How To Fake A Marriage

by quicksilversquared

Summary

Adrien Agreste is excited to go to London to get a degree in Physics- but he's less excited about the ridiculous list of rules his father keeps giving him, especially since it's clear that his father doesn't trust his judgement at all.

So what better way to rebel than to fake a wedding with one of his friends as soon as he gets to London?
Arriving in London

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gabriel Agreste was an overbearing parent, everyone who knew him and his son knew that. He micromanaged Adrien's life to the point that everyone wondered if he even trusted his son to make any good decisions on his own, even now that Adrien was very much an adult.

"He thinks I'm going to do something impulsive and ridiculous the second I'm out from under his thumb," Adrien complained to Alya and Nino during their weekly meet-up at a local cafe. He scowled down at the quiche on his plate and stabbed at it a bit irritably. "Like, what could I possibly do? Go out to a fast-food restaurant? Forget to exercise for a week?"

"Go to a rager, get drunk, and get tattooed all over?" Nino suggested.

Alya rolled her eyes and elbowed her boyfriend. "That is why Mr. Agreste thinks you're a bad influence on Adrien. You make the most ridiculous suggestions."

"I wasn't saying he should do it, I just was giving him better examples of impulsive and ridiculous things that his dad might think he would do." Nino rolled his eyes right back and slumped back in his chair. His head lolled to the side so he could look at Adrien. "Dude, it's gonna be weird with you and Marinette both gone. She's in London too, right?"

Adrien nodded eagerly. Marinette had headed to London several months earlier to do a year-long internship at a fashion house there. From what Adrien heard, she was enjoying herself but missed her family and friends. He had texted her a few times since she left, but hadn't really asked too many questions about her internship beyond a few basic inquiries about how it was going. She was probably pretty busy getting herself set up in another country by herself. "Yeah! Hopefully we'll be close enough together that we can hang out sometimes. I don't know how close my apartment building will be to hers." With a wince, he added, "Nathalie was in charge of finding a place for me to stay, so I don't actually know where, uh:-"

"You don't know what part of London you're staying in," Nino said flatly, looking thoroughly unimpressed. "Dude. Really? Your father wouldn't even let you do that by yourself?"

"He was worried that I might end up getting scammed," Adrien admitted. As much as he hated to admit it, he had been rather relieved to find that particular job taken out of his hands. He didn't have the faintest clue how to go about apartment-hunting when he wasn't even in the same country. Granted, he didn't know how to do it when he was in the same city either, but that wasn't particularly relevant at the moment. "And it wasn't as though Nathalie did that much work. One of Father's designer friends lives in an apartment in London near her business and it's a pretty nice place and doesn't cost a ridiculous amount, so Nathalie just found an empty apartment in that building and snagged it for me. It comes prefurnished, which is nice. Then I don't have to do a bunch of furniture shopping as soon as I get there to make the apartment livable."

Alya gave him a look. "And is it near where you're supposed to be for school?"

"It is," Adrien reassured her quickly. He had asked about that much, at least. "It's only a short bus ride away, really."

"Ooh, old man Agreste is letting his son ride on public transportation?" Nino said tauntingly. He
smirked at Adrien. "I never thought I would see the day."

Adrien snorted. "He tried getting a chauffeur for me there, but the ones he found that met his criteria were way too expensive and all of them said that driving back and forth the short distance to school would be a waste of time and they had better offers. Besides, I'm technically an adult now. I can make decisions on my own."

He got a dual snort in response.

"I fail to see why you can't simply complete your schooling here in the city," Gabriel said as he entered the dining room yet again for the sole purpose of trying to dissuade Adrien from his trip. Again. "There are perfectly good schools here in Paris where you could do another degree if you really think that it's necessary, and you would not have to forego your driver and your home chef. You'll have to do your own cooking in London, you know."

Adrien only just refrained from rolling his eyes. His father made it sound like cooking would be some sort of huge inconvenience. "I am aware. I have been going over to Nino and Alya's apartment to get cooking lessons from them for several months now."

Gabriel looked cross. "And have any of your experiments been edible?"

"All of them, actually." Adrien was quite proud of that. He had a previously undiscovered talent in the kitchen and even Alya praised the meals he had made. All it had taken was a couple crash-course lessons in reading recipes.

Gabriel looked even more sour at that, which made Adrien suspect that that had been his last big argument against Adrien leaving. He had been coming up with reasons (some more valid than others) why Adrien should drop his plans for studying abroad. As the day for Adrien to leave drew closer, Gabriel had only upped the frequency of the appeals.

It wasn't as though Adrien was leaving the continent. He was only going to London for a couple years, and he would be returning to Paris for visits during his vacations and maybe on a couple weekends. London was relatively safe- in fact, it looked like a paradise compared to Paris, which had suffered poor ratings for years after all of the akuma attacks. Tourism still was a little reluctant now, even with Hawkmoth long since defeated. Really, his overprotective father should have been glad that Adrien was moving to London.

"You will have rules to follow in London," Gabriel said after a moment, when it was clear Adrien wasn't planning on backing down. "You still will be representing the company, even if you insist on taking classes for physics instead." It was a long-standing disagreement between the two; Gabriel thought Adrien should stick with the business degree he had already earned at his father's insistence, while Adrien wanted to get his second degree in a field he was actually interested in. It was only because Gabriel refused to let Adrien go into debt that he was even paying for Adrien's apartment and tuition- well, that and the fact that Gabriel wasn't going to have his only son living in a pigsty while abroad just to save money. It wouldn't reflect well on the company. It also probably wasn't very safe to have Adrien living in a slightly dodgy neighborhood just because it would be cheaper.
Adrien inclined his head in response to his father's statement. "Of course." He was well aware of the rules, since he had been forced to follow them for years. Most of them were so obvious that he wouldn't have broken them anyway, even if he hadn't been made aware of their existence. Being reminded of the rules over and over just made Adrien want to break them in the most ridiculous fashion possible.

"No drinking at clubs," Gabriel started, apparently deciding to run through the rules again anyway, just in case Adrien had miraculously forgotten them. "No clubs, period. No pubs. No gluttonous consumption of alcohol in public; it's only acceptable to have a small glass of wine at a dinner function."

As if Adrien would ever dare to behave in such a manner in public.

"No smoking of any sort. No drugs at all, period. No prostitutes or strip clubs. No dating. You will focus on your studies and attend the industry functions that I request of you. I don't want to see you showing up in the tabloid headlines."

Adrien only just refrained from rolling his eyes at that last one. It wasn't as though he could actually control what the tabloids said about him. There seemed to be several particularly trashy ones in the UK that would probably report anything about him with little to no evidence to back it up if they found him interesting at all. Adrien could see the headlines already.

Agreste heir friendly with classmates: secretly starting a harem?

French model drinking wine at dinner: the start of his harrowing descent into alcoholism!

Son of Gabriel Agreste moves to London: Exclusive interviews on the family blow-out!

...yeah, dealing with that wasn't going to be fun. As long as he hadn't done anything ridiculous, though, Adrien was pretty certain Nathalie and the company lawyer would be all too eager to tear into the magazines for harassment and libel.

"Is that clear, Adrien?"

"Yes, father."

A week and a half later, Adrien finally left Paris to head to London. His father reviewed the list of things Adrien was Absolutely Not To Do twice more before he left and had Nathalie email him a list of reminders when Adrien was still on the train. When Adrien got to the station, he found his father's friend waiting for him there on the platform, holding up a sign with his name on it so he could find her as soon as he got off the train.

"Oh, you've grown so much!" Madam Rosalie said as soon as he drew close. She sounded absolutely delighted. "I've seen your photos, of course, but it's different in person!"

"Uh," was all Adrien could manage. Madam Rosalie was not what he expected. He had assumed that since she was a friend of his father's, she would probably dress similarly to Nathalie, with a no-nonsense suit or straightforward blouse and pencil skirt combo. Instead, she wore a playful polka-
dot top with a navy crinkle skirt and her brown curls were barely held back by a bandana. He suspected that the clothes she designed were probably similar in their fun style, standing in sharp contrast to the more formal designs Gabriel tended to produce.

"Do you have all of your things?" Madam Rosalie pressed on, apparently not fazed by Adrien's lack of response. "Yes? Good, good- and did you have any other coats with you? Any other bags? No? Fantastical- it's always so difficult to track down loose things left on the Eurostar. Right, then, follow me this way, my car's parked right outside. You're going to be in the same building as a lot of my interns, did you know? I'm in the building right next door."

