after all this time

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by phanniespider

Summary

Juleka Couffaine-Stone and Rose Lavillant broke up in their senior year of high school, and they went their separate ways. Juleka returned the Tiger to the Miraculous Box and became a rockstar duo with Luka, while Rose took on the role of Pigella full-time, almost never leaving her alter ego. However, when a world-ending threat emerges, Marinette reaches out to Juleka and she’s forced to re-embrace Purple Tigress and with her, everything else she’d left behind.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The One That Got Away by Katy Perry

In another life

I would be your girl

We'd keep all our promises

Be us against the world

Juleka took a deep breath. Another city, another hotel room, another crowd who would know her face but she would never know any of theirs.

Luka lay on the twin bed parallel to hers, scrolling through something on his phone. She wasn't all that interested, if she was being honest. Social media stopped being interesting the second she gave up Purple Tigress and suddenly saw superheroes everywhere. It was no longer pride she felt seeing articles and headlines, but deep shame.

"Hey, Jules?" Luka's tone was shaky as he asked, sitting up suddenly.

"Yeah?"

"Did Marinette text you?"

"I'd have to check." Marinette was one of the few people who knew her phone number, and that was really only for emergencies.

There had been a few times she'd flown over to Paris for an Akuma situation that absolutely required *all* hands on deck, but it wasn't particularly frequent. She hadn't been back for a little over three years now, anyway.

Juleka fished her phone out of her pockets and sure enough, there was a blue-haired icon in her notifications.

Mari: Can Purple Tigress make an appearance at a meeting tomorrow? It's important.

Mari: And before you answer, Luka already said you don't have a show for another three days, so find a different excuse this time.

Me: she can.

Mari: Good. Text me your flight information and I'll pick you up from the airport.

Me: thx

"What do you think it is?" Luka asked, now picking up his guitar to anxiously strum.

"I don't know," she responded, purposefully unhelpful. She laid back and looked up at the hotel popcorn ceiling. "Are you booking the flights?"

"Fine."

She closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. Something heavy always came with going home. The ghost of a best friend and first love wandered around her childhood bedroom, around every Paris street she'd known, through the very essence of the loud and boisterous Purple Tigress herself.

She spent the rest of the night and most of the next day cocooned, from the hotel room to the airport. When they got off the plane, she let Luka do most of the talking, only exchanging pleasantries with Marinette.

Luka was fine to do the talking anyway. He knew what Paris was to Juleka now. It wasn't like he hadn't been asked a million variants of, "how's the tour been?" already.

She looked out the window and nearly physically cringed at the sights so familiar to her. Places she'd walked with Rose, carried her when her migraines got too bad, or rushed her to sit down when she was going to faint. Spots they had dates, or played as small children.

She would have to ask Rose sometime, if her migraines had gotten any better.

As it turned out, the old Agreste Mansion had undergone some renovations. First and foremost, the basement had been turned into a meeting room. Apparently, it was where Marinette lived now, too.

When they walked down the stairs, her eyes almost instantly locked on Rose. More specifically, Pigella, sitting in a chair, staring wide-eyed at her. Most of the team was already there.

"So, we're just waiting for…" Marinette scanned the room. "Felix and Kagami."

"I've never known Kagami to be late," Luka commented. "Or Felix, now that I think about it."

“They’re normally pretty punctual, but Kagami’s pregnant, so we give them some leeway,” Adrian explained as he set the snacks out.

“I see. Good for them..”

Juleka followed Luka to retrieve their Miraculous’, locked away in the polka-dotted Miracle Box at the center of the table. Then, Juleka took the seat with the tiger mascot, which happened to be right next to the pig mascot. It wasn’t malicious; they were seventeen when they’d chosen the seats.

Rose had changed a lot, but Juleka knew that. She knew from stalking Mylene’s Instagram and watching superhero clips, but it was… different in person. Shaved head covered by her dark magenta hood, white cape falling off her back and splayed on the back of her chair. Her bright blue eyes flickered over to Juleka occasionally, still big and blinking despite the change in aesthetic.

Juleka took a deep breath. Roaar didn’t say a word to her, and she didn’t say a word to them. Last time they’d spoken, it was just too much. Instead, Juleka just murmured her phrase, *‘Roar, stripes on’*, and let Purple Tigress consume her.

She imagined it wasn’t too different from a drag persona, the way the tigress’ confidence consumed her. She could only assume, based on the drag queens who opened for her and just how they spoke.

A grin came over Juleka, and for just a moment, she could breathe like herself again. It was like being on stage, sitting next to Luka, when everything disappeared for just a moment. Only more prolonged, and a *lot* more pinks and purples. She took a deep breath, stood up, and wrapped her arms around Carapace.

