The Pun Book
by quicksilversquared

Summary

Every time Adrien goes to renew his favorite book, The Big Book of Puns, someone else has requested it. Who could it possibly be? And why do the librarians keep trying to set the two of them up?

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
"The Big Book of Puns? Yes, sir, it came in yesterday," the librarian told Adrien. "We just haven't put the books that came in then out on the shelf yet. Hold on one minute, and I'll go grab it for you."

"Thanks!" Adrien said happily. He grinned as he dug in his wallet for his library card. *The Big Book of Puns (And Other Assorted Jokes)* had been his favorite book from the day he found it. While he (in his own opinion, at least) had already been fairly good at puns, he couldn't deny that the book had helped him a ton with coming up with jokes on the fly and in the middle of battles. He had also gotten pulled into a pun competition of sorts with Ladybug recently, which only spurred him on in his quest to stay the Pun Master of their dynamic duo.

Thus, the Book.

"You've checked this one out a million times," Plagg whined after Adrien had checked the book out and started heading to the door with his favorite book under his arm and a spring in his step. "Why do you need to check it out again?"

"I can't read it all at once, Plagg, not with my university classes and akuma fights to take care of," Adrien said with a sigh as he headed down the sidewalk towards the car where the Gorilla waited. "So I read it in chunks, write the best bits down, and then go practice those out while that other person has my book."

Plagg sniggered from inside Adrien's jacket. "I still can't believe that someone is requesting that book as often as you. Nerds, the both of you. Maybe you're soulmates."

Adrien rolled his eyes at that. The librarians had told him a month before that the reason he could never renew his loan on the pun book was because someone else kept requesting it. The book had been bouncing back and forth between the two of them for nearly two months now, a fact that seemed to be amusing the librarians greatly. Adrien was somewhat curious about this other pun-loving person, but he didn't care enough to go to their library (yes, he knew which one- not just one, but two of the librarians had told him "accidentally" in passing, which he was fairly certain was not entirely legal) and sit around waiting to meet them when they picked up their book.

If he lived in a rom-com, that would surely be what he would do. He would return the book and then head over to their library the next day to anxiously sit on the bench in the front of the check-out desk, fiddling with a bouquet of roses until a girl his own age came down and picked up The Big Book of Puns from the holds shelf. The librarians would introduce them when she checked the book out, they would stammer a bit, and then they would go out dating, get married, and live happily ever after, punning the whole way. That was what the librarians seemed to think would happen. Adrien thought that they watched too many romantic movies.

For one, they probably didn't even know who this other person was. Since The Big Book of Puns always got sent to another library in the area and there were different librarians working at each one, it meant that the librarians didn't know who they were. It could be a middle-aged dude. It could be an old grandmother or grandfather. It could be a kid. The other person could even be married already, for all Adrien (and the librarians) knew. Besides, Adrien was still completely and utterly in love with Ladybug. No number of potential "meet-cute" opportunities could ever change that.

*Ever.*
"Ugh, Chat Noir really was on his pun game tonight," Marinette grumbled as she headed down the stairs from her loft after returning from patrol. Tikki floated along after her, eager for her cookie. "Tikki, I'm gonna have to check out that book again."

Tikki giggled. "I thought you just swore the book off after Alya nearly found it? You said that just last week!"

"I changed my mind." She hadn't intended on getting into a pun (and joke) war with Chat Noir, but after an attempt to silence his puns buy out-punning him had (spectacularly) failed, her competitive nature just hadn't let her gracefully back down. She had found the best book at the library to help her catch up on her punning abilities, and yet it still hadn't gotten her up to Chat Noir's level. She had had to return the book a little early the last time after Alya had tripped over it and only a well-timed (for once) akuma attack had distracted her from asking what the giant book sitting next to Marinette's lounger was. If Alya had found the book...

Marinette didn't even want to think about it. The responses could have ranged from "puzzled" all the way to "still has not gotten over the Adrien crush and is trying to use puns in a new and impossibly lamer yet form of flirting".

(While it was true that Marinette was not over Adrien in any way, shape, or form, she wouldn't ever stoop to punning to try to get his attention. Doing that would probably just make Adrien think that she was weird beyond belief.)

Tikki giggled when Marinette didn't elaborate. "I don't think Chat Noir thinks of it as a competition, you know. He's probably just thrilled that you're punning along with him. He's gonna think that you're flirting back."

Marinette couldn't help but roll her eyes at that. Chat Noir knew her too well to think that she was actually flirting. And she wasn't so sure that her partner hadn't caught on to the competitive spirit as well. She could spot the same glint in his eyes during their punning battles that often showed up in her eyes whenever she played a particularly difficult video game or knew exactly how to take down an akuma.

