

*Your skin has never been so soft as now covered in scales*

The moss that covered his skin was already spreading and taking root, breaking the cold concrete of the old parking lot he'd decided to settle in. Lying on the ground, Marvin was watching the small damaged-wing butterfly that had landed on his thigh a few minutes ago, and that was now stuck in the slimy and quickly forming chrysalis, a mycorrhizal cocoon that would soon swallow the young boy completely. Not before long, the tiny insect would disappear with him into a single viscous body, silent and motionless, forever bathed in the acid glow of one of the building's few remaining neon lights.

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He remembers the lake near the power plant where he used to swim secretly after school. Shortly before everything he had ever known had collapsed, some men in white had forbidden swimming and condemned access to the lake. They had also forbidden local residents to drink tap water. On TV, there were stories of people whose bodies were changing, especially teenagers. Some had become so monstrous that frightened and distraught parents, had thrown them out. What the News didn't say was that the whole population was affected, and that very few people survived, most of them not even reaching the first stages of mutation. Children and teenagers were more resistant because their bodies were still growing and were more adaptable. Melancholic organisms, they morphed through their contact with the tired landscape, as symbiotic babes defying death.

The first time he had watched these terrifying reports, Marvin had cried. He'd always imagined his mother would be so proud to see him on TV, but when his skin hardened and formed a thick, rough bark, he worried his parents would stop loving him, and to their eyes become a monster as repulsive as those haunting TV screens. What did it matter now? Neither the television nor Marvin's parents had survived.

He joined the Acanthus after his home was drowned in the heavy floods. Kim, one of the group's pathfinders, had found him in the ruins of an old farmhouse, eating rotten fruit. Kim had phosphorescent skin. Their blazing flesh always shone with a bluish light, soft during the day and electric at night. At first sight, Marvin found them stunningly beautiful. With the suppleness of a lizard - their bones had become soft due to the light rays - Kim quietly slid close to Marvin, and sharing the fresh pears they'd just picked, they explained how the group functioned.

The Acanthus formed to take care of each other, living in disused buildings and ruined constructions, ghost territories, zombie lands. They chose to give their group a name reminiscent of the soft leaves that grow in rocky grounds, bearing purplish bisexual flowers. Among them, some were still just kids, others barely older than Marvin, and they all found it reassuring to be together for the last days of the world in which they had grown up.

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He also remembers Swann, the first person he saw finish his transformation. By the time Marvin had joined the group, Swann could no longer see or speak, and both air and food had become painful to swallow. Clusters of tiny white flowers were growing inside him, in his throat and eyeballs, covering his eyes and filling his mouth, attempting to reach the dim daylight through every one of his orifices. His skeleton had slowly curled up like a snail's shell, or a stem bending under the burden of a flower weighed down by drops of rain after a downpour. On the translucent skin of Swan's back — in places tearing with the growth of sharp petals — Marvin noticed the tattoo of two large angel wings, and on his arm, the lyrics of a Linkin Park song. He had thought that surely if he had met Swann in the world of before, they would have become friends. He would have taken him to the lake, and they would have shared the same pair of headphones to listen to each other's favorite songs, for afternoons on end.

*I wanna heal, I wanna feel what I thought was never real  
I wanna let go of the pain I've felt so long  
I wanna heal, I wanna feel like I'm close to something real  
I wanna find something I've wanted all along  
Somewhere I belong*

The group had decided to bring Swann to the top of the tower of an old Gothic-inspired church, almost completely devoured by brambles. They would all watch over him until the surface of the world swallowed and digested him, making him an ivy gargoyle among the pretentious crumbling architecture, that reminded Marvin that through the centuries humans always could disguise violence in beauty.

Slowly, he had watched Swann's decay. His liquid limbs spilled over the edge of the spire, mingling with the sculptural details of the cornice, flowing like slow whitish tears as thick as wax, soon frozen into tender stalactites by the wind.

"I'll miss you drama boy" whispered Roman, whose silver-scaled face revealed a sad smile on which small drops of salt water had begun to pearl. Then he turned to Marvin, embracing him with his four shiny arms, or strange muscular outgrowths resembling metallic tentacles, and reassured him: "You know, even at the end, it doesn't hurt ».

A few days later, Roman had also become a piece of landscape, his body merging with the structure of the large baroque iron gate of an abandoned manor house. Since then on, Marvin has been there for all of them.

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At last, he remembers his armors, those that accompanied him when his human shell wasn't enough. For almost as long as he can remember - well before acid rain and the tearing of the earth – he gathered comforting and colorful figures around him, lovingly crafting them in his bedroom, with his cosplayer hands. They were made from cardboard, plastic milk bottles and feathers plucked from old pillows he found in the street. When the satellite networks still worked, Marvin would spend hours on his computer. He had watched « How to Make Full Metal Alchemist Alphonse's Armor in 10 Steps » over two hundred times. He never got tired of it. Over and over again, he'd reproduced the gestures that transform memories into matter. It had always been the only thing to do after all, the only way to really breathe: creating yourself a new shell, solid and wonderful, a sculptural and familiar place inside which you take refuge and face the world.

Alone in the parking lot, as night falls, Marvin no longer needs armor. There's nothing left to be protected from anymore.