the wetness gathering in her eyes and opened her mouth to say something, anything. But there was nothing to be said, so she simply reached for him, arms outstretched like a child reaching for a parent and Nino didn’t hesitate as he pulled her against him.

“Oh, Marinette,” he murmured against her hair, wrapping his arms around her sides. His hold loosened as she flinched but she tightened her hold around his waist and refused to let him pull away. “You had us so worried,” Nino said, his fingers rubbing down her back.

“I didn’t mean to,” the designer whispered against him, her voice hoarse from lack of water and holding in her cries.

A small laugh shook her small frame and Nino shook his head. “No one blames you,” his voice was soft like a blanket in the cool of winter.
Marinette had to shift her weight from one leg to the other and grimaced at the dirt and clothing sticking to her skin. Pulling away, she saw a smudge of brown against the boy’s shirt and wiped at her face. “I—your clothes, they’ll get dirty—” she whispered.

“Don’t worry,” Nino cupped her cheeks and his smile was kind. “They’re just clothes, Marinette. I can wash them.” He glanced down, again, at her own attire and winced. “We should get you out of those, though,” gently taking her elbow in his hand, the DJ gently pulled her forward until she was following him robotically. “Come on.”

The stairs leading upwards to the second level looked far more daunting than anything should have, but Nino settled behind her, arms on both walls to block her body if she fell. Marinette leaned a bit too much on the banister, but couldn’t really find it inside herself to care as each step was like lifting fifty pounds tied to each foot. A careful hand on her lower back got her moving again when she paused, and they reached the top slower than it would have normally taken, but not forever.

Nino’s door was covered in posters of bands and it was, perhaps, the most normal thing she had seen all day. He left her standing in the threshold, letting her look over the computer off to the side that had been hooked up to a professional looking microphone, a couple of drawers covered in CDs that almost seemed to stack to the ceiling, and those brand new LED headphones sitting on his desk.

Some fabric was pressed against her and Marinette grabbed it automatically, staring down at the soft, plaid pyjama pants and old, folded white shirt. A dark towel was placed on top of it and Nino guided her out of his room and down the hall to the bathroom. He started the shower for her and wiped his hands almost nervously on his pants.

“There’s the shampoo and conditioner,” he said, pointing to the bottles. “Soap is on the stand over there, and if you need a washcloth they’re in the top drawer.” The DJ opened it to show her and Marinette placed the clothes on the closed toilet seat. “I,” he paused. “I’m going to go make you some soup,” Nino said. “But just yell if you need anything, okay?”

“Ohay,” she said softly, and then he was out the door, closing it behind him and leaving her there. Huuxi came out from under her hair and landed by the sink, his eyes carefully averted as she stripped out of her ruined shirt. Her pants protested as she tried to pull them off, fabric sticking to her thighs, caked to her skin by blood and mud around her knees, and still wet at the bottoms where the water hadn’t yet dried. They crackled and hit the ground with a heavy thump before settling. Marinette toed off her flats and winced as the blisters she hadn’t known existed throbbed angrily under her skin.

She stood in the bathroom, wearing only her underwear, and refused to look at her reflection, half terrified of what she would see. Marinette groaned when she tried to reach back and undo the clasp of her bra, a spike of agony zipping through her arm. Bracing one hand against the counter top, the teenager sighed and closed her eyes before straightening.

Two paws brushed against her back and the fabric pinched above her skin before releasing.

“Thank you,” Marinette mumbled and Huuxi hummed, settling back on the counter as she finished getting her underwear off. She was glad Nino didn’t have one of those half-tub showers because lifting her legs in any shape or form seemed like it would take too much effort. The water was warm as it hit her skin, tricking down pale skin and leaving little rivers in the dirt that had collected on her body.

Red and brown swirled down into the drain and Marinette watched it for a while, leaning her head
against the tile and sighing softly to herself as water pounded against her back. The pressure
wasn’t as bad as she was expecting, and the bruises across her spine had long since been silenced
by the pain from other ends of her body.

She scrubbed with the soap bar, rubbing it along her arms and legs, scrubbing the dirt away. It
stung her knees as it flowed down her legs, but Marinette continued, rubbing at her skin, pressing
down until it was pink.

There was a ghost of fingers pressing into her side so the teenager turned there too, bubbles being
washed away even as she rubbed them into her body and hoping that it was powerful enough to
wash away the sudden urge to bathe herself in bleach.

Still, she scrubbed, her breathing coming faster, harsher. She needed to get clean, she needed to—

“Marinette,” Huuxi called softly from beyond the curtain and the soap hit the floor with a thunk
that startled her out of her thoughts.

Taking a ragged breath, Marinette realized that her cheek was stinging and she brushed her fingers
just below the ache and licked her lips, tasting salt. “I’m okay,” she called back, her voice not as
strong as she had hoped it would be. She strayed away from her hips and moved down, getting
the last of the grime off of her legs and the tops of her feet.

He hadn’t even—

It wasn’t like he had—

Marinette swallowed and pressed her knuckles into her teeth, breathing shallowly around the skin
as her teeth dug into her flesh.

She still felt dirty and the palm of her hand slammed into the wall, the soap crumbling underneath
the force she pressed against it. The world was becoming too small and the teenager backed up to
the wall and slid down until she was curled up underneath the spray of the water, letting it flow
over every inch of her body.

A sound came from beyond the curtain, soft, at first, before growing louder.

“—a different place where love is not illusion based,” he was singing, Marinette realized with a
start. His voice vibrating through the room and settling upon her like aloe on a sunburn. “And fear
is just a word they can’t define.”

She leaned her head back against the tile and let water pour over her collar as she listened.

“Where I’ve heard hope and happiness are found in every beating chest,” Huuxi got closer to the
curtain until she could see his form sitting on the metal holding the toilet paper. “Cause all those hearts are more or less inclined to give it all away without a fear of what's to break,” pulling back the plastic, Marinette glanced out and saw the kwami perched on top of the white roll. He met her eyes, but never fully stopped, “the answer that we never seem to find.”

She sat there, the cold tile pressed against her cheek as her eyes drifted shut and let his voice wash
over her.

“The hand we always take disintegrates without a trace and we're the ones they've always left
behind...”

For a moment, as the words trailed off, Marinette thought he was done. That was, until he took a
deep breath and continued. She pulled back from the curtain and opened her eyes to stare at the
wall opposite of her, tracing the lines of the tile as Huuxi lent her his strength using just his voice.

“Help me understand the best is yet to come. Take me by the hand before I come undone. ’Cause all this emptiness has left me feeling numb, but it's darkest right before the sun.”

Then, the only sound left in the bathroom was Marinette’s breathing and the water pouring down around her. The teenager’s heart no longer felt like it was trying to beat out of her chest and peace had settled over her. Bracing her hands against the wall, she started to get back up to her feet, grunting as her body protested moving anything.

With careful stiffness, Marinette put the cracked soap back and took a deep, steady breath. “Thank you,” she said softly, unsure if Huuxi could hear her over the sound of the water.

It seemed he did, because a low, pleased rumble—too gentle to be a growl—reached her ears and the designer turned her focus back to washing the day away.

Her hair was harder to deal with, so she lathered the shampoo as much as she could and used the only hand that wasn’t limited by a throbbing shoulder to get it into her hair. The top was fine, but Marinette swayed and braced herself against the wall when her fingers brushed a sore spot on the back of her head. The skin had clearly been cut open—probably one of the times she had been slammed into the wall—and it stung as she cleaned it.

Ignoring the conditioner—she would deal with that later when her head didn’t feel like it was going to fall off her shoulders—the teenager turned the water off, stepped onto the plush rug that didn’t aggravate the blisters on her feet, and dug out the towel Nino had given her.

It was soft and warm and she kept it wrapped around her body, patting down with her hands to help it soak up the water a little bit faster. The mirror had fogged up a bit and Marinette wiped her hand across the surface and stared at the tired eyed stranger looking back.

The cut under her eye looked angry in the florescent lighting, dark purple bruising arching across her cheekbone and up into her eyebrow. Her lip was swollen, but not as bad as she had thought, with a horizontal cut that almost seemed unnoticeable until she opened her mouth to breathe.

With shaky fingers, Marinette dropped the towel. Her shoulder looked the worst—black, blue, and violet tattooed across the slender arch and down the back to her shoulder blade. A reddened bite mark sat just beneath her collar bone, dark spots littered around her ribs like she was a Dalmatian, and oval prints had been branded into her hips where Charmer had grabbed her. Small cuts and scrapes littered her stomach from crawling around in tunnels, and there were matching ones on her arms and any other bit of skin that had been bared.

It was her knees that made the designer pause though; the skin was torn and angry looking, littered with already weeping flesh and half-formed scabs. They were framed by even more bruises—some with distinct shapes that were clearly caused by rocks.

Marinette pulled the shirt over her head and the bottoms up, tying the drawstring to keep the hem from falling too low on her hips. The ends trailed over the top of her feet, hiding them from view as she rustled around the bathroom, picking up her shed clothes. A paper bag was hanging off the doorknob and the teen shoved her clothes into it and proceeded to ignore the fabric.

Huuxi settled in one of the pant pockets, warm little body pressed up against her thigh. The teenager limped back to Nino’s room, placed the bag on the ground, and sat on his bed. Exhaustion that had only been slightly wiped away by the shower hit Marinette again and she laid down across the duvet, dragging one of the pillows closer and breathing in the smell that was purely Nino.
The door opened and closed but the designer didn’t turn to look to see who it was. She just buried her face further into the bed as the mattress dipped.

“Hey,” Nino murmured, brushing his knuckles against her cheek.

Marinette opened her eyes slowly, blinking a couple of time as she focused on her friend’s face.

“I brought you food,” he offered and she finally took notice of the bowl in one of his hands. The DJ didn’t complain as he helped her sit up. Instead, he placed the food in her hands, offered a spoon, and then guided her legs so they hung over the side of the bed.

Hissing as he rolled the pant legs up, the designer gripped the spoon tightly and fought the urge to flinch away once she saw the blue case sitting at Nino’s hip. Instead, Marinette ate and tried to ignore the stinging that came with alcohol pads against her wounds. A low groan left her mouth as the DJ pressed a gauze pad against each kneecap and wrapped them up in white bandages, careful to keep them taunt, but not too tight.

The soup had spices in it that made her tongue tingle, so Marinette focused primarily on trying to figuring out what it was, taking her time scooping it up into her mouth—“OW!”

“Sorry!” Nino cried, lurching back, his hands raised up in the air. He had been wrapping her feet when his fingers had brushed a particularly nasty blister on the back of her ankle. “Sorry! I didn’t mean to!”

Of course he hadn’t, but Marinette still flinched when he reached for her leg again. Instead, she forcibly focused her attention back on the soup and tried to ignore every flare of agony from her feet—even if it meant gripping the bowl tightly enough to hear something crack. Nino was pinning the last of the bandage down when the doorbell rang.

Jerking, Marinette felt her heart leap up into her throat, panic squeezing her already fragile ribs.

“It’s okay,” Nino said quickly, taking the bowl out of her hands, setting it on his desk, and then tangling their fingers together. “It’s alright, Marinette—I called your parents while you were in the shower.”

Maman, she thought, shooting to her feet, Papa—

Nino grabbed the designer as she swayed dangerously, pulling her close so she could brace her weight against him. “Whoa there,” his grip was gentle and Marinette yelped as pain raced up her legs under her weight. “I got you, hold on...”

They barely managed to get out of Nino’s room before there was thundering footsteps coming up the steps.

Marinette saw Sabine first, the small woman not wasting a single second before she had scooped the fifteen year old up into her arms. Bruises stinging, the designer curled herself into her mother’s embrace. The dam she had closed in the shower broke and she sobbed against the strong shoulder that kept her from collapsing completely.

“Maman,” she choked out, her face buried in soft cotton. “Maman—”

Large arms engulfed the two of them and the smell of freshly baked bread kept the tears from drying up. Tom Dupain held his family close in the small hallway as his daughter shook and let the warmth of her parents sweep through her exhausted body. The tears gradually slowed and Sabine pulled back slightly, but never let go.
“Marinette,” she whispered, her own eyes red and puffy as she wiped away the tears on freckled cheeks. “I’m so glad you’re safe,” her lips pressed against her daughter’s forehead and the designer tried to take a step closer only for her leg to give out underneath her.

An arm wrapped around her waist, keeping the teenager from crashing to the ground. “I have you, sweetheart,” her father said, his large hands strong and yet so gentle as he lifted her up against his broad chest.

Burrowing her face into his chest, Marinette only heard him say “thank you” to Nino. She was warm and safe even though her body throbbed with every heart beat. Each blink seemed to last for an eternity and gentle fingers brushed against her forehead, cheek, and nose. Turning bleary eyes to her mother, the teenager smiled softly and earned a kiss just below the cut on her face.

She hadn’t realized she had dozed off until a chill wind blew across her face. Even then, though, Marinette opened her eyes just a bit to see her mother’s car waiting on the street. The moon was high and grinned down at her, but something else caught the designer’s attention—a small movement out of the corner of her eye.

“Hold on, sweetie,” her dad said and Marinette was placed down on the stairs leading up to Nino’s front door. That didn’t matter though, because there was something small padding through the alley across from them.

Orange fur gleamed underneath one of the street lights, gold eyes burning with a secret sort of cleverness.

A fox.

Huuxi wiggled out of her pocket as she gasped and followed her gaze to meet those with the canine. “A visitor,” the kwami said softly, unheard of by her parents as they quickly moved a few things around in the back seat. “How wonderful.”

Marinette reached up to brush her fingers against the fox miraculous. “Was it a sign?” She murmured, not completely realizing she had spoken aloud.

“Of course not,” the little creature scoffed, but there was a secretive smile on his face and his eyes seemed to glow under the dim light. “That was a fox.”

Waking up in the morning, sunlight streaming through the window, Marinette blinked blearily and looked around the pink walls of her room. They looked familiar—but in the way that someone she had seen in passing a couple of times looked familiar. Her dresser seemed out of place, too broad, suddenly, too wide and tall and out of place.

Huuxi was curled up on her pillow, eyes closed and still sleeping. Someone had plugged her phone in and left her backpack sitting beside her desk—the second, she assumed, had probably been her parents. The first... glancing back at the kwami and watched his ears flick in his dreams before settling once more. A low throbbing kept the designer from moving too quickly as she scooted towards the ladder of her bed and debated on the easiest way to get down without it hurting too much.

In the end, she decided to use her toes and grip the wood tightly, taking slow, awkward steps and decided, before she even reached the bottom, that ladder were the worst invention to ever been created.

Keeping on the balls of her feet, Marinette wobbled her way to her desk and almost collapsed in
the chair. Instead, she lowered herself into the seat and stared around at the walls—the pictures she had placed up not too long ago and yet it felt like years. Her phone pinged and she glanced at it out of the corner of her eye before sighing and picking it up.

The weather of the day settled underneath the date and time.

Eight in the morning. Saturday. Marinette closed her eyes and sighed. She had lost an entire day down in the dark. Playing with the unlock feature, sweeping it back and forth, the designer looked at her window.

Huuxi settled by her phone and the teenager glanced over at the kwami. He didn’t say anything though, just watched quietly until she tapped her pass-code in and winced at the twenty-some texts, forty missed phone calls, and ten voice messages. Rubbing her face, Marinette pressed the green speech bubble with the smiley face and scrolled through the names. Nino she had already seen, but she chose him anyway.

*Are you alright?*

*Marinette please answer me*

*I’m really worried you gotta respond*

*Please Marinette we’re so worried*

*I saw the akuma please tell me you’re safe*

Her hand trembled hard enough to make the words hard to read so she set the phone down, wiped her face, and took a deep, shaky breath. Picking it back up, she settled her thumb over the keys and paused before typing.

‘I’m sorry for worrying you.’

It sent before Marinette could stop herself and she backed to the names and looked through the others—Alix, Alya, Ivan.

Adrien.

There was even one from Chloè and the designer grinned weakly at the ‘you better not be dead’.

Most of the messages were similar to Nino’s; begging her to respond, to tell them where she was, to be okay. It was Alix’s that were the most worrying, however. Most were a jumble of letters as if she couldn’t quite see what she was typing, but the apologies could be made out and a simple ‘this is all my fault’.

Marinette licked her lips and rested her head on her arms. It wasn’t Alix’s fault. It never had been. Her thumb hovered over the call button, but she decided against it, turning to the voicemails and wondering if she should actually listen to them.

“How do you work this?”

The designer glanced up and saw Huuxi poking at her radio with a scowl on his face. “Oh,” Marinette murmured and she placed her phone down, leaning forward and showing him which each button did. Playing with the black cord that could be placed in a headphone jack to play the music off a device, the kwami plugged and unplugged her phone over and over again before settling and turning on her music.
Sighing, the teenager leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, letting the beat thrum through her until her pulse matched it, heart thumping along to the song. It was simple, thoughtless existence where she didn’t have to worry about anything but what was seeping into her ears.

Then the song ended, breaking the trance and Marinette opened her eyes to watch as sunlight streamed over the pictures on her walls. The bright colours seemed too bright, too vibrant, after a day alongside dusty, grey stone. In time she would probably get used to it, but there was a strange change that festered inside her and made it feel like an itch that just couldn’t be scratched.

Perhaps it was time to paint her room a different colour than pink. Or, perhaps, she should let herself settle back into her skin before doing something that, at a later date, she might regret. Huuxi skipped a few songs, grumbling to himself, and Marinette focused on the kwami and his beige fur, the black tips of his ears, and the subtle flecks of green in his eyes that were normally swallowed by the gold. He patted her radio a couple of times, turned the volume up and down, and simply just played with the settings.

“Thank you,” Marinette said because she wasn’t quite sure she had.

“For what?” Huuxi glanced over at her, a small frown marring his face.

The designer opened her mouth and paused, thinking carefully over her words. “For helping me,” she decided.

Humming, the kwami turned back to messing with the music. “You enabled me to save you,” he said, tone casual and yet emotion ran underneath it, flowing like a river. “The credit alone does not belong to me.”

“I followed you,” Marinette shook her head and looked away. “You were the one that led me out.”

Finally, Huuxi turned to fully face her. “Yes,” he said simply. “I did, but you were the one who enabled it and allowed me to find the exit.” The large ears twitched as if they wanted to flatten against his head, but the kwami stubbornly kept them up. “There is a fierce, deep magic in trust—sometimes unpredictable but beautiful all the same.”

The teenager looked at him, a stubborn frown on her face as she rolled the words over in her head. “That doesn’t make sense,” she said. “There was no... no...”

“Spells? Enchantments?” Huuxi grinned as she nodded. “Magic is far more complicated than a couple of words whispered in the dark,” He settled before her like a teacher for a student and Marinette had the sudden feeling that she should be taking notes. “It is the very life that you have, the world that you touch beneath your fingertips. True users of magic feel it constantly around them and open their mind to it, waiting for it to show them what it wants. And magic wants to use you—your only choice is to say yes or no.”

“And me trusting you it... it did that?”

Huuxi tilted his head to the side and frowned in thought. “Yes and no,” he said. “Trust was the spark that ignited it at first, but it was the earth that spoke through me and led us out.”

“Oh,” Marinette said softly. She bit her bottom lip and frowned slightly, her thoughts bouncing between various subjects before settling on one. “Do... can miraculous users use magic?”

His laugh was surprisingly fox-like—a sharp bark followed by a serious of high yips. “Marinette,” Huuxi said kindly, “every human being can use magic, the great cities of this planet are built on top of great pools of it.” The kwami settled so he was partially laying down, posed like the sphinx
of Egypt with his hind legs under his body and his forelegs stretched out in front of him. “Every
great city has magic and you humans... you instinctually know. That’s why you travelled here,
that’s why you built your homes on the banks of the river, conquered each other, and fought over
land. It’s because you know even if you don’t know that you know it.” He paused for a second
before adding on, as if an afterthought, “And you change it naturally, helping the flow of pure
magic to find a focus.”

“What do you mean?” Marinette leaned back in her chair and was about to curl her legs up in her
chair before the aches forced her to decide against it. “Wouldn’t all magic be the same?”

“All magic is the same,” Huuxi corrected gently, “like how people are all the same—you have the
same chemicals in your body as someone across the planet, but you are touched in a different way.
Created the same, but made differently.” His bright eyes shone as the sun danced across the walls.

A car honked outside, the music from the radio changed to something slow and sweet.

Huuxi breathed in, his small body expanding for a second and Marinette wondered if he truly did
need air to live or if he was merely doing it because everything else did. “The magic here,” he
continued and the teenager was dragged suddenly back to the conversation they were having. “Is
different than, say, a city only a day’s walk away.”

“What is Paris, then?” Marinette gripped her thighs and frowned slightly. “What type of magic
is...” she frowned, unable to fully ask her question because she simply didn’t know how to ask it.
“What type of magic is here?”


Marinette’s mouth went dry and she swallowed roughly. She was grateful to be sitting down; not
knowing how her body would have reacted had she been standing up.

The kwami looked amused at her reaction. “You have a city of the dead underneath your feet,” he
said, chuckling. “What else could it have been?”

What else could it have been? Marinette didn’t know, but it was death magic. “I—” she wanted to
speak but she didn’t know what to say. “I think I’m just surprised,” she settled on.

“Because it is death,” Huuxi hummed thoughtfully even as his bright eyes shone with knowledge
she couldn’t even comprehend. “Death is necessary. It is simply part of Life and if you were to
call Life a blessing, you must say Death is a blessing as well.” He got up and floated towards her,
touching her cheeks with his paws. “Death is not evil, it is just change.”

Before Marinette could respond, a knock against her trapdoor sent Huuxi flying off to vanish in
the cubbyholes of her room just as her mother opened the latch and poked her head in. She looked
up at the bed for a second, before her grey eyes settled on her daughter and softened with the
small, but no-less bright smile that settled upon Sabine’s face.

“Good morning,” she said, managing to climb up the ladder and carry a tray full of food with all
the grace of practice that came from years of experience. There was a plate covered in various fist-
sized pains au chocolat, a small mug of thick, hot chocolate, and a bowl filled with sugared peach
slices. The tray was set on the desk and Marinette leaned into the hand that ran through her hair,
combing gently through the small tangles that had gathered there over night.

She ate even as Sabine picked up a comb and slowly worked her way through the little knots.
Each stroke was gentle, keeping the pressure off the teenager’s skull. Marinette couldn’t stop the
wince when those careful fingers brushed against the broken skin on the back of her head, but her
mother stayed clear of the area afterwards.

Chocolate melted in the designer’s mouth and she almost moaned around the bread. It was as fresh as a pain au chocolat could get, and there was no doubt in her mind that it had been lovingly crafted by her father’s hands.

Hunger from the day before, quenched only slightly by the soup Nino had given her, came back in full force and Marinette cared nothing for etiquette as she wolfed everything on the tray down and cursed her culture for having a lighter breakfast than the rest of Europe.

A hand brushed over her cheek, fingers tapping along the freckles that rested there and Marinette breathed in slowly. Her parents would want to know what happened in the catacombs. They would want to know what happened to Charmer and how she had escaped.

Cupping her mother’s hand with her own, the teenager met the iron grey of Sabine Cheng’s. She couldn’t talk just yet, the wound was still open and stinging.

Smiling softly, Sabine leaned down and kissed her daughter on the forehead. It’s okay, that kiss said. Take all the time you need.

oOo

It was a strange, delicate balance eating a xiaolongbao without spilling the soup, but Marinette was trying her hardest. The basket that had been filled with the various dumplings was set out in the middle of the kitchen table, her mother humming over the stove as she cooked various dim sums filled with pork, beef, and shrimp. Dough twisted artistically into small, flower-like shapes, each one looked almost too good to eat.

Almost being the key word.

Marinette couldn’t complain or feel guilty, though; each one was filling and warm, seeping into her bones and making the cold of the catacombs that had survived the shower finally flee.

“It smells fantastic in here, Mme Cheng.”

Yelping, Marinette just about jumped out of her seat and hissed when broth trickled down her front. She turned slightly in her chair to glare at Nino as he pulled his own chair out and sat down. The DJ pointedly ignored her dark look and pulled the basket to his end of the table, eyes bright as he looked over the dumplings. “And they look just as good as they smell.”

Sabine laughed. “Thank you,” she told the boy and grinned at her daughter’s disgruntled expression. “Be careful—they’re still hot.”

Picking one up carefully and setting it down on a plate, Nino turned his attention to Marinette. “Nice pyjamas,” he said with a grin.

She threw a set of chopsticks at him, tugging at the borrowed clothing and sinking down in her seat. It wasn’t her fault that the pants had been softened by age or the t-shirt was large and comfortable. “Shut up,” Marinette hissed at him instead and turned back to her lunch, pointedly ignoring her friend.

That was, until he slid a plastic, covered bowl to her. The inside was foggy from holding warm food and it heated Marinette’s fingers as she opened the lid. Garlic, pepper, and other spices hit the designer’s nose like a sucker punch and she breathed in the savouring scent of chicken and pork. “I love your mom,” she breathed.
Nino laughed and lifted his dumpling up to his mouth, taking the first bite and managing not to spill soup all down his front. “She knows you love adobo,” he said with a wide grin after chewing and swallowing. “And... and she felt bad for not being there last night.”

“Your mother works night shifts,” Marinette pointed out and it was true—the poor woman was constantly called in to the hospital late in the evening and barely saw her husband and kids until their days overlapped. “And none of this was her fault,” she paused and pointed her chop sticks at the DJ. “Nor is it yours.”

Sabine placed another basket filled with dumplings on the table and sighed. “It is only natural for people to take on guilt they never were at fault for,” she said and smiled softly at Nino, some gentle understanding in her eyes. “Especially when someone they love was hurt.”

“Maman,” Marinette said softly and closed her eyes as her mother ran her hand along her forehead, brushing the dark bangs away. She hadn’t tied her hair back yet; not in the mood to look for new bands to keep it out of her face.

Then, the moment was over and Sabine stepped back, smiling at the two teenagers. “I need to find my husband,” she declared. “Otherwise he’ll spend all day baking and none of it eating.”

She was out the door before they could stop her and Marinette sighed, placed the adobo to the side after covering it, and picked up one of the steaming dumplings. “You better not blame yourself for this,” the designer told Nino, her voice like the rocks that had cut up her knees. “You are not at fault for this.” Her hand motioned down the front of her body, hovering for a second over where the bruises on her ribs tinged with every breath.

“What if it was?” Nino didn’t quite snap back, but his voice was sharp. “What if I had gone with you?”

“Then I would have been pulling you away from the street—just as I did with Alix,” Marinette poked his shoulder with a chop stick. “What happened,” she paused and swallowed around the sudden tightening in her throat. “What happened was no one’s fault but Papillon’s.”

Nino watched her silently for a moment. “He hurt you.”

It wasn’t quite a question—Marinette knew that the DJ had seen the scrapes, cuts, and bruises before and after she had cleaned up. But there was something about it, like he was asking something in particular. “He did,” the designer said softly and she looked away from his hazel eyes and swallowed. “But it was just pain—”

“No it wasn’t,” Nino said sharply and Marinette glanced back at him and was caught by how much older he seemed. He turned away from her, eyes focusing on the half finished dumpling resting on his plate. “It wasn’t.”

She shuddered and tightened her hand around the chop sticks. There was a shadow in the corner of her eye, and the bruises on her waist ached as phantom hands brushed her skin. Something changed and settled around them. Time, perhaps, if it had been a physical thing, but Marinette felt older, matching the DJ in spirit and thought. “Maybe,” the designer started and paused, gathering her thoughts before continuing. “Maybe if I tell myself I’ll be okay, one day I will be.”

“Fake it until you make it?”

Marinette shrugged and poked her dumpling. “Something like that,” she murmured.

oOo
They were on some romantic comedy Marinette couldn’t quite remember the name of when she started to doze off, head drooping further and further into the back of the sofa, each blink longer and slowly cutting the movie into smaller, chopped up pieces. Her fingers were sticky from bits of an orange peel and smelled of soft citrus as she tried to wipe the drowsiness from her eyes.

It didn’t work quite so well and her cheek was against the back cushion, eyes closed before she could put up a fight.

There was a moment where she felt like she was falling, her body weightless as the world rushed around her, filling her mind with a low buzzing—like small, insect wings—before she jolted to a stop and everything was silent.

Something large was growing behind her, eyes piercing the back of her neck like thick arrows, needles poking insistently into her spine, and the smell of dust and old, rusted metal, and the overwhelming heaviness of magic that pressed down upon her, reeking of sharp citrus. Something hot brushed over the designer’s ear, tickling the skin.

“You’re mine.”

Marinette flung herself off the couch to get away from the purring voice, a scream ripping through her throat as she grabbed the closest available object and raised it like a cricket bat. Her heart pounded against the walls of her chest while wide, blue eyes flickered over every object in the room, trying to find the lanky form in a suit. Her back hit the wall and petite hands tightened around ceramic.

“—inette! Marinette!”

A jolt went through the teen and she turned her wild gaze to the fifteen year old standing across from her. He had his hands up, palms facing her, and was walking slowly in a half circle to cut off the exit and she bared her teeth, stance dropping low as she watched every movement like a cornered rat.

Her stomach was burning and every particle of her body was trembling like a meth addict’s.

She needed to get out, to bury herself underground where things from the sky couldn’t grab her because it wasn’t safe in the open, it wasn’t safe to be so exposed—

“Damn,” the boy in front of her said in an arrested voice. His hands were shaking where they were held out in front of him. “Marinette,” he took a step closer and she flinched back, almost hitting her head on the wall.

Each breath that came out of her mouth was a harsh, steep pant, but that didn’t cover the smell of rosemary and pepper. It was smell that shook the world and Marinette jerked back slightly as it overwhelmed the rank of oranges that had seeped into her mind and held her thoughts. Her fingers loosened, the long statue in her hand tumbling to the ground and only caught by Nino’s quick thinking.

“Hey,” he said softly, setting the decoration off to the side. The DJ didn’t touch her, but his hands hovered over her skin, the warmth from his palms almost like a magnet. “It’s okay, you’re alright.”

Marinette shook her head and pressed her palms against her eyes with a sharp whine. She slid down the wall and ignored the sharp pain running up and down her legs at the motion. Her heart was still pounding in her chest, every sense on high alert and thrumming in anticipation for a threat that could be there.

It took a while until the designer was able to breathe normally again, but she didn’t pick her head
up off her knees. There was a rustling and a thump as Nino sat down beside her, his side against hers, their legs brushing. One arm wrapped around Marinette’s shoulder and pulled her to lean into his shoulder and press her cheek against the bone.

Eyes fluttering open, the designer stared at the couch and sighed into the warmth that emitted from the boy beside her. Her feet were aching, so she stretched out her legs and winced when each knee popped and the skin felt like it was stretching too far and on the verge of ripping like cheap wrapping paper.

Neither teen said anything for a long time and the movie filled the silence—a low murmur in the background that was close to white noise, but not quite. A few cars passed by outside, muffled by the windows and even the people in the bakery downstairs seemed like they were miles away.

“Are you okay?” Nino didn’t push her away from his shoulder to look at her, and Marinette was grateful.

She swallowed a couple of times before opening her mouth. “I—” She started and paused. “For now,” the designer settled on and it was the truth.

He sighed and relaxed against her, squeezing his arm around her smaller body and pulling Marinette closer. “Okay,” Nino murmured into her hair.

Leaving after dinner, Nino managed to drag a promise out of the designer that she would call him if she ever felt like she had that afternoon. No matter what time, no matter where she was.

So Marinette promised and watched him walk home from her balcony as the sun set behind the Eiffel Tower and lit Paris in streamers of gold and blue. She stayed up there for a while, Huuxi settled down beside her and watching the sky with her and the lights of the cars and buildings light up.

It was only when she started shivering that Marinette turned to head back down into her room. She didn’t really feel like dealing with the ladder of her bed, so the designer laid on her stomach, rested her phone on the large, stuffed cat, and flipped through the news websites to find out what had been missed over the past day or so.

Marinette had completely forgotten about the fight between Charmer, Ladybug, and Chat Noir until she stumbled upon the article. There wasn’t anything that she didn’t know—a description of what the akuma looked like and what he was calling himself. What was different was the mention of her name.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng, fifteen years old, last seen outside of Collège Françoise Dupont. There was a video in the article and her thumb hovered over it, torn between pressing play and just leaving it be. Huuxi was watching her. He hadn’t really said anything all day, letting her have the time to think and readjust back to her life without influencing her.

She was grateful for it. Grateful for time and space.

She pressed play and turned her phone on its side so the video covered the whole screen. The picture was blurry and shaking almost wildly at first—clearly done on an unprofessional camera—but it steadied and focused on a figure dressed in all black lunging forward. Marinette heard the howl of rage that came from Chat Noir and wondered what could have possibly made him make that sound.

Charmer was there and the designer swallowed, taking in his blurry features as he turned to
defend himself against the miraculous holder, almost tripping over his own feet as he tried to get
away from the sharpened claws.

Adrien, Marinette winced as Charmer snarled something and a figure in red slammed into her
classmate. Alya. Ladybug. Chat was forced to turn away from the akuma to face his partner,
getting tackled around his waist for his troubles. The designer didn’t watch the full video and
turned it off when he flung Ladybug over his shoulder out of sight of the camera.

Charmer must have done whatever he had done to Alix that first day. The powers that Papillon
had given to him were of those to control another person, to dictate their actions.

It hadn’t been able to do anything to her, but they worked just fine on the other heroes, it seemed.

Unwinding the bandages from her legs, Marinette cleaned the blisters that had broken earlier,
 reapplied some ointment, and rewrapped her feet. After plugging her phone back in, turning her
light off, and pulling her blankets up and over her head the teenager tried to go to sleep even
though she knew she wouldn’t be able to go to sleep for a good, long while.

oOo

By Tuesday, Marinette was ready to explode. She hadn’t left the house since Thursday, all her
fabric had been used to make a shirt ages ago, and there was hardly enough yarn to make a sock
much less something wearable. Her feet weren’t healed, but she could walk on them without
limping, so she sat down in the bakery and wheedled her mother down until she got permission to
go get some supplies to make something.

Skipping the flats that were in her closet, the teenager settled with a pair of thick, ankle high socks
and some padded tennis shoes. Her feet were still wrapped and a couple of blister band aids had
been placed over the worse ones to keep the friction as low as possible.

It wasn’t a far walk, though, and Marinette kept her pace slow, doing her best to keep her knees
from stretching too far in case the scabs broke. She wasn’t limping as badly as she had been and
the teenager gradually sped her pace up when there was only slight twinges in her legs.
Everything was aching slightly when the teen got to the store, but it was a good ache—the kind
that came from taking a deep breath after climbing to the top of a mountain.

The craft store wasn’t empty, but it wasn’t full either, and there was a quiet atmosphere that was
more library-like than anything else. People ducked in and out of aisles, looking at clay, scrapbook
stickers, stamps, and frames. Marinette headed straight for the yarn and glanced around to make
sure that no one was really paying attention to her before urging Huuxi out from under her hair.

He settled on her shoulder—a place where he could easily dart back into hiding if anyone came
upon them—and looked around at the various colours and styles as the teenager dug around,
finding a few, thick wool yarns (and she settled on a beige that matched the kwami’s fur and a
black that could ‘go with anything’) before turning to the yarn that was various colours.

“I like that one,” Huuxi pointed to one that was various shades of green and Marinette put it in the
basket without pausing. She chose one that was named “sandstone” and was various browns and
greys before turning to another called “red velvet” that seemed to be every shade of red possible.

The fox kwami picked out “surf’s up” and a pink, black, and white one called “Dear Diary” that
Marinette laughed at and simply added to the pile. After finding the fuzzy, nylon yarns, Huuxi
chose one that felt like a cloud and the teenager added two to her pile—one white and the other
red—and headed to the front.
She was getting her change back from the cashier when the screaming started. Marinette snatched up her bags, shoved the money roughly into her purse, and ducked out of the shop. Screaming rarely meant anything good—especially if there was already an akuma on the loose. Dodging into the nearest ally, the teenager peeked out and looked over the shifting crowd of shoppers to see where the yelling had originated from.

Just her luck, Marinette thought bitterly as she watched the people. Just her luck that the first day she left her house an akuma decided to show their face.

“Luck is a tricky thing,” Huuxi mused beside her and the teenager jumped and yelped, pulling back into the ally in order to look at the kwami. “If luck is what you want to call it.”

“What else would you call it?” The designer grumbled and flinched when the screaming went up an octave. “It doesn’t matter, I need—”

“SILENCE!”

And then it was. The screaming cut off as if it was nothing more than a television being muted with a single press of a button.

Marinette felt the air in her lungs rush out of her as she stumbled back, her body hitting the brick of a building. The smell of oranges settled heavily on the air, thick and almost suffocating. Around her, the world seemed to tilt a little to the left before straightening again and the necklace pressed against her skin was burning as if she had left it in the sun for hours.

“Oh,” Huuxi hummed thoughtfully, “he’s gotten stronger.”

There was a crash and a crunching of metal but Marinette pressed herself against the wall and breathed heavily through her mouth even though every cell in her body screamed at her to run and run and never look back. Huuxi was watching her, something odd in his gaze like a mother robin watching her young as they stretched their wings for the first time.

Expectant. He looked expectant.

“Do you truly believe it to be luck that brought you here at this moment?” The kwami said.

Marinette gripped her bag of yarn a little bit tighter and glanced around the corner of the building to see Chat Noir on the top of a crushed car, pointing people to get to safety in the nearby shops. He didn’t say anything—no, he couldn’t—as he directed people. Ladybug was behind him, hands over her ears as she tried to dodge every physical attack Charmer was flinging.

“You’ve seen what he can do, that he can control people by just speaking to them.”

The designer pulled away from the sight and walked further back into the alley. She stopped next to a tall flower pot with a tree whose leaves were a bright yellow. Her hand tightened on the bag, making the paper crinkle almost angrily as the mistreatment. “What’s to stop him from doing that to me?” Marinette said softly.

Huuxi hovered in front of her and tilted his head to the side. “You are a fox,” he told her as if it was that simple.

“I don’t understand what that means,” she shot back, her voice shaking as the sound of something soft hit metal and the ground trembled.

“It means,” the kwami’s eyes were bright, “That you were meant to look at evil and never be touched by it.” He motioned out to the street. “Do you not wonder why he commands the world
to silence and yet you still speak?”

She hadn’t. She had only been grateful that his words didn’t hold the same influence on her that they did on everyone else. There was another crash from the street, but Marinette didn’t turn around. It was eerie, that silence. “If I don’t help,” the teenager didn’t look at Huuxi as she spoke, “will they lose?”

The kwami was quiet for a moment. “What do you think?” He said softly. “Do you believe it was merely luck that brought you here, or something else?”

Marinette finally turned to look at him. It would be easy to walk away, to turn her back and head home rather than face the akuma on the street. “All I wanted,” she shook as she spoke, fingernails digging into the paper of the bag she was holding, “was to have peace.”

Peace to be left alone, peace to live her life perhaps the easy way without her actions holding the lives of the people who lived in Paris.

But that wouldn’t make it right.

“Peace is a virtue,” Huuxi floated up so they were eye to eye. “It is a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, and justice.” He didn’t smile, but it was there, somehow. Just not physical. “It is not simply the absence of war.”

He had called her brave in the tunnels, Marinette remembered and she slowly pulled the fox miraculous out from under her shirt, baring it to the sunlight. Maybe it was time to be brave again.

“Howxi?”

The kwami smiled toothily, his canines glinting like the tips of spears on a battlefield.

“Transform moi.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone that reviewed and left kudos! This one took a bit longer more because writing moments of calm is far harder than writing action. Next chapter is 80% fighting so it'll be out soon enough, hopefully!
A Tear For the Vulnerable

Chapter Summary

Where there's a will, there's a way, kind of beautiful
And every night has its day, so magical
And if there's love in this life, there's no obstacle
That can't be defeated.

For every tyrant a tear for the vulnerable
In every lost soul the bones of a miracle
For every dreamer a dream we're unstoppable
With something to believe in.

-Waiting For Love

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Marinette had transformed with a miraculous once before and, through her panic in the moment, Tikki had felt like flowers blooming, a sweet breeze that came down from the mountains, and laughter.

Huuxi was spice. Sweet, autumn spices that wafted through a café front and reminded those walking by that warmth was only a doorway away. He was carved pumpkins lit by gold candles, the leaves cascading to the ground on gentle winds that hadn’t quite gotten so nippy that they bit at the skin, and the quiet moment right before falling asleep.

The stinging in her ribs lessened with every breath, the ache in her feet and legs nothing but a distant memory. It was magic, Marinette knew. The same type of magic that enabled Ladybug to cast her lucky charm and Chat Noir his cataclysm.

For a moment, Marinette took the time to examine the suit Huuxi had given to her. Tikki’s had been simple—just a skin tight red with black polka dots outfit. The one the fox had given her was hardly simple; black gloves, made of some thick material, went all the way up to her biceps. Thick padding pressed against her elbow and covered her knuckles, clearly for protection, but it wasn’t completely unbearable or restricting. Her boots were the same colour and went all the way up to her knees, thick soles almost sticking to the ground as she shifted on her feet. They had no heel except for the inch or so of rubber that was between her toes and the cement.

Touching her stomach, the designer noted the harder material that went all the way up to her collarbone, blending effortlessly with the padding on her shoulders that matched the same type that protected her kneecaps. It was a light orange, almost beige, and faded to white on her stomach.

A matching scarf wrapped like a belt around her waist and she followed it with her fingers only to come across the fox-like tail it created behind her. The tip of it faded from the orange-beige to a black and she watched it sway lazily behind her, curling up from the ground in a lazy J.
It was the flute that took her by surprise. A long, thin bamboo flute that was attached to a holster on her back. She brushed her thumb over the various stripes around the holes and stared at the instrument that didn’t quite match up with the heavy armour on her body. It looked too fragile to belong; too delicate.