No, Chat Noir was just into their competition as she was, and she wasn't going to give up now. She would just have to put in yet another request for the pun book from the library. The librarians would no doubt tease her again when she came in to pick up the book (again), but it couldn't be helped. She didn't have enough spare money on hand to go around buying pun books just so she could avoid a little ribbing from the local librarian.

"And the librarian is gonna try to set you and the other pun book person up again," Tikki added when Marinette didn't respond. She flitted along behind Marinette as her Chosen sat down in front of her computer and jiggled the mouse to wake it back up. "You know that, right? Are you gonna go see who it is this time?"

Marinette really rolled her eyes at that one. "No, I'm not. It's gonna be some old dude who's getting a kick out of playing a game of pass-the-book with someone else. The librarians don't even know who this other person is." She passed Tikki a cookie out of the stash she kept behind the computer before turning her attention back to the screen. "Even if it isn't some old guy, literally all the librarians know about us is that we're both interested in puns. That's not a basis for a relationship. That literally isn't even a good basis for a friendship."
"I think it could be," Tikki said as Marinette pulled up the library home page and logged in so she could request the book again. "It would be an interesting start to a conversation, at least. Asking why they've wanted the book so many times in a row."

"But then I would have to explain too, and what would I say? I've gotten into a punning war with my superhero partner? I'm sure that would really go over well." Request entered, Marinette returned to the design assignment that she had been working on. Her piece just needed one more element to really make it pop, but what exactly that was, she couldn't quite figure out. She had been staring at it before patrol, and now she would probably end up staring at it again for another hour before giving up for the night and doing another assignment.

"You could just say a friend. Chat Noir is your friend, after all." Tikki broke off a chunk of cookie, stuck it into her mouth and then spoke around the slightly too-large piece. "Just make up a name if you must if they ask."

"And then when they want to meet that friend because they both love puns and I'm just doing it for the competition? That's just spinning a web of lies that I don't want to get involved in."

"It could be interesting," Tikki tempted, swallowing her cookie piece with a loud gulp. "And I'm sure you could come up with some excuse. You've gotten better at thinking up excuses since when you first became Ladybug."

Marinette could only snort. She didn't even want to think back to that time, when she had spouted some absolutely cringeworthy excuses in order to sneak off to transform (or to try to excuse those absences). Looking back, she had to wonder how half of those excuses even flew. She certainly wouldn't have accepted most of them if she had been the one on the receiving end.

And yes, maybe she had gotten better at thinking up excuses, but that was mostly a side effect of having more things to do and having different classes than most of her friends. After all, it was very easy to tell people that she had to go work on a project for a class when they weren't in that class and therefore didn't know that the project in question didn't actually exist. It was easy to tell one person that she was meeting up with other friends when the person she was talking to didn't know the other friends well and wouldn't know that the friends in question were busy doing other things. When she was expected to attend classes but it wasn't mandatory (and when there were plenty of snobs who thought that they were too good to learn anything from class), it was easy to fly under the radar when she missed a class because of an akuma attack or came in late. If she missed an meeting with her family or friends, she could claim that she had gotten swept up in working on a design and lost track of time.

Getting older, in this case, meant that she had more believable excuses at her disposal. Still, she knew full well that that wouldn't be the case forever. Once she got into the more intensive classes, or once she had to get an internship, excuses wouldn't fly.

"I'm still not going to meet them," Marinette said decisively, finally setting the design aside to start to sketch something else, hoping that maybe a new design would help her pinpoint what was wrong with the old one. She wasn't going to waste any more time thinking about her mysterious book pal. It wasn't worth the time, especially when she had classes to worry about and projects to finish.

Two months later, the book had gone back and forth several more times. Every time when she
returned it, Marinette swore that it would be the last time. And maybe she would have been right, had Chat Noir not been seemly anticipating all of her jokes.

Her only consolation was that, thanks to the book, she was managing to anticipate quite a few of Chat Noir's jokes as well. She got to toss in his punch lines before he did, just like he did to her. So really, there was no way that she could stop checking the book out, not unless she wanted to flat-out lose.

"You could check out other joke books," Tikki suggested. The kwami had gotten sucked into the competition somewhat against her will, and now she was helping Marinette practice her joke delivery so that there wouldn't be any awkward pauses.

Or course, the practice didn't help if Chat Noir knew every single joke under the sun. She could have the smoothest delivery in the history of humankind and it still wouldn't matter if Chat Noir already knew the joke.

"Maybe Chat Noir had that book at some point," Tikki continued when Marinette didn't respond. "So he knows those jokes. If you look up other books, maybe you'll find new jokes. And then you don't have to keep playing pass-the-parcel with this joke book."

"Except if Chat Noir had this book at some point, that makes it even more important to keep working my way through that book," Marinette argued. "So that I know his jokes. And if he improved his pun game with this book, then I need to do the same thing."

Over in the Agreste Mansion, Adrien was having much the same complaints.