Adrien blinked. "I thought Nathalie said I was in the same building as you."

Madam Rosalie laughed, even as she grabbed one of his suitcases and herded him out of the station and towards the car. "Oh, no. My building is all long-term residents. Out flats are larger. The building you're in is just as nice, only a little smaller and the flats come pre-furnished. They had student housing in mind there, I think, or maybe temporary workers. It's owned by the same people that own my building, though, and I double-checked with my interns over there on the quality before recommending it to your dad's secretary."

Adrien nodded. That sounded just as good. As long as the place had good reviews from reputable people, then it was fine with Adrien.

Once they reached the car, it didn't take long for Madam Rosalie to shove all of Adrien's luggage into the back of her car, ignoring his attempts to help her. They were on the road not long after that, headed for the apartments.

"So how did you become friends with my father?" Adrien finally asked, breaking the silence. Madam Rosalie didn't seem the sort that his father would immediately click with. Maybe they had had class together at some point and had been forced to do some sort of group project- except no, that wouldn't make sense. She and Gabriel wouldn't have become friends from that, if his father's interactions with would-be collaborators was anything to go by. They would have come out of the project hating each other's guts. That was just the effect Gabriel tended to have on people.

Madam Rosalie laughed. "Oh, I was friends with your mother first," she said, flashing a grin at Adrien before returning her gaze to the road. "We were in a bunch of classes together. I met your father through her."

That made more sense. Adrien always remembered his mother as being more of a social butterfly than his father (not that it was hard to be more social than Gabriel Agreste; it was a very low bar to meet), so it made sense that she was the one making connections for Gabriel. She had also been the one to maintain connections until she vanished, at which point Nathalie took over. Despite her best efforts, Nathalie just wasn't as good at it. She was a little too stiff to make people flock to her.

Madam Rosalie was a talker, Adrien realized very quickly. As soon as Adrien's mother was mentioned, Madam Rosalie had two dozen stories to tell about the shenanigans the two had gotten into when they were younger. From that, Madam Rosalie dove straight into a few funny stories about Gabriel and by the time she was done, they were pulling up in front of the apartment buildings.

"You're on the second level," Madam Rosalie informed Adrien as she yanked his suitcases out of the trunk of her car. "It's a lovely view up there, I was just in there last week to vacuum and do a little cleaning. The room's been empty for maybe two and a half months now, so there was a bit of
a build-up of dust in a few places but it's all gone now."

Adrien blinked, accepting his backpack automatically when she offered it to him. "Were they having trouble finding someone to fill it?" He had always been under the impression that apartments in the city, especially nice ones like these, were in high demand.

Madam Rosalie gave him a startled look. "Why, no! They had several people come and look, but your father's assistant snatched it up before they could sign anything. She's been paying rent to keep it open for you."

Oh. Adrien hadn't known that.

Really, Nino and Alya could tease him all they wanted for not being involved in the search for the apartment himself, Adrien mused as Madam Rosalie led the way up to the front door, but Adrien couldn't deny that the assistance was appreciated. Renting an empty apartment to keep it until he got there was yet another thing that Adrien wouldn't have thought of by himself.

"One of my interns is in the apartment right across the hall from yours," Madam Rosalie called over her shoulder as she headed up the stairs, pulling one of Adrien's suitcases behind her. "So if you have any questions, she's right there. She's from France, just like you, and she's been here a few months. Lovely girl, and so talented! She's very kind, too, so don't worry about talking to her."

Adrien perked up. "Really?" He couldn't deny that knowing there was another native French-speaker nearby eased his nerves just a bit. He was fairly strong at English- he wouldn't be going to a university in London otherwise- but it would be a relief to be able to chat to someone in French at the end of a long day. Of course, if they were in the fashion industry, it wasn't a stretch to think that they might know who he was- and who his father was. Adrien might have to deal with an overenthusiastic fan next door, for all he knew. That would be the opposite of relaxing.

"She's out and about right now, but I'm sure you'll run into her later," Madam Rosalie said as they exited the stairwell. She stopped in front of the door closest to the stairs and pulled out a set of keys. "You're in this flat. It's got a nice view and you only have the one next-door neighbor since you're on the end, so you should be set."

Adrien nodded. Of course, he knew he would still have to deal with upstairs neighbors and he wouldn't be able to jump around like he sometimes did at home since he had downstairs neighbors, but it was nice to hear that his closest neighbor wouldn't be a problem.

The door swung open, and Madam Rosalie ushered Adrien inside. Pulling his suitcases along behind him, Adrien stepped into the living room area. It was small compared to what he was used to, but then again everything was small compared to what he was used to. Still, it wasn't as though he actually needed all that much space. Nino, Alya, and Marinette all lived in apartments, and their living rooms were about this size. It would be more than enough for him, especially since he was living by himself.

"Since this is a furnished flat, you have a lot of stuff already here," Madam Rosalie said as she closed the door behind them. "Couch, of course, chairs, table, bed, desk in your bedroom, some pots and pans and a casserole dish, knives- you might want to get them sharpened, by the way, I have no idea what condition they might be in- and silverware, plates, cups, bowls- really basic stuff and not a lot of it, but at least you don't need to buy everything. You might want to buy a few more things in you do any fancier cooking, but the basics are covered."

Adrien hadn't even considered that. He had thought about groceries, of course, but not the cooking things. For whatever reason, he had just sort of assumed that it wasn't something he would need to
get. That would have been a nasty shock if he had arrived to find that he had no food and nothing to
eat with.

"Your father ordered towels, pillows, and bedsheets for you. The boxes are waiting in your
bedroom," Madam Rosalie said while Adrien was still taking in the living room. He winced-
another thing he hadn't even considered, he was off to a great start with being independent- and set
his suitcases down to follow the designer down the narrow hallway to the bedroom and bathroom.

He was going to be stuck here all afternoon unpacking, Adrien could tell already. He would be
lucky if he could get out to find a grocery store before the sun set. He might have to order out- or
maybe he should just not unpack everything and deal with it tomorrow so that he would actually be
able to eat tonight.

The bedroom itself was a decent enough size, though he wouldn't be able to leave much on the
floor without it becoming a real obstacle. The closet was smaller than he was used to, for sure, but
he had hardly brought along the entirety of his wardrobe either. That would just be excessive,
especially considering that he didn't even wear most of it on a regular basis.

"Do you want any help unpacking?" Madam Rosalie asked as Adrien maneuvered around the boxes
on the floor. "If not, I need to stop by the office and check on a couple designs. You have my
number, right?"

"I can manage the unpacking," Adrien assured her. "And yes, I have your number. I'll be fine. Do
you know where there are any grocery stores nearby?"

"There's one a few blocks over," Madam Rosalie said, stepping back around the boxes towards the
door. "But it's more a high-end store, good for picking up a couple things in a rush but I wouldn't
recommend doing a large shopping trip there. There's a larger store a little further out that's a little
more affordable, but you can ask your neighbor for directions. Knowing her, she would probably
come with you and help you carry stuff back."

"She won't mind me bothering her?"

"Oh, not at all," Madam Rosalie assured him. "As long as she's not in a huge rush for a deadline or
anything I'm sure she would be happy to help. Like I said, she's very friendly. Oh, and here are
your keys- catch!" She unhooked Adrien's set of apartment keys from her own keychain and tossed
them across the room. Adrien caught them easily. "Have a good rest of the day! Ta-ta!"

With that, Madam Rosalie gave a cheery wave and vanished around the corner. Within moments,
there was the sound of a door opening and closing. The second he was sure they were alone, Plagg
zipped out from Adrien's pocket and surveyed the bedroom.

"It's small," Plagg commented, spinning around to look at the whole room. "And cramped, and I
don't see any cheese."

"You are about as subtle as a speeding truck," Adrien sighed, kicking a box to the side to head back
out to the main room. "I have some cubes of cheese that I packed. It's not Camembert, but it'll have
to do until I can go shopping."

Plagg grumbled.

"And you'll have to ration your Camembert a bit," Adrien cautioned. "No more eating two wheels a
day. Half a wheel at most plus some other cheeses will have to do."

Plagg let out an immediate loud whine at that.
"Don't even start," Adrien said warningly as he entered the living room and bent down to sort through his bags. "It'll look weird if I'm buying seven wheels of Camembert a week or going grocery shopping every other day. It's not back home, where we had Camembert stocked in the kitchen."

"I'll starve. You don't skimp on food for yourself ever."