“Dude, it’s been too long! After this meeting, you wanna go for drinks again?”

They both knew the reputation they had together when the tigress was in town. Last time, they’d drunkenly done some very, very vulgar karaoke in their hero personas and the turtle had bought a truck of roses for Alya. They’d also both cried. A lot.

“Hell yeah, man!” he responded.

“Not again,” Ladybug groaned. “Last time was so much damage control.”

“And so many roses launched through my bedroom window,” Rena Rouge said with a certain level of fondness that made Juleka’s heart ache. She pushed it down. The tigress was out, meaning Juleka was in and so were her feelings of loneliness and crushing existential dread.

“Let’s make it two trucks this time.” She winked, then jumped over to see Rooster Bold on the other side of the table. “Haven’t seen *you* in forever, either!”

“You should come around more,” Caprikid said, all quiet and sincere. “We could use your brashness on the team.”

“I’m not brash enough for you?” Adrian asked from the cookie table, the only one in the room not suited up at this point.

“No!” Rooster Bold answered for him, and Purple Tigress cackled.

“I’ll have to come around more, then,” she said, knowing the Juleka of it all would regret it later, knowing she would go back to the stage and Paris wouldn’t see her again until the next catastrophe. The tigress didn’t care. She grinned and laughed with her friends.

Eventually, the last two got there, already suited up. Ryuko had a noticeable baby bump as she sat down in her seat, same stone cold face as usual. Everyone else quickly moved back to their assigned chairs, with Juleka still right next to Rose.

No, that wasn’t it. This was Purple Tigress next to Pigella. They were two professional superheroes who could sit through a meeting without mountains and mountains of grief on Juleka’s end. She could keep her eyes on the subject at hand and not on the girl she desperately missed.

“So,” began Marinette, “I’ve called you all here today because we have a problem. A big one. Bigger than we’ve ever faced before.”

Juleka froze. There went her post-meeting plans.

“The Black Cat has been stolen,” continued Adrian. *Oh.* Oh shit. She should’ve noticed when they’d sat down and Adrian was still… Adrian. “Nooroo’s agreed to be interrupted from his decades-long break to allow me his use, but we need to find that ring. We can all guess what the thief is going after.”

“Shit, man,” muttered Carapace.

“We have six months to figure this out,” Bunnyx explained, reading from a notebook. “That’s when the timeline should supposedly be back in order.”

“We have a list of suspects, and we’re going to go through them one by one,” Ladybug explained. “Capture them and clear them. If something pops up, we’ll reconvene and make a new plan.”

Okay. Okay, that was easy.

“For our, um, visiting heroes–” Adrian gestured to Viperion and Purple Tigress, “–you have the choice to stay anywhere in Paris, obviously, but we have rooms made up for both of you here.”

“Sounds good to me,” Purple Tigress responded, not giving her brother the chance to. Luka would want to go home. Juleka would not. “When do we start?”

“Tomorrow morning.” Ladybug glared pointedly at Purple Tigress. “Bright and early.”

“Fine, fine!” Purple Tigress laughed out. “We’ll save the party for *after* we’ve caught the thief.”

“Good,” Rena Rouge chuckled.

She felt that same ache once more. After they caught the thief, she would be on a one-way flight back to North America, no doubt about it. There would be no party, and if there was, Juleka wouldn’t be a part of it. Maybe Luka would try to convince her to stay just a bit longer, or maybe he would already know there was no use.

This would mean she had to put the tour on hiatus until further notice. She would claim it was to care for her mother, who was too old to be alone in the crime-ridden city of Paris. She would be so apologetic, would send her love and regards from her childhood bedroom, would release a single or two in her old style as an apology.

She would then go back on tour, and she would sing away the girl sitting to her left.

“Alright, sounds good. I’ll put everyone in duos and we’ll go through roughly three suspects each day. We have a little over a hundred suspects right now, but with nine duos, it shouldn’t take us more than a month or so at most.”

Then, she listed off the duos, “Ladybug and Swallowtail, Viperion and Purple Tigress, Vesperia and Miss Hound, Carapace and Rena Rouge, Pegasus and Bunnyx, Polymouse and Minotaurox, Argos and Ryuko, Rooster Bold and Caprikid, and King Monkey and Pigella.”

Rose didn’t get along with Kim too well. While she would be so kind in public, in private, she regarded him as a complete asshole (and, well, she wasn’t exactly wrong).

“Wait,” Purple Tigress spoke without really thinking about it. “I’ll, um, switch with King Monkey.” She turned to her left, where Pigella sat, jaw dropped. “If that’s okay with you?”