Marinette slipped it back into the protective casing anyway.

Pushing her bag of yarn behind the flowerpot and its golden tree with the toe of her boot, the teenager turned to face the street.

Later on she would look back at her reckless charge into the fray and wince at her lack of plan. But that would be later.

Marinette charged out into the street, dodging around haphazardly stopped cars to make it to the akuma standing in the middle of the street.

In daylight, Charmer was no longer the shadowy figure that haunted her nightmares. The curve of his face was surprisingly human, his hands had fingers instead of claws, and there was no strange glare to his eyes.

A cold chill settled over the designer that had nothing to do with the autumn weather and she froze in the middle of the street as his bright, green eyes focused on her. For a moment, it was as if she was back underground, surrounded by old brick and rusted iron, his hands on her skin as he shoved her back against the wall—

Marinette took a small step away from him, her heart drumming a beat against her ribs, mouth drying out as she tried to swallow. The urge to run rushed through her like a zebra cornered by a leopard, to run and run and never look back.

“He wondered,” Charmer spoke up, his voice a rumble as he stalked towards her and the designer was frozen, unable to move as he approached. “When another one of you would be released to deal with him.”

She couldn’t do this, she couldn’t. Every hair on the back of her neck was on edge, her body shaking as fear gripped her tight enough that it was a noose keeping her in place.

“I guess,” the akuma leaned forward until they were eye to eye and his voice dropped to a smouldering purr, breath hot against her face as one hand lifted up to touch her cheek, hovering over the cut that was partially healed on her cheek. “I’ll just have another hero to add to my collection.”

You’re mine.

Charmer cupped her face in his hand.

You’re mine.

Marinette took a deep breath and almost choked on the reeking stench of citrus.

You’re mine.

A snarl that was wholly animalistic rose in the back of her throat as Marinette bared her teeth. Her right hand tightened into a fist and she absently noted the feeling of the glove stretching over her knuckles, before she slammed it into Charmer’s face—just below his eye and right across his cheekbone. She threw every bit of her weight into the punch and hit the taller teen hard enough to
knock him off balance. The akuma stumbled a bit, reaching up to touch the cut on his face that now matched the one on hers.

Blood dripped onto his fingers and seemed oddly bright against his dark clothing.

“Fuck off,” Marinette snapped.

Charmer straightened and looked down at the vibrating young woman who was glaring at him with all the rage of a wolf. He sneered back at her and lifted his hand, snapping his fingers like a man calling a dog. “Kill her,” the akuma said.

The whistling of steel being swung through the air was Marinette’s only warning before she managed to duck under the bo-staff aiming for her head. Chat Noir’s teeth were gritted from effort, dark bags under his eyes deep enough that they were almost visible through the black mask on his face. His green eyes—so much softer than Casimir’s—were wide, slit pupils thin like the edge of a razorblade. It was probably his resistance that slowed the staff long enough for her to dodge it, and each of his movements were jerky and robotic.

It didn’t stop his painful accuracy with his staff or the strength in which he swung it, so Marinette kept on the balls of her feet, using her ears to determine where he was going to try and strike her next. For a few minutes, the two were at a stalemate—with the staff in the way, there was no way for the designer to get close enough to touch Chat, but she was too fast for him to hit.

She just had to hold out long enough to come up with a plan or until exhaustion finally caught up with the blond and he made a mistake.

But he was only one half of a whole, and Marinette realized her mistake as a yoyo wrapped around her waist and tightened. She had a split second of horror before she was wrenched off her feet and flung back into the air. The ground flew by but there was nothing the designer could do except curl and hope her head didn’t hit a light post.

A sickening crunch of metal came with the sudden flaring of agony along her back and ribs and Marinette blinked up at the sky for a second, her mouth open and unmoving. How could she have forgotten about Ladybug? Her legs were shaking and, if she could have stood the designer would have been kicking herself. The white car she had hit held a fairly impressive indent of her body and the teenager used it to push herself up to her feet.

She didn’t want to think about what would have happened had she not been in the suit and her aching torso agreed with her. There would be an impressive line of bruises where the flute had dug in, though, and the designer was surprised that it hadn’t snapped under her bodyweight.

So much for fragile. It might outlast her if she got thrown like that again.

“Hey!” A door opened and slammed shut as Marinette tried to take a step and caught herself on the car’s mirror as she stumbled. It broke off and she grasped for the half open window instead, holding herself up by the tips of her fingers. A woman was suddenly in her face, grey hair curled and held back from her face by a black, leather band, blue eyes almost a silver-grey, and wearing worn, but clean clothes. “Look at what you did to my car!”

“Yeah,” Marinette gasped around the pain that shot up her sternum, “but look at what your car did to my ribs.”

The woman fluffed up like an irritated peacock. “You animal freaks!” She snapped as the teenager managed to steady herself and walk a few steps away from the battered vehicle. “Why don’t you go do something useful like fight them terrorists or something?”
Blue eyes on the quickly approaching superheroes, Marinette only half heard what the woman was saying. “Yes, Madame,” She said, watching Chat as he approached from the left and the spinning yoyo that would be coming from the right. “Sorry, Madame.”

Despite the throbbing, the designer managed to duck out of the way of the staff that slammed down where she had been. It hit the car, shattering the window Marinette had held herself up with and the driver screeched like a bat. Chat Noir ignored her, focused entirely on the smaller teen. He still looked like every movement pained him, and he opened his mouth to tell her something only for no sound to escape his lips.

There was no other choice but to take care of him first—he was the one up in her face, the single, huge body blocking her from ever getting to Alya.

A flash of red from the corner of her eye forced Marinette to jump up and back, landing on the white car that made her grateful to be wearing a mask with the howling of how ‘I’ll sue you all!’ as the end of the yoyo scraped off the paint. Ladybug looked just as frustrated as her partner, the normally smooth motions that guided the rope weapon breaking as if there was only a partial command for them.

Adrien was working slowly to the left, trying to flank her, so Marinette jumped towards him. Green eyes widened behind the matching lenses and she almost felt bad for bracing her feet against his shoulders to launch herself over another car.

Almost.

He hit the ground with a grunt and her momentum easily shot her over the two meter height to land on the street beyond. Not wasting any time to see if Ladybug and Chat Noir were following, Marinette took off, ducking into the nearest alley where they couldn’t flank her. Alya was on her tail and her yoyo missed the designer’s nose by the width of a cat’s ear.

Brick walls surrounded them on either side and Marinette turned to face Ladybug as Chat Noir entered the alley. He was rubbing his reddened chin and she felt a little bit sorry for the scrapes there. There was no time for apologies as he flung himself at her, staff arching in the air. Ducking underneath it, the designer pushed herself up into Adrien’s face. His green eyes went wide, mouth opening in shock.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and flung herself forward, knocking the other teen off balance as they both went crashing to the ground. There was a popping sensation and the sudden smell of freshly dug dirt. Marinette didn’t question it—she just wrapped her legs around Chat’s waist and rolled them over so it was him that got hit by the yoyo.

Grunting, Adrien cursed against her and pushed his body up, his eyes narrowed as they focused on Alya.

For a long, awkward moment that probably lasted less time than she believed, the designer stared up at the boy above her, tracing the curve of his jaw, the shape of his eyes, and the lift of his nose. It was so easy to see Adrien underneath the mask—like a spell that kept her from seeing the whole picture had crumbled to pieces.

Marinette let go as if he was made of fire and scrambled out from underneath him. Chat Noir stumbled to his feet, wincing when he touched his chin, and then froze.

Green eyes turned to the smaller teen and narrowed. “How—”

A body slammed into the designer before he could finish and she yelped, hitting the ground as
Alya sat above her, straddling her hips. Hands stightened on her shoulders, nails digging into the padding, keeping skin protected.

Charmer’s spell had broken on Chat Noir, but she hadn’t *done* anything—

Except touch him. She had grabbed him like she had grabbed Alix all those days ago.

Lurching up, Marinette wrapped her arms around Ladybug in some awkward form of a hug and the popping sensation returned, tingling along her skin now that she knew what to look for. Before Alya could fully come back to her senses and realize that her body was hers again, the designer shoved her off and managed to get up on her feet.

“Wait!” Chat Noir called out for her as she headed towards the entrance to the alley.

Marinette didn’t pause, though, sprinting back out onto the street and looking for the akuma. Charmer was waiting where she had left him, standing relaxed in the middle of the street, turned slightly away from her as if he had all the time in the world.

He turned towards her as she approached, his eyes searching the street behind—no doubt looking for signs of Chat Noir and Ladybug. “Look at that,” Charmer said, mildly surprised. “You survived—”

Taking two long strides to get up in his face, the designer put as much force as she could into the uppercut she landed in the middle of his stomach. Wheezing and curling into himself, the akuma wrapped his arms around himself and stared, wide eyed, at the ground. The smug expression was broken at last and Marinette sneered down at him.

She grabbed Charmer by his hair and forced his head up to look at her. “You talk too much,” the young woman hissed and smashed his nose down upon her knee. If felt disgustingly good to cause him pain, to watch him *bleed*.

Blood for the hours locked away in the dark, payment for her pain and the nightmares.

The akuma howled and lurched back, cupping the broken cartilage as crimson streamed through his fingers. Throwing him back onto the street as if he was nothing more than a bit of garbage (which he *was*—he was only *trash*), Marinette tried to calm the raging storm of violence whispering for her to hurt him, to take something from him. But there was something far more important than beating his face into the ground.

Snatching one of the hands holding his nose, she ripped off the only decoration Casimir had on his body—the single, plain ring. It didn’t crack under her heel, nor when she threw it with all the strength she had at the ground. Leaving it on the street, Marinette dug through the nearby cars and came back with a tire iron.

Charmer lunged for her again, his face grotesque with the red streaming down his chin, green eyes bright and wild, his bloodied teeth bared. He grabbed her arm and squeezed, the quiet ping of very real pain only softened by the magic that held the suit together arched up through Marinette’s shoulder and she screamed.

But not from pain. Her rage was too great for something as finite as physical pain and she shoved the tire iron into his stomach with her free hand.

Charmer dropped heavily, vomiting across the sidewalk. Sharp breaths whistled between his teeth. The tire iron would have been heavy enough to crush his skull if she brought it down on his head. Part of Marinette wanted to beat his head in until there was nothing left but splinters of bone. Part of her knew that there was only a teenage boy stuck in the influence of an evil man.
Part of her didn’t care about that at all.

She didn’t give into the rage, and she didn’t bring the tire iron down upon his head—she had something far more important to do.

But no matter how hard she hit it, the iron bar did nothing to the ring. Marinette chipped the stone on the street with her frantic swinging, but the silver remained unbroken. A hand grabbed her arm and the designer turned with a snarl, her blue eyes flashing like a sky full of meteors only to land on red and black.

Alya was holding the smaller teen, hazel eyes wide, her mouth open as if she wanted to say something. It was a split second of harsh, heavy breathing before the designer realized that, at some point, she had started crying. Instead of commenting, however, Ladybug gently pulled Marinette away as magic that tasted like mushrooms and smelled like smoke broke through her senses.

“Cataclysm!”

The world lurched as if someone had wrapped a rope around it and tried to force it to rotate the other way, but Marinette only had eyes for the hand that slapped down against the ring. Metal withered and rusted beneath Chat Noir’s touch and a black butterfly fluttered out from underneath his fingers, making a beeline for the sky.

Forced to let go of Marinette as she unlatched her yoyo from her waist, Ladybug caught the little insect, but there was no celebration in her movements—just long, drawn out exhaustion. The designer didn’t want to watch the akuma transform back into Casimir, she didn’t want to see the mass of insects magically fix the cars and buildings. So Marinette turned and slipped away before she could, running down the street to the alley where she had left her bag of yarn.

The transformation dropped like a tree shedding its leaves and she stared at the paper bag for a long while until Huuxi brushed his paws against her cheek. Tears that hadn’t quite dried yet still wet her skin and Marinette wiped her arm across her face with a small, shaking breath.

She was so tired of crying.

The kwami settled on her shoulder as the designer tucked the fox miraculous back under her sweater. He didn’t bother hiding himself; the emptiness of the street and alley insured by the police sirens approaching.

“Well done,” Huuxi said.

A sudden, heavy weight Marinette had never realized she carried was lifted off her shoulders. The shadow of mistakes and the quiet disappointment that followed her like a hellhound were sanded down until the sting had lessened—even if only for that day.

Standing in front of her mirror wearing only her underwear, Marinette eyed the yellowing bruises along her shoulder, ribs, and waist. Her knees were still torn up, but they didn’t look as if they had been pressed into a meat grinder anymore. She poked the discoloration along her arm and sighed when it ached rather than throbbed.

There wasn’t any new bruises from the fight—a miracle in itself—but that didn’t stop her back fromaching with every stretch. The blisters on her feet had opened at some point, but they didn’t feel as bad as they had that morning.
Life had seemed so much simpler on Thursday. When beating someone to death had never crossed her mind. It helped that the akuma was gone, that Papillon had been foiled.

It helped.

That’s what she told herself.

“You wuss,” Marinette told her reflection, shed the rest of her clothing, and got into the shower without letting it warm up first. She stayed there until the water numbed the aches of her body and mind. Pulling on a tank top and a pair of pyjama pants, the designer headed back to her room where Huuxi had managed to turn on her radio and was currently playing some jazz music. He glanced back at her as she wrapped her hair up in a towel. His eyes focused on the bruises dotting her arms and narrowed slightly.

“How are you feeling?” The kwami appeared calm and self composed.

Marinette didn’t believe that for a second. “I think,” she started slowly, the words carefully sought and placed. “The akuma is defeated. I think that the streets of Paris are safer with him off the streets.” She stopped and added a bit shyly; “And I think hitting him a couple of times helped a bit.”

Huuxi smirked and turned back to the music as the teenager sat in her desk chair. Her bag of yarn was there, just where she had left it, and Marinette pulled out each and set them in a nice, perfect line across her desk. She stared at them for a while before turning to the kwami. “Why a flute?”

“Hmmm?”

“A flute,” the designer frowned. “I don’t know how to play the flute.”

Huuxi chuckled and glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “That’s okay,” he said cheerfully. “It’s a magical flute.”

Marinette scowled and threw one of the balls of yarn at him.

The kwami ducked underneath it and settled on her desk, sitting cross legged on the wood and looking far more human-like than he normally did. “You will be able to learn how to use the flute,” he started. “It is magical—but that is purely for what it does.”

“Then how will I—”

Huuxi raised a paw and she fell silent. “When I led you out of the catacombs, you asked how I did so and I said that it was magic that enabled me to find the exit,” the kwami watched her, his eyes unblinking. “Your flute will work very much in the same way; with magic guiding you. Each time you will learn and, one day, you won’t need the magic at all.”

“That feels like a cheap way to learn an instrument,” Marinette muttered to herself.

Gold eyes danced in laughter. “The flute is not an instrument,” he corrected. “It is your weapon.”

The designer searched the kwami’s face and found the truth that sat there, bright and bare as if simply waiting for her. Her hand, as if on its own, free will, cupped the cool metal of the fox miraculous. Huuxi followed the motion with his eyes and gave her a lopsided grin.

“When you said that a fox could look at evil and remain unchanged, what did you mean?”

oOo
Marinette woke up with a gasp, her muscles tense and sending burst of pain down her ribs as they tightened against an unseen threat. Sheets stuck to her bare skin, clinging to the sweat that clung to her body. For a moment, the designer listened to her own breathing, the sound of the rare car outside, and the ticking of a clock. The sudden, nauseating feeling of dirt clinging to her skin was what made her fling the sheets aside and move her legs to head to the ladder and find something to wipe off her body.

_The flutter of fingers along her arms and a constant layer of dust and grime that caked and cracked when she moved._

A clamp squeezed around her left calf, electricity arching up her muscles as it tightened to the point where she was falling back on her mattress and trying to hold in her tears and a cry of agony. It had been such a long time since she had gotten a Charlie horse that the splitting pain took her by surprise.

All that running after days of sitting still, it was no wonder her muscles were complaining, so Marinette did her best to breathe through, relax, and try to ease away the pain. The designer was grateful in a strange, twisted way, thankful for the distraction on why she woke up in the first place.

The cramp abated, phantom twinges still there reminding her that every movement could make it spike again so Marinette laid her hands on her stomach and stared at the trap door above her head. It was the itch of her skin, the sweat that clung there and making her feel sticky, damp, and clammy that urged her out of the bed.

_Dirty, dirty, dirty._

Sitting up slowly, the designer ignored her bangs hanging over her eyes and the way her loose hair was adhering to her forehead, shoulders, and neck. Each movement was careful and stifled, calculated to make sure she didn’t push her leg too far and warrant the return of pain. Marinette shivered as she climbed down the ladder, carefully putting her weight on her good leg. The cramp was still there, buried under her skin like a parasite as she limped, slowly, to the bathroom.

She stared at the water that flowed between her fingers, the temperature cold enough that it was starting to numb her skin. Marinette splashed it up her arms and took a cloth to wipe what that couldn’t reach, breathing in slowly as the heat and stickiness was washed away. Dropping the rag on the counter, the designer looked over herself in the mirror. A thin finger, scarred by the sharp points of needles, poked the scabbed over cut on her cheek that had almost finished healing, feeling the underside of the clotted blood and fighting the urge to pick it off with her nails.

_“It doesn’t matter,” hot air that brushed across her ear, a whisper of a promise. “It doesn’t matter when I can just take what I want—”_  

Marinette ripped her toothbrush out of the holder, plastic clattering to the ground as she held it like a knife, eyes wide and wild as they searched the small confides of the bathroom. Each breath was harsh enough to echo against the walls, her heart suddenly in her throat. No one was there—of course no one was there—but she backed herself back up to the toilet and watched the door.

Each thump in her ears, each ragged breath counted the seconds, the minutes, in which she stood there, unblinking and refusing to move from her spot. There was no creak of floorboards beyond the door, no slight creak as the knob turned from someone on the other side. The toothbrush hit the ground with a clatter and the designer stared at her fingers as if they were alien to her heart still pounding fast enough that she thought she could see her pulse under her skin.
Bracing one hand against the sink, Marinette turned the water on as hot as it could go and started scrubbing at her arms, trying to remove the shadow of dirt and blood that still clung there, as if it had been embedded like a tattoo into her pores. Pale skin turned pink and grew darker, steam rose up and fogged the mirror until she couldn’t see her reflection.

She needed to clean everything off, to get rid of the filth left on her dirty, dirty skin—

No.

No that was *wrong*. Marinette had to use every ounce of self control she had to drop the rag into the sink and slowly back away. It was the echo of trauma, a shadow of horror and hurt that clung stiffly to her mind. She bit the side of her thumb and breathed slowly through her nose, digging her teeth in to simply ground herself back in reality.

That fight was over, *done*.

Charmer was gone and, as far as she and anyone else knew, no one was akumatized twice.

There was a knock on the door that had the designer just about jumping out of her skin and she turned off the water with quick, jerky motions.

“Marinette?”

She opened the door and almost sunk into herself as warm grey eyes—the kind that reminded her of old fur on happy, elder dogs and the sidewalk after it had rained—settled upon her. Sabine’s brow was furrowed, her gaze slightly bleary because of the time, but she was awake enough to see the pink skin on her daughter’s arms, the fogged up bathroom mirror, and the rag still sitting in the sink.

“Did I wake you?” Marinette shivered as the cool air of the house swept in past her mother, cooling the heat of her rubbed raw arms.

Sabine smiled slightly. “It wouldn’t have mattered if you had,” she said, reaching out to drag the back of her knuckles against the designer’s cheek.

“Oh,” Marinette murmured slightly and she watched the hand, her throat tight. She didn’t want anyone to touch her. She didn’t want anyone to touch her ever again.

“Marinette,” her mother’s voice drew the designer’s gaze back to those wise, warm grey eyes. She didn’t say anything else even as the teenager breathed in and shuddered. Sabine always smelled of frosting and sugar cookies, though.

Nothing like the cramped, musty catacombs or the harsh citrus of orange cleaner.

For a long moment, Marinette basked in that. And then she leaned forward and was pulled into a tight hug against Sabine’s warm figure. Arms tightened around the teenager’s body, like a protective casing keeping the outside world at bay for just a little while longer.

Hours later, Tom found his wife and daughter curled up on the couch, Marinette’s head tucked under Sabine’s, arms wrapped around each other. He smiled softly and left them to sleep, getting ready for another day in the bakery as his family dreamed little dreams sweeter than his cookies.

The moon was waning, no longer full in the sky as it had been when she first came out of the dark, but it still managed to light the streets well enough for Marinette to duck through them. It
wasn’t so late that Paris was asleep, but her parents had gone to bed an hour or so ago to prepare for the early morning. That was when she headed out, ducking quietly out the back door with a bag holding a water bottle, some snacks from the bakery, and a couple of hard boiled eggs.

Huuxi was tucked under her recently knitted scarf, blending in to the beige cotton with ease. In fact, in the dark he was almost invisible unless people purposefully looked for the black points of his ears and tail. But people didn’t look for that, and those few Parisians Marinette saw while she walked barely spared her a glance as they went on their way until, gradually, she saw no one at all.

Nature began to reclaim the buildings around her, ivy reaching long fingers up the side of brick and stone, tree roots cracking the sidewalks, their branches intertwined with fences, and the brown stems of what used to be flowering plants before autumn had settled.

It didn’t take the designer too long to find a broken down building with its shattered windows and half-hung door. She climbed the chain fence and hopped down on the other side, ducking her head down in case there were people watching –she doubted it—and managed to get inside without getting stopped.

Graffiti covered the walls, grand pictures of birds that soared up to the windows as if to flee the dark, open space and escape into the night. A n open set of teeth, ready to swallow a passerby whole, was beside a wolf holding a bouquet of flowers in front of a gravestone that had ‘LIBERTÉ’ written on it in jagged block letters. Piles of debris were scattered about, swept up almost neatly into various places as if the people who had been there before had decided that the mess was too annoying.

Urban explorers; they’ll break into the property you’ll never use again only to clean up the mess on your floor. Oh, and leave some artwork behind.

Marinette set her bag on one of the piles and walked out into the middle of the space, the moonlight swept in through the open windows and she turned to Huuxi, now floating beside her. It had been her idea to come out here, to find a place few people knew of to figure out what, exactly, the fox miraculous could do.

The kwami, after all, had been very tight lipped on the matter, smiling that sly little smile whenever she asked.

“Is this big enough?” Marinette spread her arms out and he hovered around her. When she offered to simply test it in her room, he had been adamant that it would be far better to not practice in such a closed space.

“Yes,” Huuxi’s canines flashed in the dim light. “Yes, this will do quite nicely.”

She shed her scarf, hanging it over her bag and pulled the miraculous from under her jacket. “And you’re still not going to tell me what the flute will do?”

He was grinning brightly, gold eyes seeming to shine even in the dark. “That is a surprise.”

The figure of Volpina—bright orange, her flute pressed too close to her lips—appeared in Marinette’s mind and, she wondered, if Huuxi knew that the powers weren’t as much of a secret as he thought. But she would let him have his fun.

“Transforme moi!”

Huuxi laughed as he was swallowed into the necklace and the orange sparks came to life, engulfing her body and leaving the beige, armoured suit behind. The spice was still there but it
seemed dimmer somehow, like a light bulb flickering for a second before settling as it was turn on. Figuring she would ask him about it later, Marinette ran her fingers over the thick, hard material that had kept her safe from harm during the fight against Charmer until her curiosity was satisfied and she headed back for her bag, pulling out a mirror to see herself.

A mask, the same colour as her suit, settled from one ear to the other, reaching high on her forehead and stopping just before the tip of her nose. Black surrounded her eyes like thick kohl, making the blue look even brighter. That same black created two lines—one on either side of her nose—going down to her mouth. The eye holes were covered with some thick, clear material that almost felt like glass but was too strong for that. It was almost unnoticeable until the designer turned her head and the moonlight glinted off the surface.

It was the same markings on Huuxi’s face and she ran her finger down one, marvelling at the soft material of the fabric before turning to the tall, pointed ears on the top of her head. They were thick at the base, attached just above her normal ears, and rose up in a rounded point tipped with black. They moved, flicking around to catch the night sounds and she reached up, surprised when a thin, almost silk material was under her fingers.

“Huh,” Marinette murmured and turned to the odd bit of material hanging around her neck, just above the fox miraculous. It folded carefully against her collar and almost looked like more padding, but she could pull it out to cover her mouth and nose like a bandana. It blocked the smells and clean air was filtered easily through the odd mask.

Magic, she figured, but the teenager kept it where it was.

The flute still felt oddly fragile in her hands when she pulled it out of the holster and Marinette rolled it around between her fingers. Her thumb traced over a black stripe before she raised it to her lips.

The motion was too awkward so she pulled it away without trying to blow. Sighing, the designer sat down on the floor and placed the flute in her lap, closing her eyes as if it was the right thing to do, though there was no reason for her to think that it was.

*Magic wants to use you—your only choice is to say yes or no.*

Marinette breathed in through the mask covering her mouth and could still smell the ground around her as it pulsed in time with her heartbeat. It was like standing in a snowstorm and watching as the flakes slowly gathered upon a coat—unfelt, but seen as they gathered and stuck. This old place, full of people of the past, of memories, of time, settled upon the designer until she was nearly a part of it.

It was a glorious symphony, a thrumming of music that was untouchable but sung in the heart of every rock, plant, and creature.

So Marinette lifted the flute up to her mouth and she played.

It was merely three, soft notes, but the sound broke the silence of abandonment and the designer opened her eyes to see a large, bright light settled upon the end of the instrument. It was orange, a soft orange, like the sunset, and she pressed her fingers against it, unsurprised when they sunk in past her knuckles.

She wondered, absently, what it would feel like without the gloves protecting her skin—tingle? Burn? Be warm? Be cold? The designer pulled her fingers out and waved the flute, holding the ball up and illuminating the walls and piles of debris.
After a while, the magic faded and she played another few notes, creating a second one. This time, however, she tried to create something with it—an image of herself, perhaps.

Nothing happened.

Frowning, Marinette got up to her feet and pictured what she knew about how she looked, forming an image in her mind and tried directing the magic into creating it. The magic simply pulsed innocently.

Somewhere, in the back of her mind, she thought she could hear Huuxi laughing. A little spark of amusement built up in her gut and she rolled her eyes. This time, when she let the magic guide her fingers, she also let it guide her hands, her arms, her thoughts. The flute swept down, the ball of magic almost brushing the ground as it swung, small flakes of it left behind on the floor.

The earth stretched and seemed to yawn beneath her feet, rumbling like a waking dragon. A map seemed to layer over what she actually saw—pulsing lines creating a maze underneath her feet and through the walls, gold and bright even though the building itself was dark and night had settled. Magic created of possibilities and Marinette focused on something aching close to her feet.

It was instinct that helped her grab onto the magic—much like the instinct on how to throw the yoyo or use a lucky charm—and she pulled.

Rock rose, jutting up in a spike, piercing the floor and creating long, jagged cracks. The designer touched it, felt the stone beneath her fingers, the energy that swelled and created a shield around the new boulder.

_It was the earth that spoke through me and led us out._

Well, Marinette thought. _Well._

She pulled at the ground and watched as it rose, following the sweep of her hands as if she was a great conductor carving out landscapes. Stone was thrown and pulled and pushed, guided through the air and to rise. The designer surrounded herself with twisted depictions of mountains and valleys until there was a maze of twisted, sharp rock.

The chime of her phone announcing that she had an hour before her parents were awake was what ended the fun, but she smoothed out the rock until the only sign she had been there was a couple of dents in the wall and new cracks on the floor. Gathering up her bag, Marinette ducked through the half-broken door and ran off into the night, slipping into the dark as easily as a fox.

—oo0—

“You had questions,” Huuxi said around a mouthful of egg. The patter of water hitting Marinette’s window made some odd sort of rhythm that compliment the slow music the kwami had put on and she turned from watching the storm outside to look at him.

Gold eyes watched her, half open but as sharp as they’ve always been. Putting the sketchbook that had been sitting in her lap off to the side, the designer rubbed her cheek and sighed. “I suppose,” she said.

Huuxi snorted. “You _suppose,_” he murmured to himself and dug his canines deeper into the egg white. “Well, what questions do you _suppose_ you have?”

Marinette frowned at him and thought about not asking at all if he was going to have _that_ kind of attitude. She turned her gaze to the storm and watched the rain fall and the grey clouds cover Paris. It reminded her of a black umbrella and bright, green eyes before the designer shook the
images out of her mind.

The memories stole all the hot air right out of the teenager and she slumped forward over her legs, resting her elbows on her knees, and staring out over the jagged city landscape. “Have you ever felt,” Marinette started quietly, “like you were always meant to be something and then, after spending so much time on it, learn that you were probably wrong and just wasted your time?”

Tilting his head to the side, Huuxi glanced up at the teenager. His eyes searched her face while he chewed a particularly large mouthful of egg. “I think,” the kwami said after a while, “that every road you take is the right road, even if you don’t know it at the time.”

“And if it’s a waste?”

“How would it be a waste?” Huuxi frowned slightly, as if confused. “You learned something out of the experience, even if the lesson was simply ‘this is not for me’.”

She played with the hem of her pyjama pants and gave him a small smile.

The kwami finished off the egg and licked the excess off his paws. “Every experience is a learning one,” he said, “no matter the circumstance, no matter what that lesson is. Do not think that even a single second of life is a waste, because it is not.”

“Why are you so wise?” Marinette poked his stomach and Huuxi slapped her hand away.

“I am very old,” he said gravely before giving her a cheeky wink. “But that’s not the question you wanted to ask.”

The teenager turned back to the window. “No,” she said, “but I think I needed to.”

Humming, the kwami settled upon her foot and watched the storm with her. “You know,” he said after a couple of songs had played all the way through, filling the silence between the end of one and the beginning of another, “Not many people have asked why they are weaker during certain times, or why they can’t perform the same feats they did a few days before.”

“I—” Marinette paused and swallowed. She hadn’t asked the question aloud when she had been in the suit and she wasn’t quite sure she wanted to know the answer as to why Huuxi knew about her thoughts.

He looked up at her as if knowing her inner dilemma and then turned away, ignoring it for now. “Many think that their miraculous’ weakness is the kwami’s fault—that we need food or energy in order for the magic to be just as strong again.” Gold eyes flashed and Huuxi caught the designer’s gaze with his own. “You think about what has changed over the past few days, what the major difference between one day and the other.”

It wasn’t quite a question, more of a nudge of an idea, and Marinette settled back and thought. He had eaten every day—even the day they had been in the catacombs. In fact, the only major difference between the first and second transformation was the length of time since she had been down beneath Paris.

Something about the catacombs, then. Something about that day.

“How do other kwami’s use magic?”

“Did you feel the music of the earth last night?”

The designer sighed and leaned back. “You answer a lot of questions with questions.”
“Do I?” Huuxi’s smile turned smug and he lowered his eyelids. Suddenly there was nothing light-hearted, nothing funny about him, just a primordial fierceness that burned down her spine.

Marinette turned away first, glancing back out at the storm that seemed to only get worse. Trees were swaying in the wind and few people were out and about, deciding to stay inside and wait out the weather instead. “You get magic from the earth,” she concluded, “right?”

“I do,” the kwami’s ears twitched. “It is like a good night’s sleep for you after a long day.”

“And... being in the catacombs—” She didn’t quite want to think about them and how he could have gathered strength from being there when it held so much of her pain.

“Think of magic as a living being,” Huuxi mused, his voice thoughtful. “It is a wild thing: like a river and, like a river, it can be directed to go a certain path through careful guidance.” He paused to watch a car go by, water streaming out behind the tires like streamers. “It is like the world opening up to you, saying what is the easiest option. The Chat Noir and Ladybug miraculous stones go against the flow of magic when Cataclysm and Lucky Charm are used. That’s why the abilities are so tiring and why the kwami’s need food to regain their strength.”

Marinette wrapped her hand around her own miraculous. “Is that why they are the most powerful?”

“Yes,” Huuxi said. “And no. They are powerful in what they can do with magic, but every Miraculous is equal in its power. What truly determines the strength is who uses it and how.”

Frowning, Marinette turned the miraculous over in her hand, running her thumb over the pointed tip. “Why should that change the power?”

“A fox who refuses to come down into the dark or surrounds themselves with dirt,” Huuxi said, careful to keep his voice from sounding accusing, “becomes weak because I have a connection to the earth and the farther the distance, the weaker the miraculous becomes and, therefore, the weaker my holder becomes.”

Marinette’s mouth went dry.

“That is not, however, saying that staying away from the earth will make the fox miraculous useless—I am, after all, a being of magic—”

“But you will be weaker,” the designer murmured, guilt clawing at her chest because she couldn’t go back down there, she couldn’t—

The small, exasperated sigh dragged Marinette from her thoughts. “No,” Huuxi said, patting her leg, “you will be weaker when you transform. My existence does not depend upon my connection to the earth.” He paused and leaned back, brow furrowing. “Actually, I have never lived on a boat in the middle of the ocean, so I’m not quite sure about that.”

Picking at a loose string on her shirt, the designer turned away from the storm and focused on her hands as if they were the most interesting things in the room.

“Marinette,” Huuxi said and waited until she shyly glanced up at him. “It doesn’t matter to me if you go down into the earth to recharge the miraculous—all that matters is how you take care of yourself.”

There was still a tight clenching in her chest though, even as the teenager nodded. She wondered,
absently, how she would have felt going into the catacombs if there hadn’t been that history, if charmer had never existed.

oOo

There was something achingly freeing about being able to run the Paris streets at night, The thin fabric that made up the ‘tail’ streaming out behind her. Marinette had waited until her parents had gone to bed before slipping out again, this time transforming the second she was out the back door. Magic settled lightly across her, a gentle welcoming that sung in her veins and urged her to test the physical limitations rather than the magical ones that evening.

Keeping away from the busier streets of the city, the designer kept to the side alleys and out-of-the-way places, ducking behind corners when people were about to see her, carefully keeping out of the night-life’s eye. A group of American tourists passed by her hiding place at one point, laughing loudly and pointing out the hand painted signs of the shops around them.

Marinette had no set destination in mind, no desire to go to a single place, so she simply picked a direction and went. Her feet led her down the side of the Seine, past the great glass pyramid of the Louvre, and the Grand Palais with its towering walls and large domes. When she finally found herself stepping out onto the browned grass of Champ de Mars, night had fully settled and the lights made the park sitting east of the Eiffel Tower look like it belonged in some dying fairytale.

The dirt was still damp from the rains earlier that day, but Marinette sat down anyway, digging her fingers into the ground as she admired the golden light that spilled from the monument. It was bright enough to light up the park and dim enough to barely outshine the moon.

It was beautiful in a way that only steel and artificial light could be. Not beautiful like flowers or waterfalls, but in a curve of a smile or hard work that finally is over. Marinette laid back and looked at the sky, only the brightest of stars seen through the dim light pollution that kept the sky from fully going dark. Someone jogged past, a couple of dog walkers getting in what they could before going home, and the quiet roar of cars over all of it.

The sounds of life that never ended and she breathed in the smell of dirt, rain, and hibernating plants. Laying there for a long time, Marinette wasn’t quite sure if she had dozed off or if she had simply lost track of time, but there was the soft thud of heavy boots landing on the grass followed by a gentle whisper of lighter shoes, and she opened her eyes to glance at two familiar figures.

Ladybug and Chat Noir.

Sitting up, the designer watched them, took in their closed off expressions, the way their hands tightened around their weapons, and the quiet tension in their bodies. Marinette slowly got to her feet and pointedly ignored the way that their shoulders tightened.

Heavy bags were under their eyes, days of missing sleep, of being unable to fully rest. If anything, the two of them looked even worse than when she had last seen them during that last fight with Charmer. Which didn’t fully make sense—even with the second akuma running around unless they hadn’t slept at all since the museum had been robbed.

She wondered what could have exhausted them to the point where each blink seemed longer than the last and even just keeping their bodies upright seemed like a horrible chore. “You look like you should sit down,” the designer told Chat and it was true—Adrien looked about ready to fall over. Why would they even transform if they were that tired—

“Hey!” Marinette scrambled out of the way as clawed hands made a swipe for the miraculous around her neck. Pulling the flute out of its holster, she didn’t miss the way both heroes tensed as
she pointed the end of it at them. She hadn’t even been doing anything.

“Volpina,” Alya sounded bone weary, like she had been constantly running around for weeks. “Just, please, we’re too tired—”

The designer straightened and frowned at Ladybug. “You attacked me,” Marinette pointed out. She had been enjoying the night, after all. It wasn’t her fault they were all suddenly in this situation. Was it illegal to sit in the Champ de Mars now?

Okay, she was a little bitter—it had been such a nice night, too.

Logic seemed to be too much for their sleep addled brains because the two just blinked. And then Alya sighed, “look,” she said, “just hand over the akuma and we won’t have to fight.”

Akuma? Brow furrowed, Marinette blinked. What akuma—oh. She brushed her fingers against the miraculous. “I’m not an akuma,” the designer said. Swinging her flute around, she stopped Chat from making another wild lunge. “Ah ah,” the bamboo hovered under his chin.

A wide toothed grin spread across his face and Adrien looked remarkably younger than she had ever seen him, eyes glinting with mischief that dropped years off his face as his hands rose innocently. “Sorry,” he said, “but the fox miraculous is being looked after by a friend,” his eyes roved down to the fox-tail hanging from her neck. “So we know that’s not it.”

Ha! Huuxi laughed and Marinette figured that would be another question to ask the kwami. But not right now.

“I’m not an akuma,” she told them again, “and I’m not Volpina.” Lila had been able to summon illusions and trick the senses into believing they were real.

“We can’t take that chance,” Ladybug said, pulling the yoyo off her belt.

Oh, Marinette raised the flute to her lips. Oh boy.

She didn’t want to fight them, not really, but the twinges of pain almost forgotten from last Thursday still rang through her. Marinette realized, as the notes rang out, that she was probably overreacting, that she should have just turned around and ran, knowing they couldn’t follow at their energy levels.

But the magic sang and it felt so good.

The yoyo was sidestepped and grass twisted under Chat Noir’s feet, sending the blond tumbling over his own feet with a yelp. He hit the ground with a grunt and Marinette turned, pulling at the ground and watched as the rock rose like a cresting wave, blocking the small, round weapon that would have gotten her in the chest.

Rock caught the string, holding it fast as Ladybug grunted, trying to pull the yoyo back to her hand.

Some deep vindication welled up within her.

Some deep, alien vindication.

No, Marinette lowered the flute from her lips. No this wasn’t her—she needed... she needed to leave.

Right now.
Without looking back at the two heroes as they managed to get their bearings, the designer ran, shooting off across the grass like an arrow, mind still reeling from the foreign feelings that had pulled back like a turtle into a shell. She ducked past the trees and kept running, twisting around corners and creating a maze out of the pathways until she could dive behind a bench and wait.

It wasn’t an overwhelming anger, not like it had been with Charmer where she had raged and fought with violence. No, it was a gratification of overcoming them, of humiliation. Marinette swallowed and closed her eyes, ducking her head. She hadn’t ever want to humiliate someone before—not like that. Perhaps with Chloè when she got particularly cruel, but never Alya and Adrien.

A strange well of guilt came, a simple burning kind that was off to the side like a memory...

Or like it belonged to someone else.

The realization had her dropping the transformation and the world was suddenly darker, less clear, but she could still see Huuxi. His ears were drooping, eyes carefully avoiding hers. For a moment, they sat there together but Marinette could be patient, she could wait.

“I’m sorry,” the kwami said at last, “I should have never—” he paused and sighed, closing his eyes as if gathering his thoughts. “I had forgotten that I could influence you that way,” Huuxi met her gaze, “and I apologize for that.”

“You don’t like them,” Marinette said, that had been clear enough. She tried to keep her voice from sounding accusing, but the designer wasn’t quite sure if she had succeeded.

He winced slightly. “I don’t like their kwami’s,” Huuxi corrected softly.

“Why?”

Something dark passed over his face. Something dark and primal and angry before it softened. “I will tell you,” the kwami spoke carefully. “Once we are back in your room.”

Marinette stood up and let him settle in her pocket before she started the long trek back home. She would keep him to that and, from the way he had seemed resigned, the designer was sure that Huuxi knew that.

Chapter End Notes

There are reviews I need to respond to so i will be getting to those. Right now.

Also, I was thinking about making a tumblr blog for this fic, would anyone be interested?

Thank you for reading! Happy Fourth to the Americans!
The Trickster and the Snake

Chapter Summary

I am flesh and I am bone
Arise, ting ting, like glitter and gold.
I've got fire in my soul
Rise up, ting ting, like glitter...

Glitter and Gold

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Alexandria of 30 BC Egypt was easily the richest city in the world. It had no need of conquered lands, no desires of an expanded empire—all it wanted was to be the port connecting the long stretch of Europe to the wide expanse of Asia.

And Rome wanted it. Rome who’s power was crumbling due to heavy civil war. Rome who was power hungry and wished for the destruction of all uncivilized nations unless they held something useful.

Rome, who had failed on conquering the Pharaoh because they needed the trade between the continents in order to keep their luxurious thirst alive with the silk, the spices, and the stories that came from the great nations on the other side of the Red Sea. When The Great Lady of Perfection, Excellent in Counsel refused to bow to Octavian, he lied to Mark Antony and the man killed himself believing the love of his life, the great Pharaoh of Egypt, was dead.

She was not.