"I'll buy other cheeses. You said you like Gouda, right? Brie? And I know you'll eat Swiss and cheddar in a pinch." Adrien dug in his backpack and tossed a large cube of cheddar to Plagg before taking the rest of the cheese and putting it in the refrigerator.

"But it's not the same."

"Think of it this way: for you, Camembert is like dessert. It's tasty. You eat less of it than other cheeses, and then it's more of a treat when you do have it." Adrien grabbed his suitcase and headed back to the bedroom. He might as well get started with unpacking so he could start getting rid of the boxes. "And I don't eat dessert day in and day out."

Plagg let out an angry mutter, but didn't argue further.

Back in the bedroom, Adrien attacked the boxes first. Once all of the pillows, sheets, and blankets were on the bed (it didn't look pretty, but Adrien wasn't actually sure how to make the bed properly and at least it worked), Adrien delivered the towels to the bathroom and tossed all of the boxes and packaging into the kitchen, where they would be out of the way for the time being. He unpacked his suitcases next, shoving shirts, socks, underwear and pants into the dresser and hanging a few things up in his closet. Much to his surprise, it really wasn't taking all that long to get things stashed away. Of course, part of that was because Adrien couldn't bring a ton of stuff with him on the train, but he had still thought that setting up would take longer. Granted, he still had grocery shopping to do. He would have to shop enough to set up his entire pantry- that meant all the spices and sugar and salt and flour and eggs and everything. That would probably take the longest out of everything.

Sighing, Adrien pulled out the list Alya had prepared for him of everything Adrien needed to start a pantry. He had made his own additions to the list, of course, since he had picked out what things he wanted to cook during his first week and obviously Alya hadn't included Camembert on the list at all. He would have to buy some containers for leftovers and some reusable bags as well...

Ugh. Grocery shopping would probably be the hardest part of the moving to a new country. At least he didn't have to deal with shopping for furniture or most kitchen tools. That really would have been a nightmare. This was already bad enough.

Adrien let out a long sigh as he gathered up his wallet, his keys, the one bag he had brought along, and the completed list. Putting off the trip wouldn't do him any good; after all, he did need to eat. Maybe he wouldn't take care of everything on his list until he found out where the budget store was, but he had to pick up a couple things, at the very least. Hopefully he would run into his neighbor soon.

Adrien was lost in his racing thoughts of what he had to get done first as he neared his flat's door. There were so many things to do that needed his attention so he could actually function, and all in a foreign country. Now that he thought about it, Madam Rosalie hadn't actually said where the closest grocery store actually was, so he would have to ask someone- and who knew if Londoners were friendly or not? He hated asking random people for help, especially when he was abroad. People tended to ask about his accent and then practically asked for his whole life story when they learned he was from France. It wasn't fun at all-
He was so distracted that he didn't even notice that there was someone passing his door until he ran straight into them.

Both Adrien and the other person yelped as they stumbled, and Adrien's hands flew out to steady the other person before they could fall or drop any of the bags they were carrying.

"Sorry, sorry- I mean! Sorry about running into you," Adrien corrected himself, switching from French to English. "I should have looked where I was going-"

"No, no! I should not have been walking so close to the door, I just am not used to anyone living there," the girl in his arms said quickly in accented English, finally steadying herself on Adrien's arm and readjusting her grip on her bags. "It's not your fault at all- Adrien?!

Blinking in surprise, Adrien finally looked down at the girl properly, taking in her wide blue eyes and oh-so-familiar face. His mouth dropped open in surprise.

"Marinette?!"

Chapter End Notes

As with most of my stories, this is a one-

I'M KIDDING. This is most definitely not a one-shot and is not complete (but like always, I love getting reviews!). The first arc of the story by itself is something 120k words (I am Suffering, this is by far the longest thing I've ever written).

I'll try to post on a fairly regular basis for a while (since I have something like 19 chapters done and currently being edited), but I can't make any promises on keeping to that schedule long-term since my job sometimes takes me to places with a distinct lack of internet access (last spring I was averaging maybe forty-five minutes of internet use a week).

ALSO: I started and wrote most of this over the past year, so it's generally season 1 compliant but no promises with Season 2.
"Your father actually forbid you from dating?" Marinette asked in disbelief as she and Adrien finished putting away her groceries. Adrien had decided to put off his grocery shopping until the next day, since Marinette had invited him over for dinner on the condition he help her put away her groceries. He had been only too eager to help and spend some time with her. "That's insane! He does realize that you're an adult now, right?"

"I don't think so," Adrien admitted, folding up the cloth bag he had just emptied. "I mean, I sure it doesn't help that I'm still doing the same stuff at Gabriel that I've been doing since collège. I might have a business degree, but I haven't been helping with the administrative stuff for the company at all and that possibility hadn't even been mentioned at all. It's all photoshoots and commercials and fashion shows and 'being the face of the brand'." Adrien rolled his eyes. "Not that I want to be doing business or anything, but it seems like a waste after getting that degree and all."

"And you didn't apply to work anywhere else, or did your father forbid that as well?"

Adrien winced. "I, uh. Hadn't thought of that. I just sort of assumed that since Father had been talking about me taking over the business end of Gabriel once I got my degree, I would automatically get some sort of job there." He should have looked into that, probably, but then Plagg had pointed out that Adrien didn't particularly like business, so why not study what he actually liked? Maybe now that he was in London, he could get some sort of part-time job using that degree so it wouldn't go completely to waste.

Or maybe he could just focus on getting his physics degree. Considering that his father was paying for his living expenses, that would probably be easier. Besides, his father would probably object if he weren't focusing all of his energy on his schooling.

Thankfully, Marinette didn't seem to be judging him at all. She shrugged, taking the bag from Adrien and stooping to put it away with the others in a lower cabinet. "That seems like a reasonable assumption. I wonder why your father didn't do that?"

"I probably could have asked him," Adrien admitted. Looking back, it was clear that he hadn't really been as proactive as he should have been in applying for jobs. Of course, he had been applying for a Physics program during his final semester of business, but he could have gotten some sort of proper job during the summer months, either at Gabriel or elsewhere.

Yeah, so maybe he was a little behind in this whole "adulting" thing. In his defense, his father seemed to be doing his best to keep Adrien from doing anything on his own and he certainly hadn't offered up any advice like Adrien's friends' parents had.

Once the food was put away, Marinette started making dinner. Adrien pitched in, chopping vegetables like a pro as Marinette started gathering the spices she was going to use for their dinner. As they worked, Adrien found himself hoping that cooking and eating together would become a recurring thing; after all, he and Marinette had become really good friends after they got past the gum incident back in collège and he had really missed her while she was gone. They chatted as they worked, catching up on what they had missed during the months Marinette had been in London.
And naturally, the conversation eventually veered back onto the topic of Gabriel's restrictions for his son while Adrien was in London.

"It's like he thinks I'm going to up and elope with someone I just met," Adrien said, rolling his eyes as he dug into the cooked potatoes. They were fantastic. Adrien recognized the recipe as one of Alya's, which made him guess that Marinette had probably gotten the same lessons he had, or at the very least she had gotten the recipes. She probably already knew how to cook, considering her uncle and all. "Which is ridiculous, I wouldn't..."

He trailed off. Well. Actually, now that he thought about it, that wasn't an awful idea. Not getting married for real, obviously, but faking it for just long enough to make people believe him. The thought of how much his father would freak out made him snicker to himself. (He might have been spending a little too much time with Plagg. The little cat kwami was a bad influence.)

"You wouldn't...?" Marinette prompted when Adrien didn't say anything. She raised her eyebrows when Adrien still didn't respond and then she suddenly frowned as she caught on to his train of thought. "Adrien, you wouldn't. There's all sorts of legal red tape you would have to deal with to get married, and then if you get divorced afterwards-"

"I wouldn't for real," Adrien assured Marinette hastily before she could really start freaking out. "Just a fake wedding. I don't know how that would work, exactly, but I would just need some photos and someone to be a fake 'bride'."

Marinette groaned, worried expression immediately turning exasperated. "Adrien..."

Adrien gave her his best kitten eyes to try to win her over. It had worked in the past, but Marinette still didn't seem convinced. "It would be funny."

"You're going to get your dad coming over and hauling you back to Paris."

"I'm an adult. He legally can't withdraw my enrolment at the university, and he's already paid for the first semester. I have enough money saved up from modeling to pay for the rest and for housing, and I can always get a part-time job while I'm studying." Maybe he was being a bit immature, but the fact that his father was still insisting on treating him like a child even though Adrien was nearly twenty-two was irritating. He wasn't about to do anything stupid. And of course, not being trusted not to do anything stupid made Adrien want to be stupid. And if he was being stupid, he might as well go big. And because he didn't want to screw up his reputation or his future permanently, a fake wedding was the best way to go.