“Um… yes?” Her voice was still so high and sweet, even with the darker look to her.

Ladybug chuckled. “Well, alright! We can make that switch in the plans, and I’ll rework the suspects those duos will work with. Go team?”

Viperion shot her a look, and she looked away, face flushed red. She took a deep breath and let Purple Tigress envelope her again.

“Go team!” she shouted out, and everyone echoed her.

She glanced to the left and saw Pigella staring at her, and she couldn’t help herself from staring back. She saw the eyes of a girl whose lips and body she knew well, whose brain she’d practically lived in with how close they used to be. She saw, even through the guise of Pigella, Rose Lavillant staring back at her.

She saw the migraine forming before Rose even felt it.

“Hey,” she whispered, “Do you need to go somewhere quieter?”

“Yeah,” Pigella whispered back.

She said her good-nights to her friends, firmly but subtly grabbed Rose's shoulder, and led her to the quieter upstairs area of the Agreste mansion.

"Roaar, stripes in," she murmured, and nearly collapsed as she felt her energy drain. Still, she knew she had to find Rose some head medicine and lay her down. That was the number one priority.

She led Pigella to one of the three Agreste family living rooms, put on the fire, and grabbed some water. She then put on the kettle. Back in her family home, before things ended, she had a routine down to help whenever Rose got a migraine or a dizzy spell.

"Are you okay, Rose?" Marinette's voice asked from nearby. Juleka was rifling through Adrian's medicine cabinet, but could still hear the conversation nearby.

"I am," Pigella responded. "Just another migraine."

"You should power down. Your Miraculous takes energy from you."

"I will soon. I just…" she sighed. "Can you believe she still remembers how to deal with all of this?"

"Honestly? Yeah. Rose, she loved you. It doesn't surprise me that she didn't just… forget how to do that."

"Yeah, I guess… Daizzi, calm down."

Juleka finally found the specific brand of headache medication she remembered Rose using and went back into the living room. What she saw was…

The girl she'd once known was so different to the girl lying on the couch, head in her hands. As she'd already known, Rose had shaved her head completely, but what she didn't know was the all-pink alt look she was wearing, nor the dark look of her smudged, heavy makeup. She looked as though she had come from a rave.

"Got the medicine," she said calmly, trying not to focus on how *hot* Rose was right now. It wasn't like she wasn't beautiful before, but she basically dripped sex appeal in this outfit. "Are the migraines getting worse?"

"Not worse, but not… better."

"What are the doctors saying?"

She shrugged. "Same as always. All they can do is give me more medicine and recommend more sleep."

"You could use more sleep," Mylene commented from the stairs, her Kwami following close behind her. "I can take her from here."

"Yeah, alright. Get home safe, Rose."

Juleka began toward the stairs, but was stopped by Marinette's voice.

"Wait," began the leader, "Let me show you to your room."

"Right, yes, thanks."

With Marinette's help, she found her way to one of the many plain, neatly-made bedrooms, had Kim with his impossible muscle mass and gym bro optimism grab her bags, and finally was able to flop into the expensive mattress.

Scenes of that day played through her head, like they did every time she went to Paris. A normal day, just a few weeks after graduation. Then boom, everything imploded on itself.

Then, suddenly, she was packing her bags, and her dad was greeting her at the airport, and everything shifted. While before, her thoughts were accompanied by Rose's, they were alone now. So, she did the only thing she knew how: she picked up her notebook and started writing.

Luka made her deeply angsty emotions into songs, and now there they were. Everyone knew Predators. Stadiums sold out, tour going strong.

She pulled up her phone, rubbed her eyes a bit, and went to Instagram to record a video.

"Hey, guys, it's Juleka. So, you might've all heard the news of the Over It Tour cancellation, and I just want to say it's true. To anyone who has a ticket to an upcoming show, you're being fully refunded and when the tour can come back, we're going to give anyone who previously bought a ticket priority over the next ones. Luka and I are so sorry, but with everything going on in Paris right now, we have to be there for our family."

It wasn't a lie. She did have to be there for her family; when Paris was in danger, her mother was in danger. Her friends were in danger, putting themselves into the line of fire. Luka was in danger, because even if she refused to go, he would.

She pressed the little red end recording button, sent the video to her PR team (because apparently, she couldn't just fucking post a video without permission), and closed her eyes.

Tomorrow would be a day full of Pigella. It would be Juleka scrambling to remember what she could say to the girl, only to realize for the billionth time that there really was nothing to say. However, tonight was only for sleep.

And if she thought of shaved blond hair and smudged eyeliner a few times more, then no one would be around to call her on it anyway.