Cleopatra, the last of the Great Pharaohs, wielder of the Fox Miraculous, held her lover as he bled to death on the steps of her home.

oOo

“Cleopatra was a fox?” Marinette leaned back against her stuffed cat, dressed in Nino’s pyjamas, legs folded.

Across from her, Huuxi tilted his head to the side. “Of course she was,” he said proudly. “She was, by far, the most clever human being I have ever encountered.”

“Oh,” The designer murmured, trying to picture the figure depicted in paintings, in movies, and in books. And yet, the half lidded eyes, the knowing smirk, and the tilt of a hip flashed before her eyes of a woman she had never met and, yet, still knew.

oOo

A boat landed upon the island that held Cleopatra’s palace eleven days later. It was more in kin to the smaller vessels that travelled up and down the Nile every day belonging to small traders who
wished to bring their goods to a market. Not the kind of ship that would see the long expanse of the open waters belonging to the Mediterranean Sea.

Mark Antony’s blood had been washed off the stone steps, the Pharaoh watching the Roman Armada that were settled just beyond the delta of the Nile, still settled on the Mediterranean unending blue horizon. The young woman watched them for a moment, marvelling at their strong bows and high sails before she went off to greet the newcomers, dressed in the finest of her robes, hair done in careful elegance, and features as expressionless as the stone that helped to build the ancient structures.

Her entryway played host to a man and a woman, both clothed in the classic sweep of Roman garb with a little more gold in their hair, a little more jewellery. “Red Beetle,” Cleopatra greeted, her eyes bright as she swept forward, “and Black Cat—a pleasure to see you, though the circumstances could have been happier than the day you have chosen.”

“We come with news for you,” Red Beetle said, the earrings—without their spots—glimting darkly in the sharp, desert sun. She had the curved nose of her Grecian mother, the high forehead of her Roman father, and the dark eyes that easily could have belonged to both. “Though, it is not good.”

Cleopatra looked over the smaller woman before turning to the young maid who had been following her. “Leave us, Amisi,” she ordered softly in Egyptian, a tongue foreign to even her own ancestors, much less the citizens of Rome, “Go home to your family, pack and leave for Giza, do not return to this place.”

The young maid bowed her head, gave no sign that the Pharaoh had said anything out of the ordinary, and slipped away with quiet steps. Sunlight glinted off a hint of metal that shone around her neck—golden against her black skin. Cleopatra waited until Amisi was gone before motioning for the two other miraculous holders to follow her further into the open hallways of her home. “I wish you had come earlier,” she said as they walked to her private quarters, “perhaps many of the circumstances that came to pass could have been avoided.”

“It couldn’t be helped, Vulpecula,” Black Cat said, his eyes carefully avoiding hers to examine the writings that covered every inch of the walls. Stories of past Pharaohs, of legends, of gods. “We were lucky to be able to come now rather than when it is too late.”

“Indeed,” Cleopatra said and pushed aside the fabric that blocked her room from the prying eyes of the palace. The great opening that led out to a large, stone balcony looked over the endless waters. Her view was polluted by ships that weren’t her own, however, so she turned away to focus on Red Beetle and Black Cat. Her eyes glinted as they focused on the younger woman. “I shall pass on my thanks to Fortuna.”

Red Beetle flinched, but it was a tiny thing, almost unnoticeable.

The Pharaoh noticed it though. Even as she turned away, she noticed it.

“Vulpecula—”

Cleopatra’s gaze was harsher than the sands that surrounded her kingdom as it focused on Black Cat. Her eyes, darker than the deep tombs her ancestors were buried in, pieced him like a lance. “If you come here only to spread your lies,” she said, her voice loosing the pleasantness it held before, “then you will call me Pharaoh.”

Only the crashing of the waves outside broke the silence, a twittering of an ibis counting the seconds as Cleopatra turned in a great sweep of her robes to the reed basket that waited beside a
large vase of wine. “Do not give me insult,” she said, her back turned to the miraculous wielders, “and presume that I do not know why you are here. We have been allies a long time—I would prefer that you did not lie to me about your betrayal.”

“Vul—Pharaoh—” Red Beetle quickly corrected herself, “—we did not lie—”

“You think I do not know how you came?” Cleopatra turned, her eyes burning with the rays of the sun, her hooked nose a reminiscent of the ancient god of pharaohs. “You think I do not know that you travelled here amongst the bosom of my enemies? That you seek that which Octavian craves the most?”

Black Cat bared his teeth like the animal he was named after. “We have come to offer you a way to surrender,” he snapped. “A chance to live, to build your life somewhere else in exile!”

Cleopatra laughed and the sound was cold and harsh. “You think he will let me live?” She said softly. “You think he would simply let me, a woman who has kept him at bay for so long, live?”

“He will,” Black Cat said. “But you must surrender to him—if he takes Alexandria by force, the Egyptians will die and your people will suffer.”

The Pharaoh narrowed her eyes. “My people?” She whispered and the two miraculous wielders took a step back. “The Egyptians are my people,” Cleopatra snapped. “The Romans who have come to live here are my people, those who travel the length of the Sahara to settle here for a couple of days and then move on are my people!” She picked up the vase full of wine and threw it and its contents at Black Cat and he scurried to avoid the pottery. “How dare you!”

Wine spilled across the floor, coating the stone much like Antony’s blood had.

“He has already killed my son,” Cleopatra hissed, “he has already demanded that I will be paraded before his city like a victory trophy; there is nothing stopping him from enslaving my people—you have sided with a tyrant.”

Red Beetle shook her head. “Octavian is a rough man,” she urged, struggling not to cower when thunderous dark eyes turned to her. “But he will take care of Egypt—”

“Stop lying to me,” the words came out as a hiss and, outside, a flock of birds took flight, “you know that Egypt is only an excuse to cover what he really wants.”

Black Cat’s eyes roved down to her chest where her neck was suspiciously bare. “Pharaoh,” he said softly, a slight tremor to his voice. “Where is Huuxi?”

Her smile was wolfish.

“Vulpecula, where is your kwami?”

“Gone,” Cleopatra sneered. “Gone someplace where you will never find him because I am loyal to my friends, Betrayer—”

The man lunged forward and shoved the Pharaoh against the table as she laughed. The woven basket tipped and fell off the surface, landing on the floor with a thump as a few figs rolled to their freedom.

“Death is already at my doorstep, Coward,” she spat, “but there is no victory here for you.”

“We will find him,” Black Cat promised, grabbing the front of her robes and pulling her to the bed. “We will find the fox miraculous and you will pay if you have harmed him.”
Cleopatra sat down upon the fabric and curled her legs up underneath her, a grim smile on her face. “Harmed him?” The Pharaoh whispered, “I have given him freedom from the man who has bewitched you with his lies—just like your kwami have lied to you in order to save their own skins from such a man.”

Because they had, there was no other way. Tikki and Plagg would have convinced their holders that siding with Octavian was the right choice. He would have told them clever little lies about his conquest, about how he sought to civilize the barbarian lands.

Octavian wanted Egypt because of its trade, its place on the map, and the object of power the ruler held. Nothing more, nothing less.

Plagg and Tikki wanted to save their own skins and leave the others to rot—the peacock had fled far to India, seeking shelter among spice traders, the turtle was long gone, going farther and settling in china.

Who knew where the butterfly had gone. That miraculous could shift in and out of civilizations with ease, never having to put themselves at stake or reveal their location.

Red Beetle and Black Cat ignored Cleopatra, the tension in their shoulders giving away the truth in her statement as they ripped through the silk, the wool, and cotton that made up her various wardrobes. Throwing gold and silver jewellery embedded with precious stones, jade from far away kingdoms, and stone carvings that had been gifts from traders to the floor as if they were nothing more than piles of dung, the two ransacked everything personal in the royal quarters.

She watched them with slight amusement, glancing out her balcony to eye the ships coming ever closer before a small rustling grabbed her attention.

The basket of figs that had been knocked over moved slightly. The snake had a broad, rounded snout, large eyes with dark tear drop marks beneath them, and mottled coloration that switched between dark brown and a bone-white and it moved silently across the stone, tongue flickering as it moved away from the two digging through the Pharaoh’s belongings.

“Naja,” Cleopatra whispered and the snake lifted its head to look at her. An aspis, the symbol of Egypt royalty. “Oh, you are beautiful.”

The serpent passed by her feet and the Pharaoh leaned down, grabbing the place where the head met the neck. The long body lashed like a whip, but she lifted it up to the bed.

“What—what are you doing? No!”

She looked up and met the panicked gaze of Black Cat as she brought the snake to her wrist. It bit down, fangs sinking deep within her flesh and she gasped, throwing her head back and letting the snake go. It slithered over her torso, long body twisting over her lap before the aspis made its way back to the floor. Cleopatra stared at the blood oozing from the two, deep wounds and made a curious sound in the back of her throat. The pain struck her, crashing through her arteries with every beat of her heart.

Laughing, the Pharaoh laid down upon her bed and stared up at the canopy. “You have failed,” she told the two miraculous wielders. Red Beetle grabbed her arm, but there was nothing she could do—no cure existed for the bite of such a cobra.

“You are still alive,” Black Cat snarled, but it was half hearted. They all knew she wouldn’t be alive if they managed to drag her body out onto their boat to take her to Octavian.
He would have a *corpse* as a trophy, not the woman he wanted to humiliate.

Cleopatra reached up and grabbed the collar of his robe, pulling his face down so that his light, sea blue could meet the brown of a great eagle. “I have something for your emperor,” Pharaoh whispered and the magic of the earth pulsed beneath them, a drum beat only she could hear that stretched for miles in every direction. It filled her up until the dark eyes rolled back leaving just the whites exposed, words spilling from her lips that held steep power. “Rome will fall to the barbarians Octavian seeks to conquer—they will ransack his great city until nothing is left of it, leaving only burned ruins in their wake.”

Cleopatra shuddered, her arm going numb but still she spoke. “The black cat will be hated—*Plagg* will be hated—hunted down by those who his wielders wish to protect because the earth will remember your betrayal, and the earth never forgets.” Shoving the man away, Pharaoh turned to Red Beetle. “And you—” the woman arched her back, the very power of the earth coursing through her to empower her words. “No matter what name Tikki goes by, her wielders will meet death with the same agony that you have forced upon me. They will live their lives hoping for love and being blind to it,” the rock pulsed again and Cleopatra gasped. “You will both be cursed by betrayal and may every kwami—every being of *magic*—know what crimes you have committed this day. *Vargad shelv nogech mil patob*—”

“No!” Red Beetle had tears streaming down her face as she covered the Fox Wielder’s mouth with her hands, trying to stop the *Words of Power* as the ground shook beneath their feet. “Cleopatra!”

But they had been spoken and the earth had heard.

Huuxi, hidden beneath the fabric of Amisi’s robe, listened the magic and the story it whispered. He curled up against the warmth of the young servant’s body and sent a thrum back to the woman who had dared to defy an Empire.

On August 11th, 30 BC, Cleopatra died.

**oOo**

Marinette gripped the fabric of her sheets, eyes on the far wall. “They betrayed her,” she said softly. “But... why?”

The kwami looked away. “Perhaps Octavian threatened to rip them away from their own miraculous stones,” he mused. “Give them to his generals so that Rome could expand even farther—the world back then was full of betrayal, but the miraculous bearers have always believed that they could trust each other.”

“What happened after that?” The designer glanced at Huuxi. “What happened to you?”

“Amisi took me far away,” he admitted, “miles to the south and past the grasp of Rome.” Huuxi snorted. “In any case, by the time I had returned to Europe the image of the fox had been tarnished beyond repair—turned into a liar and a selfish trickster.”

But the black cats, Marinette thought of. The thousands of felines burned, the holders of the Ladybug miraculous that had died alone, blind to love they could never have because of two past wielder’s mistakes. The designer shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself. It could have been her, she realized with horror. *She* had been chosen to wield the Ladybug Miraculous.
Perhaps that was why Adrien had never seen her—a curse that stretched back all the way to Rome.

But that didn’t matter because it had been wrong. The curses had long since been paid the blood they were due.

Perhaps it was time for a change.

Perhaps it was time for something better.

“How can the curses be broken?” Marinette turned to the kwami and he paused.

“Rome has already fallen,” Huuxi’s voice was low and slow, as if trying to figure out why she would ask. “That curse has faded out of time long ago. The other two—they can be broken by Black Cat and Ladybug proving it wrong; that they are not betrayers.”

And right now, Adrien and Alya thought she was an akuma.

Marinette winced.

The blisters on the designer’s feet were nothing more than healed over pink circles on her skin by the time Nino even let her get close to his house, and Marinette lifted one of his boxes up into her arms, grinning at the DJ as he cursed, struggling to untangle himself from a mess of cords.

“Having difficulty?”

“I asked you to help,” he pointed a plug at her, waving it under her nose and trying not to trip over his own feet, “not for your sass!”

Laughing, she fled to head up the stairs, adding the load to the other boxes that had been stacked like towers in the old office. It had been set up with a small desk in the corner, Nino’s laptop on top of it, currently off. A couple of microphones were here and there—some of them on stands, some of them not—and an old guitar sat in the far corner, carefully out of the way of everyone moving in and out of the room.

It would be a slow process setting everything up and Marinette was partially glad Nino hadn’t asked for her help in that—mainly because she didn’t know one cord from another and him having to tell her what to do would slow everything down anyway. Her fingers brushed against the side of her neck where Huuxi was generally hiding, but the kwami had settled in her bag downstairs listening to the music on her phone with those bright pink ear buds.

There was no safe place to hide on her anyway—each hip had been used to carry boxes, her neck was bare of a scarf due to the possibility of it tangling with something easily breakable, and her hair had been tied up in a low ponytail. He seemed content, though, so Marinette left him to his own devices for the time being.

Nino came through the door, wound up circles of cords up and down his arms like some weird type of bracelets and Marinette giggled as he cursed, tripping over one that had gotten free and tangled around his legs. She caught his shirt before he face planted into a tower of boxes and carefully righted him.

“Thanks,” the DJ said and promptly loaded her hands with five of the twelve he had been carrying.

“You’re welcome,” she droned good naturally, “that’s exactly what I’m here for—to be your own
personal pack mule."

Nino shot her a broad grin. His glasses were lopsided on his nose, hat sticking up off his head, and something that looked like marker on his cheek. Marinette pushed his face away with a laugh, pointing him towards the pile of cords he had already relocated. The DJ snickered and dumped his cargo on the already misshapen pile.

She understood why they had been so tangled, now.

Lining hers up, the designer carefully balanced each as Nino raced over to the desk and opened his laptop. Straightening his glasses, the teenager read over some things before rushing over to the boxes and promptly digging through them. Marinette watched him for a bit before sighing with a slight smile on her face and headed over to the small computer.

There was some type of blueprint like thing in a small window and she understood nothing written around the border. But her eyes were drawn to something light orange on Nino’s background and Marinette moved the picture a little to the left—

It was a picture of herself. Not a very good one for sure—it was a bit blurry—but she could make out the triangular pointed ears, the scarf that made up the tail, and the light bodysuit with its black gloves. “Oh,” she said softly. It must have been taken sometime during the fight with Charmer with the street and the cars around her. The picture itself wasn’t bad either—Marinette’s fists were clenched, her teeth bared in a partial snarl.

If anything, she looked like a fox.

The photographer probably didn’t mean to catch her at an angle that made her look just a tiny bit taller, or force the sun to shine behind her, casting her eyes into a shadow that made the blue of her irises look bright and dangerous.

“What is it?”

Marinette yelped and jolted away, staring at Nino as he tried to smother a grin.

“Sorry,” the DJ snickered, not looking sorry at all before his eyes landed on the picture. “Oh! Yeah, you like my new background?”

“It’s different,” she answered carefully because normally her friend would have images of albums or bands that were his flavour of the month. A person who wasn’t part of a band was completely different. “Where did you find the picture?”

Nino shrugged. “Somewhere on Tumblr,” he answered non-committing and the designer rubbed at a sudden itch on her arm. “A new hero though! How cool is that?”

“Pretty cool,” Marinette responded automatically, her thoughts drifting more to the fact that someone on the internet had gotten a picture of her and that it had spread enough that other people had found it fairly quickly. She hadn’t even noticed and, after the fight, had determinedly spent her time away from news websites and the LadyBlog. “I haven’t... I haven’t heard anything about her—” the designer cut herself off, looking for the right words.

The DJ rested his hand on her shoulder, a soft, unreadable expression on his face. “No, I understand,” he said and turned back to the computer. “Not a lot of things are known about her anyway—she came in to kick the akuma’s butt and then just left.”

“Oh,” Marinette murmured. Hopefully her breakdown hadn’t been caught on video. That would be nice. She cleared her throat. “Wasn’t there already a fox akuma, though? The one that fooled
people into believing she was another hero?"

“Eh,” Nino shrugged and wrapped one arm around her shoulders, pulling the small teen close to his side. “I don’t think an akuma would help take down another akuma, right? Besides, I thought Papillon could only akumatize one person at a time.”

Right, right. Nino didn’t know. Marinette opened her mouth and closed it again. Alix’s words came back to her, about how people might panic if they knew what power Papillon had managed to get his hands on.

“I’m glad Charmer’s gone though,” the DJ said softly and Marinette stilled beside him, her breath catching in her throat. Either Nino didn’t notice, or he did and had too much respect for her to call her out on it. “Him just being around was enough to cause that whole shivering, stare-at-the-wall early morning kind of feeling.”

Marinette choked on a laugh. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You know, it was like a nameless dread,” Nino said, his hands waving about before he paused and frowned. “Well, actually, there probably is a long German name for it, like Geschpooklichkeit or something, but I don’t speak German,” he shrugged and turned back to his laptop, “Anyway, it’s a dread that nobody knows the name for, like those little square plastic gizmos that close your bread bags.”

Marinette raised an eyebrow and stared at him.

“Yeah, I don’t know the name for those either.”

She sighed and leaned into her friend, staring at the picture of the fox miraculous—of herself—and smiled slightly.

You know, maybe being a hero wasn’t too bad, especially if it meant looking after goofs like her best friend.

oOo

The news played while Marinette worked on sewing a hole closed in one of her shirts. Having caught on something, a few of the stitches had torn without her noticing, but it was an easy enough fix. She pricked her thumb on accident and hissed, sucking on the wound and checking over her work at the same time.

“—The latest akuma victim, Casimir Cavey, has been hospitalized after being attacked by a young woman today.”

Marinette paused and glanced up at the screen where the familiar face of her school mate was being broadcasted to all of Paris. Nadja Chamack sat beside it, hands folded over a stack of paper on her desk.

“The woman claims that she was harassed by Cavey while he was an akuma and many others have stepped forward to the police about his actions while under the control of Papillon.”

Turning away from the television, Marinette moved robotically to her sewing supplies, digging through the thread and fabric for just something to do with her hands. When she turned around again, unable to find something to do, Huuxi was sitting in front of the television, a frown marring his features.

“—begs the question what, exactly, should we hold the akuma victims accountable for?”
Reaching forward, Marinette shut it off and sat down heavily in her desk chair. He wouldn’t get punished for it, how could the police, after all this time, try to do something about this now? Those possessed by an akuma were just victims of Papillon. It was nothing more than a victim hurting a victim.

If someone was being controlled beyond their will, how could you punish what they do?

She was trying to convince herself. She was trying really hard.

“It’s okay to want to see him punished for his crimes,” Huuxi spoke up, “he hurt you.”

“That doesn’t make it right,” Marinette whispered and realized that her throat was burning and her eyes were getting itchy. She wiped at them with the back of her sleeve and took a deep breath.

The kwami sighed and turned to fully face her. “Just because he was possessed does not mean that his actions were purely without will,” he told her sharply. “The akuma breeds and twists what you want and he wanted you.”

Marinette flinched violently and pushed herself away from the desk. “I don’t want to talk about this,” she told him sharply. “I don’t.”

“Then we won’t,” Huuxi promised, his eyes moving over her face as she looked to the side and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

oOo

After hours of tossing and turning on her bed, Marinette finally woke Huuxi to go for a midnight run. The suit gave her better endurance, better speed, and she jogged through the empty roads of Paris without bothering to stop. La Seine was a mirror of the lit buildings, creating a human made night sky below the bridges. Few people were out—the cold was settling in and there wasn’t much for people to do besides clubs and late night entertainment.

None of which she was close to.

Balancing on the guard rail keeping people from falling into the water below, she walked along the thin metal, arms outspread and humming quietly under her breath. Her feet led her away from the water, down the various streets, through a couple of parks, and over rooftops. Still, though, the designer carefully kept out of the city lights and stuck further to the darker side streets.

Most of it was to stay out of the eyes of everyone else who would probably bring attention to her and that might end up... someplace unfavourable. Like the LadyBlog. Marinette had no desire to deal with the problem that was Chat Noir and Ladybug that night.

It only made sense, then, that her feet would take her to a place that was strictly private by nature but also one place she just didn’t want to go.

The wood of the train tracks creaked under her feet, sounding like an old house greeting new visitors for the first time and letting the stairs break so that it could feel their hands on crumbling wallpaper. Marinette breathed in slowly and held the air in her lungs for a moment. La Petite Ceinture felt like a surreal area, a place between places where time wasn’t moving at the same pace the rest of the world was.

Like being at an airport between midnight and seven in the morning or a Laundromat in the middle of the night.
She kicked at a rock and pawed at her hips as her hands searched for pockets only to catch on the scarf that made her tail. Marinette kept walking though, ignoring the way the sound of her boots on the tracks made more sound than what was rising behind the concrete walls. Perhaps, during the day, it would have been more like a fairyland.

At night, however, there were long, stretching shadows and the bare, stripped trees reached for her hair and face. When she reached the first of multiple dark, tunnels, Marinette stopped before her toes breached the True Black.

And then she turned around and went back home.

oOo

There were ghosts following her, Marinette knew. The ghost of who she was, of who she wanted to be, and one that moaned in her ear when the bakery got too quiet and told her secrets about herself she never wanted to learn.

Sometimes, though, the sound of her mother’s footsteps, Huuxi’s humming, or the ding announcing one of Nino’s texts was enough to chase them away.

oOo

When her mother announced that she had visitors, Marinette expected Nino when he climbed up through the trap door. His jacket was damp from the light drizzle that had covered Paris and it smelled like warmth and winter as he swept the designer up into a gleeful hug. “Good morning!”

Laughing, she smacked at his arm until he put her down, “Morning,” she returned with a small smile and ruffled his damp hair as water fell around them. “You’re happy.”

Nino turned to look at her, like an oscillating electric fan set on medium that got caught on something and stayed there awkwardly for a second or two before finally moving again. “It’s raining,” the DJ said, shaking his head before running his fingers through his hair. The strands spiked up loosely making him look like a hedgehog and his crooked grin made him look like he was up to something.

Marinette giggled and shook her head at his antics. “Honestly,” she said, “if you like the rain that much you should go live in a swimming pool.”

Eyes brightening, Nino turned to the designer. “Maybe I will,” he returned and bounded up to her, grabbing her hand and pulling the designer towards her closet. “Get your coat!”

“Why?” His glee was contagious and Marinette found herself doing it anyway, pulling on a jacket as he shrugged his back on. Huuxi ducked from under her shelves and slid into a pocket as the designer used her body to block her friend’s view. Not answering, Nino simply grabbed her hand and led her downstairs, pulling her past the kitchen, through the bakery, and out the front door. “Nino!” She laughed and stumbled through puddles as they ran down the street, “Where are we going?!"

“To the park!”

Managing to get her footing, Marinette quickened her stride to keep up with his longer legs until they were almost running down the street. The damp asphalt reflected the street lights that hadn’t quite turned off yet, the golden glow making the world seem like it had come through an oil painting as colours bled together, no longer separated by the confines of logic or reason. There were people hiding under umbrellas walking briskly close to the buildings and away from the streets where the cars would spray an inexperienced traveller.
Shops whose doors were normally open had been carefully closed to keep the dry in and Marinette pitied them for a moment. The grey of the sky was broken apart by the soft yellow of lights, blinking red of shops that hadn’t turned off their evening signs even though it was late morning, and car headlights that turned the monotone world into a dream world of gold and silver.

It was no surprise that the park was empty—walk ways clear of the normal dog walkers, joggers, tourists, and people who came to enjoy the scenery. The benches were dripping, trees sagging under the weight of the drizzle, and the stone pathway had turned dark from water. Nino jumped into a puddle and laughed as it crashed upon his calves and splattered lady bug spots on his thighs.

Then he turned to her, his eyes bright behind slightly foggy glasses, smile crooked and wide. His hat was dark from the water, his jacket was shining under the lights, and the hand that reached out to the designer was filled with so much colour that the grey of the cement faded from view. He was so full of life that the world filled the space around him, trying to match the DJ’s energy and failed.

“Come on!” Nino called to her and the designer hesitated before reaching out to take his hand. His skin was warm, face a beacon in the dark.

And Marinette laughed freely as he pulled her through puddles and mud, ignoring the world around her to simply be alive.

 oOo

It was the rain that had decided that the teenagers needed to go home and simply stopped after a couple of hours. Nino left her in the bakery, both of them sopping wet and laughing with mud up to their knees and water dripping from their hair. Figuring that a few more minutes outside wouldn’t do too much harm, the DJ had turned down the offer to stay and, instead, headed home.

Marinette, on the other hand, had immediately stripped off most her wet things (leaving just her underwear), turned on the bath, grabbed a book, and wrapped the poor soaked Huuxi in a towel.

His fur was ruffled and stuck up in clumps, each movement wracked by a shiver as he glared at her from over the edge of the fabric he was currently burrito’d in. “Next time,” the kwami grumbled, “you can just leave me behind.”

Giggling, Marinette gently ran a washcloth over his ears, drying the thin membrane as carefully as she could. “I didn’t know we were going to be out there that long,” she admitted and sighed softly, humming absently under her breath as she placed a cup of hot water beside Huuxi to help warm him up.

He watched her move about the bathroom, her footsteps lighter then they had been for days. “You’re singing,” Huuxi said and Marinette stilled, her hand in the bathwater as she tested the temperature, “I’m glad.”

The designer stared at the water for a second—her bath bomb, a purple, pink thing, had already covered the surface with varying, swirling colours. It was such a little thing, the singing—something she hadn’t done since before she had met the kwami. Possibly right after she had given up the earrings to Alya.

With a faint plop, her wet clothes hit the floor and Marinette slid into the water, hissing as the warmth chased the shivers from her body, heating every cell in her skin and seeping down to conquer her bones. Her mind was still on what Huuxi had said though and every moment over the past weeks were carefully combed through.
“I guess I’ve changed a lot,” she said, leaning her head against the wall and looking at Huuxi.

He hummed in acknowledgement and watched her with his sharp, golden eyes. “Change is not bad,” the kwami said after a while, tearing her from her thoughts, “change is just change. It startles us, yes, but it is not evil.” Squirming out of the towel, Huuxi floated over so he could sit on the edge of the tub, his fur sticking out in every direction. “It is natural to look back and say it was better before—but that does not make it true. Different is not worse, it is just different.”

“What if you regret the moment where everything changed?” Marinette stared up at the ceiling. “What then?”

“I think,” Huuxi said slowly, picking his words carefully as if they were fragile berries on a branch, “that you can dislike the situation that change came from, but that doesn’t mean that how you react afterwards is good or bad because you have simply adapted to the situation.” He reached over and laid one, small paw against her shoulder. “You are not merely a product of an event but a person who has lived through someone else’s faults and created a soul strong enough to survive the after effects.”

Marinette sighed and reached up, scratching his ears. “Sometimes I think you write those motivational posters.”

“Maybe I do,” Huuxi huffed and rubbed his cheek against her palm, “But you’ll never be able to prove it.”

Marinette dreamed of sand.

She dreamed of a figure with eyes the colour of honey and skin the shade of the space between stars. He walked alongside a child, their footsteps wiped away by the desert wind.

“Look, Nakbet,” the girl said, pointing up at the night sky, “above the dune sea.”

Stars guided the unmarked path, shining in a sky untouched by light pollution and so bright that it almost seemed like an imitation of daylight.

“The King,” Nakbet said softly, “It will be flood season soon.” Then he turned to the left and headed away from the constellation, following the valleys to ruined pillars of rocks jutting out of the sand. They were swept away by time and war, the desert reclaiming the memories back into her arms.

The sound of voices made the travellers pause and Nakbet glanced up at the half buried temple not too far away.

“Where are the fires?” The girl whispered and Marinette felt her fear as if it was her own.

A horse whinnied in the night and Nakbet stood straighter as if years were falling to the ground around him.

“Who goes there?” asked the girl. The words rolled through the darkness.


Marinette saw seven of them. Their curved blades remained sheathed, but the look in their eyes spoke of martial training and guile.
“Where is the caretaker?” Nakbet demanded and the words rolled off his tongue like the dunes surrounding them.

“He and his wife are asleep. The cool evening prompted them to retire early,” replied one of the riders.

“Old fox, my name is Abetikun,” said another rider. “We have been sent by the Emperor.”

Nakbet stepped forward, his teeth white as they flashed in what could have been a smile or a snarl. “There is no Emperor,” he said. “There is no King.”

The girl stepped forward defiantly. The dark messengers backed away from the lantern. Long shadows obscured defensive stances.

“Deliver your message and leave,” said the child.

Abetikun dismounted and stepped forward. He reached a calloused hand into the folds of his shirt and produced a dark amulet bound to a thick, black chain. The geometry of the metal sparked recollections of magic and destruction in Nakbet’s mind and his hand closed around a weapon hidden under the folds of his long cloak.

“Emperor Rovek sends offerings. We are to be your servants. He welcomes you to his new capital at Nerimazeth.”

Mercenary words fell on Nakbet like a hammer on glass.

The girl promptly knelt and snatched up a weighty rock. “Die!” She cried.

“Take him!” said Abetikun.

With a heave, the girl hurled the rock through the air, its perfect arc threatening to shatter bone upon impact.

“Raja, no!” roared Nakbet.

The riders abandoned their half-hearted deception and the magic that hid the smell of blood and pain shattered when truth began to eclipse illusion. The caretakers of the temple were dead, their fires snuffed out by men who’s blades demanded death.

Nakbet reached for the girl as her body tore into shadows of memory that dissipated across the starlit ground. “Goodbye, sister,” he whispered.

Rovek’s emissaries fanned out, their horses bucking and snorting. The fox was flanked on three sides. Abetikun did not hesitate, drawing his blade and piercing Nakbet’s side with through the thick cloak. Marinette gasped as pain rippled through the traveller’s body.

The rider attempted to withdraw his weapon, but it wouldn’t budge. A clawed hand gripped the blade, keeping it agonizingly buried within Ascended flesh.

“You should have left me to my ghosts,” said Nakbet as his free hand pulled a great war axe from the holster on his belt.

oOo

Marinette jerked awake as Abetikun’s head fell to the ground. Her breathing caught in her throat, the dream fading away as quickly as thoughts of Christmas in April. When she fell asleep again,
the only thing she remembered were stars and the feeling of sand beneath her feet.

Chapter End Notes

This was supposed to be longer and come out sooner, sorry! I'm sorry, uh, end of part one? Chapter seven will mark the beginning of Part two and the plot of Papillon and what he's been doing picks up from there.

I made a tumblr that's specifically for this series and will be putting up sneak peeks, deleted scenes, some research, and other things on it. You can find it here. I have the notifactions active on my phone so I'll probably be able to answer questions far easier there than on here.

Once again, thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed!
Bullet Proof

Chapter Summary

I won’t let you turn around
And tell me now I’m much too proud
To walk away from something when it’s dead

Do, do, do your dirty words
Come out to play when you are hurt
There’s certain things that should be left unsaid

Tick, tick, tick, tick on the watch
and life's too short for me to stop
oh, baby, your time is running out

I won’t let you turn around
and tell me now I’m much too proud
all you do is fill me up with doubt

Bullet Proof

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A new day, a new week.

Marinette stared at herself in the mirror and sighed. The cut on her cheek had fully healed, the
bruises long faded, and it no longer hurt to put too much weight on the balls of her feet. With a
toothbrush sticking out of her mouth, the designer leaned over the sink and glared at the skin on
her face, looking for any signs of scars.

There were the faint, pale lines of newly healed skin, puckered and almost invisible against her
skin unless someone was really looking, and she huffed, spitting out the toothpaste. Heading back
upstairs, she yawned and settled with picking out the Outfit of the Day before heading off.

Huuxi was already curled up on top of a pink, black, and white scarf, his eyes daring her to pick a
different one. The designer ran a finger over one of his ears and headed to her closest, picking out
a grey turtleneck, pastel pink pea coat, and black pants. Sliding her feet into the almost knee high
black boots, Marinette made sure her socks weren’t sticking anywhere uncomfortably before
wrapping the scarf around her neck and grinning at the kwami.

“How do I look?”

He tilted his head to the side and hummed. “Cosy,” Huuxi decided at last before burrowing
himself into the fabric of the scarf.

She picked up his eggs from the kitchen, kissed her parents goodbye even as her mother pushed a
box of treats into her arms, and ran out of the bakery only to stop at the sight of Nino leaning against the wall. “Morning!”

“Morning,” He grinned and started walking beside her.

“You don’t have to walk me to school,” Marinette said, one eyebrow rising as he poked at the box in her arms.

Nino snorted, “I’m not here for you,” he said imperiously. “I’m here for whatever your parents made.”

Laughing, the designer flipped open the lid to take a look. It was like a sample box, full of at least two of every pastry her parents displayed and she slapped her friend’s hand away. “If that’s the only reason,” Marinette smirked, “then I guess you don’t get any!”

“That’s cruel and unusual punishment,” Nino whined and his hand snapped out before she could slap it away again, snatching a mendiant and taking a bite before she could grab it back. His eyes brightened even as he groaned around the chocolate. “Your parents are gifts,” he murmured around a mouthful of the chocolate.

Rolling her eyes, but smiling, Marinette closed the box and hefted it under her arm. “I’ll give you the whole box for a dozen of your mom’s utaps.”

“I would rather die,” Nino said as they mounted the steps and headed into the school. The conversations that filled the court died off as they walked past and Marinette ducked her head down, shoulders coming up to guard her ears. She felt eyes watching her, following her as she walked as quickly as she could without looking like she was fleeing to the stairs.

Only when the door to the classroom closed did the designer relax, sighing and letting her shoulders droop. The only person who was there that early was Nathaniel who looked like he was too engrossed in whatever he was drawing to even look up and see who entered.

Marinette took the seat at the front next to Nino and set the box on the desk. She felt Huuxi’s ear brush against her neck and was careful in taking the jacket off, making sure he wasn’t jostled from his hiding place under the scarf. She slapped the DJ’s hand away from the box and grabbed it after hanging the jacket over the back of her chair. “You already had one,” the designer pointed out and he slouched, pouting at her from under the brim of his hat.

Giggling, she turned away from him and headed up the stairs. “Nathaniel?” Marinette called softly so as to not startle him too bad. The redhead look up from what he was drawing and stared at her for a couple of seconds.

“Marinette!” His blue eyes brightened and he sat up straight, “H-hi!” The light pink that spread across his cheeks was just a slight reminder of his crush on her and the designer felt an odd sort of weight in her chest as her skin felt too stretched across her face.

“I know you like the cupcakes the most,” Marinette said, picking up one decorated with lavender coloured frosting and setting it down on the desk beside his markers.

He stared at it for a second and then glanced back up at her. “Thank you,” the artist murmured and she nodded, giving him a small smile before turning around to head back to her seat. “Oh, and M-Marinette?”

“Hmmm?” She turned slightly to look back at him.

“Welcome back.”
Her hands tightened their hold on the box, but Marinette offered him a small smile anyway. “Thank you,” she murmured before heading back to her seat and setting the treats back down on the desk.

Nino was watching her in that odd, contemplative way he had; leaning his elbow on the desk, legs sprawled out, and gaze seeming that much more focused under his glasses. “You okay?” His voice was carefully soft as she took a deep, shaky breath.

“Yes,” Marinette dug her nails into her palms and hid her hands under the desk.

Her friend’s raised eyebrow said everything about how much he actually believed her. “If you need to leave, no one will blame you.”

She didn’t want to leave though; she just wanted to know why that look Nathaniel had given her had tightened her throat and made her want to run all the way home and bury herself under her blankets. “I just feel... weird,” Marinette mumbled back.

“ Weird?”

She shrugged and fished her sketchbook out of her bag, opened it to a fresh page, and stared at the blank space like it would give her inspiration. The door to the classroom opened and the designer stubbornly put her pencil to the paper and began to draw a pair of shoes she had a woman wear into the bakery the other day.

That was probably why the sound of glass being placed down on the desk startled the designer so badly. Marinette’s head snapped up and stared, wide eyed, at the bouquet of orange, pink, and white flowers sitting in a vase next to her sketchbook. “Wha—Rose?”

The petite blonde was standing in front of her desk wearing a pair of puffy earmuffs, a pastel pink petticoat, and a pair of white tights that stopped at her knee high pink boots. She was smiling brightly, her wide eyes were shining like they always did and there was just something so bright about the girl that had Marinette smiling back at her.

“It’s so good to see you!” Rose said, her hands clasped in front of her as she rocked back on her heels. “Juleka helped me pick out the vase.”

Sure enough, the dark haired girl was somehow managing to hide and yet not behind her brightly coloured classmate. Marinette offered her a smile and turned to the thin paint on the glass. It was a careful mix of brown and blue, clearly chosen to offset the colours of the flowers and make them stand out more. “Thank you,” the designer told them both, “they’re very beautiful.”

Juleka mumbled something that sounded like a ‘you’re welcome’, and tilted her head slightly so the purple part of her hair covered the slight pink on her cheeks. Rose grabbed the other girl, chatting quickly to her about something that Marinette let go in one ear and out the other. Instead, she ran her fingers down one of the delicate petals, promising to herself to look up the flowers and their meaning after class.

Moving the vase so it was down by her chair instead of becoming a distraction on her desk, Marinette smiled almost stubbornly to herself and sighed softly. The rest of the class filed in soon after. Some of them wide awake, others grumbling half hearted greetings to the rest. Sketching out the vase and the flowers in her sketchbook, the designer missed a couple of them being quickly shooed away by Nino like a bouncer at a club.

She missed Max walking past, fixing his glasses on his nose as he examined her, Mylene’s quiet worry, Ivan’s gruff stature, and Alix.
Alix, who saw Marinette, paused in the doorway, and scrambled to her seat as quickly as she could. Alya and Adrien were followed by Sabrina and Chloé, and last to arrive was a panting, breathless Kim who managed to get through the doorway just as the second bell rang.

The feeling of eyes on the designer’s shoulders and skin weighed down her bones and she fought with her heart as it sped up in her chest.

She was at school, in the classroom. She’s know all of these people for years barring Adrien and Alya. Marinette gripped her pencil just a little bit tighter and the plastic creaked under her grip.

Something white landed on the desk between her and Nino and the designer jerked, staring wide eyed at the piece of paper folded delicately into a cat. The DJ pulled it apart and read the contents, turning around to look behind him before nudging Marinette with his shoulder.

“Come on,” he said.

“What?” her nails were digging almost painfully into the desk. “Where are you going?”

“We,” Nino corrected and hooked a hand under her armpit, dragging the designer up to her feet. “Grab your stuff.”

She did what he asked, putting her notebooks back in her bag, hoisting it and her jacket over one shoulder, and then cradling the vase of flowers in her arms. Then she followed him up the rows, passing Nathaniel who currently had his own art supplies bunched up in his arms. He didn’t say anything as he passed, as he took her seat in the front, and Marinette almost fell against Ivan’s desk when she realized that he had given up his table for her.

Draping the jacket along the back of her new seat, the designer placed the flowers in the middle of the desk and sat down, folding her hands on the wood.

There was still a prickling sensation on her skin, but it wasn’t so bad now.

‘Thank you’ she mouthed to the redhead when he turned around.

‘You’re welcome’, he returned and faced the front.

Marinette dug the blunt ends of her nails into the soft heel of her palm and tried to listen, tried to focus, but every word seemed to be too loud and yet coming filtered through a goldfish bowl of water placed over her head. She concentrated on taking deep even breaths to keep her ribs from constricting around her lungs.

It wasn’t all that helpful.

oOo

When the class finally ended, Marinette shot off that she had to use the bathroom and then ran all the way there, pressing her back to the wall next to the sinks, and sliding to the ground with her forehead pressing against her knees. Her breathing was ragged, heartbeat thundering in her ears, and she felt movement from her shoulder before Huuxi was pressing his cheek to hers.

“What’s wrong?”

“I—” Marinette swallowed and took a deep breath. “There’s... there’s too many people, I...”

His small paws brushed against her nose and the corner of her lips, his ears pressing against her freckled cheek. “It’s okay,” Huuxi murmured, “you’re simply over stimulated. You went from
seeing no one at all to suddenly being surrounded by people—it just makes sense.”

Marinette nodded and wiped at her wet eyes. If she couldn’t handle her classmates how could she handle being in the same school—in the same school as Casimir? How would she react to even seeing him? Her breath hitched and grew faster. She freaked out on Nino just at the smell of oranges, she jumped at shadows and tried to use toothbrushes as if they were swords.

She didn’t quite realize that she was crying until damp paws brushed at her forehead.

“Oh, no, Marinette, shhh,” the kwami said softly, “it’s okay, everything will be okay.”

The designer hiccupped and shuddered, trying to calm her breathing, to clamp down on the shakes, and to simply stop the tears that were currently falling. It failed, everything failed, and she was biting down on her wrist to muffle the sounds, knees knocking together as the world fell away leaving nothing but the past and Huuxi who was whispering kind words into her ear.