Now he just had to persuade Marinette of that, or go find someone on the street to cooperate with him.

Marinette groaned again, slumping onto the table and burying her face in her hands. "You're ridiculous."

"I'm rebelling."

"How exactly are you planning on going about getting a fake wedding?" Marinette asked with an exasperated sigh after another pause. She was sitting with her arms crossed, but Adrien knew her well enough to notice the twinkle of amusement in her eyes and the way her mouth curved up at the corners. She might pretend to be the reasonable one, but she was just as amused by the idea as he was.
"Well," Adrien said slowly, trying to think. He had been to weddings before, of course, but they were big affairs for friends of his father or obscure relatives or something that Chloe dragged him to. They involved a whole lot of ridiculous extra bells and whistles. "Uh... in weddings, there's a bride and a groom-"

Marinette giggled. Adrien pretended to glare at her.

"-which I think we have covered, if you're willing to play along with this," Adrien said, suddenly realizing that he hadn't actually asked Marinette yet. He glanced over at Marinette, hoping that she wouldn't be averse to the idea.

"Sure, I'll be your groom," Marinette said with a perfectly straight face. "Are you going to wear a white dress? I'm not sure it'll work with your complexion."

"Ha, ha," Adrien deadpanned back. "But in all seriousness, how much do we want to dress up? I don't want to spend too much money setting stuff up. Besides, too much of a fuss and the press will be all over us and my father will actually kill me."

"I have a nice dress I can wear," Marinette assured him. "We can just wear decently nice clothes and go to a courthouse and pose with an officiant there. Maybe we should pick up fake rings somewhere, so we can have, like, a ring-exchanging picture-"

"Okay, stupid question, maybe, but what makes a wedding official?" Adrien asked, biting his lip. He had come to the sudden realization that he really didn't know as much about weddings as he maybe should if he was going to do this. "Like, I don't want to accidentally get real-married just as a joke."

Marinette snorted. "Yeah, your father would never let you out of his sight again. Or maybe he would reassign Nathalie to follow you around 24/7." She bit her lip to (unsuccessfully) try to smother another snort before she considered Adrien's question. "I think there's some documents you need to have- a marriage license, for one. We wouldn't have one, obviously, but if you really wanted to freak your dad out, we could take a picture of us pretending to sign something."

Adrien grinned and held his fist out for her to bump. She did so with a grin. "I like how you think, partner. This is going to be great. Does getting married tomorrow work for you?"

The next morning found the two of them in the grocery store, doing a quick stock-up of Adrien's food supply before they headed to the courthouse. Marinette had kindly loaned Adrien her bags so that he wouldn't have to worry about getting some of his own right away ("You'll probably get a bunch at student orientations anyway," Marinette had said, "and if not, well, it's easy enough to buy a few later on.") and they had headed off, certain that with two of them chipping away at the list, it wouldn't take too long.

It was taking too long.

"At least normal shopping trips should go faster," Adrien sighed as he turned around once again to head back up an aisle he had already gone through. He hadn't organized his list very well, which meant that there was a lot of backtracking to get things that they had missed. Hopefully it would speed things up once he was more familiar with the layout of the store. "How did your conversation with your parents go this morning?"

"They were pretty amused, I think," Marinette said, grinning. After she and Adrien had laid down some details on how they were going to fake the marriage so it would be believable, Marinette had
decided to give her parents a heads-up so that they wouldn't freak out (being freaked out lead to
distraction while baking, Marinette had said, and distractions while baking lead to mistakes and
injuries; besides, her father had promised to post some sappy comments about being proud of them
for getting married once they posted the photos online, just to further confuse everyone). She had
called before they headed out, when the bakery would be in the middle of a lull. "I don't think my
father stopped laughing for five minutes after I told them. He wants copies of the photos. They also
suggested having a couple of my coworkers come and act as bridesmaids and groomsmen."

Adrien snorted as he perused the spice rack. Salt and pepper went into his cart first. "Your parents
are awesome. I'm glad I'm getting them as fake in-laws."

"They said we needed to get a picture with the cake, even if it's just a plain one." Marinette
grinned. "They're really amused by it. I get the feeling that they've been wanting to plan a wedding
for quite some time."

"Who's getting married?"

Marinette and Adrien both yelped as a new voice inserted itself into their conversation. They
whipped around as one, Adrien holding his canister of dried basil out like a weapon, and came
face-to-face with Madam Rosalie.

"Oh, you scared me," Marinette breathed, one hand still on her heart. Madam Rosalie laughed.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, but I saw the two of you over here and just had to pop over and say
hi. I'm glad you two already met. So who's getting married?"

Marinette glanced over at Adrien with a clear how do you know her? expression on her face. With a
guilty start, Adrien realized that he had figured out pretty early on that Marinette was the intern
Madam Rosalie had been referring to, but he had never mentioned her to Marinette. As far as his
friend knew, Adrien should be a complete stranger to her boss.

"Madam Rosalie is a friend of my father's," Adrien explained to Marinette as he tossed the basil
into his cart. "They've known each other for years."

"Ah."

"And, uh..." Adrien thought fast, trying to decide whether or not Madam Rosalie could be trusted
with their plan. She might think that it was stupid and tell his father, but on the other hand, she and
Adrien's mother had gotten up to some crazy things themselves when they were in school. She
would probably have more ideas for them to make the wedding seem more real. But he couldn't
help but tease her a little first. With a wide grin, he reached over and took Marinette's hand. "And
actually, Marinette and I are getting married. Today."

The effect was instant. Madam Rosalie's eyes bugged out and her jaw worked wordlessly as she
stared at them. After a minute, she finally found her words.

"You just met, what? Yesterday? Today? You can't just up and get married to someone you just
met, that's absolutely insane. I thought you two were smarter than this-

Then Madam Rosalie stopped quite suddenly and peered at them suspiciously. After a moment she
straightened up, earlier panic completely gone. "You're just pretending to, aren't you. To freak out
your dad."

Adrien groaned, letting go of Marinette's hand. Really? Busted already? "We're that predictable?"
Madam Rosalie shook her head. "Oh, no, not at all. It's just that I know what newly-in-love couples look like, and you two didn't quite manage that. I'm sure you'll be better at acting later today, though, right?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Marinette said quickly. "And we were just planning on getting photos taken, so we can redo them if we don't look mushy enough."

Madam Rosalie let out a bark of laughter. "You two, really. How did Adrien already manage to rope you into his schemes?"

"We've known each other since collège," Marinette admitted, looking a little sheepish. "And we didn't realize that we would both be in the same part of London, much less the same building- and across the hall from each other, even!"

"Oh, that's convenient. You already have a friend in the city!" Madam Rosalie looked absolutely thrilled as she patted Adrien's shoulder. "Of course, you can't let that get in the way of you practicing your English and making friends here."

"We won't," Adrien assured her. Really, he shouldn't be speaking for Marinette, but she had been in London for months already. Surely she had made some local friends already. Marinette was incredibly kind and outgoing so unless she had been absolutely swamped by work, she had probably made a dozen friends already.

"Good." Madam Rosalie looked pleased by his response for a moment before the focused look returned to her face. "So you said something earlier about a fake wedding?"

"Ah...yeah." Adrien bit his lip nervously as he tried to think of how best to explain the whole situation. "So my dad kept telling me all the things I wasn't allowed to do when I was in London, and one of the things he forbid was dating, so, uh-"

"So you decided to go straight to getting married instead," Madam Rosalie finished. She laughed. "Okay, that's hilarious. I'd love to be a fly on the wall when he hears about it. So what had you planned so far?"

By the time they finished their shopping, Madam Rosalie had been caught up on all of their plans. She was amused, but she thought they could do better. Way better.

"I have a wedding dress that I designed and just finished that you can wear for the day," she told Marinette. "And of course, I have a few tuxedos on hand. One of them is bound to fit you, Adrien." She grinned, all pumped up about being involved in their prank. "And I have some gorgeous prop rings that you could borrow for the ceremony, they're even your style, I think. And oh, I know a minister-"

And from there it just exploded.