"She's getting almost all of my jokes before I get to the punchline," Adrien grumbled, faceplanting in his sheets. His phone chimed, and he glanced at it to see that it was an email from the library, letting him know that the book would be due in four days. He grumbled, since he definitely hadn't gotten to look through the book as much as usual. A busy modeling schedule paired with several projects for his classes (and, of course, akuma attacks) had meant that he could only peruse the book while he was being driven around Paris.

Of course, that meant that Nathalie saw him. While she definitely supported his hobbies most of the time, Nathalie, well...

She didn't really do jokes. Or puns. Or funny stuff in general. She thought that it was a waste of time. His one condolence was that she hadn't told his father (yet), who definitely thought it was a waste of time and would probably pile on more activities to try to put an end to it.

"When did being funny turn into a competition?" Plagg grumbled. "And you really can't complain too much, you've been doing the same thing to Ladybug. Also, this is completely ridiculous. You two can't hold a simple conversation without punning your way through it, unless there's an akuma right there threatening to take your Miraculous."

"Competition is fun," Adrien said, only sounding moderately more cheerful. "Especially when it's with Ladybug. She's adorable when she gets frustrated over something silly like that."

It was his favorite part of this whole competition, actually. The little face that Ladybug made when he finished one of her jokes for her was a hilarious little pout (it was honestly strange how many of his jokes that Ladybug knew, and vice versa), and then the triumphant little wriggle she gave when she cut off one of his jokes or crammed more puns into a sentence than he did. He wouldn't have gotten as sucked into their little competition if it weren't for Ladybug's reactions. If he could get away with it, he would take videos of Ladybug and make a compilation of her little reactions.
If he tried, Ladybug would probably toss him off a roof. Either that, or she would stop punning. *That* would definitely be worse.

Marinette grumbled as she hurried along the sidewalk. She couldn't *believe* that she had forgotten about her assignment until so late, and now she had to go and waste more of her precious time tracking a couple of the books down at the library instead of having them requested and waiting on a shelf for her. To make matters worse, the library that had the two books she really, *really* needed wasn't her regular one. It wasn't *crazy* far away, thankfully, just a quick fifteen-minute bus ride over and then a short walk from the bus stop, but it was fifteen minutes (thirty, counting both ways) that she *really* couldn't afford to waste, not when Hawkmoth might attack any minute and take up even more of her time.

(She and Chat Noir *really* had to finish off their battle with their nemesis this summer, no matter what. Marinette wasn't completely sure that she could handle her final years of university *and* crimefighting at the same time.)

"Would it really have saved any time to have things requested?" Tikki asked from Marinette's purse. She peered up at her Chosen. "And think of it this way- you're getting out for some fresh air! That's a good thing, right?"

"I get plenty of fresh air fighting akumas, thank you very much," Marinette said tartly as she trotted up the steps to the rather imposing library. "And when I go out on walks with Alya, and when I go to the park to draw, or when I go to gardens for inspiration. It's only when stuff is due that I don't go out much."

"I guess that's true," Tikki admitted. She peeked up at the library. "Hey, we've been here before! Remember, when you were helping Adrien with that research project of his that he forgot about?"

Marinette had not, in fact, remembered that. At Tikki's reminder, though, she recalled the one time that Adrien had somehow forgotten an assignment, just like she just had. He had had too much on his plate to deal with and it had simply slipped through the cracks. She, Alya, and Nino had all showed up to help Adrien with the research and they had met up at his local library, aka the one Marinette had just arrived at. It was larger than the library that was closest to Marinette's house- like, a *lot* larger- and confusing as anything.

She should have asked Adrien for help navigating around his library. He probably would have been more than willing.

Sighing (there was no point in asking now; Adrien was no doubt busy with photoshoots or something), Marinette entered the library and headed up the stairs. The site online had told her that she would have to begin her search on the third floor.

And a search it was. Marinette scoured her way through row after row without success for a good twenty minutes, stress level rising higher and higher every time she checked the time. She couldn't help but think about how she could have been using that time to be writing her paper, to be reading, to be making *progress*. But no, instead she was stuck poking through the shelves of dusty books.

At twenty-five minutes, she recruited a librarian to help her. Three minutes later, she had both books she wanted in hand and was heading back down the stairs to check them out. They were thicker than
she had expected, so it would probably take *forever* to find the passages that she wanted.

Ugh. Another time-suck. At least her time with the pun book had finished yesterday, and she wasn't just letting it gather dust while she rushed to get her projects done. She had gotten lucky this time around, and she would be getting the book back just after her final projects all got in. Of course, then she would be juggling a million engagements with friends and a handful of commissions that had piled up over the last part of the semester. It wouldn't be *too* difficult to manage- it never was- but her schedule never quite *entirely* freed up anymore.

Honestly, that was probably a good thing. If she had nothing to do except practice puns and jokes all day, she would go a little crazy.