She was glad that Chloé refused to come anywhere near public bathrooms; otherwise there would have been a high chance that the drama queen not only would have found her, but a picture would somehow wind up online. In any case, it didn’t really matter if Chloé walked in or not—because the door to the bathroom was opening.

Huuxi scuttled against the collar of the sweater, pressing up against her neck and pulling the scarf over the suspicious lump his body left behind.

Digging her teeth into her skin, Marinette curled up tighter, hoping her small size would be able to hide behind the sink until whoever it was had left, that the press of her skin into her mouth would muffle every sound being rattled out of her chest.

Like Hermione facing the troll, however, she wasn’t quite that lucky.

“Oh,” whoever it was said softly and the designer could see the high ankle skate shoes with a pink line from the heel to the laces on top of a neon green and black checker pattern. They backtracked and Marinette turned her head away, her shoulders shaking as another cry was wrenched out of her throat, striking loud in the open room. Whoever it was will probably head off, go to a different bathroom, use the one downstairs next to the science labs.

If they were kind, they wouldn’t tell anyone about the girl crying in the bathroom.

Marinette’s tears had dampened the fabric of her sweater, catching on the fibres as they fell from her cheeks. She bit down harder and ignored the stabbing, aching pain from her wrist. Rubber squeaked against the floor and the designer squeezed her eyes shut. Each footstep seemed like the bang of a canon and they grew closer.

A hand brushed over her hair before reaching down to gently pry her wrist away from her mouth, leaving angry, red indentations behind on pale skin and the designer glanced up at Alix Kubdel with her bright pink hair and wide, blue eyes. “Do,” the skater paused before continuing, the expression on her face almost uncharacteristically shy, “Do you want me to go find Nino?”

Shaking her head, Marinette pressed her hand against her mouth as another sob escaped. No, no Nino had enough to worry about she didn’t need to add this to them.

“Okay,” Alix said and her touch was awkward but she helped pull black bangs out of the designer’s eyes and sweep them off to the side. Then, she focused on Marinette’s wrist and whistled softly. “That looks nasty,” she mumbled, mostly to herself, and started to get up to her feet.
The designer’s eyes widened, red around the corners, puffy and pink, as thick, foul panic settled in her stomach. Lunging forward, she grabbed Alix’s wrist and almost flinched away when the skater turned. “P-please,” she managed around each gasping, sobbing breath, “I—I—”

*I don’t want to be alone. Not here, not right not.*

“I’m just getting a towel,” Alix promised with a shaky, unnerved smile, “I’ll be right back.”

Slowly, Marinette uncurled her hand from around the other girl and watched as she fished out a paper towel and wet it underneath the facet. When she returned, the skater picked up the injured wrist carefully and pressed the towel against the marks. Hissing at the stinging, the designer fought the urge to pull away and simply watched as the marks were covered, dabbed at, and carefully cleaned.

The harsh wracking sobs had turned to shudders and snifflies under the steady motions of wipe, dap, dry, repeat and Marinette leaned against the bathroom wall, her head tilted back as she stared at the ceiling. A few stray tears still occasionally escaped and she cleared them away with the hand that wasn’t occupied.

When the towel was finally tossed, Alix hesitated before coming back to Marinette, sitting in front of the designer on her knees. For a long while, there was nothing more than the sounds of the designer trying to compose herself. Class could have started a long time ago, but it didn’t matter. Neither girl had even the slightest thought of leaving the bathroom.

“I just,” Alix started and swallowed sharply, “I just wanted you to know that I’m s-sorry and I never... I never meant—” Tears welled up in her own eyes and the skater looked away, her hands clenching into fists, eyes carefully avoiding Marinette’s face.

Reaching forward, the designer grabbed Alix by the shoulders and pulled her forward. Their chests hit awkwardly, the skater unable to slow her descent, and her body was between Marinette’s thighs. But then arms were wrapped around thin shoulders, pink hair brushing a cheek stained with tears.

“I never blamed you,” Marinette murmured, “not for one second did I blame you.”

Alix shook and buried her face into the designer’s collar bone, her shoulder trembling as she wrapped her own arms around the other teen’s body.

“It’s not your fault,” the words spilled from Marinette’s lips as easily as the tears had from her eyes. “It’s not Nino’s fault,” her throat closed slightly and she stared up at the lights as if that would somehow keep the water from falling down her cheeks again. The next couple of words were like a puzzle piece finally locking in place after being found underneath the couch where it had been collecting dust. They were quiet, more of a personal declaration than the others.

“It’s not my fault.”

She felt the skater’s fingers digging into her spine and simply pulled the other girl closer, tucking Alix against her body as if that would somehow free her from the amount of guilt that had boiled and festered like a poison in her mind. Their breathing evened out, heartbeats matching until time was only measured by each passing thought rather than the seconds, minutes, and possibly hours that flew by.

A pocket of peace settled around them, company and warmth keeping away the whispers that normally filled the silence.

It was interrupted by a low rumbled and Marinette flushed as her stomach protested about not
being fed. Alix leaned back, wiping subtly at her eyes as the designer fished her phone out of her bag, and laughed quietly.

That box full of treats wasn’t meant to be eaten as a meal, and Marinette was sure that her parents wouldn’t be quite too happy if she did eat it all for lunch. They would understand, though, if she came home early from school.

But still, all that baking gone to waste. Maybe she’d drop it off in a classroom, or find one of her classmates. Something to that regard.

The flowers though, she would take home and put in her room so she didn’t have to carry them around all day. Marinette would feel awful if she dropped them—Juleka and Rose had put a lot of work into it.

Lunch time was still a while away, but who cared? She certainly didn’t feel like going to classes that day and, by the look of her, neither did the skater. Helping Alix up to her feet, Marinette stretched out the kinks in her back and grabbed her jacket off her book bag. “Hey,” she said as the other girl gathered her own stuff, “ want to get lunch with me?”

“How?” Alix glanced down at her watch and frowned.

“Brunch, then,” Marinette waved her hand and pulled her coat on, buttoning it up before tugging her bag over her shoulder. “Or not, or we can just get out of here, go to the Eiffel Tower, hang out at the Louvre.”

The skater grinned and shrugged her shoulders. “Sure,” she said, “I don’t really feel like going back to class anyway.”

Flinging her arm around Alix, Marinette grinned as they walked out of the bathroom. “That’s the spirit!”

oOo

The flowers were dropped off, the treats placed in the fridge, and then both Marinette and Alix were walking with no clear set destination in mind. They simply picked a direction and followed the street, heading past shops selling various knick knacks, cafés, tourist areas, and many other things, keeping an eye open for a place to stop when they got too hungry.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” Alix said as they meandered through a park, arms linked at the elbow. “No one would blame you if you never talked about it.”

“I think I have to,” Marinette said softly, watching a group of children race past playing an organized chaotic game of tag. “It’s just one of those things, you know? The kind that you don’t want to talk about but everyone knows you need to, even though it would be hard.”

Especially if it was hard.

The skater kept her silence for a few more meters before speaking up again. “Why me, then? Why not Nino? Or your parents?”

Why indeed. The designer stopped walking and stared at the piles of leaves that had yet to be cleaned up. “Because you were there,” She said, tracing the gold, red, and brown patterns with her eyes. “You felt his words and how they affected you, you knew what it felt like to be powerless against him.”

Words, created by the cars and voices of the people of Paris, floated along the brittle autumn
breeze.

You’re mine.

Marinette flinched and started walking again. Her hand reached up and curled around the shape of the fox miraculous hidden beneath her scarf. The sharp point was softened by layers of fabric but she could feel the strange warmth of it against her skin. Huuxi had moved into her jacket pocket, a small ball of gentle heat on an otherwise chilly day.

Alix’s hand tightened around her arm but she neither confirmed or denied it. Her nails were barely felt through the thick fabric of the designer’s coat but, in Marinette’s opinion, the skater could hold on as tightly as she wanted—no questions asked. The pressure was grounding enough, keeping her aware and chasing away the ghosts that tried to whisper in her ear.

They walked, watching the leaves fall from the trees, the hopeless scraping of rakes trying to clean up but never managing to get the park truly leaf-less. Perhaps it was better that way. The strange untidiness was charming.

Marinette leaned down and picked up one that was gold, holding the stem between her fingers and rolling it between the pads, forcing the leaf to spin like a skater on ice. The veins were brown and looked almost rotten, thin against the bright colouring. “I didn’t know where I was at first,” she started after a few moments, “the scariest part was that I was so lost.”

“Lost?”

The designer sighed and closed her eyes, not wanting to see the old stone, the faded graffiti, and yet it was there anyway. “He brought me to the catacombs but,” Marinette licked her lips and wondered why they felt so chapped, why her skin felt too tight, or why her palms itched, “But I just... I didn’t know what to do, how to react.”

It was a lame excuse. A sloppy phrase. She had been more scared of using the miraculous than facing Charmer in those first couple of hours. That same fear of disappointing not only herself but someone else had been stagnating, leaving her there until she did fear the akuma. Until he was the wraith that haunted her days instead of past mistakes that seemed so trivial.

The other fear was better, was more reliable.

“I made a mistake,” Marinette said softly, her eyes on a leaf fluttering to the ground. “I made a mistake that could have cost me everything because I was afraid to act, to do something.”

Alix didn’t say anything, her head ducked down, eyes on the ground. The only sign she was still listening was her grip tightening on the designer’s arm. Huuxi shifted in her pocket, a subtle motion that grounded her in the present and not in the shadows that were slowly seeping in from the past.

A car passed by that smelled of cigarette smoke with the music on just loud enough that she could make out the tone of the singer and Marinette focused on that for a moment. She didn’t know if she could say what happened in the catacombs, no matter if she wanted to or not. The words stuck in her throat as if they were real things.

“He took me into the catacombs,” the designer said at last. “Far into the catacombs I don’t,” she swallowed. “I don’t even know how he got me there but I thought it was just one of those abandoned buildings with the graffiti and the old doors.” Her laugh was bitter and sad. “I was wrong,” Marinette said, the words breathed out, shaking and trembling. “I was so wrong.”

The rusted iron in her hand, the rage that burned from her stomach, thick and tasting like blood
in her mouth as she screamed with an anger that was so alien. There was hatred, there was disgust.

In herself or him, she couldn’t tell.

“—Inette!”

The designer jerked, the tightness in her chest making it hard to breathe as she gasped, eyesight blurring.

Something hot and wet was dripping down her face and she reached up, touching her cheek as if it didn’t really belong to her anymore, staring at the clear liquid on the tips of her fingers like she had never seen them before. Alix had moved from her side at one point to stand in front of her, hands on Marinette’s shoulders. The bright blue of her eyes were overcast by the clouds and looked almost navy.

“S-sorry,” the designer’s voice was soft and got caught on her tongue. “S-sorry I—”

“Can I hug you?”

Marinette stopped and her mouth hung open for a second. Alix wasn’t looking at her as if she was fragile, but rather with something questioning in her gaze. The type of look people gave to a loved book that they wanted to read again but were afraid would fall apart if they picked it up. The designer nodded and swallowed, not trusting her voice, and felt rather than watched arms wrap around her torso.

The skater managed to engulf the taller girl in her presence—height having nothing to do with it—and Marinette hesitated briefly before pulling her closer and resting her cheek against the bright, pink hair. Alix smelled of dust and paint, a smell that was reserved mainly for the Louvre, and the designer pressed closer, feeling her warmth seeping through the fabric of her coat.

It was gradual, but Marinette sunk down into the embrace, the muscles on her back relaxing, the taunt of her shoulders loosening. The tension bled out of her until it was Alix that was clearly holding her up, not the designer’s own legs that acted more like reeds.

That was alright, though, because the skater had never backed down from a challenge and stood there, letting the other girl hold on as tightly as she could and never commented nor complained. Until Marinette felt like she wouldn’t be sinking into the ground did she let go, pulling back slowly as her body got used to holding itself up again.

She wiped her face clean carefully, making sure to clear away the sign of tears from her cheeks before fully looking up again. “Thank you,” the designer murmured and Alix took her hands and sighed softly, rubbing Marinette’s knuckles with small, circular motions.

“Any time,” she said and there was a hardness to her voice. It was more of a promise, than anything.

oOo

Lunch was more of a light hearted affair, Alix and Marinette watching students, the threadbare tourists, and those working in nearby businesses mingle for lunch. They were far enough from the college at that point to eat in relative peace away from people they knew and the conversation stemmed from catching up on what their classmates had done over the break, what they had done over the break, and anything else that sprang to mind.

Alix mentioned the new hero, the Fox as she was called (seeing as no one really knew what else
to call her just yet), and Marinette was careful to keep her expression distant but interested. The skater didn’t really have an opinion of the hero, not like the rest of Paris who were either fairly optimistic or incredibly scornful of another miraculous wielder joining the other two.

Marinette didn’t know whether to be grateful or disappointed.

Nino was waiting for her when school was over. Alix walked Marinette back, their arms intertwined, the chill of the autumn day no longer fully seeping through the jacket and weighing down on the two girls. The DJ was leaning against the wall, hat hanging low over his eyes. His backpack was slung over one shoulder, squished uncomfortably between the brick and Adrien who was lounging, sandwiched between Alya and the other boy.

None of them seemed to be talking—the blogger scrolling through her phone and the model watching whatever she was looking at. Even Nino was flipping through a book, not seeming to be bothered by anything at the moment.

The tension in his shoulders gave him away and Marinette sighed softly and shook her head, smiling at his transparency. “You didn’t have to wait for me,” she said when she and Alix were close enough to be heard. “I live,” the designer motioned at the bakery with some lazy wave of her hand, “right there.”

Nino snapped the book shut, not bothering to mark his place, and grinned at her. “Again with the assumptions,” he sighed heavily, as if disappointed. “Maybe I’m out here, waiting for Alix, hmmm? What about that?”

Marinette turned to the snickering skater. “He thinks he’s funny,” she drawled and glanced at Adrien and Alya who had distanced themselves, but were still close enough to be considered in the conversation. A fist clenched in her stomach, tightening and distracting her thoughts for a second. Awkwardness fluttered between them, none really sure how to react in the other’s presence.

“Would you look at that,” Nino looked at the nonexistent watch on his wrist and grabbed Alix by the elbow (“Hey!”), pulling her towards the stairs, “I think I forgot something inside, so I’ll be right back!”

The designer watched them go as rocks settled in her stomach, mouth doing dry as she was left alone with Adrien and Alya. Now, without their masks, she could see the weeks of stress that had settled upon their features, the magic of the miraculous unable to hide the slope of their shoulders, the colour of their eyes, and the sickly pallor to their skin.

“Are you okay?” Marinette blurted out before she could stop herself because they didn’t look okay. They, in fact, looked the complete opposite.

Adrien blinked a couple of times, his eyes wide. The model looked taken aback, as if her words were a snowball someone had just shoved into his face. If anything he seemed more guilty after that. “I’m okay,” he said carefully as Alya nodded her head harshly enough that Marinette was afraid she would give herself whiplash. “I just, well, we, um...”

Marinette stared, she couldn’t help it, poor Adrien had never, well, seemed so nervous before.

“We wanted to apologize,” Alya said and this time it was Adrien’s turn to nod, “for what happened before... before you—”

“Oh,” the designer said because she had remembered that day, that singular moment where
misunderstanding had triumphed but had been overshadowed by, well, everything else. “No, I—you don’t have to apologize,” she said. Many things that hadn’t made sense now did but... it wasn’t like they knew that she knew about their secrets. “Both of you are very busy and I was...” she trailed off for a second before taking a deep breath and exhaling that same breath. “I wasn’t having the best of days.”

That didn’t seem to help. That didn’t seem to help at all and, if anything, Adrien looked sick.

Alya took Marinette’s hands in her own, cupping them carefully. “It doesn’t matter what type of day you had,” she said, more sombre than the designer had ever really seen her outside of costume. “What we did was wrong and we should have never lied to you.”

Something inside of Marinette wondered quietly what they would have told her, what they would have said instead of giving away their secrets. But, in the end, she wiped that from her mind. It wouldn’t have mattered; it was all in the past and nothing could change that.

“I,” Marinette paused and organized what words she wanted to say before fully speaking, “I accept your apology,” she said, perhaps a little too formally, “and I forgive you. Both of you.”

Neither looked particularly comfortable (as if they wondered why she had accepted any apology from them at all), but they were stopped from saying anything by Alix and Nino bursting out the school doors, any ‘forgotten’ objects mysterious vacant from their hands.

She let the DJ talk as the group walked towards the bakery, her mind caught up in other things like a certain cat, bug, and a curse that they were under. But if anyone could break it, it was Adrien and Alya.

All Marinette had to do was convince them she wasn’t an akuma, that she could be trusted. She had to believe that they could do it, that they could convince Huuxi and the magic that the curse no longer needed to exist, that Tikki and the black cat kwami had truly changed.

The designer sighed softly as Alix laughed at something Alya said.

Easier said than done.

oOo

There was an itch under Marinette’s skin that urged her to transform, to get out and run as fast as she could as far as she could until her mind and body were too tired to think. She slipped through the trap door leading up to the balcony, already transformed, and looked out over the dark Parisian skyline.

It hadn’t yet reached the time where the lights would go out, so Notre Dame wasn’t a lonely lighthouse in front of her home, shining out on the river like a giant beacon for any brave souls out on the fridged Seine. The light stone stood out against the dark skyline, and the dark spaces of windows were like eyes, watching Paris from the river.

They stared at Marinette as she climbed down the side of the bakery, dropping to the pavement below on silent feet where the leaves that had fallen that day cushioned her fall, damp from a fog that seemed to be rolling in. The designer breathed it in and out again, letting the chill in the air brush against her face, waking her up just a little bit more and keeping the sneaking ghosts away.

For now, at least.

She followed la Seine, keeping close to the shoulder and the inky surface of the water reflecting the amber glow of the lights along the edge. The designer slipped away when the sound of people
approaching reached her ears and vanished into the few small spaces that existed between the buildings. Cold kept the nightlife indoors and she passed by a couple of brightly lit places with laughter bleeding through the closed doors and windows.

Marinette paused and felt the warmth coming through the small cracks before darting away, off to find a new place.

The city grew quiet in some places, the little corners between places where the light didn’t quite reach and the sound was filtered through the fog.

That was where she found the painting. It was a massive mural, probably painted late in the evening when the lights had gone out or over the course of a couple of days. A triumphant image of a victorious Ladybug and Chat Noir, smiles on their faces.

Someone had vandalized it, dark red paint across the image until the mural underneath was clear, but degraded. Marinette brushed her hand over the long dried paint and looked up at the faces of the two heroes. Then she closed her eyes, sighed, and turned to disappear into the shadows of Paris.

Behind her, Chat’s green eyes watched as her tail vanished around a corner, leaving him and ladybug alone in the dark once more.

Releasing the transformation, Marinette stared at the screensaver of her computer, the same one that had been Adrien once upon a time and was now a serene image of a lake between some mountains. Huuxi was chewing on an egg almost the same size as him, balancing it in his lap as he tore strips off the top and watched her. His eyes were bright, blazing gold against the dark of her room, the only light coming from the computer.

The designer leaned forward and nudged the mouse with the edge of her hand, looking over the finished video she had been watching earlier. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard, she glanced at Huuxi for a split second, and then she typed ‘Ladybug and Chat Noir’ into the search bar.

Curling her legs underneath her, Marinette read, watched, and listened to all the information she could get out of news outlets, blogs, videos, and podcasts about the Parisian superheroes starting with the earliest videos, the shaky camera shots and mysterious sightings (one that she found was of herself and she quickly backed out to go to the next) then going to the most recent.

People became more bitter, less grateful, picking out the mistakes. There were angry rants from furious bloggers about mishaps in their life that the magic of Ladybug couldn’t fix, the journalists’ questions became accusatory until they stopped interviewing the heroes all together. Whether that was because they didn’t want to ask questions or Ladybug and Chat Noir didn’t want to answer them wasn’t clear.

Knees up to her chest, eyes focused more on her window than on the screen of her computer, Marinette listened to a recent podcast that featured many of the governmental officials of France talking about her friends.

Halfway through it, she closed the page while the host was still talking and rested her cheek on her kneecap.

Then she got up, climbed up the ladder to her bed, burrowed herself under the blankets, and did her best to go to sleep.
The week had passed slowly, but Wednesday came around and Marinette picked up one of her thicker fall jackets, wrapped one of her new scarves around her neck, and headed out to a rally she had read about online while the sun was still rising. Knitted yarn was able to cover her mouth and the lower part of her face while a pink beanie kept her hair flattened against her head. Huuxi was hidden under the collar of her jacket, his small paws clinging to her shirt, kept there by the heavy fabric around him and probably a little bit of magic.

Only people that really knew her would recognize her and the designer wanted to keep it that way.

Turning a corner, Marinette paused as Champ de Mars came into view because there were a lot of people gathered across the green. A lot more people than she expected with various signs lifted high or leaning against legs as people talked, chatted, or shouted their own chants. She passed by a man with a sign that said ‘Heroes? Of who?’ and dug through her pockets for the black leather notebook she had originally gotten for Christmas last year until it arrived in the mail and her parents realized that it had lined paper, not blank.

Foregoing her normal bright pens for one of those slick, almost professional ballpoints, the designer ducked past the first layer of people who looked more curious than anything to try to find people who were actively there.

A woman with a cigarette turned away from the group of five or so people she was with. Her long, black hair was pulled into a messy bun that had strands sticking messily out and about yet managed to look artistic enough that the designer wasn’t sure if it was on purpose or not. It was her eyes that were striking, though; a sharp brown that was the same colour as the rocks below lighthouses, the ones where past ships crashed against and were sent down to the depths.

A large sign rested against her leg, but it was turned away so Marinette couldn’t quite see what it said. Taking a deep breath, squaring her shoulders, the designer walked towards her.

“Excuse me,” Marinette tried at first and, when it was clear she wasn’t being heard over the sound of the people around her, she pulled the scarf down and repeated herself just a little bit louder.

“How can I help you?”

“I just wanted to ask you some questions about why you’re here and your opinion on Chat Noir and Ladybug,” the designer urged her heart to slow down, but she wasn’t an aspiring journalist like Alya and had never even thought of it—

“Oh,” the woman laughed and knocked some ash off her cigarette, “look, darling, first you introduce yourself and whoever you’re working for, then you ask the questions. For instance,” a hardened look shifted over the woman’s face and she seemed to grow a few more inches. “Adèle Lécuyer, La Croix, I would like to ask you questions about...” her hand waved lazily, sending ash scattering in the air, “and then continue from there.”

Marinette blinked a few times. “Oh,” she murmured and bit her bottom lip. She hadn’t really thought it over like that and had run in without a plan again. The designer glanced down at her notebook and swallowed. “What if you’re writing for a blog, do you include it then?”

“Adèle leaned back slightly and frowned. “I suppose it depends on the type of blog. If it’s small you can probably keep it to yourself. But people would like to know if they’re being put on something big.”
“It’s, uh,” the designer felt the panic truly seep in and tried to keep it from showing on her face. She hadn’t expected to use her name at all, and Marinette Dupain-Cheng had been all over the news lately that it was hard to ignore that. “It’s more of a school project,” she blurted out, “we have to make a blog post on current events and... and get some quotes.”

The woman’s face brightened, “well,” she looked almost excited, “if that’s the case I hope you won’t mind sharing what you’ve written when it’s done? I would very much like to read the results of your research.”

Marinette’s mouth went dry. *Abort, abort, abort,* sounded like an alarm in her head and then, because it was too deep of a hole to get out of, she agreed. Huuxi pressed his paws against her neck, his ear against her skin and no doubt being deafened by the sound of her thundering heart. She took a deep breath through her nose and gave Adèle a smile when the woman told her to try approaching her again.

Only when her back was turned to the reporter did Marinette let the panic seep onto her features. “What do I do?” She hissed at Huuxi.

“You do what you say you will do,” he answered simply. “That is the cost of your words,” but the kwami didn’t sound disappointed. Rather he seemed proud. “It will be good, anyway, to be able to have a reason to ask questions.”

“I don’t even have a name I can use, I don’t have a blog—”

Huuxi chuckled softly, “Then make them,” he said as if it was that simple. “There are places to do so, yes? Simply make what you need.”

“What about the name?” Marinette turned on her heel and cleared the panic from her face to approach Adèle again.

The kwami hemmed and hawed for a second before he spoke up again. “Inari Kuzunoha is a good name.”

“Isn’t that Japanese?”

His ear flicked against her neck almost in admonishment. “Yes, but you asked for a name. And it is a good one.”

“Right,” Marinette murmured and then straightened, squaring her shoulders and taking a deep breath to ease her shaking hands. It wouldn’t do to have handwriting she couldn’t even read, after all. “Right, okay.”

Adèle was waiting for her, still smoking the same cigarette, her eyes bright with something Marinette couldn’t quite puzzle out.

“Excuse me, Inari Kuzunoha, I was wondering if I could ask you some questions for my school project?”

oOo

Marinette threw her notebook and pen on her desk, tossed her coat on the chaise, flopped into the chair in front of her currently sleeping computer, pressed her hands to her face, and made a sound that was more on par with a yowling fox than anything human. Huuxi made a beeline for her radio, snickering the whole way.

“It wasn’t that bad,” he said, dragging her phone towards the cords so her could plug it in. “I
“thought you did pretty well!”

“Adèle Lécuyer gave me her card and is expecting me to send her my non-existent school project!” Marinette dragged her hands down her face and glared at the kwami. “How is that not bad?”

His bright gaze turned to her, a smirk on his small, but stupidly cute face. “Because you now have a connection with the media,” he told her simply, “and she seemed willing to help an ‘aspiring reporter’ like yourself!”

Marinette scowled at him and reached forward, snatching her phone under his grasp (“Hey!”) and plugged it in. “I don’t know anything about web design, I don’t know anything about journalism, and I certainly don’t know anything about blogging!”

“You are friends with one, yes?” Huuxi curled on top of her phone once she had put it down again, the heat of his body making the screen freak out, opening apps and closing them. “Why don’t you ask her?”

The designer froze, flushed, and murmured something under her breath that made Huuxi tilt his head to the side and frown. “I didn’t catch that,” he said.

“I don’t want to force her into helping me,” Marinette spoke up. “And she’s probably feeling pretty guilty about…” She winced because the apology had been a couple of days ago but by the way Adrien and Alya were walking around her as if they were on eggshells, it wasn’t completely ‘forgive and forget’ as the designer had hoped it would be.

Huuxi heaved a mighty sigh, rolled off her phone, and shoved it towards her. “She’s your friend,” he stressed. “Ask her for help, I’m sure she will be happy to.”

Marinette stared at the device as if it was a pan of spaghetti sauce that had been dropped on the floor before reaching out and looking through her contacts for Alya. Glancing back at Huuxi, the kwami gave her an encouraging nod, and she took a deep breath before opening a new text message.

“What do I say?”

The fox kwami curled up underneath one of her scarves and peeked out from under the edge, his ears making it look like a tent as he smiled toothily at her. “How about ‘I’m trying to make a blog and don’t know the first thing about it please help’?”

Sticking her tongue out at him, Marinette turned to her phone and ended up typing out a multitude of messages, deleting them, and starting over until she found one that wasn’t too overbearing or distasteful. It ended up being close to Huuxi’s recommendation but she hid the screen each time the kwami tried to look.

Sure!

Alya responded back a couple of minutes later. Do you mind if I come over now to help? I’m not sure when I’ll get another time.

Oh.

Marinette stared at the text for a long moment and then squealed. “She said yes!”

“Of course she did,” Huuxi said, having rolled himself into a scarf-kwami burrito. “Now, can we —what are you doing?” He yelped when she grabbed him and kissed him between the ears.
“She’s coming over today! I have to—I have to clean—”

“Clean what? Your room is spotless—”

“And snacks, I have to get snacks ready, Nino likes snacks, what type of snacks do you think she’ll want—”

“Anything probably, teenagers are bottomless pits—”

“And she’ll probably have Tikki with her too, oh, this will be awkward—”

“Marinette!” Huuxi’s voice snapped through the room and the designer stared at the poor, ruffled kwami still clutched in her hand with wide, blue eyes. “Right, thank you, okay,” he managed to wiggle out of her grip with a pop and floated in front of her face, fur ruffled and puffed out. He tried to smooth it out with his paws before giving up with a heavy exhale. “First of all, your room is spotless and she won’t care,” he held up one paw to stop the designer from speaking, “second, ask her if she’s hungry when she gets here, third, Tikki won’t reveal herself to you at all so it’ll only be awkward if you make it awkward.”

Nodding stiffly, Marinette relaxed as much as she could and Huuxi settled on her shoulder, pressing his cheek against her neck affectionately. “Are you calmer now?”

She pressed her hand over her heart and took another deep breath, “Yeah.”

“Good,” Huuxi said and grinned wolfishly. “You should probably text her back telling her that today is fine.”

Marinette’s cheeks turned crimson.

oOo

It was just after lunch when Alya showed up and Marinette was spinning in her chair, picking at the hem of her shirt as she waited. The knock on the trapdoor still made her jump slightly and she managed to stutter out a ‘come in’.

Alya pulled herself up, tossing the designer a smile before turning back to the ladder she had just climbed up. “Thank you!”

“You’re welcome, dear!” Sabine called up and then they were alone with Marinette fiddling her thumbs in her laps and taking one last glance around her room to make sure that Huuxi was hidden away. The kwami had, of course, vanished into some corner and she took in a deep breath and stood up, turning her full attention to Alya.

Who looked just as nervous but was managing to hide most of it.

“Thank you—”

“So what did you need help—”

Both girls laughed and Alya motioned for Marinette to go first.

“Thank you for coming,” The designer said with a small smile, “I know you’re busy.”

“Of course! I would be happy to help,” Alya made her way closer to the computer and placed her bag on the floor next to the drawers. Marinette had pulled a second chair out so she wouldn’t have to lean over the desk or be stuck standing the whole time. “Now, what do you know about
blogging?"

Marinette woke up the computer, nudging the mouse with her hand and shrugged. “Nothing, to be honest,” she opened the web browser simply for something to do and stared at the blank page. “I’ve looked at some fashions blogs before but...”

“Alright, well, what are you planning to blog about? From there we can figure out the website you can put the blog on,” Alyra reached into her bag and pulled out a fairly large notebook that, when Marinette caught a glimpse of the inside, was full of URLs separated by colour and different bullet points.

“It was, um,” the designer ducked her head a bit, shoulders moving up around her ears. “It was going to be private.”

Alya paused for a moment, the notebook she was holding centimetres above the surface of the desk where she had been about to put it down. “Oh,” she said and then smiled at the designer. “Well, there are some websites that enable you to password protect your blog so only you can see it.”

“That would be great, actually,” Marinette said and typed in the URL Alya pointed out to her. She fished through her emails for one that wasn’t really in use anymore but that she still remembered the password to, and created an account.

“So the first thing you need to do is make up a name.”

Marinette stared at the white box. “I don’t really—”

Alya leaned close enough to almost be over her shoulder. “Well, the name can be anything and you can always change it later if you don’t like it.”

“Oh, hmm,” the designer’s hands hovered over the keyboard before she just typed in some random letters.

‘That username has been taken’.

She was looking at the sentence as if she couldn’t actually read it while Alya snorted and turned away, laughing quietly to herself. Frowning, Marinette added an extra Z at the end, just for emphasis, and was able to hit the okay button.

“Okay, so, if you go to the little person in the top right corner—yeah, that one—you can click on it and get the information about your blog as well as go to the settings. You want to click on that.”

“Alright,” Marinette murmured, following the instructions. “Is the Ladyblog on this website? I just... never noticed.”

Alya shook her head, “Actually, that has its own domain. I have donation buttons and ads on it because I have to pay for it—this website is free though you can still add your own buttons and ads if you need to.” She scooted the chair closer until Marinette felt the heat of her body bleeding through the sleeves of her shirt.

The designer tensed the closer the other girl got and the blogger glanced at her from the corner of her eye before she backed up, putting distance between them again but leaning over uncomfortably so she could still see the screen.

“So if you want to change your blog banner you just click on ‘edit appearance’ but that’s more for mobile users because your theme won’t show up on the app.”
“There’s an app?” Marinette murmured and then waved Alya on, figuring that she would download it later.

“Below that you can edit the theme. The site has some you can use but, to be frank, they’re really awful.”

The designer scrolled through the rest of the settings before going up and clicking on the ‘Edit Theme’. “Do people make their own themes then?”

“Some,” Alya admitted, “but there are people who make themes and put them up on their own blogs so we can go through those and look, I have some of the blogs that reblog them for their followers.” She wrote some of them down on a sticky note for Marinette before giving her one to type in a new tab. “A lot of blogs have a certain purpose like, for example, some people want just picture blogs so there’s a small sidebar with very little information, others are more for fandoms so they have large sidebars with lots of information.”

Nodding as she scrolled, the designer frowned thoughtfully. “What does that mean? The 500px?”

“Well,” Alya leaned back slightly, “that’s the width of the posts on the blog—some people like bigger posts, others like smaller, but they won’t go over five hundred pixels because that’s the standard width of a picture on the website.” She pointed to a post as Marinette moved past, “go ahead and use that one, it looks like it has a lot of settings you can change.”

Nodding, the designer clicked on ‘code’ and copied it before going back to the theme page. She pasted it where Alya told her to and frowned at the mess that turned up which didn’t look anything like the image on the blog post itself except for the layout. The blogger simply laughed.

“Yeah,” she said, “that happens.”

The next couple of minutes were spent playing around, with Marinette changing the colours, text size, making the picture posts greyscale, and other things. Alya walked her through making the text bold, italicized, or even creating a link in the description (as well on how to find the coding again on the internet if she forgot).

The panic burst like a bubble in her stomach when Alya’s arm brushed against hers without warning. It had been rising slowly since she first heard that the blogger was coming over and had been filling her chest, pushing up her throat until there was barely any room to breathe.

And then it was the only thing that existed as she jerked back as if a cattle prod had jabbed her in the back. Alya jerked back, and apology on her face as Marinette’s chair screeched against the wood of the attic.

“Sorry,” the designer managed, her voice choking around the emotions clogging her throat. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Alya said, her voice carefully soft and controlled, each movement slow as she straightened the keyboard and mouse on the desk. Once everything had been put back it its proper place, the blogger placed her hands in her lap and waited, reading over the URLs she had in her notebook and giving Marinette the illusion of privacy as she pressed her hand against her chest and urged her heart to stop.

There was a heavy silence that settled between them, the kind where action could happen and the people involved were waiting for it to explode. Marinette shivered and placed her head in her hands. She breathed slowly, carefully, taking it a couple of seconds at a time. Oh God, why did this have to happen now? At all times?
“You know,” Alya murmured, voice conversational, eyes on the screen, looking over the half-done theme. Her voice made the designer open her hands to peek at the blogger between her fingers. “It’s okay to acknowledge that someone did something horrible to you, it’s okay to know that you didn’t deserve it, and it’s okay to not be okay about it.”

Marinette stared at the other girl, her jaw slack, until Alya turned to her with a small smile on her lips.

“It’s not your fault.”

The designer flushed and nodded, looking away. “I know,” she said, “it’s just—”

“It’s easy to forget.”

“Yeah,” Marinette breathed and straightened. She took another deep breath and scooted her chair back to the computer. “Okay, so, show me how to reblog things.”

oOo

Alya headed off a couple hours later, waving goodbye as she bounded down the street. Marinette watched her go before ducking back into the bakery to pick up the three boxes her parents had prepared to deliver that day. She had offered, needing to get out and just breathe, maybe work off some of the energy that was buzzing around under her skin.

It would be nice to walk the streets of Paris without the fox miraculous clinging to her skin and see if anything had really changed. So, with Huuxi tucked under her collar, scarf wrapped protectively around her neck, jacket donned, Marinette set off. She balanced the boxes easily and walked.

Nothing was different. The people were still the same, the older signs creaked, a couple of lights jingled in the wind, a man was out front his own shop cursing at the leaves that kept coming through his door when someone walked in. She smiled at the lady who played piano every Thursday with her windows open, letting everyone listen and found that, perhaps, the world hadn’t really changed.

The leaves still crunched under her soles, the air still was a tiny bit damp, threatening a wet cold and maybe a bit of rain, people still talked, they ran, they shopped. Tourists took pictures and looked at their maps, pointing in different directions as they talked in their own language.

Everything was so normal.

It was perfect.

So Marinette dallied a bit, enjoying the world as she walked. The boxes were delivered, money accepted, and with a “Thank you for your business!” she headed back home.

The designer was halfway there when she smelled the smoke. It was such a little thing at first, like a bitter stench of someone scorching their tires against the pavement, before she heard the yelling. Like a moth to a flame, Marinette turned on her heel and went towards the sound. Paris, with its building so close together, didn’t have many hiding spots for her to transform so she improvised, hiding behind a bush and pulling the necklace out from under her jacket.

Huuxi floated out beside her and watched as she fumbled with the fox tail for a second. “I’m sure the fire department can handle it,” he said, his eyes sharp as she took a deep breath.

“It will be good to do something other than fight akumas,” Marinette said, “don’t you think?”
He grinned even as he was sucked into the metal. The suit was warm and fit around her like she was always meant to wear it, like she was always meant to do this. The smell was stronger with Huuxi’s magic, putrid and choking and she ran towards it, tail streaming out behind her.

The building was four stories and old, one of the ancestral places Paris boasted. People were out front, some of their beloved items with them as they watched the smoke billow out of the windows. It wasn’t too bad just yet, someone must have caught it pretty early and evacuated everyone else.

Sirens were approaching and Marinette headed over to a woman who was keeping a tight hold on a girl that looked no older than four years old. “Is everyone alright?”

“Huh? Oh!” She blinked down at the designer, her eyes wide as she stared.

“You’re one of those heroes!” The little girl said, reaching forward until her mother pulled her back a respectable distance. In the background another woman was calling out for someone named Marcus, her voice full of irritation. “Are you friends with Ladybug?”

The day with Alya passed through Marinette’s mind as she kneeled and offered a small smile. “Well, yes, I suppose I am,” she said carefully. “What’s your name?”

“Léone! What’s yours?”

Marinette paused and fumbled for a moment. What was her name? It wasn’t like she had really thought it over. Volpina had some negative connections and she didn’t really want to borrow the name of an akuma. Not now, when Paris was so wounded by them.

“My people? The Egyptians are my people, the Romans who have come to live here are my people, those who travel the length of the Sahara to settle here for a couple of days and then move on are my people!”

“Vulpecula,” the designer said. “My name is Vulpecula.”

The fire trucks arrived as Léone, back straight, shoulders squared, shook Marinette’s gloved hand and started talking about how she wanted to be like Ladybug when she was older no matter how pained the expression on her mother’s face became. On her head, the large ears twitched and turned, focusing on the sounds of the fire fighters unpacking their hoses.

And the feet in heavy boots currently approaching.

“We normally don’t get your kind around these.”

Marinette froze and turned her head slowly until her eyes were facing the same direction as the ears on top of her head. “I’m sorry?”

The fire fighter was dressed in smoke stained black protective gear with bright yellow stripes going vertical down his chest. “I mean,” he said, blue eyes piercing like the taste of lemonade on a cold day-stinging and not as welcome at the time, “we don’t get your kind around here.”

“I was,” the designer spoke slowly as she stood up, uncomfortably aware of Léone’s mother pulling the little girl away, “simply making sure that everyone was alright.” Patience was key, she couldn’t get frustrated. This had been their job long before she had even been born. “But I am glad that you are here and that everyone is safe.” Marinette smiled down at Léone who showed off the gap between her front teeth where one was missing.

Before the fire fighter could say anything, the designer turned on her heel and was about to head
back towards her home.

“Wait!” A hand grabbed her arm and the panic was sudden and explosive, Marinette yelping and jumping about three feet in the air even as she turned around. The woman who had grabbed her, a wild eyed lady with a hijab covering her hair and shoulders, pulled back just as quickly. “Please, please, my son is inside!”

Marinette shook her head like a dog and took a couple of deep breaths. “Sorry, sorry, your son is inside?” Her heart was jumping in her chest and a sweat that had nothing to do with the fire was forming under her bangs.

She was hoping a purpose would make the panic magically disappear. Like cold focus putting it out like cold water and being drunk in stories and movies. It didn’t work like that, however, and Marinette tried her best to focus on the woman in front of her when all she wanted to do was curl up in a safe corner and hide her head between her knees.

“We live on the third floor,” the woman said, whether to the fire fighter or Marinette the designer wasn’t sure. “I thought he was right behind me but he must have gone back for Kata because he didn’t follow me out!”

“Kata?” The fire fighter asked, already waving over one of his co-workers, and Marinette was grateful because she could barely form words around the lump in her throat.

“Yes, Kata! His stuffed bear, he never leaves without it—”

Another fire fighter joined them, his face stony, but in the professional sense, not the stern kind. “Yes, monsieur?”

“There’s a boy trapped on the third floor—madame, what room?”

“303, please—”

The fire fighters pulled away to talk to each other privately and Marinette could hear them even over the sound of the fire, the smoke, people speaking, and the heartbeat roaring in her ears.

_Existential damage. Fire possibly spreading to other buildings. Too dangerous for them._

Marinette took a deep breath that tasted like charcoal and looked up at the building. Her fingers brushed the dubious fabric of her outfit. It was stronger than it looked, she knew. Flame retardant? Probably. Pulling the scarf that was folded carefully against her neck up around her mouth and nose, the designer was surprised when the air was filtered and easy to breathe rather than stifled.

“I will try to find your son,” she told the woman softly, careful to keep her voice low so the fire fighters couldn’t hear.

“Thank you,” the mother said, tears clinging to the corners of her eyes even as she held herself straight and tall. Proud even though her emotions were clear under the surface.