Chapter End Notes

yall the lesbianism is STRONG on this one

fair warning these characters will be having sex pretty soon. it's a slow burn with some familiar moments between them iykwim

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Something in the Orange - Zach Bryan

But I miss you in the mornings when I see the sun

Somethin' in the orange tells me we're not done

"So," began Roaar to a half-asleep Juleka, "since we're going to be here a while, we may as well start talking again."

"Mmm…"

Juleka rolled over in bed, taking a second to remember where she was. The answer was the spare bedroom in Adrian's home. While the Kwami was unbearably loud 24/7, she had to admit she'd missed them.

"Alright," she agreed, "How have you been?"

Their eyes flickered elsewhere. "Lonely."

An ache pulled at her heart. "Hasn't Sass been keeping you company?"

"He's usually meditating, or yelling at me for 'interrupting his meditation', or something like that."

Roaar giggled, so Juleka did too. "Well, you have me for… probably the next month, knowing my luck."

The Kwami grinned. "Well, let's make the best of it! C'mon, Juleka, let's get some food in your stomach and get ready."

"Yeah, yeah." She fished two breakfast bars from her travel bag — one for her, one for Roaar — and scarfed hers down in no time.

The last time Juleka was in Paris, had spoken to any friends she'd once had, had spoken to *Roaar*, was three years ago. This was common knowledge. That was when they'd defeated Chrysalis, after all, and when she was no longer needed.

Juleka and Rose had already been broken up two years at this point. Juleka was more focused on making her and Luka's career actually *work*, but when Paris needed her, she still returned no matter what.

Then, she realized, without Chrysalis' influence and with all the Miraculous in Marinette's control, Paris didn't really need her anymore.

She sat upon a rooftop with just Roaar to break the news.

"So," she began, voice hoarse from recording her latest album, "I have something I want to talk about."

"Yeah?" responded Roaar, who also seemed pretty tuckered out from their previous battle.

"I, um… I think I'm going to move. To North America. Full-time."

Roaar's eyes widened, like they knew this conversation. It made sense. An immortal being with the power of a deity would have at least some experience with loss.

"So you're… going?"

"Yeah. I'll be back if there's, um, another big threat, but…" she felt tears stinging at her eyes. "But yeah, I'm going."

"Juleka, you can't! Paris needs you!"

"Paris doesn't-" she coughed down her tears, "-Paris will be alright. The rest of the crew has it under control."

Anger contorted the pink Kwamis face. "You can't be serious! After all we've done together!?"

"I-"

"Is this about Rose? Why doesn't she just leave? She's the one who-"

"Roaar!" she interrupted the Kwami. Tears were streaming down both of their faces now. "I'm going. It's not about Rose, or you, or anybody else. It's me. I've made my choice."

Roaar geared up to let out a loud yell, but before they could, Juleka pulled off her bracelet and shoved it in her pocket. She would return it to the Miracle Box before she left tomorrow. She would ignore the aching pain of loneliness when she went to rub her bracelet for comfort only to get none. She would move on.

She would move on.

Purple Tigress arrived at the spot Ladybug told her and Pigella to meet to go over suspects. As it turned out, it was quite familiar to her — more specifically, her and the supheroine in

front of her had made out after school in this very alleyway many times.

"So," began the tigress, "are you feeling better?"

Pigella nodded. "I am. Thanks for… caring."

"Like I would've stopped."

A tense silence built over them.

"Um, did Ladybug give you our suspect list?" Purple Tigress finally asked.

"Yes, just let me-" she grabbed a hastily written list from her pocket. "I have it right here. It has all of our suspects, and a rundown on their day-to-day. I don't know if you saw Ladybug's message, but she says we might have a few more depending on how, um, how King Monkey handles them."

"You mean depending on how incompetent Kim is?" Juleka whispered.

Pigella gasped, but smiled nonetheless. Juleka would deny how much she missed that smile, but warmth still returned to her when she saw it. "Jules, you can't-"

"C'mon, we both know you hate him. Not even Luka can whip his sorry self into shape. Max refuses to work with him, too, last time I heard?"

"Professionalism!" she shouted out. "Professionalism, Tigress!"

Juleka found herself, her true self, the one deep down, laughing out. It was dangerous, how even after five years, Rose could still bring that out.

"Fine, fine. Professionalism, Pigella. Who's our first suspect?"

"Seems to be… Miss Mendeleiev?"

"The science teacher?" chuckled Purple Tigress.

"Seems to be. I think Ladybug's checking anyone who could've gotten access to Adrian during the average hours of his day. I mean, really, anyone could've done it."

"Fair enough," she sighed, "I mean, yeah, obviously."

Pigella chuckled. "I know that look. Someone has a hunch."