Marinette's thoughts didn't stay stuck on jokes for long. As she finished descending the staircase, her mind was already whirring with what she needed to get done for her project. She had a few online sources that she wanted to pull in, and then she had to polish up her outline. It was a relief to discover that she had at least gotten a *tiny* amount of work done, a sort of framework that would make her last-minute rushing go a little more smoothly. She would really have been in deep trouble if she hadn't already decided on her research topic, back when the project was first assigned.

She was so deep in thought that she only just barely missed running over a very familiar blond heading for the checkout counter.

"Adrien!" Marinette exclaimed, delighted. What were the chances of her running into her friend here, now, in the middle of the day? Surely he had somewhere to be. "I didn't expect to see you!"

Adrien, who had turned around the moment he heard his name, beamed over at Marinette. "Mari! I thought you used a different library!"

"Normally, yeah. But I needed some books for a project that I, ah, forgot about, and it's too late to request them and have them actually arrive on time." She waved the two thick books at him and then immediately yelped and scrambled to catch them as the books nearly escaped her grip. Adrien grinned and quickly put his own book down so he could help her steady the books before they could slide to the floor.

"Do you need any help finding stuff in the books?" Adrien asked as they straightened back up, books safely back in Marinette's arms. "I still owe you for your help that time when I forgot an assignment."

"If you have time to spare, sure," Marinette said, somewhat surprised. From what she had heard from Nino, Adrien didn't normally have any time to spare. He was busy (or, rather, was kept busy) with university courses, modeling, and the assorted other lessons and practices that his father insisted on. "But if you're busy, I can totally take care of it on my own."

"You're in luck," Adrien promised as he picked his book up again and led the way to the checkout counter. "I have a rare afternoon off- or at least I *currently* do. Hopefully Nathalie doesn't find out and try to wedge in an extra piano lesson or something."

"Does she really do that? That's awful!" Marinette exclaimed. "How soon do you get to escape her scheduling?"

Adrien winced. "...yeah, it's a little insane. She'll drop things out of the schedule if I explain that I had wanted to get together with you guys or need to study, but she and my father both believe in no free time so that I'm not screwing around 'rotting my brain with video games'." He rolled his eyes. "But as soon as I graduate and find a job, I'm done with her scheduling my life. I can do occasional
photoshoots and runways, but that's it."

"You aren't quitting modelling?" Marinette had always been under the impression that while Adrien didn't particularly mind modeling, it wasn't something that he was particularly fond of, both because of the time drain it had on his free time and because the fangirl attention that he got from being a model had only (infuriatingly) increased over the years, to the point where particularly gutsy fans would even interrupt their friend get-togethers.

He just shrugged. "I'm not completely sure. On one hand, I'm kind of tired of it. On the other..." Adrien winced again, looking a bit guilty. "I'm good at it, and it pays well. I won't be model material forever, so I might as well take advantage of the opportunity while I have it, right?"

"Right, of course," Marinette agreed absently. Heaven knew that she would probably jump on the chance to make a bit more money, even if she would be doing something that she wasn't super fond of. Her eyes drifted down to the book Adrien was handing over to librarian, curious to see what he was reading. When she recognized the cover, her eyes went wide and she nearly dropped her stack of books again. "Wait. You're the other person who keeps checking out the pun book? Really?"

Adrien glanced over at her and then back at the book he still had in his hands. "...yes? I've been checking this book out for a couple months-"

Marinette could pinpoint the exact moment when Adrien realized the implications of what she had said. He positively froze and his eyes went big before his head swung around so he could stare at her. "Wait. The other person- that's you? I never would have thought that it would be you- I didn't know that you were into puns!" He remembered himself long enough to finish handing book and library card over to the librarian at the counter, who was watching them intently, before swinging back around to look at her. "How did I not know that? How long have you been into puns?"

"I...not long, really," Marinette admitted. She couldn't believe it. Her pun-book buddy was one of her best friends and they hadn't even known. Unbelievable. "I just somehow got pulled into a pun war with one of my other friends- from university, you know-" Adrien hadn't met all of her uni friends, so hopefully he wouldn't ask too many questions about who it was- "and I'm not great at punning, so when I found that book it was great."

Adrien looked even more surprised at that, and they both missed the librarian at the counter gesturing excitedly and pointing them out to several other librarians who were in the middle of sorting a pile of books. "A pun war? Me too! With a, uh, model friend. They've really stepped up their game recently and it's a bit of a struggle to keep up sometimes. Want to hang out and practice our puns together sometime so we can defeat our respective friends?"

Marinette only just refrained from groaning. More time punning and telling jokes? It wasn't that she didn't enjoy it, at least to some extent- she wouldn't have let herself get pulled into the pun war with Chat Noir if she didn't- but still. More conversations made entirely of puns and jokes.

On the other hand, Adrien wanted to spend time with just her, not with Alya and Nino as well. They had hung out by themselves before, of course- they had planned video game hangouts before, and had done homework together when their friends were busy, but they definitely tended to hang out together more in a group.