Marinette turned to the building and focused on any opening available to her, told the panic to go stuff itself in a bread box, and launched herself towards the front door. People cried out behind her but she ignored it, bursting through the heavy smoke that blocked the foyer and paused for a moment.

The heat was dry and stung Marinette’s bared skin, eating up the moisture that had been in her skin since the beginning of time, and felt like a sunburn after a long day in the summer. Smoke brushed across her cheeks, sticking to her hair and clinging to the sweat that had already started to
form under her mask. The goggles and face scarf kept it from drying out her mouth and eyes, however, and the designer ducked low, scampering as close to the ground as she dared while the fire licked at her boots and claimed the walls.

Paper was peeling, flaking down with their ends glowing like deadly sequins, flickering and daring someone who was inexperienced to touch, to burn.

Cracking wood, splintering under weight and heat, was thunderous around her, reminding the designer that the world was on a time limit and Marinette gritted her teeth and took in a deep, filtered breath.

With more bravery than she ever thought she had, the designer dared the stairs. Her footsteps were light and quick as the banister was already gone, leaving a drop that would dump her into the towering flames already licking at her ankles. Beneath her, the building trembled as wood crashed and fell.

The smoke was heavier on the third floor, black and thick, but the fire hadn’t quite reached. Some pockets of heat were smouldering and Marinette had almost pressed her chest against the floor with the hope that it might be easier to see. It was, but it was more like a foggy night while a few lights from cars illuminated the way than anything else.

Room 303’s door was open and Marinette scrambled inside, her hands slipping across the floor before the claws on the tips of her fingers got purchase. Sending a quick, mental apology to the woman who sent her inside for the odd scratches on the floor, the designer perked her ears up and headed for the nearest room.

The smoke was still heavy and she flipped over furniture, peeked in the small places, and couldn’t find the boy. Cursing, she went room to room, black clinging to her skin, the beige and white of her suit becoming darker the longer she stayed.

Fire was crawling up the stairs, hissing at her, warning her to go faster because it was hungry hungry hungry.

In the end, it was the smoke that saved the boy’s life. The heat, the smoke, and a coughing fit. Marinette ran shouldered a door open, ran through the living room, vaulted over the kitchen table, and wrenched open the pantry. He was curled up under the lower shelves, covering his face with the collar of his shirt, and a small stuffed bear that had seen better days was hugged close to his chest.

She kneeled down where he could see her. “Marcus?” Marinette glanced at the boxes, the cans, the bottles surrounding the boy. “Marcus, I’m here to help you, okay? I’m here to get you out of here.”

There were tears streaming down his face and his small body wracked with each, wet cough, but when she reached for him, he pulled back.

Behind her, the stairs crumbled and crashed, eaten by the fire.

“You’re scared,” she said quickly. “I know, I’m—” Marinette swallowed, “I’m scared too, but it’s okay, because I’m going to get you and Kata out of here, I’m going to bring you back to your mom, how does that sound?”

He was hugging the bear so tightly she thought the grip would pop the poor thing’s head off.

“Please, please let me help you, Marcus. It’ll be okay, you’ll be okay, I promise.”
There was yelling and shouting outside, barely heard over the hissing and crackling. The flames had reached the hallway and were getting closer.

Marcus was crawling out from under the shelves and Marinette took his arm, carefully pulling him free. It took precious seconds to pull a rag from a drawer and tie it around his face to protect him from the smoke that was making him cough so badly but the boy buried his face under her chin as she lifted him up onto her hip.

The designer looked around the place, focusing on the window leading outside that was big enough to fit her and the boy. “You’ll see your mom soon, okay?” Marinette told Marcus and made her way over. Instead of seeing if she could get it open with one hand, she slammed her heel into it, shattering the glass and peeking out to the street below. “Hold onto me,” She said against his dark hair and felt small arms wrap securely around her neck.

Then she was hoisting herself out, careful of the sharp pieces left behind as she guided herself and Marcus through the open space. Smoke was streaming out alongside her, finally released from the makeshift prison holding it inside and Marinette fought the urge to cough herself. The small grooves of her gloves caught onto the small nooks and crannies in the side of the building and, with aching slowness, the designer climbed down.

An explosion from the far side rocked the foundations and she clutched at brick, keeping Her body between the ground and Marcus just in case she lost her hold. A boot slipped, unable to find purchase. Sweat formed between the leather of the glove and her palms. One of the windows was covered in metals bars and she grabbed hold, wincing as the heat seared through the protection on her hand.

With the other, she reached back and pulled the flute from its holster.

It was a far drop to the ground; five or so meters. Normally, she would take that jump, trusting the suit to protect her in case she landed wrongly. But a fox was no cat and Marinette wasn’t quite sure how she would be able to land with Marcus clinging to her front and the odd angle she would have to push off from the building.

*Help me, Huuxi.*

One handed, she put the instrument up to her lips and played a single note. It cut through the sound of the fire, the smoke, and even the roar of water trying to put out the flames. Beneath her, Marinette felt the earth pulse. It reached up and she pulled, ignoring the sudden yelling as something gave way.

The designer stepped back and felt her foot touch solid ground. Peeling her hand away from the iron, the suit awkwardly sticking to hot metal that she was incredibly grateful her bare hand hadn’t been touching the metal, Marinette stood upon the pillar she had pulled and pushed it back down, guiding the stone slowly back into the ground like an elevator without any walls as she played her fingers along the flute.

When the song ended—only a couple of notes actually played—Marinette stood upon the street and gladly let the paramedics lift the boy from her arms. The fire department was still working on putting out the rest of the flames, and the people—home owners or curious civilians—were watching her.

The fake ears (though she questioned that, because she heard through them as if they were real) twitched and flicked, curved back on the building.

Something was hissing. It was a low sound, like a snake or air being slowly let out of a balloon.
The magic beneath her throbbed, the stone rising like a cat towards heat, whispering in a language she didn’t understand. A smell reached her nose. It was sharp, rotten, and pierced through the scarf around her mouth so suddenly that she was sure something had helped it.

Both hands free, Marinette lifted the flute back up to her mouth and blew a note that made even her own ears hurt. Stone burst from the ground, rising as if it was a living being, creating a wall between the building and the street.

Water that had been spraying across the building rained down upon her and the fire fighters as the very earth of Paris guarded the front of the house from view.

For a moment, there was nothing.

And then, the building exploded.

Metal, wood, brick, and glass were blocked by the shield of solid rock as the immovable object stopped death in its tracks. Some pieces fell around her, managing to make it past her shield but the fire was still raging and getting the stone to sink, to fall back into the ground was harder than she ever expected it to be.

Marinette turned from the destruction and passed the fire fighters that scrambled to help. Her skin was sticky, muscles tired, bones aching. The man who had confronted her at first was directing the others around him before he turned to her as she tried to pass.

“That was dangerous,” he said simply, eyes burning into her. “You could have gotten killed.”

“I didn’t,” she said carefully, softly, worn thin from the panic, the rush, and the fear that tainted the air. There was an amber shine from beyond the fire trucks, ambulance, and police cars. Cameras focused on the fire, on her.

The fire fighter shook his head. “We have procedure for things like this,” he said, though he wasn’t harsh. More tired. “To keep ourselves safe, to keep others safe.”

Marinette looked down at the glove that had been holding onto the iron, the one she had known would have ruined her hand. It was flawless, unharmed, and she closed her fingers. “I don’t want to do your job,” she told him carefully. “I admire what you do but if... If it means interfering in an ensconced, outdated system, to help just one woman, man or child,” Her eyes turned to where Marcus was being gathered up in his mother’s arms, Kata the bear still clutched tightly in his arms as she layered kisses over his hair. “I’m willing to accept the consequences.”

“Even if it puts you in danger?”

Her smile was tired, but it was real. “I have to believe that I am wearing this suit for a reason. And if I’m meant to wear it, then I should do something with it.” She ran her hands over the protective armor on her stomach. “Perhaps Paris doesn’t need any more heroes, perhaps it simply needs someone to help the heroes out, from time to time.”

He was watching her, his face still hard but she realized that was simply his expression—stern and angled. Then, he offered a hand. “Captain Mäel Paternoster.”

Marinette took it. “Vulpecula.”

oOo

The video came out sooner than most would have expected, filmed on a smart phone and quickly posted on the internet where it gained viewers and was passed from blog to blog, twitter to tumblr,
Yahoo to Huffington Post. There were people who translated it into their own languages, who gave pages of story, who simply wrote a caption.

Alya, in her room, watched it on her phone.

Adrien saw it on the news.

Nino heard about it on a blog and followed a link to the original.

And Alix found it in her email.

A name passed through Paris that night, whispered from ear to ear, through the wide, expanding threads of the internet.

\textit{Vulpecula}.

Marinette heard none of it, standing upon the tracks of \textit{La Petite Ceinture}. She stared at the yawning shadows of a tunnel, her suit still smelling of smoke, dark charcoal clinging to her skin the miraculous didn’t cover. Behind her, the sun was setting, blazing across the rooftops of Paris.

The designer squared her shoulders and took a step into the dark.

Chapter End Notes

This took longer than expected, thank you for being patient! Please enjoy and review!
This one’s for the lonely, the one’s that seek and find
Only to be let down time after time
This one’s for the torn down, the experts at the fall
Come on friends, get up now, you’re not alone at all

-Comes and Goes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The stone and dust had not changed over the past three weeks (had it really been that long?)—though why would it, when the tunnels had been there for close to a couple thousand years—and Marinette leaned back against one of the crumbling walls, her eyes on the flittering shadows cast by the light from her flute. Around her, the rock thrummed and pulsed, beating like the heart of a living thing if she closed her eyes and let it engulf her.

Just around one of the corners was the entrance and the designer kept that firmly in her mind as she breathed in the air. It wasn’t as stale here as it was further in, the surface on the edge of collapsing around her, reminding her of the busy world above. To be quite honest, it wasn’t as confining or claustrophobic as she had thought.

He suit still smelled like smoke from going into the fire, however, and Marinette took a deep breath and released the transformation. As the flute scattered into orange sparks, the last of the light died and she was left in complete and utter darkness.

Her breath hitched. “Huuxi?”

“I am here,” he said and something gentle brushed her hand. It came suddenly and she jerked reflexively before settling back down against the stone. In her left pocket, she fished around for her phone before managing to finally pull it out.

“I don’t think I thought this through,” she said after a moment, using the flashlight app to illuminate the tunnels again. The light wasn’t as warm as the one that had come from her flute. This one was colder, like moonlight reflecting off snow. “I just—”

Huuxi was pressed against her thigh, partially curled up on her hand. “It wasn’t very rational,” he agreed and glanced up at her. “How do you feel?”

Marinette shrugged slightly and curled in, bringing her legs closer. “I don’t know,” she admitted carefully. “I’m sure,” the designer paused and carefully corrected herself, “I’m not sure, not of anything.”
“An easy mistake to make,” the kwami said, his eyes shining with humour as he climbed up to her knee and settled there like a sphinx. His ears were up and alert, twitching this way and that, but his gaze never left her face. “The more we seem to learn, the less we seem to know.”

Resting her head against the stone, Marinette looked up at the not-so-far ceiling. It was no more than an inch above her head, perhaps even less. “I thought I was strong enough to come back,” she said softly.

“It is easier to take these things one step at a time,” Huuxi agreed, “but I do not think you were wrong in assuming you were ready.”

The designer’s head snapped down and she stared at the kwami.

He merely gave her Cheshire grin, “you are strong, Marinette,” Huuxi’s tail curled up beside his body, the two large ears flicked as if warding off an insect. “But sometimes you do not need to be a fire to conquer a mountain. Sometimes you can be a river and find your way through the cracks.”

She flushed, “this must seem so silly to you.”

“Hardly,” the grin on his face dropped and Huuxi was staring at her with all the seriousness of an ancient predator. “You want to rip the Band-Aid off while there is still healing to be done. Be patient, Marinette. You will heal, just as we all heal in time.”

Scratching the back of her neck, the designer looked away her cheeks still slightly flushed. Silence, the type of silence found only under water, settled around them like a subtle cloak as the light and shadows danced across the walls. Marinette brushed her hands absently across her cheek and felt the heated skin there, still warm from the flames. She was probably a little red from the heat and black from the smoke.

A rock fell somewhere in the distant tunnels and the sound echoed back to her, clattering against the walls and fleeing like a mouse scurrying into a hole.

“Huuxi?” Marinette said when the silence became too much.

The kwami hummed and stretched like a cat out on her leg, tail curled up over his nose. “Yes?”

“Will you tell me a story?”

His gold eyes turned up towards her, catching the corner of the light and flashing crimson for a moment. “Ah, well,” he picked his head up a little bit higher, “I don’t see why not.” Huuxi was quiet for a moment longer as he situated himself so he was sitting rather than laying. “What type of story would like to hear?”

“Oh,” Marinette blinked and frowned, “what about love?”

“Love?” The kwami murmured and tilted his head to the side, his expression more of contemplation than anything else. “I suppose I could tell you a story about love.”

In the dark, Marinette leaned forward as the kwami began to speak, his voice a candle in the dark, his words careful and soft.

oOo

Mount Vergalor was a place of myths and had become a beacon to dreamers, madmen, scholars, and those looking for adventure. It was once the greatest peak in the world; a towering place of
sun baked rock amid a range of summits unmatched in scale. Remote, Mount Vergalor was all but impossible to reach except by the most determined seeker.

Many legends clung to that stone, ranging from tales of blazing warriors imbued with great powers falling from the sky to fantastical creatures and their celestial abodes crashing down to form the mountain.

Some stories even go so far as to say that the mountain itself was a sleeping titan of antiquity.

Those who managed to survive the journey to the foot of the titanic mountain were welcomed as fellow pilgrims by the scattered, nomadic communities that have set up camps around its base.

Helia was from such a community. She was a child of the Ra-Kora, proud and strong, willing to train with the other children to become the great warriors that their people demanded. Bearing a sword and a shield, Helia learned to fight and was successful at it, but she also dreamed and that was, what her people considered, her fatal flaw.

Loving the world and what was in it, Helia would continue her studies in bloodshed and then disappear for an unprecedented amount of time, travelling the paths of the valleys and mountains. She would bring back little treasures; stones that looked like starlight, flowers that reminded her of the sky, treasures dropped by travellers and other nomads.

A collector of sorts, you might say.

At age sixteen she would have to face the hardest trial of her life; the right to live. Her people had a tradition to fight, to go to war, and within that culture was the idea that only the strongest warriors could continue. So, while she was a teenager, Helia faced one of her brothers in combat.

No one questioned it; the trial was simply what was done at the time and Helia, who dreamed of beautiful things and travelled the paths of the mountain, saw the ways of her people and wondered ‘why? Why do we do this?’.

She refused to kill the boy, another fifteen year old, someone she had grown up with, trained with. Helia turned to the elders of her people and asked why.

So they sentenced her to go up the mountain. It was a death sentence, a way to kill her without raising their own swords and everyone knew it. ‘Perhaps,’ they said as she packed her meagre things, ’she will learn the ways of the people on her journey, perhaps she would figure out why’.

Helia started on her way up the mountain and, on her way up, met someone incredibly interesting.

Marinette had settled with her legs outstretched, feet braced against the other side of the tunnel, her eyebrows raised bemusedly. “I thought you said I was getting a love story,” she said.

The kwami scoffed and flicked one ear. “Please,” he waved one paw up at her, “all good love stories have interesting people in them,” gold eyes glittered with mischief as he added slyly; “and, in my humble opinion, this story is great not because of the love, but because it is true.”

“True?” the designer straightened as well as she was able with such a low ceiling and narrowed her eyes, watching Huuxi sharply. “What do you mean by ‘true’?”

“By that it happened,” he told her.

For a moment, Marinette stared at the kwami and then, when what he said finally registered, she
shook her head. “There’s no place called Mount Vergalor,” she said, “not in legends, and certainly not in the history books.”

“Of course there is,” Huuxi grinned up at her. “Not under that name, true, but there are mountains that have hosted gods and legends. Olympus for one, Kunlun for another. The mountain Moses hiked up to receive the law of the Abraham God. Do you not think that these stories have, at least, something similar?”

The designer tilted her head to the side and thought about it—all those stories about mountains, journeys, success, and failures.

“Remember that religion was often born at the top of mountains, where the sky is the most clear and the world is the most bare,” Huuxi smirked at her before he cleared his throat. “Now, may I continue?”

“No,” Marinette told him grumpily, but the fox went on anyway.

oOo

In a different nomadic tribe, one called the Lernkin, a young woman named Selene had discovered the ancient ruins of an old temple. Bringing her findings back to her people, she tried to convince them that there was once a religion for the people who lived on the mountain. She, unlike Helia, was a scholar, an archaeologist if you must. It was her who charted the stars for her people, her who learned the language of their neighbours, her who discovered and invented.

Her people listened to her, went to see this temple, and then they destroyed it.

Any religion other than their own was heresy and Selene was exiled to climb the mountain, just as Helia had been. Unlike Helia, however, Selene had chosen to climb the treacherous paths. She wanted to prove her people wrong, that the other religion of these past people not only existed, but that it wasn’t wrong.

Treacherous words, to be sure.

The mountain’s sheer flanks and the treacherous conditions of its high slopes made it incredibly difficult to climb. Rocks were littered with the contorted bodies of those who have made the attempt and failed. Ascending was all but impossible, a gruelling test of every facet of a climber’s strength, character, resolve, willpower and determination. Some climbers ascended for weeks or months, others for only a day, for the mountain was inconstant and ever-changing.

Even for those hardy few who somehow survive to reach the top, the testing was not over. Some who clawed their way to the summit did so only to find it utterly empty, an abandoned expanse of ruins and faded carvings beyond human understanding.

For unknowable reasons, the mountain would reward, only to find the climber’s soul lacking.

It was this that Selene had offered to do, this that was Helia’s punishment.

Climb the mountain and reach the summit victorious, or die like others before them.

oOo

“Then why climb it to begin with,” Marinette had shifted, curling up slightly and more on her side so the stone wasn’t digging into the same spots. It wasn’t as comfortable as it could be but with the dim glow from the screen of her phone she almost felt like she was camping rather than pressed against stone thousands of years old and many feet under the surface of Paris. “Why go through
all that pain and struggle only to come up with nothing?”

“Why indeed?” Huuxi said. “Why do we love? Why do we fight? Why do we travel?” He shrugged his small shoulders. “Perhaps it is merely the hope of something, that hope that maybe we can be something, have something, greater that spurs us on.”

Running a finger between his ears, the designer hummed softly in the back of her throat and the kwami continued.

oOo

It is said that they met on a path close to the base of the mountain, others say that they met further up after days of walking the trails, climbing the rocks. Whichever is true, Helia and Selene met and, like so many other travellers, they turned away from each other.

The journey up Mount Vergalor was to be taken alone, but it didn’t seem as if the mountain itself was all too fond of letting them be by themselves. Each corner turned, just when Helia and Selene thought they were apart, brought them together again, each rock climbed brought them to the foot of the person they believed to be behind them. Finally, when the day grew darker and the paths grew colder, the two of them decided that if the mountain wished for them to travel together, who were they to complain?

(“You, apparently,” Marinette murmured, fighting with a small smile that was trying to form on her face.

Huuxi smacked her knee, his gold eyes bright. “Hush, you,” he told her.)

They set up camp in an empty cave, piling their supplies on separate sides of the makeshift camp. It wasn’t as if they knew each other—they came from two different tribes after all. Sometimes the mountain was used for exiled prisoners by outsider countries, sometimes it was a form of banishment for traitors. Who was this other woman? They thought. Where did she come from?

It was around a campfire, huddled away from the storms that had carved the smoothed stones of the mountain, that they told their stories. One, a Ra-Kora. The other, a Lernkin. Not enemies, for sure. Their tribes differed on ideas, on religion, but they had never gone to war over it. Selene and her people worshipped the stars, Helia, the sun.

To Selene, no doubt the stories of battle and training were as alien as the great frozen landscape of Antarctica was to the first explorers. Her people were remarkably peaceful, owing their way of life to those like the Ra-Kora that defended the mountain with their blood, sweat, and tears. It was several communities that were separate, but helped each other though trade and marriages. Hunters traded their meats for furs, furs for writings, writings for agriculture, agriculture for meats. The list could go on and on, because these people shared one thing in common and it kept them closer than anyone would have thought.

Living at the base of the mountain seemed to be enough to keep them from fighting against each other. Magic? Perhaps it was, perhaps they didn’t want to anger the stone they lived upon, that granted them its food, its protection from outsiders wanting to own the secrets kept hidden in the ancient crevices and pathways. Or, perhaps, they feared the return of the Aspects. Whichever the reason, the people were peaceful towards each other.

Helia and Selene, therefore, were Sisters in the Mountain’s Shadow and, while the journey to the summit was to be taken alone, they obeyed the paths of Vergalor and travelled together. It was rough for one person, but I would assume, with a pair of helping hands, the two were able to double their pace. One was strong, the other was smart, and they managed to keep each other safe.
from the threat of avalanches, rock slides, and predators.

But the mountain had more than just nature to test them against. Hallucinations, dreams, nightmares, and ghosts haunted the rocks. A seeker might fall asleep upon the path and wake up someplace entirely else. Unable to solve the puzzle of their visions, the traveller would succumb and perish on the slopes.

It was the final test and Helia woke up to the day she faced judgement. Spear in hand, she stared down the same boy that had sent her on this journey in front of her friends and family. There was blood already on her hands, the bodies of her fallen brothers and sisters around her, reminding her of tradition and her duty.

*Would you do it all over again?* A voice whispered in her ear. *Would you tackle the mountain one more time?*

She looked over her shoulder at the slopes of Vergalor, the storms at the summit, the snow on its rocks and remembered the faces of countless people who had come through their village of tents only to never return.

Helia lifted her spear and slammed the tip into the ground before she offered her hand to the boy before her.

A second refusal. She would dishonour herself a second time to save his life and sacrifice her own.

On the mountain, Helia opened her eyes and found herself grasping the hand of Selene.

Selene who had been trapped in her own vision, standing upon a narrow bridge. On one side there was a podium with a leather bound book. *The answers to all that you seek*, she was told by the wind.

On the other, a woman who’s leg was trapped beneath a fallen tree. There was no immediate danger, none that could be seen at least, but the trees were dark and the sky was cloudy. If a storm came, it could easy roll the tree off the cliff and take the woman with it, but on the other hand, the water would ruin the ink on the pages.

Knowledge or humanity.

In the end, she ran for the woman, reaching out for her as the rain began to fall, grasping her hand, and chose humanity.

Selene blinked and stared up at Helia.

In their dreams they reached for each other and after long weeks of hiking, stumbling, and shivering, the two leaned in, pressed their foreheads together, and breathed in the sharp air underneath the expansion of light and glory that stretched above them.

Around them, the sky was bright and clear, the stars twinkling high above their heads, bright enough that it seemed like they could reach up and catch them. The summit of Mount Vergalor had the ruins of old stone temples, each one marked by a series of pictographs made by ancient people who travelled the slopes just as they had, who saw the sky and marvelled at its splendour, building temples of glory that were forgotten by the people far below.

They had made it.

Together.
Marinette flicked the switch that turned the flashlight app on and off, creating a slow strobe light as Huuxi’s voice stopped echoing throughout the tunnels. “I thought you said it was a love story?”

The fox kwami shielded his eyes from her fidgeting. “It was,” he grumbled and reached for the phone, taking it away from her and placing it on the ground so the light hit the low hanging ceiling. “Are you saying that it wasn’t?”

“Well,” the designer murmured to herself and scratched the back of her neck.

“It is not the full story,” he mused, “perhaps that is why.”

Frowning, Marinette sat up again, painfully aware of the dust sticking to her pants and hands. The light from her phone lit the kwami up from behind, making him seem more like a spirit. “Why? What happened to them?”

“War,” Huuxi admitted carefully, looking away from the designer, “War, darkness, and a curse that would keep them apart until someone was brave enough to break it.” He sighed softly and his bright, gold eyes were sad. “It is a similar story to many, many others.”

Marinette picked at a thread on her sweatshirt with her nails, ignoring the slight feeling the fabric had between her nails that sent an odd shiver down her spine. “I think we should get out of the dark,” she said, slowly getting to her knees to crawl back to the entrance. It wasn’t far, the designer reminded herself when phantom twinges of pain echoed from the past inside her knees. The skin was sometimes sore over the bone and there were mottled scars left over.

“That sounds like an excellent idea.”

Time passed like a hand waving from a train Marinette wanted to be on, the school days continued, the leaves kept falling, and she was sitting in class again (back of the room now, of course). Chloé was prattling on in the front, clearly talking to Sabrina even though her voice was loud enough to make sure everyone heard.

Alix was bristling, glaring at the back of the blonde’s head like she would personally like to stab the other girl in the neck with the pencil cracking in her hand. Chloé didn’t seem all too aware of the death stare from the pink haired skater, still making sure to chatter with enough volume that no one could be sure she was doing it on purpose (she was).

The noise of others raising their voices to cover the discussion in the front only forced the mayor’s daughter to raise her voice even more which resulted in a cacophony of almost-shouting that had Marinette placing her hands over her ears and her forehead on the desk.

“Here,” Nino said, offering his light-up headphones, “maybe these will help.”

Marinette snatched them up and shoved the plastic over her ears, almost sighing in relief when the voices were replaced by some orchestra music that Nino had been listening to before offering it to the designer.

It was when Marinette tore her own attention away from the music Nino had let her borrow—his headphones were remarkably comfy and kept the noise of the class out—that she started to hear snippets through the breaks between songs. Something about the mayor, the Louvre, and someone missing. Alix looked ready to rip into Chloé when Mme Bustier walked in, a stack of papers in
her arms.

The teacher looked a bit haggard, a leaf sticking out of her hair and scarf lopsided, but she smiled at her students anyway. “Good morning!” She called, effectively silencing Chloé and whatever she was saying. Marinette turned the music off and handed Nino back his headphones, fighting the urge to peak at whatever he was writing in his notebook. It was the blue one, which meant music, which meant that he would be distracted all during lunch. Sighing fondly, the designer turned her attention back to the front.

“—It will only be a two day assignment where you will do a short presentation this Thursday on what you found.” A groan rippled through the class and Mme Bustier just smiled. “Because there aren’t many topics, you will split yourselves into three groups of four with one group of two,” she had to raise her hand to silence the murmurs, “The group of two will, of course, be assigned the topic that would only require two people.”

Nino nudged Marinette in the side and she jumped, managing to silence her yelp beforehand and glared at the DJ. He pointed at her, then back at himself, and raised his eyebrows questionably.

The designer rolled her eyes, ‘of course,’ she mouthed and he did a small little dance in his chair. A few other people are latching onto each other, groups already forming and then quickly latching together if they were too small or snatching up another person to fill the final space.

“Hey,” Alya hissed ahead of them, waving her hand to catch Marinette’s attention. She motioned between her and Adrien then pointed to the designer and Nino, getting an easy nod in response. Everyone was pretty glad to give the group of two over to Chloé and Sabrina; no one wanting an uncooperative fourth wheel that just left more work for the rest of them.

They were released to meet with their group-mates and speak with each other as Mme Bustier walked around to write down everyone’s names as well as their chosen topic from a list. Adrien and Alya moved up to the desk in the back, bringing their chairs with them to huddle in close. Nino shut his notebook and grinned as Marinette leaned over teasingly, threatening to look inside even as he pushed her seat away with his foot.

“I was thinking about doing depictions of media in literature,” Alya opened with and the designer accepted the list of topics from Nino so she could catch up to everything she missed with the headphones on.

“You just want a reason to do a research project on superheroes,” the DJ said with a broad grin. “I know about your crush on Lois Lane.”

Alya reeled back in mock-outrage. “Everyone has a crush on Lois Lane,” she pointed at him with the business end of her purple gel pen, “even Superman.”

“Is it a crush when they’re married?” Nino theatre-whispered to Marinette.

“They’re married?” The designer hissed back with wide eyes, grinning at the affronted gasp that came from the blogger’s direction. She glanced over at Adrien who was watching them with those bright green eyes of his, a small but no less happy grin on his face. They let Nino and Alya bicker, sitting in relative quiet until Mme Bustier arrived at the desk.

No one had any problems with the blogger’s suggestion, so depictions of media in literature turned out to be their topic. The move to the library was an easy step, each of them packing up their things to leave the classroom and head to the books. Alya and Nino continued to bicker about crushes, superheroes, reporters, and movies with too much broth and not as many potatoes leaving Adrien and Marinette trailing behind them.
“At least they have that in common,” the blonde spoke up, startling the girl beside him out of her own thoughts, “the superhero thing.”

“Nino hides it well,” Marinette said carefully, not quite sure what to say around this boy who she’d stumbled around for the past year or so, “but he has a few posters and an impressive collection—though...” She shrugged sheepishly, “I don’t know all that much about comics so I’m not the best judge when it comes to things like that.”

“That’s okay,” Adrien shrugged his shoulders and shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants, hooking his thumbs through the belt loops. “I’m more interested in the movies and video games than the comics themselves—"

“Blasphemy!” Alya spun around on her heel, poking the blonde in the chest forcing him to blink his wide eyes and gape at her. “There’s no history in those movies!”

Marinette smiled sympathetically as Adrien stammered around an explanation, holding his hands up to ward off an arms-crossed, foot-tapping Alya. “Look,” the designer stepped in between the two, “the history of the comics translated into movies isn’t really that big of a deal because it introduces more people into the medium than would have otherwise been interested. Like young women who are uncomfortable reading comics because of major sexual stereotypes or over sexualisation specifically of young women in revealing costumes—the movies opens up an entirely new media to explore that also connects more to a younger generation.”

Snorting, Nino threw his arm around her shoulder, making sure she could see his hand and pull away before the weight settled upon her if she wanted to. “Sure thing, Freud,” he said.

The designer shoved him in the ribs, rolling her eyes with a grin at his teasing tone. “I’m serious,” she said, “imagine how many people who were never interested in comics went to go see, say, Iron Man, because it looked interesting?”

“So, you’re saying that I should be happy for the broadening of comics because it means more people to enjoy it?”

Marinette winked at Alya, “more people enjoying comics means more comics for you.”

The blogger narrowed her eyes, looking up at the ceiling in contemplation. “I have to say,” she said, “that sounds like a great marketing campaign.”

“How dare you.”

The group promised to meet again the next day after school to compile all their research together and work fully on their presentation. Marinette headed home, a few books tucked under her arm so that Huuxi could claim the entirety of her bag for his own entertainment. Her father was at the counter when she walked into the bakery and she gave him a kiss on the cheek before fleeing upstairs to work on the homework for that day. The yarn she had bought had taken its place in the crafts section of her room and she found herself looking over at the flashes of colour when the work in front of her couldn’t quite distract her.

Huuxi entertained himself with her radio, chewing absently on an egg she had fetched for him halfway through her math work. The flipping through songs almost had her tearing her hair out so Marinette snatched the phone from his hands, turned the music to shuffle, and then promptly locked the screen so the kwami couldn’t change it.
He pouted at her and turned to what she was doing instead, watching her work with lazy, half
lidded eyes.

“Are you done yet?” He asked her after a while and Marinette rubbed her cheeks and squashed
her face, glaring down at him like an irritated marshmallow.

“Obviously not,” she muttered.

Huuxi bared his teeth in a mock snarl and pressed his small body against her hand. “We should do
something.”

“I am already doing something,” the designer said, turning back to the numbers with a headache
slowly growing behind her eyes.

“We should do something else when you’re done,” he said and tapped the metal of the
miraculous, looking up at her with fierce gold eyes full of promises and old secrets.

The thought of transforming made Marinette’s heart stutter against her rib cage and she turned
away from Huuxi to focus on the homework. That rush, though, rose up in the back of her mind,
reminding her just what it felt like to dash through the streets with the magic singing around her.
She was addicted. Beyond addicted, really, and it was too early to know if that was a problem that
needed to be addressed.

It didn’t take too long for her to finish the rest of the math problems and read over the chapter in
her history book taking carefully written notes that took just a few minutes longer than usual with
Marinette slowing down the looping of her pen when Huuxi was watching. The kwami sneered at
her and narrowed his bright eyes, huffing like an enraged bull when she read over a passage for
the third time, triple checking her notes.

“Really?” He grumbled when she finally set the notebook and pen to the side, his small arms
crossed over his chest. “Was that necessary?”

“Absolutely,” Marinette said, stretching out her wrist and smiling down at the kwami. “I’ve never
had someone encouraging me not to be a good student before.”

Huuxi scowled and stared after the designer as she went to go pack her bag with snacks, her
sketchbook, a little black journal, and a sweatshirt. “There’s a time for learning and a time for
playing,” he said simply. “And if I have to watch you do homework for another minute I would
have started doing it for you just to get rid of it.”

“Wait,” Marinette paused in pulling on her shoes, “are you saying you were bored?”

Gold eyes flashed like a fire starting from glowing embers. “I will admit to nothing.”

“You were bored,” the designer said, tying her laces.

“Kwamis do not get bored.”

Marinette looked back at him as he floated after her, raising a single brow. “Uh huh,” she said, not
even bothering to hide her scepticism, “whatever you say.”

“I am older than the very idea of civilization,” he grumbled as they both made their way up to the
roof. “before human beings even thought of the word boredom and were picking their noses in
caves.”

“Sure,” the designer said absently, breathing in the crisp air of the evening, the bright lights of the
buildings around her creating an amber glow on the horizon with the Eiffel Tower a centre piece. La Seine was murky and dark, reflecting the bright windows to create an odd mockery of the night sky. She shivered as a breeze rose up under her scarf and tickled her nose, nipping at her cheeks. Huuxi settled on the banister and looked out over the city, his black and beige ears perked up, pointing towards the streets.

Marinette took a moment to simply enjoy the evening, listening to the laughter of tourists, the sound of a violin being played some blocks away, and a couple impatient drivers honking their horns to the tune of rush hour. She rested her elbows on the iron, leaning over Huuxi to watch people walk along the streets with their phones to their ears, their hand in someone else’s, or trying to juggle bags hanging from their arms.

When the little fox looked up at her, Marinette figured that it was time to transform. So she murmured the words and felt the cold fall away like a storm finally clearing. She breathed in deeply and felt the air tickle the inside of her mouth before it warmed on its way down to her lungs. The smell of something sweet was in the evening, something like a pinch of cinnamon on ice cream or a fruit pie resting on a window sill.

She climbed down from the balcony, adjusted the bag on her shoulder, and made her way slowly through the streets lit not by street lamps, but by fairy lights. The quiet corners and quiet places, that’s where the designer walked, looking out over the glow that framed the buildings and the windows spilling gold out onto the streets. A bookstore hosted a small party, coffee and tea being offered for a visiting author that Marinette had never heard of and she pulled away just as someone turned to glance outside.

The backend of many stores featured garbage bins, some new stock that was slowly being brought inside, and, occasionally, tables and chairs for people to eat surrounded by the most quiet you could find in Paris. Marinette ducked past those places as quickly and silently as she could, pressing her finger to her lips when a young boy saw her, his eyes wide and fruit falling from his open mouth.

He stared after her even long after she had ducked around a corner, and Marinette giggled her eyes bright as she peeked back at him, watching as he pointed to where she disappeared and chattered excitedly to his parents in his own tongue. The large ears above her head twitched and she paused, sniffing at the air, taking in the hint of leaf and the strong mint normally found in tea.

“It seems that what they say about foxes is true,” a voice spoke up behind Marinette and she hissed in surprise, spinning around, ears at attention, and eyes wide. A man, an old man, with balding, black hair, a goatee, and warm brown eyes was watching her, leaning hard on an engraved bamboo cane circled with turtles, snakes, chickens, and rabbits. Perhaps what stood out about him the most, however, was the bright blue Hawaiian shirt he wore with pale pink flowers and small coral green surfers.

He looked familiar the same way an old hobby from childhood was familiar and the designer tried to place his face. Maybe he was a friend of her mother’s? Maybe she saw him on the street once?

Marinette tilted her head to the side and narrowed her eyes. “What do they say about foxes?”

“That they’re never where you expect them to be,” the man said, holding his cane with both hands.

The designer frowned and the scarf-tail flicked behind her. It was a nervous gesture, one that would seem impatient to cats and happy to dogs. “I suppose,” Marinette spoke slowly, “that it’s true.” She had never heard it before, but, then again, many people don’t often hear what people spread around their backs unless someone tells them. It would make sense that a Fox would not
know what people said about Foxes unless they happened to listen very, very closely to every
conversation.

She noticed the stacks of boxes, then, that seemed more like the walls of a castle than a delivery
and then looked down at the old man leaning heavily on his cane. A frown marred the designer’s
lips and she glanced over her shoulder at the night and the escape that waited for her.

It could wait a little while longer.

“Would you like some help?” Marinette offered, motioning with one hand to the packages.

The slight widening of brown eyes spoke of true surprise and the man glanced at the boxes before
turning back to her, a thoughtful look on his face. “If you wouldn’t mind,” he said.

“I don’t,” the designer promised and reached for the first three, balancing them against her chest
and cheek. It would be good to get other things spread about Foxes; her helping a gossipy old man
might build a small amount of trust, might break down walls a little at a time.

Marinette followed him back to his shop, heading through the delicate, wood door and paused,
briefly, at the pale, paper lanterns and dark, watercolour paintings that decorated the walls. A pot
of bamboo grew in the corner and she hesitated a moment, not looking back at the man following
her. A flush was growing on her cheeks, darkening as she looked upon a painted Mandarin
character she knew meant Health, but couldn’t read.

The man didn’t make it awkward, pointing out where each of the carefully labelled boxes were
supposed to go, so Marinette slowly relaxed. Some packages were placed in the kitchen, push
unobtrusively into a corner to go through later, others in a couple of different rooms, and the
designer found herself pausing as the smell of jasmine seeped into the shop.

“Would you like some tea?” The man offered as she brought in the last of his things.

Marinette glanced over at the sleek, brown clay teapot and cups placed upon the table on a
bamboo mat. She glanced back towards the door, ears twitching, and then slowly moved towards
a chair. Each movement was carefully controlled and slow, like a cat wary of something large
lurking in the shadows and ready to spring away at any moment.

She stood by the chair, glanced down at the waiting cup, and took a deep breath. “Thank you,”
the designer said softly, folding her hands just below her chest and bowed far enough to duck her
head, but no so far as to bring her nose to the table. Then Marinette sat, picked the cup up with
both hands, smelled the steam rising up from the liquid, and took a small sip.

The old man watched her with bright eyes, his expression unreadable, but thoughtful. Her fake
fox ears twitched and Marinette took another sip of the tea, letting the liquid sit on her tongue
before swallowing.

“I am Master Fu,” the man spoke up after her cup was half done, looking over brown clay that
matched his own, dark eyes.

Marinette jerked, realizing that they hadn’t really introduced themselves to each other. “I’m...” she
paused and the fox miraculous warmed against her collar. “My name is Vulpecula,” the designer
finished, saying the words slowly so that she wouldn’t accidently introduce herself with her actual
name.

“Vulpecula,” he said, tasting the word on his tongue, rolling it around his teeth like some sort of
hard candy. He was staring at her, eyes narrowed just slightly as he took a drink of his own tea.
The designer wondered if this was what animals in a zoo felt like; stared at, judged, with no power to stop it. She felt Huuxi’s ire rise up in the back of her mind and, if the kwami had been sitting beside her, he would have had his teeth bared and hackles raised.

“Your energies are out of balance,” Master Fu continued. He watched her, as if he was testing her reaction, waiting for surprise, acknowledgment, or something else that would show in her expression.

Marinette carefully tried to keep her face expressionless even as her heart thumped loudly in her chest. She’s not sure if it worked—she was too expressive for it to actually work—and, by the slight rise of Master Fu’s eyebrow, it didn’t. Her thoughts went back to a night in a bathroom where she ripped a toothbrush out of a cup and tried to use it as a sword against the ghosts of her memory.

“It is not wise to keep such things unchecked,” Master Fu said, still watching her with those iron-like eyes.

The steam rising up from the cup suddenly reeked of clay and dust, the splash of orange colouring in a paining teased her with the smell of citrus. Bile rose up in the back of her mouth and the designer could almost hear the words that would come out of the dark, could almost feel the hands—

Marinette placed the partially finished cup of tea carefully on the table to hiding the shaking of her hands and stood, not caring if it was rude to leave the drink unfinished. Her skin prickled uncomfortably and ice slithered through her veins, forcing a small shiver to rise up from the bottom of her spine up to her neck. “Thank you for the tea,” she said with a small bow and then promptly took off towards the back door, ducking into the dark back streets while her heart tried to force its way out of her chest.

Outside, the smell of oil, bread, and wood surrounded her. Humidity forced the blown away by the wind to be sodden and stick to little fences, and little fairy lights kept the nothingness at bay until Marinette could breathe. She breathed in as much air as her lungs could hold and held it. The fake ears on her head twitched at the sounds of car wheels and motors, of people talking and laughing that slowly replaced the blood rushing through her ears.

A few more deep breaths replaced the clay and dust, the phantom of citrus, and, when Marinette could think clearly again, she closed her eyes and tilted her face up to the sky. You’re okay, she told herself. Everything is fine.

Okay, so it wasn’t fine, but it was better and she could finally think again without her muscles aching to run far, far away. She took another couple of breaths before fleeing from the place, not looking back at the Chinese shop and the eyes watching her from the window. Marinette didn’t know where she was going, nor did she care, just taking random turns and avoiding the main streets, keeping far enough from the lit up windows that her body was never touched and, yet, close enough to dance just out of sight.