"I mean, I just- Nothing else was stolen, right? Just the ring. So, it has to be someone with knowledge of the Miraculous. Maybe even extensive knowledge. I just don't think that's Olga Mendeleiev." She looked down at her bracelet. No one except for a select crew knew what it truly did.

"No, I don't think so either." Pigella paused. "But for now, we'll follow out Ladybug's orders. When we take our break later, we can read over the list and see if there's anybody we think

should be a priority."

"Good idea," Juleka agreed. "Now let's get to it!"

The two superheroes got to the school within a matter of minutes, and were given clearance almost immediately. While nobody really remembered Purple Tigress, everyone knew Pigella, and she was able to vouch for them both.

They made their way to the chemistry classroom, where Mrs. Mendeleiev quickly cleared her name via an alibi. The two girls thanked her then went on their way.

Their next two suspects were busts too; just people Adrian volunteered with semi-regularly. They had alibis as well.

"I guess it's time for the most important question of all, then…" Juleka began as soon as they were out of earshot of the others, "What're we having for lunch?"

Pigella chuckled and rolled her eyes. "I could go for something from the Patisserie, if you're willing?"

"Absolutely. I'd love a little taste of Paris while I'm here."

On their way, they were stopped by someone — a grandmother walking with her young granddaughter, holding a pig plushie.

"Grandma, grandma, look, look, it's her!" whisper-shouted the girl. "It's, um, um, it's- it's Pigella!"

"That superhero?" The girl's grandma turned her head and spotted them, a soft smile coming over her face. "Oh, goodness, it is!"

It was at this point that Rose noticed the two and waved them over with a smile. Juleka's only option, as someone who wasn't really a superhero at all anymore, was to stand to the side.

"Hi, what's your name?" Rose asked with a cheery smile, the sweet kind she used when talking to kids. Juleka remembered it fondly, remembered the similar smile she put on as well. They were publicly a couple at that point, after all. Now, they were just… business partners. One known, one faded out of public eye almost completely.

"It's, um, um, Sophie!" the girl said. "You're so- so- so brave! I wish I could be that brave."

Pigella knelt down and ruffled her short hair. "You wanna know my secret, Sophie?" The girl nodded, eyes full of stars. "If you want to be brave, you have to put yourself out there. The real you, the one deep down inside."

"Really? It's- it's that easy?"

Pigella smiled, then shook her head. "No. It's one of the hardest things ever. But if you start now, then by the time you're big, you'll be really good at it."

The girl gasped. "Okay, okay! Then I'll be a hero like you, 'cause I'll- I'll be big and brave!"

"Yes you will," she agreed. She turned to the grandmother. "Do you two want a picture?"

"Oh, absolutely! Doris wouldn't believe I'd seen you otherwise." Her eyes settled on Purple Tigress as Pigella took the phone from her hand to get the picture. "I remember seeing you on the news a couple of years back. Pink Panthress, was it?"

"Purple Tigress, ma'am."

"Janice." She extended her hand, so Purple Tigress took it. "You saved my neighbor's son-in-law from one of those darned Akumas. It's nice to see you back on the scene after so long." She smiled down at her girl. "Heroes like you two truly make Paris a better place."

Purple Tigress found herself smile, the same way she did on stage. She supposed this was just as much of a performance. "It's what we do, ma'am."

"Now, I don't know about my granddaughter, but I most certainly want a picture with you, Purple Tigress."

"Don't worry about it, already got one." Pigella showed them a photo of them just chatting, the sunlight hitting the older woman's face perfectly. "Tigress here clams up a bit when she knows a photo is being taken of her, but I knew you would want one."

"Woah, you're like a- like a- like a ninja!" Sophie shouted in awe.

"Sometimes, being sneaky is my job." Pigella raised her index finger to her lip, and Sophie giggled, doing the same. "Which is why you absolutely can't tell Ladybug we took extra time on our break today."

"Never!" Sophie agreed.

"Oh, I wouldn't dare," Janice said. "You made my girl's entire month."

Pigella hugged Sophie one more time, then she and Purple Tigress found some place to de-transform. Rose looked a bit more put-together than last night; her makeup had been wiped off, substituted for something cleaner, while she wore a cute pink skirt and cardigan. Still pretty as ever, even with the change in style.

Finally, they headed on their way to the Patisserie.

"It's such rewarding work," Juleka murmured under her breath, "Remind me why I ever stopped?"

"You could probably blame me for that," Rose replied.

"I…" she went quiet. "Everyone always thinks that. That I left because I was running away from something — from you, I guess. They don't ever believe it when I say that there was something I was running toward."

Rose physically stopped moving, so Juleka did too. "And… was there?"