"Yeah, definitely!" was what Marinette said- or, rather, what she would have said had the librarians, having finally picked up on the fact that their couple already knew each other and weren't dating, burst out in dismay-

"Wait. You mean that we've been trying to set you guys up for ages and you already knew each
other?!
Despite all of the practice Marinette was getting in with Adrien, she wasn't actually doing much better in her pun war with Chat Noir.

In fact, she was doing worse.

It wasn't that her jokes and pun delivery was suffering at all. In fact, it was the opposite. Adrien was an actual master of pun delivery and he was endlessly helpful with hints on how to stick puns into words smoothly. She was a fast learner- after all, she had been doing some low-key punning pretty much her whole life and she had been around serious punners the whole time- and soon she and Adrien were having entire punny conversations, much to the combined confusion and amusement of Nino and Alya. She had gone to every patrol and battle with a spring of confidence in her step.

This time she would definitively crush Chat Noir with the sheer number of puns she was going to spout. This time she would use Adrien's original jokes that he had shared with her and Chat Noir couldn't cut off her punchlines.

It would be great.

Except it wasn't. Not at all.

Somehow Chat Noir was impossibly more on top of his pun game, and he still anticipated her jokes. He looked startled every time she used Adrien's jokes, and he had even used some of the jokes that Adrien had sworn up and down that he had made up himself.

It was, for lack of better words, really weird.

"I know that Adrien wouldn't lie about making up those jokes," Marinette told Tikki as she sat back, momentarily abandoning her design homework. "I mean, one of the jokes that Chat Noir told last night was one that Adrien came up with right in front of me. It just doesn't make sense."

"Do you think that Adrien just thought that he made the joke up?" Tikki suggested. "Maybe he read it in a book once and forgot that that was where he saw it."

"That would make sense," Marinette agreed. "If it had only happened once or twice. But Chat Noir knows all of Adrien's jokes."

They fell silent, puzzling over the whole situation. Marinette could believe that Tikki might be right about one or two of Adrien's jokes, but even if she was right something still didn't sit right. It was something about Chat Noir's reaction, how he was just as surprised about her knowing the jokes as she was about his knowledge. It suggested that he thought that the jokes weren't common knowledge.

...like he knew that someone had made those jokes up just recently and hadn't shared them with
"Oh!" Marinette realized, sitting up straight as realization hit her like a lightning bolt. "I know! Adrien said that he has a modelling friend that he punned with a lot. His friend must be Chat Noir!"

Tikki blinked up at her, puzzled. "What makes you think that?"

"Everything!" Marinette threw her arms out, thrilled to have finally figured out the puzzle that had been bothering her. "Adrien must use the same jokes he tells me with his modelling buddy, who is Chat Noir! So then Chat memorizes the jokes because of course he would, the dork." The pieces were falling into place now, so fast that they were making her head spin. Chat Noir kind of walked and posed like a model a lot- he almost always looked ridiculously good in their press photos- and he must have started young, just like Adrien. For as long as she had known him, Chat Noir had walked and posed the same.

She had just assumed that it was the cat influence from his Miraculous and Chat Noir's over-the-top personality. Him being a model made so. much. sense.

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Adrien wasn't entirely sure what in the world was going on with his pun war with Ladybug. He had come up with a whole slew of jokes that he could have sworn he had come up with, ones that Ladybug couldn't possibly know already...but she did.

He couldn't figure out what was going on.

"I've only told those jokes to three people," Adrien complained to Plagg, who was studiously ignoring him in favor of a large round of warm, gooey Brie. "Nino, Alya, and Marinette. And Nino and Alya really aren't the kind to go around telling jokes like that. Like, they joke around and all, but they aren't the kind of people to go around telling jokes where others would hear them."

"Mhmmm."

"So that just leaves Marinette," Adrien said, flopping back on his bed. "Normally, I would say that she doesn't tell jokes either, but clearly that isn't true."

It had been a pleasant surprise to find out that Marinette was the other person checking out The Big Book of Puns, because now they could share instead of passing the book back and forth. He definitely enjoyed spending time with Marinette, and he had been thrilled to find a new excuse to hang out with her. Marinette was such a cheerful person to be around, and while she groaned and rolled her eyes at Adrien's jokes just the same way Ladybug did, she couldn't hide her amusement. He had to laugh at how disgruntled she looked whenever she mentioned the pun war she had gotten caught up in.

Really, what were the chances that both he and one of his friends got caught up in a punning war at the same time? It was a rather amusing turn of events.

Punning war.

The revelation hit Adrien like a bus, and he sat up so suddenly that he nearly fell off the bed. Of
Marinette was in a punning war with a classmate, so it made sense that she would be using some of the jokes that he shared with her.