She found her way to an empty park and finally stopped, freezing along the edge of the walkway and glancing around at empty benches. Still Marinette kept to the trees, bushes, and desolate flower beds, walking over the hibernating grass before she saw the fountain. It wasn’t on, of course, but the designer was drawn to the carved stone anyway. She sat on the edge and looked out over the tree line to the buildings beyond, focusing on the rise and fall of the angles as her legs came up and her arms wrapped around her knees.

That comment from Master Fu—the one about her energies being unbalanced—it was true. She ducked her head between her arms and breathed out with a shaking breath. Even just the mention
of something being wrong from a stranger was enough to freak her out, she thought bitterly and rested her cheek on her kneecaps.

Anger rose up from her stomach like a tidal wave—sucking up every emotion over the past couple of days to fuel it until it shadowed everything else around her. It was clogging her throat even as her eyes stung and Marinette pushed herself off the fountain and paced around it. Twelve steps to the left, stop, turn, then twelve to the right. She kicked out at a stone and watched it hit a tree hard enough to crack off splinters of bark.

She ran gloved fingers through her hair and the fury only rose when the leather stuck to the strands. The desire to reach back and rip out every strand one by one made her fingers twitch and Marinette bit her tongue to keep from screaming, swallowing back every sound she wanted to make so they gathered like stones in her stomach. Her teeth dug into the thick material of the suit and she held it there, on the place between her thumb and her wrist, digging in just so that the sudden frustration and rage would bleed out through a small act of violence.

The gloves were too thick for her to do damage to herself and, with the lack of pain, Marinette felt the desire to kick something grow so much that she looked around for anything to slam her heel into. Her teeth left imprints on the suit that healed only after a couple of seconds and that little thing finally had her picking up a rock on the edge of the path and throwing it at the nearest thing—which just so happened to be a bench—with a howl that ripped through her throat carrying all that pent up rage and hatred.

Stone hit metal with a sharp clang and the sound vibrated through her head.

*Stone and dust and shadows along the wall from a battery operated lantern. There was a metal bar in her hand, heavy and sharp from rust around the edges that stuck to her skin almost painfully.*

*A scream that rose up from the very depths of her soul.*

*The same bar clattering against the ground as she threw up so violently it felt as though her stomach would come up through her nose.*

Marinette flinched away from the bench and pressed her palms against her eyes with a low curse that was smothered by a rough, choking sob. She stumbled away from the rock and the bench, back towards the trees and bushes, tripping over exposed roots until she tumbled over the ground, falling clumsily to her knees, and stayed there. Her hands pressed against her face and she breathed in the leather and smell of spice that seemed to be embedded into the Miraculous.

Finally, finally, when it felt as if she could breathe again, Marinette fell back on the grass, dug her fingers into the dirt, and stared up at the sky. Exhaustion rolled through her and she let her limbs lay like noodles underneath the stars, the brown leaves of grass tickling the back of her neck and sides of her cheeks.

She was so tired of just being consumed by all these stupid emotions. Wrapping a hand around some of the grass, she ripped it out of the ground and tossed it up into the air with a groan. The little pieces fluttered back down onto her stomach like sad confetti and Marinette wiped the mess off with the back of her hand and sighed.

Curse Master Fu and whoever the hell he was, sitting there and telling her that her energy was out of balanced. Marinette scowled, she knew that there was something wrong, but there was nothing she could do about it. There was no way to fix it, no way of getting rid of those memories without stripping them from her mind, no way of turning back time and doing anything different.
She shivered as a breeze brushed over her nose. It wasn’t cold, exactly, just a reminder that she was outside and not down in the dark, silent, catacombs. Marinette didn’t want to think about Casimir Cavey either, she didn’t want to think about anything.

“I’m not brave,” she had told Huuxi all those weeks ago.

Perhaps it was true; perhaps she was nothing more than a coward unwilling to face a final, great fear. The Final Boss, so to speak. That Last Obstacle before The End.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng was nothing more than a coward.

The metal against her chest warmed sharply as if telling her to ‘knock it off’ before cooling again and the designer wrapped her hand around the Miraculous, breathing out slowly through her nose. Huuxi’s admonishment was clear and she flushed slightly, rolling onto her stomach to bury her face in her folded arms. The loam of the earth was there, filling up her nose until it was all that she could smell. Marinette used the petrichor to focus her thoughts through the rollercoaster of emotions still burning in her chest.

It was not an easy thing to stop being afraid. She drew lines in the dirt with her fingers, between each blade of grass until she had created a maze for ants. “What do I do?” The designer asked the plants and looked up to the stars, focusing on the low hanging ivory glimmer of the moon. It was halfway hidden behind some bare branches, not having yet fully risen in the sky.

“What would you do?” She wondered softly and immediately felt silly. The moon was not a person, nor a being with active thought. It was a collection of stone and rock that circled the earth, pulling at the water and blood of the things living on the surface.

Marinette pushed herself up to her feet and brushed off her front, glancing back at the moon and sighing softly before turning on her heel to head, well, anywhere really. The streets were more empty now, people having arrived at whichever place they wanted to go whether that was home or someplace else leaving very few to wander about. She braved the streets then, turning whatever way she felt like as her thoughts kept trying to follow her feet and catch up.

An American President had once said that courage wasn’t the absence of fear, but rather deciding that something else was more important than that fear and doing it anyway.

Her fear was Casimir and there was no reason to do anything about that. What could she do, anyway? Walk up to him in the hospital, give him a good ol’ punch to the nose, and tell him ‘that was for all the things you don’t remember doing to me’? Marinette sighed heavily for what felt like the millionth time that evening and felt like slamming her head against the nearest wall.

What could she even say to him? It wasn’t like she could go to him as Vulpecula—

Or.

Or.

Marinette froze, staring blankly at a sign.

Or she could do just that. Maybe... maybe seeing him like that, like a human being, like a student would get rid of the nightmares of the monster. Maybe if she just reminded herself that he wasn’t an akuma anymore she would stop thinking of him as one.

And there was something comforting about him being bound to a hospital bed anyway.

oOo
Looking back, it was fair to say that rushing head first into any situation was not the brightest choice. Hindsight, however, is always better after the fact but, to be clear, it is always better to make decisions after asking someone advice about them first. Unless, of course, you are in the middle of the ocean surrounded by some sort of mythical creature that demanded a sacrifice to leave you alive and the only way to do that was to either feed it you or your best friend.

In that case, asking for advice might result in two options; 1) the monster gets bored and decides to eat both you and your friend or 2) your friend pushes you overboard to save their own skin. There is, of course, the viable third option where either you or your friend sacrifices themselves to save the other person but humanity is fickle and very few people do that who are not called Harry Potter.

Advice, however, is very important in all other areas of life especially when there is no such thing as a Plan involved and the answer to any question that would normally inspire a Plan is ‘well, I guess I’ll just wing it’.

Marinette was currently in a very serious relationship with ‘just winging it’ ignoring her own questions of what she’ll say if she ran into hospital staff or if there were guards outside Casimir’s room (if she could even find his room).

The lobby was empty with no one but the receptionist at the front steadily typing on the computer and Marinette walked up to simply ask where Casimir’s room was. Without looking up, the woman typed in something and told her (in the kind of voice that had lost all emotion or feeling about twenty years ago) that he was currently in room 506 and that visiting hours were almost over.

“Thank you,” the designer said and scrambled off to find the stairs.

What she was about to do caught up with her around the third floor but she squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, and pushed on. She had to pause another flight up, held tight to the banister, and whispered, “you can do this” over and over until she was able to almost believe it.

By the fourth floor, she was stomping her jelly legs to make them hold her up and when she reached the door leading out to the rooms on the fifth, her hand was shaking so bad that Marinette was more worried about not being able to open the door leading out to the hallway. She managed to steady her grip after a few shuddering breaths and stepped past the threshold.

The lights on the other side seemed too bright, like sunlight reflecting off snowfall, and Marinette fought the urge to cover her eyes. She blinked instead, letting her gaze focus and adjust before trying to find a sign mentioning where each room was located. Just focus on the small things. One little step at a time.

When she was in front of room 506, Marinette froze, her eyes on the painted numbers, fingers hovering just above the door knob. It was dark inside, the lights off and curtains closing off the windows. She saw no movement through the small glass keeping her separated from the boy on the other side but, still, the designer hesitated.

There’s nothing to fear, Marinette hissed at herself, urging her frozen body to move. It wasn’t like Casimir was going to be waiting on the other side of the door, posed to strike the moment she walked in. Swallowing harshly, the young woman bit her bottom lip hard enough to think she felt the blood vessels between her teeth. This was ridiculous.

Narrowing her eyes, she forced her fingers to close around the door knob and twist before pushing. The hinges creaked and she flinched, poking her head through the gap and then squeezing the rest of her body through into the room like a fox pushing through a hole in a fence.
to escape a rabid dog. Marinette shut the door quietly behind her and turned. The ears on the top of her head twitched forward, focusing on the machines around Casimir’s bed as her eyes adjusted to the dimness.

Tubes were in his wrist and his nose. Dark colouration spread across his forehead and cheek—partially healed now. A leg was set in a dark blue cast and Marinette closed her eyes and just breathed in and out through her mouth before taking a step closer. His hair fell lifelessly across his face, the once handsome features drawn and thin with dark half circles under his eyes.

He looked...

He looked like a broken doll.

And Marinette never hated him more than in that moment, seeing him lying there in a bed, pills keeping the pain at bay while she twisted herself inside out just to sit down in a chair every day at school. He rested here, in peace, while she woke up ripping her blankets to shreds under the fear of strangling hands pressing her down onto stone floors.

How dare he?

The designer tore away, stalking across the end of the bed and then turning back, keeping her eyes on his broken face as she paced back and forth like a jaguar in a cage. Every part of her body vibrated with desired violence and the muscles across her shoulders were stiff as Marinette reached out to drag the tips of her nails across the bar on the bed only to pull back at the last second.

Casimir shifted with a soft groan and the designer froze, her eyes flashing coldly in the light coming through that small window on the door, but he didn’t wake.

“Why?” Marinette hissed, her arms pulling in closer to her body, lips pulled back over her teeth, and spine curving until it looked as if she was curling in on herself, making herself more compact to lunge forward and...

And...

She raised her hand without thinking about it, controlled more by emotion than any actual thought process, and wanted to do... to do something, to do anything, to that sleeping boy on the bed when the sound of approaching footsteps sent her scrambling under the bed, curling up so she couldn’t be seen from the window or anyone coming in. Whoever it was walked past the room, whistling a small, repetitive tune as Marinette panted against the floor, her cheek pressing into linoleum.

What are you doing, Marinette? A voice said in the back of her head, rumbling through her body with the age of a millennium behind it. She scrambled out from her hiding place, ripped open the curtains, and slid the window open. The cold, autumn breeze was a slap to the sternum and her chest caught on the chilly air, freezing her body even as she was tempted for one last look.

Go, that same voice snarled.

She did, crawling out the window and closing it behind her, carefully using the brick on the outside of the hospital to get to the ground and running as fast and as hard as she could from that room and its occupant until she ran out of breath somewhere that the buildings looked like they hadn’t been maintained in quite a while with the paint flaking off the outside and the windows boarded up with wood that had been spray painted so many times that each new layer looked like it was shadowed by a couple hundred works.

Sliding down one of the walls, curled up behind a battered trash bin, Marinette hissed as the
miraculous heated and the magic snapped around her, the transformation falling away brutally, leaving her exposed to the cold, night air. She wrapped her arms around her torso and tried to quell the sudden chattering of her teeth and the shivers that tore through her body, but nothing worked.

“Marinette,” Huuxi said at last, his voice crackling with a stiff anger that was being carefully contained.

The designer couldn’t look at him, her face burrowed in her folded arms as her eyes stung and her breathing grew harsher, rougher, and more broken as the seconds passed. She didn’t want to see the look in his eyes, the expression on his face. So she wrapped her arms around her head and dug her nails into the back of her neck.

“Marinette,” The kwami said again, more forcefully and she flinched slightly, shaking her head at the sound of his voice, “look at me.”

There was a new feeling festering in her stomach that felt like a beast ripping apart her intestines and tying them back together tighter and around her throat. Shame. It was shame that burned the back of her throat, which filled her lungs with water so she couldn’t breathe and tore at her stomach until she thought that if she threw up everything would come up in a bloody ball made with shredded strips of flesh.

Small paws brushed against her hand and Marinette finally—finally—looked up at the kwami.

“You were not ready to see him,” Huuxi told her softly—there was no burning rage in his eyes, no declaration of her mistake and her hatred and what she had almost done—and she hiccupped hard enough for her ribs to ache. “Not like that, not like...” He sighed. The image of him was swimming and unfocused, blurry around certain edges and sharper in the corners.

She blinked to clear her eyes and the burning sensation only to feel something hot and wet drip down her cheeks.

“S-sorry,” Marinette managed and choked back a sob. It ached inside of her and she waited until she had gasped for air before escape, turning every breath into a rough hiccup, every inhale into something choked and heavy. “I-I’m s-sorry—” She uncurled her arms simply so she could breathe, but not her legs, holding on to the fox miraculous with white knuckled fingers, keeping it close to her chest as her sternum bucked like a wild horse. Her rib cage felt like it was cracking and the designer let out another burst of hiccupping sobs, her face a mess of snot and tears as she tried to frantically clean it away just so she could see clearly.

“You weren’t ready,” Huuxi was saying even as he tried to shush her, brushing his paws against her chin and cheeks, gold eyes wide and dark, “You are not ready for something like that—”

That only made it worse and she felt like a puzzle being knocked off a table, broken back into a couple thousand pieces when it hit the floor.

“I-I’m sorry, I di-didn’t mea—I wasn-wasn’t—!”

“Shh,” he urged, “Marinette stop, just, for the love of Yggkaouro, please just stop.” Huuxi’s voice was choked, almost as broken as her sobbing but he simply wasn’t big enough to wrap his arms around her, to pull her against him and keep her warm and safe.

He was small, only barely larger than her closed fist, but her did his best to wipe away her tears and press his cheek to hers, offering what comfort he could. Marinette cupped him in her hands and held him there, shaking in the dark as if that could hide her thoughts.
“It will be okay,” the kwami murmured as her broken sobs cracked through the silent night.

oOo

Marinette didn’t quite remember how she got home. There had been a transformation involved because she wouldn’t stop shivering and her teeth wouldn’t stop clattering. Her face was sticky and swollen and crusty from all the crying but she pressed it into her pillow and curled up away from the kwami. Wrapping the blanket around herself, almost wanting it to turn into the memory of strangling hands, the designer stared at the pink paint of her wall.

“Fear sometimes makes us into people we never want to be,” Huuxi said softly from his place on her desk, his voice loud enough that she could hear it over the occasionally car and the settling of her home, “our duty is to not let our fear control us.”

“I could have hurt him,” Marinette whispered, her voice catching on the barbs of her words, “I would have hurt him.” There was moment where she thought about how her hand had raised above Casimir, how she had... how she had stopped when the footsteps had come.

She could feel the kwami’s eyes focused on her back and she clutched the blanket in her fist, refusing to turn around. “Would you?” He asked carefully, tone strangely gentle.

Would she?

Could she?

oOo

Outside, the dark night of Paris flooded the old streets. A man coughed as he lumbered home, a woman tightened her fingers around the knife hidden inside her coat. The moon watched the world continue, the lives of the people beneath her quieted by the stars and the darkness of a rotating earth.

A baby woke up their parents with a wail. A small white dog barked out into the night.

And, from the shadows, through a rip between the earth and the sky, came a glowing, spectral spear. It dug into the ground as the bells of a church range once in warning, before it was whisked away as a pale, teal mist.

The moon watched and she knew, but just as when Marinette spoke to her earlier, she couldn’t speak of the times to come.

She could do nothing but watch.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if people are still interested in this story but I'm making steady progress back into writing it.

Thank you so much for your patience, your kind words, and the encouragement in your reviews. I'm still dealing with a couple of rough patches, but I got a new job that allows more free time for writing.

Thank you and please have a pleasant rest of your day.
The Hole in The Heart

Chapter Summary

Memory comes when memory’s old
I am never the first to know
Following the stream up North
Where do people like us float

There is room in my lap
For bruises, asses, handclaps
I will never disappear
For forever, I'll be here
Whispering

-Morning Keep the Streets Empty

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is a world beyond the one that we know. It is strong, it is wise, but, most of all, it is hungry.

It has been caged for too long, it snarls in the shadows and strains against its bonds.

But soon it shall be free.

Because we will set it free.

That is our destiny.

oOo

Carved rock loomed around Marinette, encircling every free centimetre leaving nothing except for a hair’s width to squeeze past sharpened stones that dug into her bared skin, scratching up her arms and face, threatening to take a chunk out of her skull if she moved too fast, to twist or snap her ankle if she stepped wrong. Behind her, she heard the footsteps, the baying of a hunt and thunder as he could move freely through the closed tunnels.

As he came closer.

Her way was lit by the glow from behind and it hindered more than helped as the shadow from her body disguised holes as safe spots and just-now-forming stalactites as flat ceiling. Her hands were pressed against the walls, palms dragging, feeling, over grooves and catches that slipped between her fingers and cut her skin deep enough to leave steadily growing blood prints behind.

Marinette went faster, scrambling as well as she could as the air became hotter, as her breath drew laboured.
No, no, no, please no, she begged as the light grew brighter. Her nails caught on a groove and she hissed as the pain shot up through her wrist and into her shoulder. The scream grew and died in her throat as the air grew heavy enough to drown in.

Marinette tripped, her knees dragging along the ground and she tried to find a hand hold to pull herself up only to find the stone gone and nothing but decaying skeletons of homes and buildings around her. Trees with gnarled branches and heavy limbs twisted around her accusingly, the bushes were sharp and thin with leaves that looked oily and lifeless.

The stone tunnels were gone, leaving nothing but a ghastly desolation. Marinette breathed in the air that reeked of rot and decay and felt her body move slowly as if life was a ghost here in this place.

See, a voice whispered in her head, sad like the mournful wind and soft like a queen who had grown wise in years of poverty and discord. The sound echoed around her like it was tangible, like it, itself, was a whole person, see this place. It said. See what it has become.

“I don’t understand,” Marinette said, what do you want? What do you want me to know?

Something rose up behind her and she spun to look only to find nothing. Chains clanged in the distance, softly like they were blowing in the wind and Marinette felt as though ice had been poured into her stomach.

Eyes were watching her, hunting her.

Voices rose up from the spectral mist, dark fires glowing blue and green burned on the edges like eyes gleaming on creatures unseen.

I... must remember...

Your human form is so confining... you could be infinite—

What delightful agony—

Fear the thundering hooves of the dead!

I will take them all to a better place...

Together, they surrounded her, whispering in her ears, just over her shoulder, hidden in the shadows of the trees and the darkness of the ruins. Marinette flinched away and those clanging chains were coming closer, the beat of feet that chased through the tunnels turned into hooves and she turned as a spear flew through the air, piercing the mists and aiming at her chest—

She jerked awake before it struck, a scream in her throat, hands twisted in the blanket that was supposed to be covering her. Marinette pushed everything off of her and sat panting in the dark, sweat sticking her hair to her forehead and pyjamas to her skin.

The time blinked at her from the alarm clock and it was too early for anyone to be up—even bakers—and the designer wiped her hands down her face and tried to keep the heavy sigh from bleeding out of her mouth. Her heart was still pumping, beating like those hooves against her ribs and she pressed her unmarked palm to her chest where the fox miraculous lay.

It hadn’t been there when she had gone to sleep, but now her fingers curled around the metal and Marinette took a deep, shuddering breath. “Just a dream,” she murmured, her voice nothing more than a breath in the dark. “It was just a dream.”
She climbed slowly, almost painfully, down the ladder and pulled off her pyjamas, reaching for a new pair before heading off to the bathroom. Huuxi’s gaze was on her, she could feel it on the back of her neck but the designer kept moving, taking slow deep breaths and reminding herself that there was nothing that should be feared in the shadows of her house.

But she kept the miraculous around her neck, just in case, finding comfort in the presence of the metal and warmth of the chain.

oOo

It was nothing more than a passing remark on the news, a small little article in the paper. A man found murdered in the park. Officials looking into what happened. Simple, easy, murders happened all the time (far more often than they should, but they happened).

But not like this.

Not in this way.

Blood splashed across the brown grass, splattered in patterns on the trunks of trees and the leaves that still rested limply on the bushes. His white dress shirt was sliced open, crimson creating a grotesque painting across his chest and up his neck where it had ran in his death throes. Pale eyes stared at the sky, his mouth still open in a silent scream no one had heard.

The holes in his torso were from something that pierced through his ribcage, coming out the back before they had been ripped out again. It would have been agonizing. Of course, the police didn’t tell this to the already panicked population of Paris.

Perhaps they should have.

Perhaps it would have saved more lives, in the end.

oOo

The dreams followed Marinette through the rest of the school week, leaving her drowsy and sluggish with whispers in her ears and shapeless forms just out of sight, teasing her in the corner of her vision. She could barely concentrate on her school work and the others glanced at her in concern, carefully removing her work load piece by piece in group projects and making sure she didn’t forget her homework when they were released at the end of the day.

With sleep just out of reach in the evenings, the designer was stuck doing her homework, working out the fine kinks of her new ‘blog’, write out that so-called article for her school, and half-heartedly crochet a new hat out of the red and white yarn, making a little fox-eared beanie that also doubled as a kwami bed for Huuxi. She sometimes would fall asleep on her desk, managing to get enough sleep to make it through the next day but not enough to ever fully rest.

And, if she slept too long, the nightmares returned. Casimir was in most of them, but strange things began to appear—a woman in ancient armour with ghastly glowing eyes, a chained hook that shot out of the space between shadows, catching on her shoulder and dragging her from her rest, a mournful wail that seemed to rise and fall depending upon whether she was alone or not.

So she wrote her little blog post and she crocheted and she watched the days count down until the next break.

The end of October was coming, winter looming and the slowly growing tradition of Halloween in Paris had risen up from the small little place it hid all year long. Children whispered about their
costumes—ghosts, ghouls, vampires, and the ever popular witch—while their parents either groaned and muttered about the “American Holiday” or got behind it with the same enthusiasm as the kids. Spiders and dolls decorated fences, the faces of witches loomed over sidewalks, and movies began to litter the channels on the television. Horror movies, creepy movies, movies about monsters and spooks and those things that go bump in the night.

Marinette watched the small decorations appear in the windows of shops around the streets by the bakery. Her parents had put little pumpkin stickers in the windows and made little cakes decorated as spiders, smiling pumpkins, and the occasional bat. More deliveries were requested for sweets with haunted decorations, something her parents proudly took in stride. There wasn’t a day that the designer would walk in through the doors and families were gathered outside the door, looking in the windows at the treats.

‘Candies or a Spell’ was chanted by children skipping from door to door, their eyes bright and their faces caked with makeup. Marinette watched them walk with their bags down the streets, parents following doggedly, their watchful eyes keeping track of the shadows and the candlelit windows.

“What is this?” Huuxi asked her, bundled up in one of her scarves, his body wrapped around her mug of tea.

“They call it Halloween,” Marinette told him softly, the dark bags under her eyes prominent even in the dim fairy lights that twinkled on her balcony. Her dreams were catching up to her, rising like a hunting hound and chasing her through the early hours of the morning until sleep was its own phantom, haunting her just out of reach.

The kwami glanced up at her, his gold eyes brighter, somehow, even under the new-moon sky. “‘They’?” He wondered.

“Americans,” The designer murmured, leaning over the railing and looking out over the skyline backlit by the amber light. The silhouettes were sharper in the orange glow, looking like the teeth of Jack-O-Lanterns against the sky. “It’s an American holiday that was adopted, I supposed.”

Huuxi looked amused, “why do they dress up?”

Marinette shrugged, not knowing the answer to that herself, and went back to counting the ghouls and witches. One girl was wearing bright green makeup that seemed to cover not only her face but her neck, hands, and arms. The fabled Wicked Witch of the West. Smiling at the image, the teenager stifled a yawn and blinked a couple of times to clear the tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

She shivered in an evening breeze and felt Huuxi’s gaze on her. Not bothering to look at him—Marinette knew she would just see the concern in his eyes—the designer went back to her people watching. Someone was holding a long, lit candle, balancing the flame carefully as his friends danced and ran about him. Her eyes glimmered with pinpricks of stars as the laughter wafted up towards her, creating a song with the cars and the people still out and a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth at the antics beneath her.

A child laughed beneath them, chattering like a bird with their friends, a mother called out for her son to ‘stop running or I’ll never feed you again!’ Tomorrow would be the sombre celebrations, the visits to the graveyards, the meals with family. For now, though, there was laughter and joy in the face of death.

Turning away from the balcony and the streets below, Marinette sat down on her weather-battered chair, curled her legs up underneath her, and looked up at the sky. Huuxi settled in her lap, still
wrapped up in the scarf, his large ears twitching back and forth as if he was listening to something. The designer smoothed her finger over the crown of his head, rubbing that spot between his ears that was hard to reach.

oOo

There are doors that have long been closed.
Eyes kept shut and voices silenced.
Now, the hour has come, and a rough beast shakes itself from deep slumbers.
Soon the whole world would see.
But it would not understand.

oOo

The countdown for All Saints Day began, the clock ticking up in seconds as Huuxi watched. Marinette was curled under her blankets, face pressed against her pillow, eyes closed, for once, in a peaceful sleep. Midnight loomed ever closer and a cloud blocked the dark surface of the moon, hiding the pale lady from the sight of the world.

Then, the clock struck and the ground shuddered like a giant wolf, shaking off the snow that had gathered on its back when it slept. Its teeth were bared, its limbs posed to strike. Huuxi snarled back, his wide, gold eyes narrowed to slits, ears pressed back against his head.

The veil between worlds fluttered like a curtain in a breeze.
A black butterfly fluttered under the stars.
A woman sobbed underneath broken ceramics, soils, and ruined life.
A smile in the dark.
A voice that tempted sweet sin.
And the veil tore open with a howl of agony.

Beneath the bakery, the earth moaned, cracked, and shattered. Buildings trembled and shook, glassware vibrated closer to the sides of what they sitting on, racing to head to the cliff that would lead to the floor, objects in shop windows tumbled off displays, and the cars began to panic, honking and blinking their lights. Parisians stumbled out of their beds, peering blearily through their windows to see what was going on.

Marinette woke with a choked scream, her fingers clawing blindly at her blankets, eyes wide and wild as she scrambled to the edge of her bed like a frightened cat and half fell, half climbed her way to the floor. The fox miraculous was grasped in her hand, the metal edges digging into her palm as she collapsed with her forehead pressed against the floor, shoulders shaking as the stone beneath Paris wailed in anguish.

Limestone columns eaten away by water quaked underneath the force, cracking under the sudden weight and horror that came through the hole. They trembled like knees after a run that was too long before finally collapsing. Above them, the ceiling caved in, folding like a man in a game of poker with a horrible hand of cards.
A different tremble went through Paris then, screams rising up over the edge of the city, the
gaping chasm growing like a mouth opening, waiting to devour the people whole.

In her bedroom, Marinette curled up on the cold, wood floor, her palm pressed flat against the
boards, eyes staring blankly at the wall as she panted. Her other hand was closed around the
burning metal of the miraculous, body shaking as a roar grew that only she and Huuxi could hear.

It was a howl of agony, a scream that pierced through the silence, consuming all other sounds and
filling every crack until Marinette’s head was ringing and sweat dripped off her skin to puddle
beneath her and in the dips and valleys of her flesh. Her nails clawed against the floor, leaving
depth gouges in the wood that looked strikingly like claw marks. The muscles in her back and
along her ribs contracted, tensing like a spring and she arched with a strange cracking sound that
only came from bones forced into a place too fast and too roughly. She didn’t notice Huuxi had
started pulling at her fingers; her body shaking like an addict’s, eyes blurry and unfocused, her
mind not working as it was filled with only pain painpain.

Each breath was a wheeze, her lungs sounding like a smoker’s after a particularly bad coughing
fit, and the designer sobbed as another burst of agony struck through her. She whimpered through
grittled teeth, her molars feeling like they would crack under the pressure of her jaw.

“Let go of the miraculous, Marinette!” The kwami howled, tugging at her frozen fingers, “Let
go!”

Her knuckles were bleached white, her bones locked in position and muscles frozen by pain. The
designer jerked away from him like a puppet whose strings had been yanked on and Huuxi hissed
an apology before biting down on her finger with his sharp, little teeth. It was enough force to
shock her hand into opening, dropping the necklace to the floor with a clunk. He pulled the metal
away, revealing a sharp line burned into the designer’s skin and she gasped for air, curling up on
her side with a sob only muffled by her lips dragging against the splintered floor.

“—Deep breaths,” his voice urged through the thick snowfall that seemed to have blanketed her
mind, “you have to take deep breaths, Marinette.”

She tried to obey but her chest was being squeezed by an invisible snake and her throat was
clogged with snot and tears. A rough cough managed to dislodge most of it and the designer rolled
over onto her back, staring at the ceiling as her chest rose and fell. “W—what—” Marinette tried to
speak and then swallowed around the sandpaper in her throat. Her jaw ached each time she
opened it. “W—what happened?”

Huuxi pressed his paws to her cheek, his bright eyes filled with a strange type of fear—a true fear,
one that only existed when something truly horrible was going to happen

Marinette felt her heart throb in her chest and it became hard to breathe again.

“The seal has cracked,” the kwami said.

The designer glanced over at the fox miraculous with its five cracks slithering like lightning bolts
across the surface. “I—” She tried and swallowed. Five. It still just had five. That wailing was still
ringing in her ears, though, and Marinette rested her forehead against the floor, panting against it.
“T—the seal?” Her thoughts were jumbled like a pen with running ink that couldn’t write without
the letters bleeding into each other.

“The seal, our seal—shhh,” Huuxi turned to her, pressing himself against her cheek as she tried to
stand up. “It shouldn’t have gone to you,” he hissed and glared at the necklace on the floor.

The designer shook her heavy head, trying to clear the strange fog that held onto her thoughts with
a tightening fist, plucking at the words she tried to say like they were guitar strings. “The miraculous?"

“Yes,” soft fur brushed under her nose and one long, ear twitched as she exhaled.

“Y-You said s-seal—”

“Your miraculous is not a seal,” Huuxi corrected gently, catching on to her confusion at last. “None of them are. They are more like,” he paused and frowned slightly, body still pressed against her, “They are more like keys.”

Marinette breathed out a soft ‘oh’ as if she understood (she didn’t). Her body shook with small shivers and she closed her eyes as she rested against the floor for a moment, trying to regain her bearings. The designer turned on her side with a groan and blinked slowly, the corner of her lips dragged along the floor and creating a macabre smile on her otherwise exhausted features. Her hands twitched hard enough that she flinched in shock.

“Can you stand?” Huuxi’s voice was gentle and foggy blue eyes partially focused on him before they closed.

Grimacing, the designer did try; she braced her palms against the floor and pushed only for her elbows to give out and send her crashing back against the wood. “N-no,” Marinette choked out, “I—I—”

“Hush now,” the kwami soothed, “that’s alright.”

Her bones ached, her muscles throbbed, then there was the liquid fire that was slithering through her veins and arteries. Marinette licked her dry lips and swallowed around the lump in her throat. “Wh-what happened?”

Huuxi froze and looked down at her, one ear flicking nervously. “You already asked that,” he told her carefully.

“I-I did?” She didn’t remember. Shifting around with a tired groan, Marinette pulled her knees up to her chest and pulled her arms in close to her body. The designer stared with half-lidded eyes at the wall, not having the energy to look anywhere else at the moment. Everything felt cracked. Everything felt broken.

She was so tired.

“A seal cracked,” Huuxi told her carefully, settling down by her hands and pressing his cheek to her burned fingers, “our seal, that’s why the earth was in pain—something happened that should not have.”

Footsteps pounded in the hallway beneath the attic and Marinette managed to focus on the trapdoor as it opened, her mother pushing the makeshift door open and focusing immediately on her daughter. Huuxi slipped into the designer’s pyjama sleeve, pressing against her wrist as the baker called down to her husband.

“Marinette!” Sabine brushed the back of her hand against her daughter’s forehead, “what happened? Are you alright?” Her hands cupped the designer’s pale cheeks, holding her head in her palms as those bright, grey eyes shone with worry.

“M-mama,” Marinette pressed against the cold skin and shivered, “I—” she swallowed and the lies burned her tongue, stinging like acid. “I h-had a nightmare and... a-and I-I think I f-fell—”
Fingers brushed back her bangs and Sabine moved closer, wrapping her arm around Marinette’s shoulder and slowly easing her up. The designer groaned at the movement, her head falling forward without the strength to keep it up so she rested it against her mother’s shoulder. “You’re very warm,” Sabine murmured gently, almost to herself even as the teenager shivered in her arms.

Outside her window, Marinette heard the sirens wail and closed her eyes, curling up against her mother for now. The rest could be dealt with later.

Yes. Later.

It took about twelve hours, three cups of hot chocolate, enough food to feed an army, and a long nap before Marinette could even look at the fox miraculous. Huuxi hovered nearby, watching her with poorly disguised concern. Her parents had whispered in the kitchen while she had been curled up on the couch, silencing themselves when she so much as looked in their direction, and kept the television firmly locked on movies and television shows, the news nowhere in sight.

Her computer provided enough images though; catacomb collapse. Six dead. Seventeen injured. Luckily, the tunnel collapse hadn’t been underneath a building, but it was close and the yawning hole in the ground made her shiver at just the thought of a foundation crumbling beneath her feet.

There was an investigation going on. Some blamed the rise of akumas, others said that it was only a matter of time. The earth mourned beneath her, whispering apologies between tiny shakes and in the breeze that swept by.

“It was a terrible accident,” Huuxi told her as she stared at the necklace still laying on the floor from where the kwami had tossed it. “We can’t fix it.”

“Not the deaths,” Marinette murmured in agreement, but still she wouldn’t move, her fingers twitching against her thighs.

Humming in agreement, the small creature glanced back up at the designer, tracing the slight frown marring her face, the way her eyes were on the miraculous, but not focused on it. “You don’t have to,” he said softly.

“Don’t I?” Her blue eyes focused on him, hard like the sky before it was going to hail. “Didn’t I promise?”

“Perhaps Paris doesn’t need any more heroes; perhaps it simply needs someone to help the heroes out, from time to time.”

The sirens had stopped a while back, but Paris carried a black shroud over her head, the sound and activity of the afternoon halted by more mourning than there should be on All Saints Day. People tiptoed about, staying home with their blinds closed and doors locked while those who had no other choice responded to the panic.

Huuxi sighed softly, his gaze dark as he watched her stand up and take a step towards the miraculous. She took a deep breath and leaned over, brushing her finger along the metal before finding the courage to pick it back up off the floor. The chain ran along the pink line across her palm, the burn sore and stinging each time she had tried to hide the mark from her parents. Now, the metal was cold, almost chill to the touch, and she hesitated for just a moment before pulling it over her head.

The fox tail hung down over her chest and she gripped it in her palm for a moment. “You said it shouldn’t have come to me,” Marinette murmured.

“I did,” The kwami admitted.
“Why?”

His gold eyes shone, catching the dark navy of her own, glimmering gaze. “Because you do not have a defence against something like that,” Huuxi told her, “because you receive the pain in everything that it is.”

“Then why?” Marinette ran her finger along the curve of the metal, tracing the edge until she reached the pointed tip. “Why did it come to me?”

The kwami’s ears twitched before drooping slightly, his bright eyes turning away to stare at something on the wall. “Because it was scared,” he said softly, “and because it trusts you.”

A frown formed on the designer’s face. “It...” she started and trailed off before lifting up the necklace, tangling the chain up between her fingers. “It trusts me?”

“Yes,” Huuxi said, “you are my chosen.”

Marinette shook her head. “No,” she said, her voice dropping to something that sounded almost like bitterness. “I found you, I bought the necklace—you didn’t choose me.” Not like an earring box suddenly in her room, of a kwami happy and eager to meet her. She remembered that first meeting, that day of being a ‘chosen’ of a miraculous and how great that had turned out.

The laugh that came out of Huuxi was shifting like the sands and brighter than the desert sun. “A person can use a miraculous,” the little fox said, patient and kind. “They can control the powers, use the magic, but that doesn’t make them a chosen.”

“I bought you,” Marinette urged, shaking the necklace in emphasis.

“Yes,” the gold eyes glittered with ancient humour, “and I am very glad.” His voice softened then, turning kind in a way that was so incredibly gentle. “It is so strange to be chosen?”

Her eyes sharpened and her hand tightened subconsciously around the miraculous. There was hesitation in her face, written in the furrow of her brow and the darkness in her eyes. Marinette didn’t shake her head, but she did look down at the necklace still between her fingers. “It didn’t work out so well, last time.”

“Maybe so,” Huuxi said, “but I think you’ve proven yourself so far with this particular miraculous and, who knows,” he gave her a small, toothy grin, “maybe the Ladybug really wasn’t a mistake, maybe you just needed something to bring you to me.”

Marinette stared at him, her face filled with enough emotion that it seemed as if she would cry or laugh in his face in the same moment.

“Maybe you were always meant to have a miraculous—no matter which one it is.” The kwami finished, his voice like silk and the designer turned away from him, looking out the window to the grey sky and the silent city.

oOo

The lifeless grass in Champ de Mars lifted, going from brown to green under the dark sky. Trees that had been left without leaves in preparation for the incoming winter were straightening; their branches suddenly filled with colour as the snow on the ground turned to water and vanished into the soil. Thick vines pushed out of the ground and curled, twisting to create a throne of thorns out of thick, wavy limbs that creaked and groaned as they grew faster than they ever would have.
The park became a forest of angles and points, the thick, poisonous thorns of some fantasy place. Somewhere that shouldn’t exist, that lived only in old animated movies about girls and witches and a forever sleep.

A strangely silent Paris, cold and distant from a new tragedy, didn’t pay attention to this brand new phenomenon. The rare person out wasn’t loitering in the parks. But that single tourist, the people who tried to move on with their lives, to keep the tragedy out of thought and out of mind found themselves being swallowed by twisting plants, their screams smothered out like small fires.

In the middle of it all, sitting on her custom made throne, an akuma smiled.

They would all care soon enough. They would all take notice of her.

And plants can be patient.

oOo

The transformation was harder for both Huuxi and Marinette, both of them aching in pain that was both theirs and someone else’s. It was the miraculous stone that carefully took it aside, but when they joined, for one, split second, the two could feel the aches that the other was feeling.

Her body still sore from that morning, the designer took to the streets with slower, careful steps than she otherwise would have, her muscles feeling like a newly mended sail being strained by the wind again for the first time. She moved along the edge of La Seine, the grey skies finally opening and releasing a steady drizzle of rain. The entirety of the city was colder, harsher, with jagged lines standing out from the cloak of grey, creating castle walls to protect the rest of the cracked but not yet broken pieces. Reflections on wet concrete seemed like long, distorted shadows—black on the water and stretching out like fingers even though there was no sun in the sky.

The only colour seemed to come from Marinette, with her beige and oranges, and the gold relief on statues, unhindered by the gloom of the afternoon. Her footsteps were the missing thunder of the small storm, echoing through the empty valleys between buildings. There wasn’t normally a lot of laughter on All Saints Day, but this... this was worse. This wasn’t quiet respect of the dead; it was fresh mourning of the lost, of the injured.

It was the quiet that only came after tragedy.

Marinette paused on the edge of the bridge leading to Place de la Concorde and looked up at the sky. She felt the rain against her cheeks, creating fresh tears that dripped down the edge of her nose, soaking her hair to her back. Beneath her, the earth groaned and she hesitated, watching the sunless heavens for just a second longer then darted towards the pain, the sadness, and the fear.

Before her was the towering figure of the Luxor Obelisk, stretching high enough that the golden tip was covered by the grey of the rain, the normally tour bus-filled oval shockingly quiet and empty. Streetlamps looked like ants compared to the limestone, the trees creating a grim, silent audience as she passed it to turn onto the empty Champs-Élysées. The beautiful street, normally filled with the hustle and bustle of Parisians and tourists alike, was nothing but a path for ghosts. The edges were walled off by trees on both sides and small, amber lights that seemed to float the further the designer looked.

Without anyone else on the avenue, Marinette was free to run down the middle of it, but it felt wrong. This wasn’t a place that was meant to be empty, that was meant to be quiet. Even during the worse of akuma attacks people were on Champs-Élysées. Over the horizon that marked the middle of the street, however, red and blue lights flickered just out of sight.
She expected that, but something familiar was missing—something square that had always seemed everlasting, something which marked the street for what it was.

A gaping maw sat in the place where the Arc de Triomphe had been.

The circular street that had surrounded it was broken, shattered, the edges like those of an egg in a frying pan. Emergency vehicles sat around the perimeter—police cars, a fire truck, and a few ambulances. Here, it was here that the earth groaned and whimpered, here where the pain had come from.

It had been late enough that very few cars had been on the street when the ground had collapsed; but she could see one, half buried beneath rock, peeking out of the darkness of what was left.

“Oh,” Marinette breathed, stunned by the destruction.

Place de l'Étoile, the Square of the Star, was gone leaving nothing but the streets that had once been the cause of its name branching out in six different directions. The people around the edges hadn’t noticed her just yet and, stunned, the designer took another, shaking step towards the darkness.

A thickly gloved hand grasped her forearm, pulling her away from the edge and she jerked, spinning on her heel with a snarl on her lips. Blue eyes stared her down, hard but not unwelcoming.

“Captain,” Marinette tried to ease the tension that had grown in her body.

Mäel Paternoster was covered by dust, his features brown with dirt that had become mud in the rain, the normally bright uniform darkened by wet earth. “Careful,” he told her, “we’re still not sure if there will be another collapse.”