Juleka laughed, nodding. "My career had started to boom, and then we defeated Chrysalis, and I just…" She took a deep breath. Those times, right before and right after she left, were some of the worst in her life. She hated every decision she made. Every breath she took was something she scorned and criticized for months. All she wanted was to feel at home again, and she just didn't feel that in her New York apartment yet. Not even when Luka joined her did she properly feel at home. It was only when she eradicated Rose Lavillant from her mind that she felt like a person again. Going back to those months just felt… dreadful. "I felt that same rush of relief when I went to that first drag night that I did in Kitty Section all those years ago. I felt the same way every time I climbed up onto *any* stage, when I first opened for a bigger name than me, when I got to dress up in a fun costume and just *be* for a little while. The weight of the world wasn't on my shoulders so much when I was in a gay bar in Miami, and I finally felt free. I wanted to cultivate that feeling. I wanted Juleka Couffaine to thrive, and so Purple Tigress had to… fall to the wayside."

"Wow," Rose whispered, "I had no idea this was… holding you back so much."

Juleka shrugged. "I think it was just… me. I couldn't handle it anymore. Being Purple Tigress and Juleka Couffaine at the same time, it was… it was suffocating me."

"I just- I'm sorry I assumed. Y'know, that it was because of me."

Juleka wouldn't tell her about the spirit of an optimistic girl she felt all around Paris, how that spirit wore pigtails and got migraines and laughed and cried and loved. She would just nod. Rose didn't need to know that part of that hopelessness, that crushing weight, was because of her.

"Might've been a little presumptuous," she teased. "Let's keep on going. We're not far from the Patisserie."

Rose nodded. "I've been thinking about the list. Maybe we should try to get access to some other lists as well?"

"Good idea," Juleka agreed. "I'm sure most of the team would send their lists no question, but I'm also sure Marinette kept the hardest suspects for herself."

"She's going to work herself to death if she keeps this up," Rose mumbled.

"So she's still an overachiever?" Juleka wasn't sure why she was asking. As long as Marinette Dupain-Cheng was the guardian, she would pile her workload higher than the Eiffel Tower.

Rose nodded. "She's not great at taking it easy. The last time we all got her to take a break, Adrian had to take her phone because she was calling Alya so much."

Juleka chuckled. "Nathaniel told me about that. He and Marc were worried sick."

"We all were."

Juleka's stomach dropped. It was right at the beginning of her tour, and while Luka flew over for the weekend to comfort everyone and mediate the situation, Juleka holed up in her hotel room all alone. She couldn't face it. Paris needed her, her *friend* needed her, and she couldn't face it.

She was a disgrace to her team and everyone knew it. Roaar's mighty spirit would be better in the hands of literally anybody else. Cerise Bianca would do a better job embodying the Tigress.

They finally reached the Dupain-Cheng family's Patisserie, and without any hesitation, Rose ordered *their* order — two chocolate scones and two lattes, one with extra sugar and the other iced. They got the same thing every day after school when it was time to work on homework or chat about life.

They slouched into the same two-seated table as they always did. The place hadn't changed much. The menu had expanded, with the family presumably having more room without their daughter living there anymore, and the ambience was a bit calmer, but it was still the same place she had visited all those years ago.

One thing she realized, as she bit into her scone and let out a small moan of delight, was that she'd really missed French pastries.

Juleka coughed quietly. Rose was staring. "I'm sure if we explained ourselves to Adrian, he'd give us their list too."

"Good point," Rose agreed, rummaging to find her phone in her pocket. "I'll message him."

She did so, then set her phone down on the table. Just a few minutes later, a loud ding rang out from the device.

"Did he respond?"

Rose picked up her phone, then shook her head and set it back down. "No, that was just from a-" she cut herself off.

"From a what?"

"Um, not important."

Juleka chuckled. "Was it a date?"

Rose's face flushed, and she nodded. "I just… I didn't want to make things uncomfortable between us."

She shrugged. "We've been friends before. I don't see why we can't be friends again, right?"

The blonde's eyes slowly but surely met hers, and she smiled. "Yeah, I'd like that. Friends."

Only hours later, when Juleka was alone in her room, did the all-consuming pit of *'just friends'* begin to eat at her. The only thing worse than never seeing Rose Lavillant ever again was being so close to her, close enough to touch and kiss and love, but not be allowed to do any of it. She would have to know someone else would be doing that for her.

She would have to persist. She and Rose would be working together for upwards of a month. She couldn't afford to be reckless.

Purple Tigress would have to stay calm and collected. She would not lose her sanity.