If it was only a couple jokes of his that Ladybug knew, then he would probably suspect that Ladybug overheard Marinette and her mystery classmate punning away. But it wasn't just a couple jokes, it was a lot of jokes...

...which meant that Marinette's punning opponent was Ladybug's civilian identity. Which, in turn, meant that despite all of her grumbling about puns, Ladybug didn't mind them enough to freely enter another punning contest without being bugged into doing it.

Hah. So much for her apparently feigned disinterest in all things punny. Clearly it was just a front.

Adrien snickered as he thought about it. He couldn't believe that Marinette apparently knew Ladybug- well, civilian Ladybug. What were the chances of that? It really was a small world after all.

And then another realization hit Adrien, and this time he groaned. He had been hoping to meet the classmate that Marinette had been having a pun war with (after all, he never turned down the chance to meet potential new friends and someone else with an interest in puns? Sign him up!), but now, knowing that it was Ladybug?

He couldn't. He couldn't ever meet Marinette's classmate, no matter how much he wanted to, because he and his Lady still weren't supposed to share their identities with each other. If Adrien had been younger, he might have ignored that rule. But he was older now, and better able to understand the risks that would go along with them knowing each other's identities. He had seen firsthand the kind of variety in powers that Hawkmoth could give to his akuma, and if they ever had one that had the power to make them tell secrets...

Well. Needless to say, Adrien was all too willing to wait until after Hawkmoth was taken care of to find out his Lady's identity if it could help keep her safe.

"Why did you tell Adrien that you couldn't come to his photoshoot?"

Marinette sighed as she slumped into the chair in front of her sewing machine. Tikki swirled around her for a moment before landing and perching on the machine, head cocked to the side in puzzlement. "I can't. I wish I could, but now that I know that Chat Noir is one of Adrien's modeling buddies, I can't risk it. I know a lot of the other models working for Gabriel rotate, but since I've been using Adrien's newest jokes and Chat Noir already knows them, that makes me suspect that he and Adrien regularly work together."

Tikki frowned. "But Marinette-"

"And theoretically I could ask him if the other person he's been punning with is there, but then if he said yes, I would have to say no right away and that would look weird." Marinette carefully started threading her machine, tongue sticking out for a second as she slid the thread through the needle. "It's too bad that he isn't doing the individual shoots anymore, because then I could actually tag along to those. But now that his schedule is more flexible his father has him doing shoots with the rest of the..."
models." Before, she had appreciated the change. It had meant that when she tagged along, she could see more normal working conditions for photoshoots compared to the individual shoots that had made up the majority of Adrien's modeling gigs when he was younger. She had enjoyed being able to see how the photoshoot team worked together with the designers to keep everything running smoothly as possible.

Now, though? She couldn't, because she wasn't supposed to know who Chat Noir was until after they defeated Hawkmoth for once and for all.

Beside her, Tikki still looked puzzled. "But if Chat Noir is there, don't you think you would have noticed before?"

Marinette shook her head. "Before, Chat Noir could have been any number of blond, green-eyed boys in Paris. But blond, green-eyed male models around my age? There's not as many of them." In fact, she couldn't think of any other male models that met those descriptions besides Adrien.

_Huh._ Perhaps Chat Noir's Miraculous changed his eye color. She had wondered about that before, since obviously there was _some_ change already- no human had naturally green sclera, after all- so really, it wasn't a reach to think that maybe his eyes were a different color completely.

Still, she was 97% positive that if she saw her kitty as a civilian, she would recognize him, _especially_ now that she knew he was a model friend of Adrien's. Even if he didn't have naturally green eyes, the punning would probably give it away right off the bat.

"Really? You're that sure?" Tikki asked a bit dubiously. "But you've interacted with Chat Noir when you weren't transformed before- you even _worked_ with him for a while, and he didn't catch on! What makes you think that it would be different for you looking at him?"

"I was purposefully acting ridiculous and over-the-top," Marinette shot back. She had been _really_ concerned about that whole ploy, especially since Chat Noir knew her so well, so she had gone out of her way to act as awe-struck as possible when he was paying attention to her. She had slipped a few times, of course- when they were with the Evillustrator and she had to get them out of the box before the ship sank was the most obvious example that came to mind- but by then she had hopefully thrown him so far off the scent that he wouldn't suspect her. "And I knew that I was talking to Chat Noir. If I go to one of Adrien's photoshoots as myself, then Chat Noir's civilian self would probably just be his normal goofy self, and then that would give him away."

Tikki didn't look convinced. "Really? You don't think that Chat Noir might tone it down a bit while working?"

Marinette had thought of that, too. "Even then, I would just have to spot the blond male model on set that Adrien's joking around with. There can't possibly be many of those."

Tikki had to concede there.