There won’t be, she wanted to tell him, but the earth sighed beneath her and even Marinette wasn’t quite sure. She looked over the layers of the ground—the pipes broken and dripping into the depths, the sparks of broken wires, and the different colouration of each time period that had passed before her.

“The akuma hasn’t come back, either,” the fire fighter told her and the designer sucked in a deep breath.

“This wasn’t an akuma,” she admitted, her voice soft.

Captain Paternoster sighed heavily. “We were hoping it was,” he told her, his own words just as quiet.

“I’m sorry.”

“No,” he turned away from her, looking back over the chasm. “No, it’s not your fault.”

They stood there, together in the rain for a moment. People were talking, shouting orders through radios that buzzed and crackled. Rope and wires trailed down into the darkness, holding people Marinette couldn’t see, but knew were there anyway. A crane was being used to pull cars carefully up out of the wreckage—some had already been found, battered with shattered windows and dented tops and lined up along the blocked off Avenue de Wagram.

“I want to help,” Marinette told the Captain.

He looked at her, his eyes bright and piercing even in all the grey. “You’re young,” Paternoster
said, “and it’s dangerous.”

Marinette turned to face him; her head tilted back, the miraculous warm around her neck. The designer felt the stone beneath her plead and ache and cry. “I’ll do it your way,” she said, because this was destruction that couldn’t be fixed by destroying an akuma but, maybe, she could make it better.

A band aid over an amputated finger wouldn’t last very long, but it was better than nothing.

“Please.”

Paternoster closed his eyes and rubbed at his face, only smearing the grime even more across his features. “Fine,” he grunted, turned, and headed back towards one of the large fire trucks. Marinette followed, keeping close behind him as emergency personnel swarmed like bees—each person knowing where to go and what they needed to do for something to be done. The doors of an ambulance slammed shut and the vehicle turned off to head down one of the streets, quickly replaced by another with new paramedics replacing the old ones.

Some people were covered in dirt, some people looked exhausted, and even more were grave-faced, working without smiles or the crude humour that normally followed those types of jobs that saw the worst and best of humanity. Marinette was given a harness to climb into; a couple of thick fabric straps that hooked around her thighs and hips, attached to more that created an X on her back that hooked over her shoulders before being clasped across her chest. A man in full gear tightened the straps until they were tight, but not uncomfortable, and Marinette took the bright yellow safety helmet with a wide, LED light on the front that he offered her. It pressed the false ears back against her head and they twitched in protest, but she clasped the plastic down anyway.

Something tugged on the metal hook on her back before she heard a clunk and a click. “What’s that?” Marinette looked over her shoulder at the strangely twisted rope that was attached to a large, steel setup above her head with many a couple of others that were either not in use or had someone attached who had already gone down.

“Shockyard lanyard,” the man who hooked it to her said, his brown eyes amused even as he frowned in concentration, hooking more things to her. “That way, if you fall, you won’t break your hip.”

“That’s good,” the designer said absently. A bar was attached to the two circles hanging on either side of her thighs, bringing them up so a rope could be threaded through. “What’s that one for?”

“Evens out your weight.”

The designer nodded and jumped when he grabbed her hands, checking over her gloves before nodding and leaving them be. Her boots were inspected as well, the thick heels and soles carefully considered before the man stepped away. “I think you’re ready,” he told her.

“Think?”

His smile was all teeth and very little humour. “Not many people are actually prepared for what they see down there,” he motioned to the hole in the ground.

“Oh,” well, yes, Marinette thought absently. That’s probably true. She glanced down at the darkness that waited for her, the edges seeming sharper, the descent farther than it had before. A small sigh left her lips and the designer turned away from the dizzying drop only for the man who had helped her already moving on, leaving only Captain Paternoster.

He offered her a radio that was twice as big as the ones she had played with when she was
younger, numbers across the front like an old, brick cell phone. “Keep that on you,” the firefighter said, “we don’t know how deep it goes yet.”

“Yes, sir,” Marinette clipped it to the harness. The fake tail rose in preparation, the ears under the helmet twitching and would have been standing in attention had they not been squashed against her skull.

“Don’t take any dangerous risks,” the captain continued, ignoring her cheeky response, “if there’s someone and they’re injured but it’s too dangerous for you to go to them, call for help.” He tugged on the straps, almost lifting the teenager up off the ground. “Your safety comes first.”

Marinette nodded, her gaze just as serious as his. It wouldn’t do to have two people needing rescuing instead of just the one. She glanced back down at the hole in the ground and breathed in the smell of wet dust and broken stone. At any other time of day, at any other place, it would have been soothing.

With the sight in front of her, however, it was nothing more than sobering. The rain continued, the stone being stained with brown tears that became thinner the further they were. The designer pushed her wet hair back and away from her face. She glanced back over her shoulder at Captain Paternoster.

He gave her a single, slow nod.

“Alright,” Marinette murmured to herself and climbed down over the edge of the asphalt. Her boots caught on the thick grooves, fingers finding holes in the ridges, and, carefully, she climbed her way down. It wasn’t a straight drop all the way; at some places it evened out enough that she could slide down on her butt. At others, the ground broke off like a cliff, opening up to wide rooms were stone had crumbled and collapsed. The light on her helmet made the shadows thick and long, the water that was dripping off sharp crevices shone like tiny fairies in the dark.

There was a monster in her memory that rose up along her spine, making the hair on the back of her neck stand on edge. A different echoing drip that had her eyes flickering to every little movement in the corner of her eye.

It’s nothing, she told herself. There’s nothing here.

Nothing but the earth and the dark and the destruction that came with it. Taking a deep, gasping breath, the designer focused on what she could smell—that wet dust, the rusty metal. There was no musk of oranges and it was… it was older, here. Older, wiser, untouched for a long time.

At some point, Marinette had gone so deep that the rain didn’t reach her, just the water that had trailed down. The fragmented pieces of the Arc de Triomphe were caught on ledges and thrown this way and that. At some point she stood atop the list of names carved into the side without realizing it until she was looking down.

The radio at her hip crackled, the only sound that deep besides the dripping water, and Marinette pressed her hands against the stone.

“What happened?” She whispered, “What caused this?”

The earth hissed and wailed, trembling under her fingers. Magic surged and the designer felt as if something was sucking at her, tugging harsher and rougher until something—it or her—finally snapped leaving her breathless and kneeling on the ground. Her bones throbbed from the earlier pain, reminding her of being on the floor, her body on fire—

“W-what—”
A simple, soothing tune played up from the rock, an apology in a language she couldn’t fully understand and Marinette patted the stone beneath her like it was a patient dog. “Someone hurt you,” She whispered, digging her fingers into the loose gravel and debris, “I’m sorry.”

It was a different sound, then, that rose up through the magic; a confirmation and a sweet coo that accepted the apology and soothed that what had happened wasn’t her fault. The designer sighed and sat down on the floor, the harness straps digging uncomfortably into her thighs until she adjusted the straps. The case holding the flute was digging uncomfortably into her lower back, pressed there by the harness and she finally just pulled it awkwardly through each of the straps until it was laying across her lap.

“Captain Paternoster to Vulpecula.”

The sound jerked her out of her distracted musings and Marinette fumbled for the radio, “this is Vulpecula,” she said after a few moments of fumbling with the buttons.

“What’s your status?”

She glanced around her at the debris and shook her head slightly, getting back to her feet, flute case in hand. “I reached the bottom,” or what seemed to be the bottom—it was hard to tell in a place like this where holes in the floor could lead to deeper labyrinths, “haven’t seen anyone just yet.”

“Copy.”

The designer slid the radio back into the pouch that attached it to her hip, hooked her flute to a metal ring around her waist, and breathed out slowly, aiming the light sitting on her helmet at the broken stone. “Okay,” Marinette murmured, “okay.” She walked around a pile of debris that looked like contorted steel ribs of a giraffe and ran her fingers along the edges, noting the odd burn marks from a fire that had gone out when the rain and dust had soaked the underworld. Unhook the rope from her body, she climbed through a hole in the wall and tumbled down the other side, landing with a huff.

A car had face planted, buried underneath the limestone and metal of old pipes, train tracks, and other things that had been lost in the building of Paris, squashed like an ant beneath a shoe. History mixed with modern times, coming together in a melting pot making it difficult to see what was going on. But this car was here, beached in the mixing of old and new, caught in a Venus Flytrap of destruction.

“Hello?” Marinette called out, making her way over and under the groaning rock, “is anyone in there?”

Silence.

She brushed her hands over the torn metal of the door, silver paint carved away leaving the nakedness underneath. It was too dark to see inside the window and pressing her face up against the glass just made it even more difficult. Removing the helmet, Marinette held it back, close enough that it could light the inside and yet far enough so she wasn’t knocking the tip into the vehicle every time she leaned forward.

An arm was stretched out on a car seat, fingers curled up towards the sky. The rest of the body was hidden behind the folded back of a seat. She couldn’t see any blood. Couldn’t see anything at all, really.

Marinette tried the door handle first, tugging and cursing at the lock when it wouldn’t budge. The
ridge over the frame had been folded over the glass like lava that had eventually cooled before it could finish dripping into the sea. “Sorry,” she whispered to the limp arm and pulled back, setting the helmet back on her head, before driving her fist through the window. The glass crashed around her fist and the designer flexed her fingers, marvelling at the small sting along her knuckles before it faded.

She fiddled with the lock and tried to open a different door only for the metal to groan and moan, but not budge. “Excuse me?” Marinette poked her head through the window, partially climbing through so her eyes could follow pale skin up to a dark brown sweater belonging to a turtle neck. The woman was partially curled up on her side, a long, jagged cut along her forehead oozing blood that had dripped and created a crimson delta.

Trying the door once more only for nothing, Marinette reached for her radio. “Vulpecula to Captain Paternoster.”

“Go ahead, Vulpecula.”

“I found someone,” she pushed back through the broken window, bracing her feet against the side of the door and hanging on to the headrests. “She’s in critical condition, currently unconscious,” the designer leaned forward and saw the woman’s chest rise, “still breathing.”

The radio crackled but, over the noise, the earth groaned and the car shifted, tilting forward like a slowly rising tree straightening after being pressed down underneath a layer of snow.

Marinette cursed and scrambled for a hold, her ribs pressing into the edge of the window, glass not yet piercing her side but coming close. Her boots squeaked against the paint before they caught and stuck to the surface.

“Copy,” Paternoster said, “stay where you are.”

“I don’t think that will be possible,” Marinette told him, watching as small rocks tumbled down around the car, landing on smaller piles that already existed. Something cracked—something deep and strong—and the designer felt the earth sing out a warning that sent fire through her legs.

The car sunk down with a single, jerking movement that almost threw the teenager off. She had to reach back at the window, grab the jagged piece of glass, and break it off before it could go deeper. It hadn’t yet managed to pierce her suit—but it was a close thing.

“Don’t do anything dangerous,” Paternoster barked over the radio, “You hear me?”

Marinette’s eyes were locked on the gravel, rock, and metal that she could see through a cracked windshield. “Yeah,” she breathed, her tail arching up to attention, ears twitching forward. “Yeah I hear you.”

The helmet fell out of her hand and tumbled to the floor, the light spinning and highlighting the angles of the rocks. It sent her shadow in through the window, covering the blood on the seat and the broken glass that sparkled in the dim darkness of the old quarries.

She felt the cracks beneath her, heard the notes in the song that weren’t there. “Hush now,” Marinette urged the earth as it whimpered beneath her.

Then, she reached for her flute.

oOo

Paternoster cursed above her, his eyes on the black radio in his hand, blond hair plastered to his
face as the rain ran down his features. The storm had grown over the past hour, with puddles growing on the ground and water streaming down into the hole. He stood on the edge of it still, staring down into the dark as a debate grew around him about whether or not to call those down in the tunnels back to the surface as the sky grew darker.

“Should I go down after her, sir?” A different fire fighter asked. His dark skin was like a shadow against the grey of Paris, eyes standing out like flowers blooming after a fire.

The captain scoffed, “We don’t even know where she is,” he said and ran a hand through his hair and groaned, “I knew it, I knew she would do something like this—”

“Sir,” a voice spoke up behind him and Paternoster turned to see a black cat and a ladybug, “are you Captain Paternoster?”

oOo

“I’m going to try something incredibly stupid,” Marinette told the unconscious woman, leaning half in and half out of the car, her butt poking up towards the ceiling, tail streamlined out behind her so she couldn’t lose her balance and tip forward or backward. Around her, metal voiced its displeasure, reminding her that, at any moment, the vehicle could tip forward and go crashing through this level of stone and go down into the next. The miraculous was warm against her chest and she thought of it as Huuxi being reassuring.

Or it could be his chastisement. She could never really tell.

“If we both die, I give you permission to yell at me for all eternity, or haunt me, whichever one that works for you.” Ah, rambling. Marinette clenched her jaw shut to stop the words from coming out of her mouth. She started to tug at the woman, pulling at her body carefully so she was laid out on the back seats, turned away from the windshield.

After doing one last check to make sure the woman wouldn’t randomly go tumbling out of the car, the designer moved back, extracting herself from the vehicle and making her way down to where her helmet had rolled. She gripped her flute in one hand, having removed it from the case, and stood on the stone with the instrument held up to her lips.

Magic. Everything was about magic.

The earth was still singing and she filled its song with the missing notes, closing her eyes as the sound echoed through the dark and the depths, filling each hollow and every crack. It rose up like the Nile during the wet season, coating the broken and pulling it apart so it could be fixed properly. Soon, it was a duet rather than a simple overlay, and Marinette played with the stone around her, watching as the pieces that had fallen rose up and melded themselves back to where they had come from.

Groaning, the car tilted backwards, the tires getting closer to the debris as the earth pushed the hood out from the hole as it repaired.

_Slowly_, Marinette urged the earth, stepping around trembling piles to hook her foot in the strap of her helmet, keeping it out of the way of some pipes that were pulled off the floor by the stone they were attached to. _Repair, fix, back to what it was before_, said the song and the earth chirruped and hummed along.

The quarry repaired itself, the magic crackling and snapping into place around her until the floor was flat and the ceiling was whole. Well, whole except for the hole in the ceiling that is.

With a crash and a groan, the car landed on its wheels and shuddered like a great beast after a long
nap. Marinette paused the song and her fake ears twitched, focusing on the dust and mud covered silver paint. Keeping a hold on her flute, the designer inched forward and looked into the broken window.

The ground held beneath her, still and silent.

Tugging the helmet on over her head, the designer climbed into the car, reached down under the woman’s shoulders, and guided her up and out the gaping window. It took some careful pulling before Marinette was finally, finally, able to hoist her up into her arms. A few seconds of trying to figure out how to get the woman through the hole in the wall was solved by the designer putting the helmet on her head before trying to push/pull her through.

It was dirty, and messy, and Marinette found herself covered in the muck that had been created during her time in the cave. The rode was still there and she hooked it back to her harness, ignoring the way that the water dripped off onto her face. “I’m not quite sure how this is going to work,” she told the unconscious woman honestly. Normally, she would have just tried to climb but with no hands and only her feet (as well as a fairly long patch of rope), the designer didn’t quite know if she would be able to sling the woman on her back without her, well, falling off.

She had taken a pretty deep tumble already, Marinette wasn’t quite sure if she would be able to handle another. Instead, the designer fumbled for her radio, setting the woman off to the side for a moment so she could lay on the ground, underneath one of the broader overhangs so the water didn’t quite reach her: “Captain Paternoster?”

“You’re alive,” the captain sounded both a proud and disappointed.

Marinette scoffed and flicked her tail. “It was safe.”

There was a crackle from the radio.

“Mostly.”

There was a second of silence from the radio where she could picture the captain covering his face with one hand before finally answering her. “What about the woman you found?”

“I have her with me,” The designer said, glancing at the still features and the blood that had smeared across pale skin, “But I’m not quite sure how to get her up to the surface.” She looked up at the hole and the dark that waited. The rope tightened for a moment, vibrating against the stone before it loosened again.

“Hold on to her, Vulpecula,” The captain said over the radio, “we’ll pull you up.”

Marinette scrambled to the woman and pulled her back into her arms, holding the little black device in one hand and settling her cargo between her chest and the rope that was attached to her thighs. Wet hair that could have been black or brown or even blonde before it touched the dirt spread across the designer’s shoulder and hot breath danced across her skin.

Above her, the rope tightened again and started to pull them up, Marinette guiding their ascent with her legs, pushing them away from the sharp ledges and crevices. It was a slow process, a painstakingly long process, but she was grateful for the carefulness they put into it. There was always enough time to guide around an outcropping that was coming too close or to unhook herself from something that caught her in its grasp.

Light began to flicker into existence high above, first as a dot and then growing as she pulled through the uneven holes in the ground to where the rest of Paris waited. Captain Paternoster waited for her at the top, arms crossed over his chest, brow furrowed, and a scowl on his face.
“I told you to keep safe,” he growled at her, pulling on the rope so she was over solid ground.

“I did—was,” Marinette blinked innocently up at him, handing over the woman to the waiting paramedics. “Took no unnecessary risks (“Unnecessary,” the captain muttered) and even managed to get us both out, safe and sound.”

Paternoster muttered something unkindly to himself and shook his head like a dog, sending water flying everywhere. They both watched as the woman was loaded into an ambulance and whisked away.

“Will she be alright?” Marinette’s voice was soft.

“Only time will tell,” the captain said, his shoulders slumping before he sighed and straightened them. “You did well.”

Her gaze was icy. “I’m going back down.”

“Not necessary.”

“I’m going.”

They glared at each other, two wolves that dared the other to move, to cross the boundary. One would have to give in and Marinette was small and slight, but she wouldn’t. Not this time.

Paternoster huffed, “it’s getting dark; don’t you have someplace to be?”

“Yeah, “The designer rolled her eyes and pointed at the hole, “it’s down there,” she snapped back.

Someone laughed and Paternoster turned, his lips curled up in a sneer. “Don’t you have something that needs doing?”

“Yes, sir!”

Marinette rested her hands on her hips and stared up at him defiantly and, at last, the old wolf gave in.

“Fine,” he said, pulling her away from the end of the asphalt, “but first you need to learn some codes so you don’t freak out the pedestrians standing around.”

Pedestrians? And, sure enough, a group of tourists had gathered to take pictures of their ruin. She bared her teeth at them as her tail lashed. Their cameras flashed in the gloom and she felt like ripping each bit of plastic out of their hands and throwing them into the abyss. This is a tragedy! Marinette wanted to scream at them. Show some respect! It was her country, her heritage. Death was not an amusement park.

It was not something you could watch on a television screen and then move on with. It was there and it was painful and it was so horrifically real.

“Get them out of here,” Paternoster snapped at another fire fighter, motioning to the tourists and Marinette felt a strange sort of fondness for this grumpy, prickly, hedgehog of a man.

“Do I still need to learn codes, then?”

He gave her a scowl that seemed softer than it had before. “Yes.”
Someone offered her a cup full of hot chocolate and Marinette sipped at it, sitting down on the edge of a makeshift bench made from rock as the captain sat beside her.

“First thing,” Paternoster said, placing his radio between them, “Code Three is a dead body. Code Four is everything is fine.”

“Code Three and Code Four,” Marinette muttered around her cup, “got it.”

He eyed her and took a long drink of whatever was in his cup before speaking up again. “Those are the main two besides calling someone you rescue ‘cargo’ or ‘package’.”

Marinette’s nose wrinkled and she shook her head in distaste. “Doesn’t that seem counterproductive if you’re trying to rescue someone?”

“You would think so, wouldn’t you?” Paternoster said. “But it’s good to keep people questioning whether or not you have a person or an object with you.” He finished his cup and looked up at the sky, ignoring the water dripping down over his eyebrows and his cheeks. “Most codes are simply so the people around don’t know what we’re talking about so it causes less panic.”

It made sense, sure. A group of people were a finicky, panicky thing. Any wrong thing could set them off. Anything could cause a riot.

There was always the human element in the world that could change how history worked, how everything played out. Marinette watched as the tourists were herded away like the sheep they were and finished off her own hot chocolate. She brought her feet up on the stone and wrapped her arms around her knees. The rain continued to fall as studio lights were set up all across the Place de l’Étoile, bringing brightness to the darkness that was falling around them as the sun finally set (though it hadn’t really been out, had it? Not really). The street lamps flickered like candles in a window, their amber lights more tired than anything. Almost as if they didn’t want to look at what had happened around them.

That was okay, she didn’t really want to look at it either.

“We need to get the cars out of there,” Paternoster said, looking out over the horizon and the silhouettes of the buildings made foggy by the rainfall. “Before we can do anything else, we need to find the cars and make sure there’s no more people trapped.”

Marinette nodded and wiped the rain away from her face. It had been mixing with the sweat that had gathered there from before and was trying to run into her eyes. The faded orange colouring on her suit was stained with splashes of brown and black, smeared across her thighs, over her chest, and along her arms. It was from the catacombs and she picked at the chunks trying to dry on her legs.

They stuck on her knees, making it hard for the fabric to bend, and Marinette blocked the idea, the memory of that being like something that had happened before. Where she had stumbled and tripped over herself because each time her leg bent or straightened the skin burned and cracked. Her skin didn’t burn this time. Now it just felt cold.

She just felt cold.

The teenager sighed softly and turned away from the sky and the rain to watch the streetlamps that had grown steadier but still flickered from time to time. Lights were off in the buildings around them, the residents having been evacuated some time ago.

Evacuated or fled. Both were equally possible.
Drinks done, break over, Marinette headed back over to the rope that had pulled her to the surface. She checked the clasps on the harness, tugged to make sure they were secure, and, with a final salute to the Captain, she headed back down. The sides were slick, almost squishy, and her fingers dug into the places where there was soil. Edges of a broken pipe caught on one of the straps keeping her attached to the surface and she spent a bit of time making sure nothing had torn.

It wasn’t the fastest process, getting back down to the bottom, but she got there and went searching for the car she had left behind. The ground still groaned around her, the earth voicing its complaints as she stepped just a little too wrong. Marinette soothed what she could, humming under her breath and running her fingers over the cracks until they melded together like clay. She squeezed through the hole, popping out the other side with a grunt, and rolled to her feet.

Two bright lights focused on her face and the designer jerked back, raising her arm over her eyes so she wasn’t blinded.

“What are you doing down here?”

Alya. Marinette held back the sigh that wanted to force its way through her mouth. “Helping,” she said honestly and scowled at the two, floating orbs currently making spots dance in her eyes. “Do you mind not blinding me?”

There was a mutter that could have been an apology, and then the light was pointed somewhere else, away from her face. She blinked the blind spots out of her eyes and turned her own lamp away so it was pointed at the ground.

“Helping?” And that was Adrien.

“Yes, helping.” Her tail rose up, the ears tilting so they could be laid back against her skull should anyone get aggressive.

Both of them were covered with just as much muck as she was, though Chat’s black suit made it harder to see. His blonde hair was sticking to his face, though, plastered to his skin and was constantly being swiped away from his eyes. Alya’s wavy, dyed hair was straightened under the weight of the rain that had gathered in it, and dripped noisily on the stone. The two heroes had their arms crossed defensively over their chests, the skin around their eyes red, and their skin a pale pallor that seemed almost sickly.

Marinette’s ears flicked and she frowned, glancing at the car still sitting on the rock. Unharmed from where she left it but still looking like a squashed can. “Well,” she said, ignoring the way Chat’s tail whipped from side to side, “since we’re all here, I don’t suppose you mind helping me get that,” her hand turned to where the sky waited.

“Are you an akuma?” Alya asked, shoulders slumping forward. She didn’t look like she was looking forward to the answer. Whatever that answer was.

The fox, the cat, and the ladybug were all in the dark watching each other. Waiting. Beneath them, the stone moaned.

“No,” Marinette said slowly, taking a step towards them, her hands raised so that they could see that they were empty. “No, I’m not.”

Chat Noir—Adrien—watched her, his eyes bright and unblinking, the slit pupils wide in the darkness and leaving nothing but a halo of green. His belt-tail curled and straightened again and again as she watched him think.
Leather ears flicked and hers twitched in response.

“We’re not quite sure how to get the car out without damaging the surrounding stone,” Adrien said, turned back to the car and looking up at the hole it had come through. “Damaging it further, at any rate. No one wants to cause a domino effect through the streets just in case.”

“We could,” Alya continued, walking around the other side of the car, “make a pulley system to hoist it to the next level, but we’re not sure if the rock wouldn’t just,” she mimed something crumbling to pieces and falling. “You know?”

Nodding, Marinette moved to the front, running her hand over crumpled metal. “We could always take the car apart, move it up piece by piece.”

“While it’s possible, I don’t think the owner will be pleased.”

Adrien snorted and offered both girls a toothy grin. “Pretty sure the owner will just be happy to be alive.”

Rolling her eyes, Alya shook her head. “The Captain said no more damage than necessary.”

Marinette knocked her knuckles against the cracked windshield. “I don’t think he meant the cars,” she told them, seeing the slight smear of blood on the seats where she had moved the woman only an hour before. “If we can rip it apart and get it back up to the surface without causing another cave in, that might be better than trying to get the car up there whole, failing, and then causing more tunnels to collapse.”

“Less destruction,” Adrien said, looking up at the hole in the ceiling, holding a hand over his face to keep it clear of the water dripping down, “would certainly be a first for us.”

Tilting her head to the side, the designer watched him with narrowed eyes. “Seeing that the destruction never sticks I think this one can be forgiven.” She traced the edge of the window she had broken with a gloved finger and leaned forward so her head was sticking into the car once again. “In this case, though, it seems necessary.”

Adrien frowned and poked at the metal with the tip of a clawed finger. “If I use cataclysm—”

Marinette wrenched at the door and the metal groaned, warping under her hands. “I think,” she said with a grunt as she ripped the door off, “we can do it the old fashioned way for now.”

The door came off, the force throwing the designer back on her butt with a grunt. Alya and Adrien stared at her and looked back to the now gaping hole in the side of the car.

“Rip it apart?”

“Why not?” the fox holder grinned up at them. “All your frustrations taken out on something that won’t tell anyone and won’t fight back.”

They were kids. They were just kids. All of them.

A little bit of fun, a little bit of chaos, and a whole bunch of frustration at the world all bundled into three nice little packages.

The three teenagers grinned at each other before turning towards the vehicle.
A makeshift basket of car parts was pulled up to the surface. Doors, wheels, chunks of metal, and each tire stacked one on top of the other. Claw marks were gouged deep past the paint on the surface. Along the corners and in the edges. Claws belonging to a cat. Claws belonging to a fox. Marinette grinned toothily at the people who stared as they put the mangled mess of parts down on the ground floor of Paris. Chat Noir and Ladybug helped her settle it all down, making sure that nothing teetered or wobbled. Other cars were brought up to the surface using the same technique—rope, basket made of parts filled with parts, and placed off to the side.

The rain eventually stopped, but the water was flooding the lower levels leaving the three teenagers to slosh around, crawling through water that stretched out their necks when they tried to keep their faces above the water but low enough so they didn’t knock their faces into the stone above them.

They started from the bottom, wading through rooms full of dirty water to trying to climb up to levels using the slick, muddy rocks on the walls. Each of them looking for more survivors, more cars, until every millimetre had been searched, every crevice, every cave in.

Sitting on the edge of the hole, legs dangling over the abyss, each sipped on a cup of coffee or hot chocolate, depending on their preferences, and watched the stars wink in and out of cloud cover. Paris was dark, the lights having been turned off quite a while ago, leaving the streets dark and the dim lights that were left reflecting off the puddles that the rain left behind.

“It’s beautiful,” Adrien said, staring out at the murky skyline, the shadows and the stars and everything in between all shining in a quiet manner.

“Yeah,” Marinette grinned up at the moon who was peeking her way around a curtain to see the people beneath her. “Sometimes I forget how pretty this city is.”

Alya made a sound in the back of her throat that was like agreement. “It’s sad we only see the broken parts.”

The fake fox tail flicked and the designer glanced at the ladybug miraculous user out of the corner of her eye. “Who said that it wasn’t beautiful?”

“Destruction isn’t beautiful,” the blogger stared at her with her brow furrowed and Marinette offered her a toothy smile.

“No, but here we all are, working together,” she nodded out to the groups of fire fighters, the police, the paramedics, all of them still here with their hands wrapped around food or drinks or radios. Rope with people still attached disappeared down into the darkness, the floodlights having been replaced by smaller lights around the food and equipment.

It was quiet and the hurried rush from earlier had been swallowed by the night.

“Is that not beautiful?” Marinette said.

Chat Noir’s tail flicked and his eyes were bright, glistening with the lights all around them. He didn’t answer. No one did.

oOo

They went back down not long after, helping to bring up the rubble and debris, stacking stone upon stone, pipe upon pipe.

And the moaning of the earth grew the longer the night went on, louder now that she was picking up limestone and handing it over to her classmates. It ached inside of her, her muscles vibrating
like a strummed guitar.

*Please,* it moaned, *please.*

Marinette walked across the repaired floor and where the silver car had sat, looking up at the hole in the ceiling that was still there, that waited like a wide smile. It wasn’t an akuma attack, Ladybug couldn’t fix it by tossing a lucky charm in the air and calling on the magical insects.

But it was earth and she had already fixed one part, repaired this small, little section. The designer pulled out her flute and ran her fingers down the deceptively strong wood, tracing the holes and the stripes of colours. The water didn’t seep into her clothing, it didn’t soak, but she felt it like a ghost against her skin.

If felt like fingers brushing against her skin, seaweed holding onto her ankles even though nothing was there. But, then again, Marinette couldn’t tell if the feeling came from the water or from the magic reaching out to her from the earth.

*Please.*

She lifted the flute to her lips and swayed to the broken song, filling the empty spots and watched the debris fly up to fit into place like puzzle pieces. Some of it left a jagged scar before it was smoothed over.

Clay moulded together right before the kiln. Smoothed with fingers before the heat.

Marinette climbed up to each level, the song burning through her body, through her heart and her brain and her ears and eyes and toes. Magic lit up the end of her flute, filling the stripes and the holes until she was the pied piper guiding each little stone off the ground or the out of the holes and back to where it had been before.

Above, on the surface, stone lifted off piles, pipes surrounded by rock rose and went down, back into the abyss, repairing, fixing, forming something whole once more level by level. And among it all, Marinette played her flute and she knitted the magic of the earth back together again like it was one of her outfits.

Hook, hole, hook, hole. The yarn of this planet they stood on mended and tied and stitched.

Floodlights turned back on, focusing on the hole that wasn’t filling, but going backwards in time, step by step. Marinette worked her way to the surface under the eyes of the people who had come out to help—volunteering or just doing their jobs. The water came with her, rising up to her knees, to her hips, to her stomach.

Some of it flowed through already existing holes to drain down, but not fast enough, not just yet. It would reach a drainage system eventually now that it was slower, now that the water went step by step instead of all at once. The others had climbed out and watched from the surface as she got closer. Each rock they had gathered down to the smallest pebble, flew down to the fox and her flute. Soon, she was at their level, and the white stones of the arc stacked one on top of the other as the brick formed beneath it, a pattern of grey scales that had shed and healed.

The flute echoed strangely in the dim light of the dawn, the sky purple and lightening just on the horizon. A song danced through the empty streets, echoed and made a duet with the singing of the earth. Above Marinette, the arc reformed, the portions placed and eased together. Men on horses, names, all forming after the debris.

And the fox danced and swayed to the song of stone, her tail flicking and rising. That ached that had settled inside her bones was still there, burning and biting harsher now. Her limbs felt even
heavier, almost as if she had climbed her way up a volcano and waded through the thick lava all the way to the top while the black, crusted surface was tied to her waist, peeling back with every step like every other hard, tedious task that pushed muscles until they wanted to do nothing but sleep.

It burned, it ached, and when the last tiny speck of stone settled on the top of the Arc de Triomphe, Marinette fell to her knees and her flute clattered to the ground and rolled until it was stopped by a dip in the earth. The magic that had roared through her, following the song, and settled like fine dust over Place de l’Étoile.

The area felt a newly healed wound, something that had scabbed after someone picked at it. It felt like that, but it didn’t look that way. No, to everyone else it looked as it always had but maybe, perhaps, a little bit dirtier. A little bit wetter than it had ever been before in those spaces between each brick.

Marinette sat down fully, her legs spread out in front of her like they were made of wet sand and her arms fell to her sides like steamed carrots. A headache was blooming behind her eyes, like a lily.

Like a Venus Flytrap.

oOo

“Are you sure?” Alya asked, Marinette’s arm over her shoulder, keeping the designer close with an arm wrapped around a slim hip. “Here?”

The fox blinked at the train tracks and the graffiti on the walls. Above them, the sun was hanging low in the sky, still rising like a balloon let go at an amusement park. It hurt her eyes, so the designer looked away to the boy standing on her other side, steadying her with his own shoulder.

“Yeah,” Marinette said, careful not to trip over the soggy wooden beams. Around her neck, the fox miraculous beeped, warning of the two minutes left before she and Huuxi were forced apart. “Just put me underneath that station over there.” It was dark underneath. Not as long as the one leading to the catacombs, but long enough. She could stay there for a while where it was dark, where no one could see her, and just hide away until her head didn’t feel like it was going to explode.

They left her there, against a stone wall, and stared as the second to last line on the necklace flickered and was gone.

“I’m sorry,” Alya spoke up as Marinette rested the back of her head against the wall. “You’re right, you’re not an akuma.”

The designer looked up at her with half closed eyes, a small, lazy smile on her face. “Gotcha,” she whispered and blinked.

By the time her eyes opened, though, Chat Noir and Ladybug were gone and the necklace let out one last warning before the padding and armour and mask fell away to reveal Marinette. Huuxi fell to her lap with a grunt and curled up into her knee with a groan and a shudder. The designer dug her hand into the loose rocks beneath her, the ones that dug into her thighs and her butt and her calves.

“She hurt so much,” Marinette said after a while, her throat full of dust and time that made the words struggle to come out. More of a choke than anything else, as if they were physical objects lodged inside of her. “Why did she hurt so much?”
The kwami didn’t respond. His eyes were closed as he slept, pressed up against her. Beneath them both, the earth hummed her song and the magic sunk back into the limestone, back into the tunnels.

And it watched.

And it waited.

A Question of Superheroes and Teenagers

By Inari Kuzunoha

Paris is beautiful; a city of light that has captured the mind of poets, artists, and dreamers from around the world. It can be inventive and it can be stuck, struggling to accept change when it appears. Sometimes this city accepts with open arms and it is only later when the opinion from the public sours and rots.

Never before have I seen it so articulated than with Ladybug and Chat Noir. The first Ladybug vanished not too long after her appearance and was replaced, but that does not actually matter—despite what so many gossip columns and blogs on the internet might have told you. No one truly knew who the first Ladybug was, or where she had come from, but there’s one thing that she and our current Ladybug have in common.

They are both teenagers. Chat Noir is as well. Teenagers, children, looking out for this city alongside the many police officers, fire fighters, and others whose sole purpose is to help the people. It is a hard job, a deadly job, and, according to the rally in Champ de Mars, a thankless one.

So many lives have been changed over the course of the four months. People have died, lost their jobs, lost their homes. The reparations come but each time they wonder ‘is it too late?’ What if one day it doesn’t come? What if the power of the Ladybug fails? What if, one day, there’s something that the Ladybug can’t fix?

I think, at this point, it is important to point out that Ladybug and Chat Noir currently have a 100% success rate. No akuma has defeated them, each have been released, and the magic has fixed the damages.

This isn’t about the damage, however. This is about Chat Noir and Ladybug, this is about how old they are, and this is about how Paris has treated them.

In a small, enclosed area close to the Seine, hidden away from the prying eyes of the tourists, there is a mural. Perhaps it was painted months ago, perhaps it was painted only a few weeks before I started writing this, but whenever it was painted, it shows the two heroes in a glowing light. They are celebrated in the original and then someone—the original artist or not, we will never know—defaced it. It is disrespectful to the sacrifice that they make, that they are making, every time they fight.

Paris is a world of artists, of workers, of students, parents, writers, and, most importantly, home to children. What type of message are the people of this city sending to the youth of the city if every movement of two teenagers is under constant scrutiny and people pick out every single
mistake? What is it that we are saying about mistakes?

If Ladybug and Chat Noir are judged so harshly for an imperfect but still passing score, do you judge your own children for that simple missed question on a test? Berate them for missing one question and ask them how they didn’t get everything right?

They are teenagers—children. We cannot expect them to be perfect just like how we cannot expect ourselves to be perfect. At the rally in Champ de Mars, more people were protesting the time that it took Ladybug and Chat Noir to capture the akumas rather than their attitudes or personalities. Of course, each minute an akuma is loose there is a high chance of property damage, of someone getting hurt, but each time it has happened we have seen the repair.

So, I suppose my question is; what are the people of Paris really mad about? “It’s more that people have gotten hurt, have been changed, by the akuma attacks,” Adèle Lécuyer, writer for La Croix told me, standing among other people at the rally, “there’s no protection for the innocents that have gotten hurt.” That is really the question; how does the city of Paris change to incorporate these changes in how people are harmed by akuma attacks? Bodily harm, disappearances, and even transformation is fixed under the magic of the Ladybug Miraculous, but what of those who lost their jobs because it was that one day they couldn’t be late? Understandably, corporations are worried that if they do make a plan for those types of instances, they would be taken advantage of but it seems that it is a necessity at this point.

Instead of focusing on two teenagers who are simply doing a job to the best of their ability, perhaps it’s time for Paris to rally for opportunity to change this system around the akumas, to focus on providing safety not only for health but for jobs, property, and other such things.

Blaming the younger generation has never worked before. Ladybug and Chat Noir no longer need to be this city’s scapegoats.

Let them be children.

It’s time to fix this akuma ourselves.

Chapter End Notes

Hello again, I did say that this was going to be a shorter wait, didn't I? Here it is though, a chapter of 14,000 some words. Not my best, I think, but I hope you enjoyed it regardless.

Clues were left there. Little things. I hope you find them, they might have been a bit more fun to put in than I had thought.

I work nights now. Soon to be Days to Nights. Not graves, but not days. A mix of both.

I am happy and it's a good feeling.

Inari's (Marinette's) blog can be found here, where the post has been waiting since the 31st of October for me to finish this chapter. Now I can reveal it after all this time.

Until the next time, perhaps when it's a little less sunny and the moon is out,

Grim
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sun light broke apart the rooftops of Paris, reflecting off humidity that had frozen in the chill of the morning. It created an effect that turned the puddles and thin streams on the streets to gold. Everything smelled wet and earthy; warm, despite the chill in the air, and Marinette stumbled through the city. She fumbled through puddles, the water splashing up around her ankles and weighing down the fabric of her pants, forcing it to cling awkwardly to her skin.

Marinette caught her reflection in one of the still puddles on cobblestones, noting the mud smeared across her face and clumped up in her hair. She didn’t bother to pick at it, looking at the mess with a “hmm” kind of sound before moving on. The world seemed... brighter around her with the sun. Buildings turned brown and beige in the light and their old stone looked like faded parchment that she ran her fingers over. Her palm braced against one wall as she tripped over her own feet and she groaned, steadying herself before falling on her face.

Without any money or even the pass to get on the train, she was forced to continue walking through the zigzag streets, tracing a similar path she had taken all those nights ago from the same little railway that surrounded the city. Everything was quiet with people not quite daring to get out of bed and face the day. The events of the night before weighed upon the city, keeping it quiet and still like a layer of snow.

Marinette breathed in the cold air and felt it clinging to her nose and cheeks, nipping at her skin though not uncomfortably. She was free to take her time, to watch the sun rise higher as she made her way home, but exhaustion clung to her shoulders and she slumped the further she walked, unable to really take a steady step or even stand up straight.

Home, though, she wanted to sleep at home, and that was just about the only thing keeping her
going instead of finding a hiding spot or a friend’s place to curl up and pass out.

HuuXi was hidden in one of her pockets, curled up and sleeping soundly, his own, small body warm and comforting against her thigh. She couldn’t buy him an egg at any of the stores they passed seeing that everywhere was closed due to the holiday and the events the night before and figured that it would just be easier to wait until they were home. Getting in past her parents would be a problem, but she just didn’t have the brain power and the concentration to tackle that problem.

On any normal day, she would climb up the side of the bakery, but her limbs felt like they were bags filled with wood chips that were grounding together with each movement. Splinters dug into her skin from the inside, not piercing, but just there and even her blood pumped sluggishly like molasses through her arteries and veins. Marinette breathed in through her nose as she rounded the corner to the school and saw a group of people pass by, heading towards the river.

Pressing back against a wall, she watched them go by, their voices soft in the golden light of the morning. If they had turned just a little to their left they would have seen her with mud smeared across her face and pants partially drenched with water. The group continued on over one of the many bridges and Marinette turned her attention towards home.

Those last few blocks to the back door of her home were the hardest ones she’d ever taken and Marinette pressed her forehead against the door, fumbling with the doorknob and breathing out in relief when it was open. The bakery was closed, the lights off as she passed the small hallway leading to the ovens and the massive, walk-in fridge. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, however, she paused and listened to the quiet that had settled in the house.

Her parents might not be awake, but that was as likely as a cat not to startle when a blow horn was sounded in front of its face, and silence tended to be more of a sign or danger than a sign of safety—especially for a teenager.

Her stomach roiled and Marinette leaned her shoulder against the wall, trying not to let her dirty face brush against the paint. “Okay,” she murmured to herself, “okay.”

Taking the first step was like walking through a mass of snakes and she winced when it creaked under her weight. It didn’t stop her from using the banister for balance as she worked her way up, shoulder still against the wall for balance as her head swam with each movement. At one point, Marinette’s foot missed a step and she careened forward, only managing to catch herself at the end of the banister and not crashing to her knees. Her legs creaked as she stood up, knees cracking when they straightened and a small groan left her mouth, stifled only by the worry that her parents would hear her.