Almost all of the staff and interns that Madam Rosalie called up jumped on the chance to prank the Gabriel Agreste. They all piled into the Rosalie Fashions building to try out the suits and dresses that Madam Rosalie wanted to use to find out who fit in the pieces with minimal adjustment. Those who wore the pieces best would be standing in as makeshift bridesmaids and groomsmen. A few interns that normally worked with the photographers during photoshoots brought along several cameras and a video recorder to catch the whole thing on tape. Someone trotted off to get Madam Rosalie's minister friend, who came in dressed in full garb. By mid-afternoon, Madam Rosalie was herding them to a private part of a botanical garden, which she had managed to procure by calling
in a favor from the owner of the garden.

Adrien was of the opinion that Madam Rosalie knew half of London. She really was able to call in all sorts of favors, all for one little prank.

"You have to go big or go home," was all she said when Adrien and Marinette protested how much trouble everyone was going to just for them. "Besides, your mother would have found this hilarious."

Adrien couldn't argue with that. His mother probably would have jumped on board to help plan the prank, even if the intended target was his father.

Especially if the intended target was his father. She was just awesome like that.

"All right, I want you three arranged up front," Madam Rosalie ordered, pointing to the three assigned "groomsmen" who were milling around the gorgeous private garden. They were all dressed in identical suits from her newest collection. She waved one of the photography interns forward. "Arthur, arrange them. Adrien, Chris, you join them."

"This is certainly looking very realistic," Chris, the minister, told Adrien as they found themselves being steered into position in front of the vine-covered trellis. From their position, they could see the majority of the private garden around them. Most of the flowers were long since gone, since it was fall, but the area was still gorgeous. The gardeners had picked out plants that had interesting-looking leaves to keep the area beautiful once summer was over, and some had a purplish hue to them to break up the green and grey of the plants and stone walls around them. During an actual wedding, the area would probably be filled with rows upon rows of folding chairs, but right now it was rather sparse. That didn't mean that it wasn't busy, though. Madam Rosalie was steering the bridesmaids and Marinette into a line and checking that everyone else was in position and not accidentally going to show up in the video.

From Adrien's point of view, the setup certainly didn't look like a particularly realistic wedding. It looked far more like a photoshoot in the middle of being staged.

Of course, that was kind of what it was. A photoshoot, or perhaps a movie. Looking towards the front of the garden, it probably did look much more like an actual wedding, and that was what counted in the end.

"Does it really?"

The minister was grinning as he watched everyone being steered into position by a very much in charge Madam Rosalie. "I've officiated more than a couple rush weddings in my time. Some of them looked almost just like this."

Adrien's eyebrows shot up. He had figured that between the designer outfits, the location, and the other details that had fallen into place, the element of believability might have been completely lost. "Really?"

Chris laughed at the look on Adrien's face. "You don't believe me? I'm not saying that all rush weddings are this nice. They vary, just like the weddings that take months to plan. I've seen everything from people dressed in sundresses and shorts all the way to one couple who had rented the most fancy wedding dress and tux I've ever seen."

"For a rush wedding that their family didn't even come to?"

"Oh, no, their family came!" Chris assured him quickly. "Immediate family, that is. They had a
very large extended family that they didn't want to deal with and they didn't have the budget for but they still wanted a fancy wedding, so they threw everything together in the two days after they got engaged and had the gorgeous, but very small wedding that they had always wanted."

"They must have had some plans in place before they did they got engaged then, right?" The mere idea of even trying to plan and pull off a wedding in two days gave him a headache. His and Marinette's original simple plan had been hard enough to plan out already in such a small timeframe, and that was with as few bells and whistles as possible and without the added hassle of inviting guests and having a reception afterwards. Somewhat subconsciously, Adrien found himself taking notes on all of the moving parts there seemed to be to a wedding. After all, he would presumably be doing this again for real someday and it would be good to be prepared—unless, of course, he just decided to elope. But no matter how tempting the idea was after all this, he wasn't entirely positive that his father wouldn't disown him if he actually did elope. "Don't things like flowers and cake normally have to be ordered months in advance?"

"All right, places!" Arthur yelled from where he was standing next to one of his tripods. He had set several up so that they could get photos from several different angles. "Benny, start recording, if you please. Ellen, the music. Adrien, look like you've fallen head over heels in love with Marinette. I want lovesick! Just a normal smile won't do—perfect! All right, let's go!"

"You look amazing, Marinette," Adrien murmured in her ear during a small pause in the ceremony. His grin turned even more genuine as he saw her blush. She didn't have time to respond, though, before they started the vows. They were pretty standard, since they didn't have time to think up their own and besides, they didn't want to say anything that would give away the fact that they had known each other for years. It was best to keep things short, sweet, vague, and ridiculously sappy. The interns that Madam Rosalie had put in charge of coming up with the vows while everyone else got their hair and makeup done had clearly had loads of fun going absolutely over the top.

And then it was time for the kiss.

Adrien's heart almost stopped as the pastor looked at the two of them expectantly. He had forgotten about that particular part of the ceremony. How, he didn't know, considering that it was only the most important part ever or at least the part that everyone seemed to look forward to the most. He hadn't even asked Marinette if she was okay with kissing him, though maybe he should assume that she would be fine considering that she had agreed to the "wedding" in the first place and the photos that they would have taken with the ceremony that they had planned originally would have more likely than not included a kiss. Besides, Marinette was looking up at him expectantly. There was no way to misinterpret that look as reluctance and he definitely wasn't
against kissing Marinette.

Decided, Adrien stepped forward to close the gap between himself and Marinette and, with only an impish grin as warning, he dipped her and planted a lingering kiss on her lips.

As soon as the ceremony proper was over, Chris guided them towards a small table that had been set up on the side. The minister had procured a fancy-looking piece of paper for them to sign in place of a marriage license, and it took all of Adrien's strength not to snicker at the "bla bla bla"s that filled the paper where the legal mumbo-jumbo would usually go. Marinette signed first on the line, and then she handed the pen over to Adrien. He pressed a kiss to her cheek before taking the pen from her and signing as well.

"That was fantastic," Madam Rosalie exclaimed as soon as they were finished signing and the cameras had stopped rolling for a moment. "If I hadn't known better, I would have thought that you two were getting married for real. If your father isn't fooled, Adrien, then it'll be a miracle."

"Your coaching earlier was incredibly helpful," Adrien said humbly, remembering how- well, not awkward, really, just stilted- the two of them had been before Madam Rosalie pulled them aside for some coaching while everyone else got dressed. He beamed at Marinette. "And Marinette was amazing. I don't think I would have been able to pull that off with anyone else."

Madam Rosalie looked strangely smug at his words. Marinette turned pink.

"All right, almost done!" Arthur interrupted them. He waved his camera at them. "It's time for the photos! First, I want all of the bridesmaids and the bride, and then after that I'll want the groomsmen and the groom. Then it'll be a few group photos."

Marinette beamed at Adrien and then moved off to join the other girls arranging themselves at the front of the garden, in front of the few still blooming flowers in the garden. Adrien watched her go, letting himself enjoy watching the way her dress swished over the grass. Marinette was a natural at this, really. He wouldn't be surprised if she was asked to model more in the future.

"If I'm not needed in any of the photos, then I should go," Chris announced, checking his watch before glancing around again. "I have some things I still need to get together for this Sunday. It's been great meeting all of you," he added, shaking Adrien's hand. He lowered his voice. "And feel free to call me up when you and that young lady get married for real. I'd be happy to officiate."

Then, before Adrien could respond, he was gone.

"Now the groom and the groomsmen!" called Arthur. "Come on, come on, we don't have all day! We're going to lose the best light soon! We'll do the cake-cutting after this."

"Is something the matter, Adrien?" Madam Rosalie asked when Adrien made no move to join the others. She followed his gaze curiously, but Chris was already gone. "Adrien?"

"Sorry, sorry, just zoned out for a minute," Adrien said hurriedly, quickly heading up to where the other guys were being arranged by the photographer. When he and Marinette got married for real? Either Chris hadn't been given the right story by Madam Rosalie or he had read too far into Adrien and Marinette's acting and thought that the chemistry was really there. There was no reason to overthink the minister's remark. Maybe the guy was a romantic at heart. If he officiated a lot of weddings, that definitely was a strong possibility.

Adrien let Arthur guide him into position and automatically posed for several photos, following Arthur's directions without having to think about it too much. The entire "wedding party" piled
together for another series of photos, and Arthur hummed in pleasure as the group posed naturally. He and Marinette threw themselves into their roles again, gazing at each other with hearts all but floating out of their eyes. As soon as that was done, the whole group piled over to where a rather simple wedding cake was sitting on a folding table (covered, of course, by lacy white linen snitched from Madam Rosalie's collection) so that Adrien and Marinette could cut the cake and hand it out. They posed for a few photos during that, too, since Madam Rosalie insisted that it was tradition.