"Chat Noir and I will just have to defeat Hawkmoth soon before either of us can slip up," Marinette decided as she picked up a half-complete dress and started carefully arranging it on the sewing machine. "Since he's Adrien's friend, I'm sure he would fit into our group well." She sighed and pressed her foot down, beginning to sew. "It's a pity we can't meet each other now. I bet he and Adrien are _complete_ dorks together."
What followed was several months of Adrien and Marinette dancing oddly around each other, each trying to make sure that they didn't accidentally discover their partner's civilian identity. Marinette realized a week in that she might accidentally have pictures of her partner as a civilian, since she had all sorts of pictures from various Gabriel photoshoots, both men and womens' lines (after all, she now gathered the photos for inspiration, not (just) to ogle Adrien, so it wouldn't make sense to only have photos of one Gabriel model). She panicked and had Tikki gather up all of the photos and hide them, so she wouldn't accidentally figure it out or give in to temptation and peek.

"There wouldn't be the personality clues, of course, but if Adrien talks to him as often as I think he does based on Chat Noir's pun knowledge, then he's probably in a lot of Gabriel photoshoots," Marinette told Tikki as the kwami carefully pulled a page out of Marinette's inspiration binder. "And I would probably notice that, even if I wasn't trying on purpose." She cringed as she saw the number of pages Tikki was pulling out of the binder "...I guess it's a good thing I'm not really all that into menswear."

"Can I leave photos with just Adrien in them?" Tikki wanted to know, floating away from the binder to inspect the pile of pages she had pulled. "And what about pictures with guys in them if the guys aren't blond?"

"That's probably fine," Marinette decided. "Chat Noir hasn't ever dyed his hair, as far as I know. I just don't want to see pictures of blond Gabriel male models other than Adrien."

Tikki nodded and went back to shuffling her way through the modelling photos, putting pages that passed inspection back into the binder before continuing paging through. As she finished, she frowned.

"Marinette?"

Deep in a designing kick, it took a few more calls for Tikki to get Marinette's attention. When she did, Marinette looked up with a start. "What is it?" She noticed the lack of pages pulled out of the binder and frowned. "Did you hide the pages already?"

"There weren't any, Marinette!" Tikki exclaimed. "There aren't any blond male Gabriel models besides Adrien! They all have brown or black hair. I checked every photo."

That made Marinette frown. "But Adrien said... Do you think Chat Noir does dye his hair and he decided to do it brown instead? Mr. Agreste might just not hire other blond guys for modelling since he has Adrien, so maybe Chat Noir dyed his hair so he could get hired by such a large company. Could the Miraculous make his hair color show up as the natural color instead of the dyed color?"

Tikki frowned as she thought. "I don't know, Marinette. I've never had a Chosen who dyed their hair before. It's possible."

"So that could be a possibility, then," Marinette decided. "Or maybe Chat Noir could be someone who works on set who used to be a model when he was younger. A photographer, maybe, or something. That would explain the model walk and why there aren't any blond male models other than Adrien and how Adrien sees him probably every photoshoot." She groaned. "So now I can't go to any of Adrien's photoshoots without having to worry about accidentally recognizing Chat Noir. Great." She huffed in irritation. "I liked going to Adrien's photoshoots and seeing how they were run. Drat Hawkmoth and his stupid coward self. If he ever came out of his stupid lair, Chat Noir and I could have defeated him by now."
Curiosity was slowly killing one certain black cat in Paris. Now that Ladybug's identity was so close, he really wanted to know. He tried to talk himself in both directions alternately, one minute arguing that he shouldn't even venture close to Marinette's university out of fear of spotting her with a petite, blue-eyed girl with gorgeous black hair pulled back into pigtails, the next minute arguing that there were probably plenty of girls like that on campus and really, what were the chances that he would spot Ladybug right off the bat even with the additional clue of her being one of Marinette's friends.

"Or she could be just one of Marinette's classmates too, I suppose," Adrien told Plagg, who was So Very Over the entire discussion. "I don't remember if she specified or not. So maybe I wouldn't be very likely to see her anyway even if I visited Marinette over there." He paused. "Or maybe I shouldn't risk it, I don't know..."

As it turned out, the decision was taken out of his hands. Nino and Alya had teamed up with several of Marinette's friends from university to throw her a surprise birthday party. They invited all of Marinette's old friends from lycée and collège, which Adrien did know about, as well as all of Marinette's friends from university.

Adrien wasn't aware of that part until he walked into the door and nearly ran over a blonde girl he didn't recognize. As he apologized, he spotted several other people that he had never seen before. All of a sudden, his gut clenched.

He might be meeting Ladybug in her civilian form for the first time tonight.

*I should go,* his logical side argued. *I need to go before I see her, because it's not safe to know! Besides, she doesn't want me to know right now! It's not safe for us to know yet!*

But he couldn't. Now that he was at the party, there was no way to gracefully bow out. Besides, he had been looking forward to the party for quite some time, both because, well, party, and because he always enjoyed seeing Marinette. He would just have to hope that Ladybug wasn't coming.