No one was in the living room, though, when she passed and the kitchen was all clear.

The door to the attic was open.

Closing her eyes, Marinette squared her shoulders as if she was a soldier about to go into battle. Her head had tiny ice picks digging into the bones behind her eyes, her body was filled with water soaked sand, and every thought felt as though it was streaming through hardening caramel. Step by step, she worked her way up the ladder, peeking through the trap door.

Her mother stood by the oval window, looking out over Paris, arms across her chest, and waiting.

Marinette paused on the last rung, one foot braced on the wood floor, the marks her nails had left behind gouged deep and obvious in the mid-morning sun. She became painfully aware of the mud caking on her face, flaking away from her skin. The temptation to scratch at it filled her fingers but
Marinette kept her arms firmly at her side and breathed in slowly to calm her racing heartbeat.

“Where did you go?”

“Maman,” Marinette slumped, the fight taken out of her with just her mother’s voice.

Sabine turned to face her, hands clasped in front of her chest. “Marinette,” she said, her voice soft, “please.”

“I had to,” Marinette said, looking away from her mother’s warm, grey eyes. “I had to go, I had to get out.” It was the nightmares, too; those stifling nightmares that kept her awake at night with their voices and their screams. She didn’t hear them now, not when every part—including her mind—could barely keep her standing upright.

The earth had been screaming and she had no choice but to help. Or, rather, there was no other choice for her. There was nothing else she could have done but help. Even now the magic shuddered beneath her after a long night of hurting, prepared to go to curl up like an old cat, ready to rest and sleep the day away.

Her mother reached up, palm cupping Marinette’s face, thumb catching on a layer of dried mud. It flaked off, pulling at the skin and setting over sensitized nerves on fire. That didn’t stop the teenager from leaning in to her mother’s touch or from sighing softly and letting her weight be transferred ever so slightly to Sabine’s strong arms.

“I’m sorry for worrying you,” Marinette said, the words struggling to get out of her throat.

“I just want you to be safe,” Sabine told her, cupping her face in her hands and making sure their eyes met. The grey gaze burned with worry, dark circles beneath them from a restless night. “Were you safe?”

Surrounded by fire-fighters, officers, Alya, and Adrien while wrapped up in a suit made of magic. Marinette held her mother’s wrists, brushed her thumbs over the veins and bones, and gave her a small, shaky smile. “Yes maman,” she said, “I was.”

Sabine leaned forward and brushed her lips across Marinette’s forehead. “Get some sleep,” she paused and then grinned coyly, “and perhaps a shower.”

Marinette stuck her tongue out at her mother and watched as she went down the ladder with a fond little smile on her face. Once Sabine was out of sight, she gently took Huuxi out of her pocket and placed him on a lump of red and white wool that was her partially completed fox stocking cap. He was still sleeping after everything and she made a physical note to find him something to eat once she was done with her shower, not quite trusting herself to remember.

The trip to the shower was an exercise in balance—something she didn’t really have on a good day—and a struggle in concentration. The bathroom wasn’t too far from the attic, but climbing down the ladder was more of an exercise in muscle memory than actually paying attention. In a blink, she was staring in the mirror, hands braced on either side of the sink with no true recollection of ever getting there.

Shedding the dirty clothing, Marinette watched, disconnected from her own body, as each part slapped against the tile. She didn’t wait for the water to warm up before jumping in and the cold was a shock to her systems—breath catching in her chest, eyes bursting open, her knees stilling and stopping their exhausted shaking.

As it warmed up, however, the water beat against sore muscles, running over places she didn’t realize ached until the heat had relaxed some of the parts that had just been louder than the rest.
Resting her head against the tile, the designer groaned and closed her eyes, letting the spray fall across her spine and the back of her head. The fox Miraculous hung from her neck from its small, gold chain that felt ten times bigger than it actually was, lighting her nerves on fire like a weight and Marinette reached up, wrapping the un-burned hand around the edges.

She must have fallen asleep at some point, because by the time she opened her eyes the tips of her fingers were squishy and wrinkled and the water was getting colder each second. She was so tired now-a-days. Even her blood could not be bothered with redness. It was just too much work. Shutting the shower off, Marinette dried as quickly as she could to just get dressed, grab snacks from the kitchen, and placed them next to the sleeping form of Huuxi after managing to get up to the attic without falling back to the floor below.

Cursing her decision to ever make getting to her bed harder than it should be, Marinette climbed the ladder up to her mattress and lay across the duvet, curling up on her side with no move to get under the sheets.

She was asleep before she could think about even think about the covers, after all.

oOo

The gaping chasm in the earth yawned open beneath her and earth was being sucked down into it like a ship into the mouth of Charybdis. Buildings tumbled down into the abyss as if they were made of paper and Marinette could do nothing but watch. Stone that had been grey was blackened, stained by a fire that had long been extinguished.

Even as she watched, Marinette saw the earth turn dark, the colour sucked out like ink draining from a fountain pen until the world wasn’t even left in monochrome it was simply just… dark.

Like there was nothing left.

Time passed like one of the expensive nature documentaries showing the cycle of a plant as it bloomed and then died again in months compressed into seconds. It crawled slowly like a hermit crab in syrup and then shooting off as if it was a squid in dark water; flexing, never stopping and, yet, never the same.

Marinette woke up that afternoon with a stomach full of rocky soup that churned even as she rolled over on her bed and watched the light move slowly across the walls. It didn’t go away as she massaged the stiffness away from her calves, when she brushed her teeth, or as she combed her hair. Something felt like it was missing and her skin felt like it was stretched too tightly over her body but no matter how much she pinched or rubbed the sensation didn’t stop.

Instead, she tried to ignore it—like an itchy bug bite—and hoped that the feeling would go away.

It didn’t, but Marinette got good at ignoring it over the soreness that was etched deep into her bones. There were twinges when she moved too fast or stretched too far and she was regretting not having eaten anything when she had gotten home just hours before. Her eyes still itched in that uncomfortable, exhausted way but sleep was distant and the nagging in the back of her mind only caused her to toss and turn atop the covers.

In the end, she settled down in a bath, curling up in warm water as the city of Paris slowly patched over the wounds and did what human beings did best; forget and move on. Marinette played with the Miraculous, watching it sink under the bubbles and traced the edges with her nails. Taking it off seemed like a ludicrous concept—as if something was encouraging her to keep it closed.

It was like that first night when she had woken up to it suddenly being in her hand.
Huuxi was still asleep when Marinette got out of the bath, the food around him partially finished as if he had fallen asleep in the middle of eating. The kwami was exhausted, and Marinette couldn’t blame him. She wiped away the crumbs and the excess before carefully lifting the Miraculous up and over her head to wrap her hair in a towel.

Keeping an eye on it, she watched how the sun played across the bronze and highlighted the light markings of where the cracks would be had Huuxi been joined with it. The burn on her hand stung when her fingers flexed and she examined the angry, red line down her palm before turning back to the Miraculous.

“Trust,” Marinette murmured softly and reached out again, gingerly picking up the now cool metal, letting the chain run through her fingers until it felt like rough water, “Why?”

It didn’t answer her. Of course it didn’t, it was just an object. Marinette gripped it in her hands and closed her eyes.

The edges pressed into the burn, the curve and pointed end of the tail digging into the fleshy, meaty bit just beneath her thumb. Gold chain hung over her wrists, binding them together and Marinette sat there at the desk and just breathed.

“Magic just wants to use you,” Huuxi had told her once, “You only have to say yes or no.”

Yes, she told the Miraculous as the sun fell across her shoulders and her hair dripped down her spine, please, I need to know.

Outside, a car honked and people’s voices rose up to the window, dulled by the glass and her walls. The noise had been slowly growing as people moved about their own business on the holiday, gathering their families to mourn the old and newly dead. Marinette sat there in her room with her eyes closed, heart beat thrumming in her ears as she listened to the world around her. The magic of the earth hummed beneath her, stretching and yawning like a cat while it played the song she had worked so hard to help fix.

Listen.

Marinette jerked as the voice came from behind her, ghosting over her shoulder. Beneath her, the Earth Song changed, a few notes replaced by others, turning into a mournful hymn. Her brow furrowed, her eyes still shut as she held onto the Miraculous. Something hit her in the chest, driving the air from her lungs and sending her spiralling backwards and down, down.

She opened her eyes to a ship and the ocean. A cool, salty breeze brushed past her cheeks, ruffling her hair and blowing the strands wildly in her face until she pushed them back behind her ears. Beneath her, the water was a bright turquoise with the waves turning midnight when they rose up to crash against the rocky cliffs of the island. The ship was crafted from dark wood with billowing sails made of crisp, white fabric. A flag hung from the top of the tallest of the sails and Marinette watched as the wind tugged at the edges, making it twist and dance awkwardly before straightening long enough so she could see an emerald serpent twisted through a gold crown.

No one was currently on the deck except for a single soldier in gleaming, silver armour. Horses nickered on the shore, close to a stone walkway that moved inland and Marinette, awkwardly floating as she was, followed it.

This is the world that was, the voice whispered, blending in with the rise and fall of the water and the gentle murmur of the wind.

The teenager felt like a ghost, like she was living in a dream and watching the people inside it
move about their lives. In her hand, the Miraculous warmed but, when she looked down, there was nothing against her palm. The designer was in this place but not as she could feel the breeze of the ocean and the sun coming in through her window.

This place, were the Miraculous had sent her… it was beautiful with towering trees weighted down by heavy leaves and lush vegetation. Waterfalls were just out of sight, their roar in the distance. The stone of the path she was on was sprinkled with rain that had fallen just minutes or hours before that dripped off the leaves of the plants around, falling through Marinette’s body.

Buildings peeked out, here and there, made of gleaming white stone that stood out like snow on the island. The designer tried to brush her fingers along them and only found herself sinking into them, so she pulled away and continued on to where the noise of horses and clattering armour was. She slowed as the white stone rose up around her in towering pillars that kept the plants at bay and levelled out to a circular plaza currently hosting a dozen or so horses that snorted and shifted when Marinette approached.

They watched her with wide, gleaming eyes, but didn’t stop her as she descended down the staircase into a domed building. Angry voices echoed up to her and she hesitated those last few steps before taking a deep breath and continuing down.

She didn’t walk because, really, she didn’t exist in this time, so her footsteps didn’t echo off the tall, arching stone. Marinette was nothing more than an observer—a watcher—who was there to get answers. So she floated instead, following a path that wasn’t quite hers to choose because something important was happening in this place, something that the Fox Miraculous wanted her to see.

Voices rose up to her, bouncing around until the sound echoed so much she could barely pick up words much less full sentences. Still, though, the teenager went down, following the path until there was an open room. It was lit by sunlight released through carefully placed holes in the ceiling, angled just so that large blue crystals reflected the light across the walls and floor, illuminating the place where, otherwise, there would have been darkness.

It gave everything an almost underwater effect, with everything covered by that strange azure colouring. There were hooded, stone figures along the wall, but Marinette’s attention was quickly dragged to the people in the middle. Most were dressed in armour, hoisting up that same banner she had seen on the ships—the emerald snake winding through the gold flag. The serpent stared at her with its cold, empty eyes and the teenager moved off to the side, out of its sight and where she could see the others.

Those standing across from the knights were dressed in long, flowing blue robes lined with silver and gold. Their faces were hidden, the hoods hanging low over their faces and Marinette snuck closer as one spoke. His voice made her heart tremble; deep power sat behind his words.

“There is no magic to do what you have asked for,” he said and motioned forward with one long sweep of his arm.

A sarcophagus sat between the two sets of people that was made of gleaming, white stone that had floral decorations along the edges in gold. Marinette wasn’t able to get close enough to see the clear carvings on the sides, sneaking around as she was and, in any case, someone stepped in front of her, blocking her view of the art; a woman with the same, shining armour as the others, long spear in hand.

“Uncle,” she said and one of the men turned. He was more decorated, with engravings on the iron that protected his chest and a gleaming crown upon his brow. “My king,” she corrected herself with a partial bow, hand pressed just above her heart, “if they can do nothing then it may be time
to accept that the Queen is gone.”

“You brought us here, Natela,” the king said, his eyes hard and cold like the ocean before a storm, “do you believe that they can do nothing?”

The knight hesitated, glancing over at the robed men. Her shoulders were tense even as she straightened. “We are here as guests, my King,” she said, her voice unwavering, “We cannot ask more than what they are willing to give.”

One of the robed men stepped closer to them, “we will not heal someone who is already dead,” he said.

The teenager perked up at the words as the ground beneath her shuddered. A feeling of dread weighed down her stomach like a bag of stones. She watched as the King turned slowly from the Lady-Knight to the man across from the Sarcophagus.

“Will not?” He repeated softly.

Witness.

Marinette shuddered at the sudden cold feeling trickling down her back and the itch rising up in her legs demanding that she flee this place, that she run and hide and never look back. But the Miraculous kept her anchored against the stone. Instead, she reached out to the song of the earth and breathed in as it hummed beneath her feet. It didn’t respond to her, not like the earth in Paris, and the song was... different; older, wiser, filled with a bouncing tune of life. She curled up in that song and breathed deeply enough to calm the fluttering bird in her chest as she continued to watch.

“You are a King, Uncle,” Natela was saying, having placed her body between the knights and the men. Something desperate rang in her voice—like she wasn’t used to pleading with madness, “You must understand that there are rules you cannot cross for your own people—much less outsiders!”

Witness the Ruin.

The knight in the shining armour turned her desperate eyes to a man standing silently at the edge of the half circle of knights. He stepped forward, an emerald sash around his chest, a snake engraved along the plates of his back. A spear, too, was in his hand, with a gleaming tip that seemed like liquid in the strange, blue lighting.

The Ruin of the King.

“Natela,” The King said, his voice like the tremble of a volcano before the pressure in its depths was released, “kill that monk.”

Monks didn’t seem like the right word, Marinette was sure. But the Miraculous was still translating and there might not have been a title similar to theirs in French so the magic did what it could.

“I will not!” The knight with the snake and the emerald sash stepped up beside her and Natela’s shoulders relaxed just a small bit. “Quirinus,” she said softly, though the stone echoed her words anyway, “Thank you.”

“Is this your betrayal at last?” The King snarled, his face distorted by his rage. He could have been a good man, once. A kind man. “Following your father’s footsteps?”

Natela straightened, though the hurt in her eyes flashed for a moment before it was squashed
down like a grape beneath the heel of a boot. “You are the betrayer,” she hissed, “coming here to
raise the Queen when she is already gone, demanding things you have no right to.”

“She is my wife!” The king snarled, sweeping his hand over the sarcophagus.

“She is my blood!” The Knight snapped back, and it was her words that echoed through the room,
silencing all others. “And you know as well as I that the laws of nature are not to be trifled with.
The Dead are not supposed to walk the land of the living.”

Natela turned away from the king to face the man at her side, “We will take the Queen home,” she
said, her voice quivering just slightly in exhaustion, in pulling power that she had never meant to
use unless the time was dire, “And we will lay her beside her sister.” She never looked up from
the sarcophagus, and so missed the look shared between a King and his Serpent.

“What is it, that you say, Golden General?” Quirinus said, his hand tightening around the wooden
shaft of his weapon, the leather in his glove creaking in that weird way leather did. “‘Death to all
betrayers’?” He turned in a flurry of green and silver, the sash around his chest whipping off to
the side as he thrust his arm forward.

Marinette flinched backwards as wood clattered against stone, dropped from a limp hand.

Quirinus’ spear crunched through gleaming armour, pushing through flesh that made a sickening
slurp as it was pierced. Natela gasped, her dark eyes wide as her hands came up to grip the wood
centimetres before it vanished into her body. “Y-you,” she hissed, body shaking as she bared her
teeth in a wolf-like snarl, “you worm.”

As one, the knights around the king lunged forward, some to defend the woman skewered in
place and others to stop them. Natela ignored the clashing around her and wrenched the spear
deeper into her body, bringing the man close enough that they could touch noses. The tip exited
just right of her spine, having gone through the squishy, fleshy part of her stomach and dripping
blood down the shining armour.

“You have ruined us all,” She told him and grunted when another spear went through her back.
Those who had been loyal to her lay on the stone, their blood turning the crevices into rivers with
too-sharp turns with their blank gazes turning to stare at the world without seeing it. Natela’s grip
loosened on the wooden shaft and she slid backwards.

Quirinus let her fall with his weapon, the spear sliding through his own, gloved hand while his
dark eyes were a blank, black chalkboard that had never been used—revealing nothing of what
was going on inside his mind. But, as Natela lay there, choking on the gurgle of her own blood,
he gave her a smile that was all teeth.

Marinette covered her mouth with her hands, unable to look away from the woman on her knees,
hers back arched, head back as if she was a puppet with broken strings. The only thing currently
keeping her up were the two spears that had pierced her back and abdomen, one tip dug into the
white stone, creating crimson puddles as blood flowed down the wood shaft and steel tip. She
couldn’t turn her gaze away, though. Couldn’t block her vision as Quirinus took a step forward,
wrapped one hand around the one he had first driven through her body, and wrenched it out with
a sickening squelching that was followed by something cracking. A rib, maybe. Most likely.

The teenager fought the urge to vomit and shuddered, taking deep breaths through her nose to
settle her roiling stomach.

“Does anyone else,” the king said carelessly as if a woman had not been murdered in front of him
—as if his niece had not been murdered in front of him, “have a problem with killing the monks?”
There was silence from the knights. The type of very still silence that belonged to a mouse who wanted to stay alive while a cat prowled through the grass.

Marinette didn’t watch the slaughter that happened afterward, covering her ears with her hands and staring at the hooded statues that lined the wall. She trembled like a drug addict, her breathing coming in sharp pants she was sure that the knights would be able to hear once they paid attention just slightly. “Why?” She pleaded with the Miraculous, stubbornly tracing the reflection of blue light as a man screamed. *Why are you making me watch this? What does this have to do with me? With Paris?*

She felt the phantom of the Miraculous against her hand back in her room, pulsing with a quiet comfort.

*This is an answer to a question you asked,* the voice returned, whispering into her ear despite her hand pressed over it with a quiet, mournful sound like a rainstorm after a long, bloody battle.

Marinette’s own voice came to her, then; a softly pled ‘why’ in her room as she held the Miraculous.

“‘An answer’?” She whispered instead.

The Miraculous warmed for a moment, almost like it was laughing. *Clever little fox,* it said, *yes,* it is the answer to a question you have asked.

“But not particularly the one from my room.”

A sharp sting drifted up her hand from the burn on her palm and Marinette jerked slightly. Then there was a different memory, of a time in her room, panting, gasping on the floor, her nails digging into the wood and scratching like claws. “*Wh-what happened?”* She had gasped out, the words directed at Huuxi at the time.

“The earth... hurt,” Marinette said, though she was unsure because something had hurt the earth, something had made her crack but whatever had done it remained a mystery. Behind her, a monk pleaded for his life.

*But no,* it wasn’t this, at least, not completely. *This* was history—the death, the betrayal, the King and his knights, but it wasn’t even recent history. The armour wasn’t anything like the kind she had seen in museums, either—it was too sleek, made of a metal that seemed like iron but shone like finalized steel. “This isn’t human history, is it?”

*No,* the voice sounded amused, not human.

Around her, the light shifted, moving as the sun above was fast forwarded through its own cycle until everything stilled. Marinette glanced over at the remaining knights and their king. What was left of the monks were strewn about, their colours muted by the magic of memory, helping the teenager to focus on the scene before her rather than the moments that had gotten them there. Except for one, last man, on his knees before the merciless entourage. He had a blade to his throat and his dark, green eyes stared up at his executioners without fear.

Marinette shuddered. There was something not quite right about his face.

No, she realized. No, it was his eyes. They were hungry as they stared up at the king, full of desire and *want* that wasn’t sexual at all but something different, something darker.

“You want to be with your queen for all of eternity,” he said, and his voice was smooth like honey and the king fell into his words like a fly, “I can help you with that.”
Marinette shuddered as the blades fell at a hand motion from the man who ruled them.

“What is your name?” The King looked down at the monk who smiled up at him.

“Isa,” he said, hissing the middle of the word out between his teeth. He seemed less like a snake, though, and more of a crocodile with his wide, white smile and the flickering of his eyes. One of the knights grabbed him underneath his arm and pulled him roughly to his feet. The monk didn’t seem to notice, his dark, green eyes had focused on Marinette.

_He sees me_, she realized with a jerk and she took a step back, away from the man and his cold stare.

_He does not_, the Miraculous whispered back, _he does not have the kind of power to see watchers._

The teenager stepped slowly away and, true enough, his eyes did not follow. That did not stop the shiver that went down her spine nor the sudden itch in her skin to _flee, flee get out._

“Your answer lies in the Halls of Forbidden Magicks,” Isa said and turned to one of the gated doors, his back bared to the king and his knights who had just slaughtered their own. “Follow me. And bring your Queen.”

And they did—a few men reaching down to lift the sarcophagus—as well as Marinette who floated after them through the gate and down a long, winding stone staircase. The armour clanked and clattered on the way down, but, between the rare moments of silence between one step and another, she heard a different type of sound. Something heavy that clinked softly and rustled like bird wings dragging against the ground. The teenager strained to hear it, her eyes narrowed as she tried to separate the noise from the rest and find out why it sounded so _familiar._

She jerked when the recognition came to her, like a phantom screaming out of the dark.

_Chains._ It was the sound of _chains._ Heavy, thick, metal kind of chains, the ones that were used fantasy Medieval dungeons in films and on television.

Now that the teenager knew what it was, she kept hearing it over the sound of the armour and the stomping of the knights. And the sound followed Isa, hovering around him like a pack of ghosts even though she could see no metal anywhere on his person. She heard it though, and, with each step they all took down into the depths of the island, it got louder until Marinette could barely hear anything over it.

_Cling clang go the chains_, the Miraculous whispered mournfully. The words sounded like part of a song but, when they were spoken, Isa turned around to look through the knights, catching the teenager’s eyes before she remembered that he couldn’t see her.

That didn’t stop her heart from thundering or the falter in her movement forward. She held her breath until he turned around again, stopping just before another gated door and pulling a string of keys out from his sleeve. They clanked and clacked together and Marinette shuddered. The knights didn’t seem to think anything was wrong, standing still and silent behind their king.

_Danger_, something hissed in the back of her mind, _danger, danger, go, run!_ The fox in her bared her teeth and pressed down against the floor, watching the man with glimmering eyes. He was a predator, something that slinked in that shadows and hunted in the dark.

The lock on the gate fell open with a clunk and the iron creaked as it swung open. Something smelled in the darkness, a rank, twisted smell that was like someone had squeezed out a bottle of perfume over the bastard child of a rotting fish and an avocado. Marinette pulled away from it, her
nose crinkling in distaste even as the others around her didn’t react at all.

It was magic, she realized after watching everyone around her. Different types of magic all swirling together until she couldn’t pick out pieces, just the melting pot of them all together. It was the fox that could smell it all; not her human nose.

Something about that didn’t make Marinette feel any better.

Isa bowed and motioned the king and knights onward, watching them out from underneath his sleek, black hair. “This way,” he said, and then led the way through the gate, past diamond shaped crystals that glowed with an ominous blue light. Underneath their cloudy surfaces, it looked as though something was moving and the teenager looked away, shivering as she followed the circular grey stones infused into a black surface. It made everything look as though it could crumble beneath her feet at any moment, like a beast would come out of the dark and open its mouth, swallowing her whole.

Shivering, Marinette turned her attention ahead to the arch filled with light. The knights moved closer together like cows huddling in a field. Now they were frightened, clinging to their spears, eyes wide and wild as they searched the shadows.

Those clanking chains returned, louder now, ringing in her ears and whispering _flee, flee little fox._

The teenager shivered and ignored it, soldiering on even though she fought the urge to look over her shoulder. She didn’t know what she was expecting beyond the arch, but a library was certainly _not_ it.

The king was even less pleased.

“What are you playing at?” He hissed at the monk who didn’t seem all too cowed by the knight currently hovering behind him, hand on his bloody spear.

“Knowledge should always be kept in easy accessible places,” Isa told them, his voice just the right pitch that they couldn’t be sure if he was mocking them or not. By the glimmer in his eyes and the slight curl to his mouth, though, he was, but his next words saved him from the fate as his kindred. “The forbidden knowledge is kept here.”

*Here* being shelves upon shelves of leather bound parchment. In the distance, there was a swiftly silenced wailing that almost made Marinette wonder if it was just the chains again or if she was hearing the echoes of what had happened before.

Isa brought them to the middle of the room where a stone stand stood in the middle of a circular stone plaza. Lines crossed through the centre—seven of them, making a misshapen-looking star. Off to one side, there was a hole in the floor surrounded by about a meter high wall of bricks with a stand and a bucket. Sunlight drifted down from high above, muted and fading even as Marinette watched. The monk lit one of the hanging lanterns with his fingers, an emerald flame sputtering to life that cast strange, ghoulish shadows across everyone’s faces.

“You want to be with the Queen for all eternity,” he said and a book floated down off one of the shelves and landed on the stone.

“Yes,” The king said, his voice empty, drifting, as if he was already under some sort of spell.

Isa motioned to the well, “then draw her Life Water.”

Marinette watched Isa rather than the King, moving forward despite the fierce beat of her heart and the cold sweat sticking to her back. She got close enough to almost look over the monk’s shoulder before he turned his head slightly, eyes focused on her but not on her.
He couldn’t see her, no, she knew. But he could sense her.

The chains clinked louder.

“Go away, nosey spirit,” he hissed, glaring at her out of the corner of his strangely bright eyes.

Marinette bared her teeth at him. *What will you do?* She dared, trusting that her Miraculous was right, that this was nothing more than a memory and he couldn’t touch her in this place. The teenager was an observer of a movie that existed all around her. His lantern swayed dangerously close to her hand and she wrenched herself away, circling the stone platform and the book. It didn’t have pages, she realized with a start, not like the pages in her books back home. Instead the leather cover opened revealing a strange, swirling liquid that ebbed and flowed like ocean tides but never spilled over the edges.

*They are memories,* the Miraculous said, *so that people could learn through the eyes of those that came before them.*

It was complicated and beautiful and explained the various smells in the air if each of the books were the memory of an entirely different person. Isa dragged his fingers through the strange magic and it parted like a mist. Marinette shuddered, thinking about that man touching her own memories and fought the sudden cartwheel her stomach did. She turned away, looking back over at the other bookshelves and the knights that had moved around to encircle the strange plaza. The sunlight was dimming and the light of the lantern began to be the only thing keeping the shadows at bay.

Here, though, the dark crept closer and Marinette shuddered, frowning slightly and watching as the long, spiny fingers consumed wood and leather. Shapes formed out of spaces and she felt like something was there, watching and waiting.

Murmuring brought her attention back to the knights, the king, and Isa. The sarcophagus had been placed before the book and its platform, a bucket of the well water sat beside it, an odd, ominous blue light flowing out of it like fog from a block of dry ice. It smelled like rain, though, rain after a long thunderstorm on a hot day. Marinette moved close enough that the strange light ran through her feet before it faded away.

There was something about it that made her want to inch closer, but Isa had started chanting in a language that made her very bones shudder and she pulled away as he reached for the bucket. The lid on the sarcophagus was lifted off by four of the knights and placed down beside it, scraping against the stone floor as it was lowered. One man grunted as his fingers were crushed and breathed out slowly through his nose while he stood up.

The words, the teenager realized, were muffled after that; like they were coming through a speaker underwater in a pool and she was sitting on the ledge. “What’s wrong?” Marinette felt the Miraculous warm uncomfortably in her hand.

*They are dangerous words,* the voice said, *words no one should repeat.*

Isa continued chanting and Marinette shuddered as the magic around him rose up like a snarling beast. It licked at her ankles and made the hair on the back of her neck rise. The fox inside of her scuttled back and told her to *run, run, run* because this magic was more than a hunter; this magic was death itself.

She held still, though, holding her breath as she watched. The world seemed to pause around her, the sound still muted but she could see Isa lift his hands, could watch as something in the shadows and corners moved and came closer. The life water was lifted, glimmering under the light of the
dimming sun and seemed to move like oil. Two of the men took the lid of the casket in hand and lifted it with a grunt, pulling it off and setting it to the side with a grunt.

The sound came back, all at once, and Marinette forced herself not to cover her ears. She couldn’t, in any case, torn and distracted by the fact that Isa had his hand in the water and one hand on the book. His eyes were glowing, she realized, a mix of white and blue that was eerie on his gaunt features. Magic hissed and sputtered, but it raised the body in the casket and the teenager stared at the fluttering white fabric, the pale features, and the strange bluish tinge of skin that used to be full of life.

The queen would have been a beautiful woman, once. Her cheekbones were high, her hair long and swaying underneath her. Isa said something, a name, perhaps, and the streams of the life water struck like a serpent, flowing over her arms and legs, covering her chest and entering her gaping mouth. Marinette watched like one might watch an oncoming train wreck—knowing something would happen but not quite sure what it was.

And then the woman coughed and heaved. The water fell to the ground, splattering like rain and Marinette jerked away from it as it seemed to have a life of its own, flowing through the cracks and crevices to a drain and slipping through it like a ghost. The queen heaved and choked, her body shaking even as the king pulled her to him.

“My love—” He crooned.

And she screamed. Hands shoved him away and she clawed at her throat, at her chest, at her skin. She fell back against the casket, chest heaving, eyes open and wild. Her hands were curled like claws, scratching up and down the sides of the stone casket, her body contorting as tears streamed down her painted cheeks.

“What have you done?” She howled and everyone else watched as she keeled over and threw up. Something black and thick flew from her mouth and landed on the floor. It looked like slime, like a bunch of mud and moss found on a forest floor, squashed into mulch by someone who didn’t care and just left there.

The smell made Marinette cover her nose and grimace, fighting the urge to vomit herself.

Reaching forward, the King tried to support his Queen but she pushed him away again, body shaking and eyes wide and bloodshot. “What have you done, Radge?” She whispered and the words cut through the library’s silence. “What did you do?”

“I love you,” he said softly, reaching out to cup her sweaty, feverish cheek, “I couldn’t lose you.”

“Please,” she begged, curled over with her arms wrapped around her waist, “please, let me go, let me die.”

There was a twitching in her fingers, Marinette realized, her eyes were unfocused, each pant came through shuddery, aching lungs that were wheezing like a whistle. She was still dying, the teenager realized, whatever had killed the Queen in the first place had never left her system and she was still dying but held to life by magic. It simply wouldn’t let her die and now the poison was inside her still, eating away at her body that was being restored just as quickly.

Endless torture, Marinette realised. She would never live in peace, not like she had before. Every waking moment would be filled with the agony of her last breath.

The king took the Queen’s hands, his eyes filled with tears as she begged before him. There was magic still in the air, still between them and it sung a dangerous song as he turned to Isa. “Release
her,” he said softly.

The monk’s face was expressionless and he looked between them. There was a glimmer of glee, though, in his eye and Marinette shuddered realizing that he was enjoying this. “If you’re sure.”

“Yes,” the king said and reached out to cup his wife’s face, tears streaming freely over her cheeks that he wiped away with his thumbs. “Release her.”

Isa raised his hands and Marinette felt herself scrambling back, a fear building deep within her body without much conflict from anywhere else.

Something was wrong. Wrong wrong wrong.

There was very little she could do though, and the Miraculous warmed in her hand as Isa reached out towards the queen and made a pulling motion. She breathed a sigh of relief at last and fell forward, boneless like a puppet and Marinette’s eyes flickered over her, over the king, over everyone in the room.

The knights were gently helping their ruler to place his dead wife's body back into the sarcophagus but Isa's eyes were still on the king, watching, focusing.

“I had hoped we would be together until the end of days,” the king said softly, almost to himself, had the words not echoed back through the silence of the library. “But now I know that it's not to be done.”

“What if it was?” Isa said, his voice smooth like the smear of an avocado. “What if you could be with her forever?”

“Is it possible?” The king turned to the man and his book, “to be bonded together even in death?”

The smile on Isa’s face was like that of a jackal, his eyes gleaming with something dangerous. “Oh,” he said, voice soft enough to almost be a croon. “It's very possible.”

“Then do it,” the king said, “do it now.”

Marinette shuddered and the monk raised his hands. She didn't want to hear the words he spoke and the Miraculous blocked them out anyway. But she could see the water rising out of the bucket, could smell the scent of decay on the air, and heard the soft crone of a death song. “What—” she murmured and then it struck the King and queen. The water flowed over them and mixed with the magic, turning to dark mist as Isa laughed and laughed and laughed.

She didn't understand, she couldn't understand. The king was screaming, his knights shouting, and Marinette's eyes were only on Isa as the mist clawed up his arms to his face, ripping the skin from his body as he howled in agony. His features became twisted and morphed, darkened like they were being burnt in a fire and his gleaming, glowing eyes turned to her.

Marinette turned and she ran with the mist licking at her heels, swirling and pulsing as it chased her out through the library. There was someone in front of her, though—the knight that had betrayed Natela, the one with the spear. He didn't have his weapon with him now as he left his King and brothers to scream and howl and wail behind him. The doors burst open as he shouldered through them and Marinette followed close behind as he took the stairs two at a time until they reached the slaughtered knights in the courtyard.

Natela's body was still there, eyes open and staring at the ceiling, mouth open in one last howl of betrayal, Marinette froze as the mists reached up through the cracks in the stone, flowing over her chest and mouth and eyes. It seeped into her, that black mist, and she didn't raise with the choking
gasp of the Queen but rather something like a statue waking up—all still until there was a single
blinking of eyelids, the twitch of a hand, the slight movement of a head.

She rose, the spears still inside of her and stumbled, gasping softly. The other dead knights rose
around her, though not as eloquently. They howled and wailed and sobbed, hissing and spitting.

Natela looked at Marinette, her eyes a spectral green, now, that had glowing pupils as piercing as
the spears that were in her body.

Go, something screamed at the teenager and she ran, fleeing away from the accusing gaze that
followed her retreating body. Screams were rising up from the buildings, people choking as they
tried to flee the tidal wave of the mists but they were unable to escape, swallowed by the dark
magic and twisted. They turned into ghouls and wraiths before her eyes and began a hunt of the
others, of those that were still alive.

Marinette fled towards the sea, following the stone steps that had been surrounded by so many
colours only for that, too, be swallowed by the black mists.

She saw the man, the knight, on the beach, almost reaching the ship with his white stallion
beneath him before he was overtaken. Man and beast roared together, the leather of the reigns and
saddle melting away as if it was nothing more than ice. Their bones crunched and snapped,
twisting and breaking, bonding and vanishing. Marinette felt bile rising up in the back of her throat
as Quirinus’ legs moulded into the horse’s ribcage and the broad neck stretched and contorted,
pressing back up against his armour until the long face had been absorbed into his chest.

He howled; a bestial sound that shook her down to her bones and then the world was swirling
around her like a reflection in a pool that second of clarity before something was dropped to break
the surface. Marinette tried to breathe and choked as something tugged on the lower half of her
stomach, wrenching her back by the waist of her pants and flinging her back into the chair in her
room.

Her hands were still clenched around the fox Miraculous and she dropped it as if it was on fire,
wrenching back and away harsh enough that she almost tipped the chair backwards before
catching herself on the edge of the desk. “I—” The teenager tried and swallowed when the words
captured in her throat.

Every part of her body was shaking and she leaned over to vomit into her trash bin. She held the
plastic in her hand, shoulders racking, her heart clenched around her chest as each movement
caused her stomach to rebel.

“Oh, god,” Marinette murmured, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She took a deep
breath and almost groaned from the effort pulsing through her ribs. Pressing a hand to her
forehead, the teenager took a moment to just breathe with her closed eyes and try to calm the
rebellion happening in her abdomen. It worked, it seemed, for a moment and she relaxed further
into the chair.

Small paws brushed against her cheek and Marinette opened her eyes with some effort and looked
over at Huuxi.

“What did it show you?” His voice was quiet.

Marinette swallowed and closed her eyes as her stomach rebelled again. The sounds still echoed in
her ears—the snapping, the screams.

She didn’t want to talk about it.
Huuxi pressed himself against the side of her hand and was quiet, letting her keep her silence.

They fell asleep like that; Marinette leaning over her desk with Huuxi pressed against her. And she dreamed.

She dreamed of clinking chains, spears through armour, thundering hooves. A voice, the same voice she had listened to before, came in through her dreams and the miraculous was in her hand as she dreamed, fingers tightening around the smooth metal.

Remember the tale
A very old tale
Of an island on the sea
Where a king and a snake
Betrayers did make
And became a warden’s key.
Hope then was lost
With a very high cost
Which took then you from me.

Cling clang, go the chains
Run from them in fear
Cling clang go the chains
The last sound that you’ll hear.

oOo

Plants had claimed the park, vines had twisted around the benches, the statues, and the trees. Flowers grew, even though the sky was over cast, and reached for a sun that wasn’t there.

A mist was rising from cracks in the earth, flowing up and creeping like fingers squeezing though doorways. They flowed like a fog over a street, twisting and turning in ways that it shouldn’t, trying to sniff something out like a bloodhound.

Glowing, spectral eyes watched the movement of the moon even though it was hidden by the clouds.

A woman woke up to the sound of hooves clip clopping down the street and assumed she was imagining it so turned over and went back to sleep.

The earth song rose and fell like an ocean tide, splashing up against the base of the bakery and drawing the teenager from dark dreams she didn’t quite remember.
Marinette transformed late in the night and it was like taking a long stretch after an intense workout. Her body burned and each muscle needed to be worked through before the ache became a buzz deep in her muscles. She wandered slowly through the streets—still quiet, after the events of the last couple of days.

Her breath came in small puffs and she watched it disperse into the night.

At one point of aimless wandering, Marinette found herself on one of the old bridges stretching over the quiet, abandoned railroad tracks and she headed down to follow them, walking their long unused path.

She kicked a rock against the rusted bars and sighed as it echoed along the high walls. Wood groaned under her weight, soggy from the rains and not creaking as it would have on a drier day. The darkness in the tunnels looked like mouths and each time Marinette entered, it was like they were swallowing her, relieving her of past burdens and past thoughts as she passed through.

The entrance to the catacombs came up sooner than she was expecting and Marinette stood by the hole in the ground, her false tail twitching. In a moment of decisiveness, she lifted the flute off her back and twirled it. The end lit up like a wand and she dropped down into the tunnels.

Like a fox into her den.

She wandered, crawling over the rock and stone, tracing the old and new paintings with her gloved fingers and masked eyes. The light from her flute didn’t falter and she continued, past the spot she had listened to Huuxi’s story, past where the ceiling was so low that she had to crawl.

Limestone walls rose on either side of her, brick walls made by different hands over the years. Marinette stood in their history, breathing the slight must that only belonged to something that had been there for a very long time.

It was the furthest she had gone since that first day, since Huuxi had guided her through the winding tunnels. Now the earth was beneath her, humming a song that rose up through her feet and she took another step forward, trusting the song to guide her way back out should she get lost.

One step, another, and another. Marinette walked and ducked and stumbled, but she gained her footing and continued. Water splashed at her toes, it licked at her heels, swallowed her thighs and calves. The suit was waterproof and she only felt a chill from her waist down.

No jeans to stick to her skin, no shoes to slosh and slide in.

She lifted one hand and braced it against the wall to keep her balance and thought she saw a ghost of herself pass by with a torn blouse and swinging lantern. At one point, Marinette had to pause and just breathed. The smell of the suit—that crisp cinnamon and apples, the pumpkins and the ash—covered that of the dust of the earth. She moved forward again, working her way through the tunnels, following the notes and song like it was a smell and she a bloodhound.

The rectangular hole in the wall, drilled, Marinette realized, by something round, waited for her. Sounds passed through the hole. Laughter, cheering, music. She put her flute between her teeth and wiggled through the hole. The material of her suit didn’t get caught on the stone smoothed by those that had crawled through before her—one of which had been herself.

Her feet touched down on the sandy floor of La Plage and her light illuminated the paintings she had passed so quickly by, urged by Huuxi that first time around. Reaching out, she touched red paint that had long been dried and froze as another burst of laughter came around one of the
pillars.

There was light coming from there, too, creating a gold glow against the gallery that sat in the dark. Marinette put out the light on her flute and inched closer.

It was probably just kids hanging out, having some fun down in the dark tunnels.

She peeked around a pillar and looked over the group of people sitting around a couple of lanterns. Candles filled the crevices and made a path from the painting of the wave to where a makeshift table made from planks of wood and stone was under the arch, next to the painting of the naked woman.

Drumming her nails against painted stone, Marinette tried to map out a path that would take her around the light and get her on the other side of the quarry when she heard something shuffling behind her. Another person was dropping through the tunnel and her tail flicked.

Nowhere to hide.

Shit.

Marinette took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders before she turned around to face the person who was coming around the side. They had a flashlight and it was, for the moment, focused on the ground before the edge touched the toes of her boots and moved up, slowly, going from where the leather ended to the pale underbelly of the suit and, finally, to her face.

She winced and wondered what it was with people blinding her with flashlights that week.

“Holy shit,” the person breathed, “holy shit! You’re—”

“Shh,” Marinette hissed, but it was too late.

The party was already quiet and she heard the sound of shoes on sand.

She closed her eyes.

Double shit.

Chapter End Notes

You know how I described a lot of groaning in this chapter?
That's me.
Right now.
I will now get to answering reviews!
SORRY IT TOOK SO LONG.

End Notes

I'm a bit new and all constructive criticism is welcome. English isn't my first language (nor
my second, or third, or fourth) so any help/pointing out any mistakes is extremely helpful. Thank you!

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