"All right, I'll get these and the video on a USB drive for you," Arthur said, reviewing the photos on his camera. "One last photo everyone, I want a group picture to remember this by!"

Adrien grinned as everyone who had helped out, from their false bridesmaids and groomsmen to the owner of the garden, set their cake aside to pile together with him and Marinette. He had already made several friends from the group, even though they had been insanely busy getting everything ready. Marinette had already promised to bake another cake for them all to have later in the week as thanks for all of their help, and Adrien was trying to figure out if he could cook a meal to go along with it or if it would be too hard to cook for so many people. He was rather inclined to think that it would be too hard to do. Maybe he should just bring some drinks and extra dishes for everyone to use.

"Are you telling your friends back home?" their second bridesmaid- Lynsey, Adrien was pretty sure she was called- asked. "I mean, I know Marinette said she told her parents. But your friends- Alya and Nino, I think?- do they know that it's a prank?"

Marinette and Adrien exchanged a look. They hadn't really thought about it, though they definitely should have. Adrien was tempted not to, just because Nino and Alya's reactions would be hilarious. They would probably freak out in very loud unison.

"Let's not," Marinette said after a moment, clearly having the same train of thought as Adrien. "I want to see how much Alya freaks out. Besides, if too many people seem to know about it, it starts to look planned instead of a spontaneous 'we just decided to do this'."

Adrien held out his fist for her to bump. "Great minds think alike. I just wish I could be a fly on the wall when they see our posts." He grinned. "It would be absolutely hilarious."

Chapter End Notes

Next time: the fallout :D

If there's any British people out there screaming at the screen "THEY'RE CALLED FLATS NOT APARTMENTS IN LONDON!" I would like to say- yes, yes, I know, I lived in a flat in New Zealand when I did a study abroad. I'm very aware that they're called flats in London. But the French word for it is super-similar to "apartment" ("apparment") and Adrien and Marinette would probably be speaking in French, so I just used that instead.

...also I couldn't figure out what a building of flats was called, whereas "apartment building" is nice and straightforward. That might have played a small role in my decision.

Please review, it really makes my day!
Nino let out a groan as he stumbled to the kitchen table. He hated Mondays, mostly because he hadn't yet broken his habit of staying up far too late on the weekends and so his sleeping schedule got thrown off. He was basically sleepwalking as he slumped into his chair and opened his laptop to peruse his Facebook feed while Alya toasted bread for their breakfast.

"What's new?" Alya called over her shoulder as she poured herself a cup of coffee. "Anything interesting?"

Nino scanned the page with sleepy eyes, brain not quite comprehending the words in front of him yet. He needed his coffee first. "Uh. Ivan and Mylène posted new photos, Alex challenged Kim to a race, Nathaniel shared a drawing, Adrien changed his status to 'Married to Marinette Dupain-Cheng', Rose joined a scrapbooking club, Marinette-" "WHAT?"

Nino choked and spat out her coffee all over the counter. "WHAT?"

Nino blinked up, puzzled at the scene in front of him. Coffee was dripping from the kitchen counter and had drenched the toast Alya had already made. "Huh?"

"What was that last one?" Alya demanded.

Nino consulted his computer, puzzled. "Rose joined a scrapbooking club?"

"No, before that!"

Nino looked again. "'Adrien changed his status to 'Married to Marinette Dupain-Cheng' - WHAT?"

Nino exclaimed, suddenly awake as he jolted in his seat and stared at his computer screen in shock. "He did what?"

"He must just be kidding," Alya said as she hurried over to Nino's side. "What does Mari's profile say?"

Nino clicked on a few links as he maneuvered to Marinette's page and then he squinted at it. "Her status says...Married to Adrien Agreste. She changed her photo, too. Look."

Alya gaped as she plopped down in the seat next to Nino. Marinette's Facebook page had changed drastically from the previous day. Her cover photo, previously of the London skyline, had changed to a photo with her, Adrien, and three other girls and three guys. Marinette was wearing a blue wedding dress and Adrien wore a tux, and the others were just as dressed up. Marinette had a bouquet of white flowers in one hand. Her profile picture was a close-up of her and Adrien in their wedding attire.

That was definitely not photoshopped.

Adrien's page looked almost exactly the same as Marinette's. He used slightly different photos, though, and his profile photo was of him dipping Marinette into what was possibly the most romantic kiss they had ever seen.

"Bro," Nino said in absolute disbelief as Alya clicked through Adrien's posted photos. There were
photos that had clearly been taken throughout the wedding, including one that had him and Marinette signing something and looking very cuddly as they did so.

"I can't believe it," Alya said, pausing on the photo. She looked like she was about to murder someone. "They actually got married. They signed a wedding license. What were they thinking? And why couldn't they even wait long enough to invite us and Marinette's parents?"

"Babe-"

"I DID NOT BUST MY BUTT TRYING TO SET THEM UP FOR YEARS ON END JUST FOR THEM TO ELOPE AND NOT INVITE ME TO THEIR WEDDING!"

Gabriel didn't check in on his son until two o'clock on Monday. He pulled up Adrien's Facebook page, expecting to see a couple new pictures of the apartment, maybe a status update on how the move went.

He was not expecting to see Adrien dressed in a tuxedo, standing next to a girl in a wedding dress and with the rest of a wedding party around them.

Gabriel gaped at the pictures as his brain shut down and refused to work. After a second, he scrolled down frantically, looking for some sort of explanation that would tell him that Adrien had gotten caught up in some elaborate ruse of some sort.

Instead, Adrien's most recent post read, "Just ran into her yesterday and we decided we had to get married! 3"

Gabriel's jaw dropped and he stared, mind stalling out. No. No way. There was absolutely no way.

"Are you okay, sir?" Nathalie asked as she entered the room with a pile of papers. She frowned when she saw Gabriel's mouth hanging open as he stared blankly at his computer screen. "Sir?"

"He got married," Gabriel said in disbelief after a long pause. "He got married to someone he hadn't even known for twenty-four hours."

That got Nathalie's attention and she hurried over to join Gabriel, dropping the forms on her desk as she did. "Who did?"

"Adrien did!" Gabriel gestured to the computer, tone starting to turn just a bit hysterical. "Look, he posted the photos! He didn't even said anything to me first, or I would have put a stop to it!"

"Tha...that was probably why he didn't say anything, sir," Nathalie managed. She was absolutely stunned as well. She had known Adrien for years and he had never seemed the impulsive type. His escapes, from everything from going to public school to slipping away from his bodyguard to go to a movie, were planned out in advance. He had a plan for everything, and he almost always considered the possible long-term consequences for his actions.

Getting married the day after moving to another country to a girl that he had only just met was decidedly out of character, to say the least.
"I need to get over there now," Gabriel decided, slapping the desk and bringing her attention back to him. "Nathalie, find plane tickets for both of us. We're going to go over there, figure out what's going on, and bring Adrien back. Oh, I knew this was a bad idea..."

Nathalie watched as Gabriel clutched at his hair, launching himself out of his desk chair and pacing back and forth across the room. As he started spinning in panicked circles, Nathalie turned her attention to Adrien's Facebook page. She couldn't spot any obvious signs of Photoshop having been used on the photos, and there were enough pictures that Nathalie strongly doubted that they were fake. The same photos were on the girl's page, and a dive a little deeper into her archives showed that the account wasn't at all new and that it was the same girl in both the wedding photos and in the earlier photos.

Nathalie bit her lip as her stomach filled with nerves. She had been hoping to find some sort of evidence that the photos were faked, but the evidence was piling up that Adrien had, in fact, gotten married after being in London for not even a day. The photos showed absolutely no evidence of photoshopping (and after years of working as Gabriel's personal assistant, Nathalie knew full well what to look for), the girl's account wasn't a fake either.

This was bad. This was very bad. Even ignoring how out of character this seemed for Adrien- was there some sort of blackmail involved? Coercion? this was bad. The wedding would have all sorts of consequences that Nathalie was positive that Adrien wouldn't be able to handle. The cost to put it all together so quickly must have been absolutely staggering. The dresses and tuxes by themselves must have cost a pretty penny, considering that they were obviously designer, and what were the chances that Adrien had thought to rent the pieces instead of buying them? And on top of that they would have had to rush order the minister, the flowers the cake, the photographer, and reserve the clearly private garden.