Adrien was on edge as more guests showed up, praying with each new arrival that they wouldn't be his Lady. When the last guest arrived, he breathed a sigh of relief. While Marinette did have a couple friends with black hair, their hair was either too long or too short, and their eyes were brown instead of blue. In fact, Marinette was the only one at the party with the combination of black hair and blue eyes, though she had switched out her usual pigtails for a bun.

"Ladybug must not have been able to make it," Adrien told Plagg as an update when he stepped out to use the bathroom. Plagg didn't appear to care. "I guess that's for the better, but..."

*But there was a small part of me that just wanted to know,* he finished mentally. A small part that sounded very much like his fourteen-year-old self. He knocked that part of him over the head and sent it off to bed, then headed back out to join the party.

There was no point in dwelling too much on it now. He had a party to enjoy.

Besides, they needed to defeat Hawkmoth before they could share their identities with each other. He could only hope that it would happen sooner rather than later.
"Wow, another generic akuma," Chat Noir taunted as he dodged the Grocer, an akumatized grocery store employee who had gotten frustrated with customers asking about a sale item that was out of stock. "Hawkmoth really doesn't have enough backbone to face us himself, then, does he? No change there."

The Grocer scowled and Hawkmoth's glowing purple butterfly outline flashed over his face. Chat Noir smirked, unable to resist taunting a bit more. "What, is the Big Bad upset with the truth? He's never come out to fight us himself. All he does is send one lame akuma after another."

"Well, obviously he doesn't want to fight us on his own, he sees what we do to his akumas every other day," Ladybug chimed in, catching on to Chat Noir's plan. They had both been talking about needing to lure Hawkmoth out of his lair more and more recently, and clearly taunting the supervillain out was the plan of the day. "So he hides in his sad little lair and sends out minions to try to do his dirty work for him- try being the key word here."

"That's it!" the Grocer finally announced loudly. "You're going to regret saying that soon! Do you really think you can take on both of us at once? He's coming out, and then you will lose! Mwahahaha!"

"Time to end this fast, then," Chat Noir said quietly to Ladybug. He was completely serious, jokes and puns completely gone for now. "Take down the akuma, then retreat and recharge fast before Hawkmoth gets here."

"Done." Ladybug nodded sharply as she eyed the akuma. "The corrupted item is his apron. I'll call a charm, and then we need to move."

They moved. A minute later, the Grocer was defeated and Ladybug had moved her Lucky Charm out of the way so they could repair the damage after the fight with Hawkmoth. She didn't want to tip Hawkmoth off to the fact that his akuma had been defeated before he arrived.

Hopefully he would be too distracted to notice via his link with the akuma.

Ladybug detransformed as soon as she landed in the alley. Tikki already knew what was going on, and she made a beeline for the cookies in Marinette's purse and started scarfing them down faster than Marinette had ever seen her do before. While Tikki ate, Marinette pulled out her phone to check the Ladyblog. If there were any signs of Hawkmoth being out, they could make a beeline for him and catch him before he discovered anything wrong. With any luck, they could take down Hawkmoth today with enough time for Marinette to do the reading for class that she had put off in favor of calling Adrien up and trading puns for nearly twenty minutes before the akuma had showed up.

"Ready to go, Marinette," Tikki told her, wiping some smudges of chocolate off of the edges of her mouth. "I'm super-charged up, so I should be able to hold your transformation for longer after you use Lucky Charm. Only up to ten minutes, though."

"All right." Marinette pocketed her phone, squaring her shoulders. "Let's do this and finish it for once and for all. Tikki, transform me!"
As Ladybug bounded back onto the rooftops to join Chat Noir and head over to meet Hawkmoth before he could retreat back into his lair, she couldn't help but smile. Even though the fight was bound to be one of the hardest ones they had ever done, she couldn't help but look forward to it. It would be great to no longer have to deal with akuma attacks, of course, no longer having to miss class or be late to get-togethers. It would be fantastic to work their frustration out on the man actually responsible for the years and years of attacks, and at the end of the fight know that it was finally over, not just another chapter in an endless battle.

And best of all, Ladybug mused as she and Chat Noir raced over the rooftops, it would be amazing to be able to hang out with Chat Noir as their civilian selves and be able to introduce him to her friends. He was one of her best friends, and being able to see him more often would be amazing.

She couldn't wait.

Chapter End Notes

.......this is the end for real this time. Did anyone REALLY think that I would actually do a reveal? :D

(I already did a pun-book-related reveal with The Cheese Project, if anyone is interested.)

Please review, it really makes my day! :)

End Notes

......yeah, obviously practicing their jokes together isn't going to be an issue at all in the future :D

Like with most of my stories, this is a one-shot and therefore complete (Unless I get run over by a plot bunny. It happens sometimes).

Please leave reviews! They really make my day. :)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!