Chapter End Notes

second chapter, woohoo!

i feel like all lesbian breakups have a "lets stay friends" stage that they're most definitely going to break at some point.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Afterglow by Taylor Swift

Meet me in the afterglow

It's so excruciating to see you low

Just wanna lift you up and not let you go

Juleka developed a new bad habit in Paris, which was staying up far too late.

She said 'new', but really, it was just one she had previously kicked. As a teenager, she often spent far too much time on Tumblr, shit-posting for the fun of it until the early hours of dawn. She'd write angsty poems and song lyrics that she'd end up making into music.

When she took on the Tiger, all staying up until four in the morning instantly stopped. She had no energy for that when all of it was being used saving the city. How could she?

However, now that she had nothing to do *except* be Purple Tigress and interrogate civilians, it was a bit easier to spend her nights scrolling Tumblr, which really just ended up being superhero fanart most of the time. When she wasn't on the team, it was a nice way to stay connected, and now that she *was* on the team, it was… flattering, to say the least.

The public had a reaction she'd have never expected after her first day back in action: they rejoiced. Years-dead fan-pages kicked back up, paparazzi were suddenly taking photos of her, teenagers wanted autographs on their TigerPig fanart, the works.

Oh, and that. *TigerPig*. As it turned out, having a public relationship and not announcing it ended really left something open and hopeful in the air, at least for them. She'd had at least three people come up to her in the past week thanking her and Rose, telling her how much it'd helped them come out publicly that she already had. Having an openly queer superhero meant *so* much to Paris.

Her relationship with Rose, no matter how real it was anymore, meant so much. Too much for her to willingly let it go,

Juleka's new habit wasn't all bad — for example, now, she was two weeks into her new schedule, she was awake in bed on her phone, and she got a text from Rose Lavillant.

She tapped just on instinct and what she saw was… wow. It was a sight so familiar but so different.

Tastefully framed and cropped in a mirror picture was Rose's bare midsection, under-boob and pubic hair just barely visible. Her frame was just as thin as before, though she'd definitely become more toned, abs more visible now. It was a very clear message: *'Come over and find out what else there is to see.'*

A very clear message very clearly *not* aimed at her.

Me: wow rose

Me: how cruel is this

Read by Rose Lavillant

Well, Juleka's next act wasn't anything she would do in her right mind, but she really wasn't. The sight of Rose, *her Rose,* made her breathless and dizzy.

She transformed into Purple Tigress, if just to gain *her* confidence, then unzipped the zipper on the front of the spandex. Her chest and midsection were revealed, only a bra on her now. She went to her private bathroom, where a large mirror sat hung on the door. She pulled up the camera on her phone, used the device to carefully obscure her face, then took a picture. Without any further thought, she sent it.

Me: if we're comparing

Rose: Wow.

Rose: Were you training?

Me: yes

Me: just taking my break lol

Me: so good timing I suppose?

Rose: I would say so

Juleka paused as she de-transformed. How was she going to work in the morning if they kept up like this?

Me: so who was that photo meant for

Me: out of curiosity

Rose: Just a hookup

Me: lucky girl

Me: you have fun

Rose: That was the hardest I've came in months.

Rose: So it's not a high likelihood.

Rose: <3

Juleka felt pride sweltering in her chest, and with that confirmation, she allowed herself to plunge two fingers into her wetness and let her enjoy herself for the first time in a while.

The next day, it felt almost like it didn't happen. The two arrived at the Patisserie at about the same time, discussed their suspects for the day, discussed the random things on their minds, discussed their fans, discussed everything that wasn't the pictures from the last night.

When they de-transformed for lunch, everything was normal. They went over plans, built up a better suspect list, and checked with the rest of their team. Marinette announced a progress meeting, and naturally, it was mandatory that she go.

One thing of note was that, over the last two weeks, Juleka had been dodging any live TV interviews. She never did well with them, not as Juleka Couffaine or as Purple Tigress.

As she sat down in that chair in Adrian's basement, she felt Ladybug looking at her. Well, her and Pigella.

"So," she began, "I understand there's been some concern about workload distribution. I understand that I gave some pairings… easier assignments than others, if just to test working compatibility. Right now, we don't know what happened to the Black Cat, or whose hands it's ended up in. It's scary, yes, but no cause for panic. So, because of this, I'm going to allow some of us to switch suspects, switch partners, and work with their preferred workload." She paused. "Adrian and I are going to need a week off to assess some things in our personal lives. We're going to give all of our suspects to the rest of the team. I trust that you'll all be capable enough to handle it, and if you need us, you'll call."

Before King Monkey could rush over to volunteer for even more work that they logically couldn't do, Viperion held his arm in front of him. Purple Tigress chuckled at the sight, and she could hear Swallowtail doing the same.