Last minute rush orders for things like that did not come cheap. Nathalie knew that well after arranging for far too many last-minute changes for Gabriel photoshoots. And she doubted that Adrien's new wife had paid for any of it. Adrien had probably just volunteered to cover everything, bleeding heart that he was, and the little gold-digger had probably just happily accepted it.

Nathalie groaned as she returned to Adrien's page and saw a brand new post on the top. This one had a video and a caption of "Some wonderful people took a video of our special day so we could share it with everyone who wasn't there! Apologies for not inviting friends and family back in Paris, but we just couldn't wait! 3".

Nathalie was tempted to strangle Adrien the next time she saw him. Of all the irresponsible things...

She could already foresee the headaches sorting out this whole mess would cause.

The Dupain-Chengs had not been expecting their daughter to call them up Sunday morning with the news that she was getting married to her collège crush. She had explained that it was fake right off the bat, of course, but still. Unexpected.

And also very, very amusing.
Marinette had sent them updates via text all day Sunday as their little 'fake wedding at the courthouse' turned into 'impromptu ceremony in a garden complete with wedding dress'. Her parents had become more and more amused as things got more and more complicated.

"Ooh, they got some really nice photos," Sabine said gleefully as she opened the folder of photos Marinette had uploaded to her Facebook Monday morning. "Ooh, look at her dress! I can't believe her boss let her borrow that. It's gorgeous."

"She should ask if she can borrow it in the future when she and the boy get married for real," Tom said with a grin, leaning over Sabine's shoulder to get a better look at the photos. "It looks good on her. Are you texting her? Tell her I send my compliments to whoever did her hair."

"It does look really nice," Sabine agreed, sending the message. "And her makeup as well! Of course Marinette did say that her boss called in some of the company's hair and makeup people."

"Mmm." Tom grinned at the series of photos of Adrien and Marinette's dip kiss. "Aww, so cute!"

"I'm downloading all of these," Sabine claimed with a grin. "All of them. And my phone background is going to be this picture, right here. They look so into that kiss."

"I'm posting my congratulations," Tom said, grin spreading even further across his face as he reached for the computer. "Be the proud dad that doesn't question his daughter's decisions at all. It'll confuse everyone."

Sabine giggled as she gave up the computer so Tom could type comments for each of the photos. He started with the cover photo and Marinette's profile photo before putting little proud comments on every photo in the wedding album. With another mischievous grin, Tom headed over to Adrien's profile and posted a few "I can't wait to meet my son-in-law!" comments on his page as well for good measure.

"So how long do you give them before they get married for real?" Sabine asked as they closed the computer and washed their hands before heading back into the bakery. "Two years? Three?"

"You really think it'll take that long?"

Marinette and Adrien were having a very amusing day.

Texts, emails, and phone calls had been pouring from friends and family alike all day, ever since they posted the photos and changed their Facebook status. They gleefully ignored them, letting the confusion increase in favor of pretending they were too busy "honeymooning" to respond.

Of course, they were actually both working for Madam Rosalie- Marinette as an intern, and Adrien in the office filing paperwork as thanks for all of the help Madam Rosalie had supplied- but no one needed to know that.

"Oh, I got a comment from your dad!" Adrien said with a grin when they checked their Facebooks over lunch. "He said, 'I can't wait to meet my son-in-law! Lovely photos!' Nice man. I'm glad I have him as a fake father-in-law."
Marinette giggled. "Ooh, I wonder what Alya and Nino made of that."

Adrien grinned. "Oh, I bet their faces would be precious." He let out a snort at another comment and continued scrolling down. "I'm actually kind of concerned how many people I know actually think I would up and get married to a random person I supposedly met not even a day prior. I mean, I can kind of understand some of our friends from collège and lycée believing us since they know that we knew each other, but I'm getting congratulations from my photographer and a bunch of the models I work with, too...and from the Gorilla? Seriously? I thought he would know me better than that. I thought that he would recognize you for sure."

Marinette peered over his shoulder at his phone. "Any word from your father yet?"

Adrien shook his head. "Nope. I'm guessing that he's been too busy to check my Facebook yet. I'm sure I'll know the minute he sees it."

"What have you been doing for Madam Rosalie?" Marinette asked, changing the subject. "I haven't seen you all morning!"

"Oh, I've been neglecting you, my princess!" Adrien exclaimed grandly with a wide grin, grasping Marinette's hand and planting a kiss on her knuckles with a deep bow. "What kind of man does that to his brand-new fake wife?"

Marinette snickered.

"I've been putting my business degree to work and doing some paperwork for her," Adrien said with a little wince, releasing her hand and straightening back up again. "It's not my favorite thing ever, but it's not particularly difficult either. I'm just glad that she's letting me do something for in return for all the help she gave us yesterday. I'm sure she lost a bit of time getting that all set up for us."

"That was insane," Marinette agreed with a groan. "Everything really looked fantastic, though. I'm glad she helped out, even if it did take up several more hours of my weekend than I had planned for it to."

"I'm really sorry about dragging you into all of this," Adrien apologized immediately with a grimace. "I didn't expect for it to take so long either-""Really, it's fine," Marinette said hurriedly, before Adrien could get too far into his apologies. She had learned long ago that he had a tendency to overthink and get too worried about offending or inconveniencing others, and it was best to make sure that he didn't get too caught up in his (often unnecessary) concern. "I had fun, I really did. I would've just watched cooking show reruns all afternoon if I hadn't run into you."

"And quite literally as well," Adrien said, grinning and pressing his lips to Marinette's hand again. She groaned at the joke and pushed his face away with a finger on his nose. "Shall we get back to work?"

"I suppose."
Shortly after two, Adrien's phone lit up again. He glanced at it briefly before going back to his work sorting through the pile of forms on Marinette's desk, certain that it was probably just Nino or Alya again. And then it lit up again.

And again.

And again.

"Ah, I think Father maybe has noticed my Facebook post," Adrien said mildly as the texts continued to pile up, along with several missed calls. "And Nathalie has as well, it seems."

"Oh, great," Marinette said, appearing in the doorway. She set a fresh stack of papers down at the end of the desk. "Did the trick work?"

"It did. I'm almost a little offended that he honestly thinks that I would be stupid enough to marry someone I just met," Adrien said, watching his phone as the string of texts kept piling up. "And Nathalie believes me as well! Do none of my father's staff actually know me well enough to know that I would never do that? And never mind that, don't any of them remember you? I could understand my dad not recognizing you, but Nathalie and the Gorilla both met all of my friends loads of times."

Marinette giggled. "Are you still getting texts from Nino and Alya as well?"

"I don't even know. Father is burying everything in his freak-out texts and I had stopped checking earlier. If I looked at my messages every time I got a new one, I wouldn't get anything done."

Adrien grinned as he set the phone aside and pulled Marinette down into his lap for a hug. "How long should we let him simmer before we let him know we were kidding?"

Marinette bit her lip, thinking for a long second. "A day? I feel like any longer and he would freak out enough that the tabloids would catch on."

Adrien snickered. Marinette gave him a look.

"We don't need the tabloids trying to report on our nonexistent marriage," Marinette scolded him, though her lips were twitching in amusement. "They would never leave us alone again and I'd like to be able to complete my internship in peace, thank you very much."

"Ah, fair enough." Adrien checked his phone again before tucking it away out of sight. Really, this was the best reaction he could have hoped for. He had been a bit worried that his father would see right through him and render the whole effort useless, but it seemed that his concerns had been completely unfounded. "So, do you think my father will be able to get a plane over today, or is it late enough in the day that he won't be able to get a flight until tomorrow?"

"What on earth could he have been thinking?" Gabriel exclaimed for the millionth time the next morning, more frustrated and impatient now that he was stuck on a plane and couldn't pace and shout without attracting attention from the other passengers. Gabriel Agreste didn't do attracting judging stares from strangers. He gestured to the photos filling Adrien's Facebook page yet again, as though Nathalie hadn't seen them a dozen times before. "He only knew her for a few hours! Oh,
I knew I shouldn't have let him go off on his own..."

Nathalie, who had recognized Marinette Dupain-Cheng quite easily after the initial shock had finally worn off (several hours after initially seeing the post, but she wasn't about to admit that), didn't bother to correct Gabriel. She had analyzed the photos and Adrien's post again once her head was clearer (and then she headed back over to Marinette's Facebook page to check it against Adrien's again) and come to the conclusion that it was simply an elaborately staged prank. Adrien’s wording was a little too perfect at suggesting he hadn't known Marinette for long when in reality they had known each other for years, and Marinette's page said nothing about only knowing Adrien for a few hours. Still, Nathalie wasn't going to alert Gabriel to her suspicions. She might be wrong, after all.