Pigella spoke up, flashing a smile to Ladybug, "Does anyone mind if I share my idea for a plan?"

"One more thing, and then I'll hand the floor to you." Ladybug looked directly at Juleka. "Everyone needs to participate in press interviews. The public are terrified. We need to soothe them, we need to promise that we're doing everything we can."

"Right," Juleka whispered. "Sorry."

"Just try to be better about it?"

She nodded. "Thank you, Ladybug."

Rose took a deep breath. "So, let's talk strategy."

Juleka, in her personal career, almost never agreed to live interviews. She liked to agree to questions beforehand, and she liked to have a say in the final edit. If that wasn't the case, she walked. It was how she and Luka ended up doing interviews on their own YouTube channel, rather than with a bigger outlet.

Now, though, she was sitting in a studio with a news reporter, cameras rolling and all of Paris watching, with only the mask of Purple Tigress to hide her anxiety behind. She knew that with just one wrong word, her entire city would fall into a perilous fear.

The interviewer was a simple news personality with a cookie cutter smile and no real personality in her words. She asked the questions, she gave media-trained responses, and that was it. Juleka couldn't even remember her name, if she was being honest.

Next to her was Pigella, sat with her hands in her lap, smiling politely.

"So, Purple Tigress, we understand that you and Viperion have been away from your duties for a while. Any reason?"

That was another thing. The gossip. Everybody wanted a headline, and these questions were specially designed to pick at it. The people in charge never cared whether or not this would *really* make people feel better — they saw themselves as invincible and everyone else as insignificant anyway.

"Well," she began, voice slightly shaky, "as a part-time superhero, I only come out in times of need. While we're not facing a Chrysalis-level threat this time, I refuse to leave my fellow superheroes overworked right now."

Pigella smiled. "We appreciate it very much, too. I'm not sure what we'd do without you and Viperion."

The interviewer let out a fake giggle. "That's another thing: what is the relationship between Purple Tigress and Viperion? Is the re-emergence of you two at the same just a coincidence, or is there something more between you two?"

Juleka would've gagged at the implication if she wasn't on Live TV. "We're both part-time superheroes, and if I'm being honest, decent friends too. There's nothing more between Viperion and I than that."

The interviewer smiled again, and glanced at the card in her lap. "And what about you two? Pigella and Purple Tigress? Rumors have been spindling for *years* about your relationship to each other. People online often assume that because of your affectionate nature, you're in a relationship. Any comments?"

"No," Pigella said sternly, "We're not in a relationship."

Juleka felt pure pain in her stomach, but Purple Tigress kept speaking, "Which isn't to undermine the fans or their queerness. We're both very much activists for queer rights, as are everyone else on our team."

"Of course," Pigella agreed. "I've seen a few different things on social media from fans, and we've signed some very cute things from them too, but we really do just work together."

"Ah," the interviewer answered simply, clearly disappointed. "So just friends, then?"

"Just friends," Purple Tigress agreed. Juleka glanced over and saw Rose. She saw the migraine forming, saw her brain stop to function. She looked down at her watch and widened her eyes dramatically. "I'm so sorry, but Ladybug needs us. Emergency meeting, you understand."

"Of course." She flashed her pearly whites nervously.

Purple Tigress looked into the camera. "Before we go, I want to send this message to all of Paris: we're all doing our best to make this city a safer place. If you see anything suspicious, call the number on screen, and report it to us."

She flashed a smile, grabbed Rose's arm, and rushed them out of the studio as fast as possible. They found their way to the Patisserie nearby and de-transformed in the upstairs room with Tom and Sabine's permission. Juleka wasn't the bravest girl, but if Rose needed it, she would probably go up on stage in front of a billion people out of costume and out of her persona just to get it for her.

"What- what does she need?" Rose asked meekly.

"Nothing," Juleka answered quietly. "Just noticed you were having a bad time. Figured you'd want to get away from the bright lights."

"Thanks." She slumped into the floor, head in her arms. "How do you… why…" she groaned in frustration. "You should go."

"What?" Juleka almost laughed at how stupid that was. "Why would I go?"

"I just- this is a lot. For anyone."

"I know. Trust me, I know how much it is. That doesn't mean I don't want to be there for you." Juleka slumped down next to her. "Even if we are 'just friends'."

"Yeah… I guess 'just friends' don't send each other pictures like that, do they?"

"No, probably not," Juleka answered, though she was grinning wholly. "I guess we've always been kind of strange, though, haven't we?"

Rose laughed, just for a moment, but that was all Juleka could ask for. She just needed for her girl to smile.

"We have."

Chapter End Notes

now remember everyone this is a SLOW BURN do not get your hopes up for these lovesick lesbians just yet

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