(Besides, Gabriel had gone a little overboard in his list of Do's and Do Not's for his son and watching his cool demeanor melt to pieces was amusing. As long as this was a prank, Nathalie heartily approved.)

(And, well, even if it wasn't…Miss Dupain-Cheng seemed to be quite a nice young lady, and she and Adrien had known each other for a while. It would be weird for them to skip over dating to go straight to marriage, but it wouldn't be the disaster Nathalie had initially assumed it would be.)

"I should have checked his page earlier in the day yesterday," Gabriel groaned, falling back in his seat with a thud. Thankfully the other passengers in first class had long since decided to ignore them. "Then we could have actually gotten a flight yesterday instead of having to wait." Nathalie didn't respond. She personally didn't think the twenty hour delay would really make that much of a difference- after all, if Adrien was in fact married, there was nothing they could do about it now; if not, they had wasted money on airline tickets for nothing but it wasn't as though Gabriel's budget couldn't handle the cost. Adrien hadn't responded to the texts she had sent before they boarded the plane, giving him a heads-up that she and his father were coming.

Of course, Adrien could have responded while they were stuck in the plane. Nathalie wouldn't know for sure until the plane landed and she could turn her phone back on. Not having service was making her twitchy.

"Or we could have driven to London instead," Gabriel said, shifting anxiously in his seat and tapping his fingers restlessly against the armrest. "It would have been, what? Five hours, six hours?"

"Slightly over six with good traffic," Nathalie said without looking up. "And no offense, sir, but you get impatient enough on a one-hour plane ride even when Adrien isn't doing stupid things. You hate car rides longer than half an hour."

Gabriel grumbled under his breath and slumped in his seat. He corrected his posture a moment later and pulled out a notebook, stress doodling on a blank page. He didn't say much for the rest of the flight, though he did mutter under his breath quite a bit. As soon as they landed and had stopped at the gate, Gabriel was up and headed for the door, leaving Nathalie to snag their bags from the overhead bins before hurrying after him.

Gabriel powerwalked through the airport, sending people scattering to get out of his way. He summoned a cab with a couple sharp words (because Gabriel Agreste did not take public transportation, no matter how much cabs cost), and soon they were zipping off towards the neighborhood Adrien's apartment was in. Nathalie turned on her phone as soon as she was settled in her seat and frantically flipped through the messages that had piled up. All of them were work-related, most from having to reschedule the few meetings that Gabriel absolutely had to attend and
that had been abruptly canceled and a few other messages from the inters that she had selected to attend other meetings and take notes for Gabriel to review later. With a sign, Nathalie finished scanning through them and stuck her phone back in her pocket. The meetings could wait; after all, she didn't know for sure how soon they would be able to head back to Paris.

Nathalie pulled her phone back out as it let out another chime, the custom one she had set up just for messages from Adrien. She raised her eyebrows at the dual texts from Adrien- 'Just made new Facebook post' and 'At Madam Rosalie's fashion business'- before setting the phone aside and navigating to Adrien's page on her tablet. He had posted another photo, set in the same park as before, and with the same wedding party as before. This time, there were more people in the photo, including quite a few in streetwear, and a woman Nathalie recognized as Madam Rosalie. The caption read: 'Thanks to everyone who helped us pull off the impromptu wedding! In case you haven't already guessed, it was completely fake. I'm slightly concerned by how many people thought we weren't kidding though! :D'.

Nathalie was torn between letting out a huff of exasperation and a relieved sigh at the confirmation that Adrien had not lost all of his common sense after all. She suspected that the timing of the prank reveal probably wasn't coincidental; after all, the best way to stop Gabriel from going on a rampage through London looking for his son was to come clean. She suspected that Adrien probably had anticipated this exact reaction from his father and had pulled the prank with the intention of provoking him, but she wasn't about to admit that to Gabriel.

"Adrien has posted something new on Facebook, sir," Nathalie said, holding out her tablet a bit gingerly. Mr. Agreste probably wouldn't break it in frustration. Probably. Hopefully. "You might want to read it."

"More photos with his new wife?" Still, Gabriel took the tablet without complaint, though there was a deep scowl on his face. "He should know better, she's probably some gold-digging floozy-oh."

Nathalie allowed her lips to twitch upwards before resuming her professionally blank expression.

"Ha-ha, very funny." Gabriel sounded completely unamused. "Very mature."

"They did a really good job setting it up," Nathalie said. It was impressive, really, even if it did look like most of the crew involved were involved in fashion and were probably used to staging things for photoshoots and runway shows. They were probably used to setting things up and making them look convincing on short notice.

"I suppose." Gabriel still didn't sound impressed and the scowl was still in place, though it was somewhat diminished. "I still fail to see why it was necessary."

Nathalie really didn't think it was that difficult to figure out. "Adrien probably decided to rebel against all of the rules you set for him. Technically, you didn't forbid him from getting married. Or from pretending to get married." She glanced back down at her phone and leaned forward to tap the cab driver's shoulder. "Change of destination to Rosalie Fashions. Adrien sent me a text," she explained to Gabriel.

"Right." Gabriel handed her tablet back over to her and settled back into his seat, displeased expression still firmly in place. "Let's go talk to my son."
It was shortly after noon on Tuesday when Nino picked Alya up from work for a quick picnic in the park. As expected, Alya immediately dove back into their discussion about Adrien and Marinette, picking up right where they had left off that morning.

"I wish we could have gone over to Tom and Sabine's bakery," Alya grumbled as Nino spread out their blanket on the grass. "Did you see Tom's comments on Marinette's page? He was totally fine with Marinette getting married in a foreign country with absolutely no warning!"

"I'm guessing that either Marinette called him beforehand or he already had words with her but wanted to put up a positive front in public view," Nino said reassuringly, hoping to get Alya to calm down. The surprise marriage was all Alya had talked about ever since they had seen the post, and Tom Dupain's comments had only served to add fuel to the fire. Alya was absolutely speechless that Marinette's parents didn't seem to have any problem with it, as was Nino. It was just weird. "Or he didn't want to create bad blood with them. Maybe they'll have another ceremony in Paris so we can actually go in person and see them instead of watching a video."

The video, which had dispelled all doubts about the legitimacy of the photos. It had been a lovely ceremony, no doubt, which made Nino wonder how on earth they had pulled that off on such short notice. Adrien didn't know anyone there besides Marinette and Marinette had only been there for a short while, so they couldn't have possibly made that many connections already. Maybe they had gone to a wedding planner. Nino wouldn't put it past Adrien; his best friend was a romantic at heart and would no doubt want the best for his bride, even if he had to pay a ton to get things done on such short notice.

Also, Nino wasn't completely convinced that Adrien was used to being concerned about money. Since Adrien came from such a rich family, he never seemed to flinch at the cost of anything. Hopefully Marinette could help him get better at managing his money before Adrien accidentally spent himself into a hole.

"And he posted on Adrien's page, too! Calling him his son-in-law! Did you see that?" Alya was on a roll. "And a bunch of models from Gabriel were commenting and congratulating him! For eloping! Some of them thought that he had only known Marinette for a day and they still thought it was super cool!"

"Models are cray-cray." Nino had thought that was weird, too, but maybe eloping with people they just met was normal behavior in the model world. He wouldn't know. He had only accompanied Adrien to a couple photoshoots before, and they had been ages ago. He hadn't really talked to many on the models there besides Adrien either.

"And I still can't get a response out of either of them!" Alya finished indignantly. "What are they doing?"

"Do you really want to know?" Nino asked dryly. If Marinette and Adrien had just gotten married, they could very well have decided to have an express staycation honeymoon before Adrien's orientation for classes started on Wednesday. He would rather not think about it. After all, it was their best friends that they were talking about. He didn't want to know what they were or weren't getting up to.

"I want to know what's going on! How on earth could they go for years and years knowing each other and not dating and then they just happen to bump into each other in London and decide to get
married right off the bat? It's absolutely crazy!"

Nino's phone beeped with an alert and he pulled it out as Alya continued to grumble. A new Facebook post had shown up on his feed, so he clicked on it as Alya snarled about the injustices of the shotgun wedding. Another photo of Marinette and Adrien's wedding came up, filled with the whole wedding party and a handful of other people, including...Marinette's boss?

Confused, Nino scrolled down to see the caption.

"'Thanks to everyone who helped us pull off the impromptu wedding! In case you haven't already guessed, it was completely fake. I'm slightly concerned by how many people thought we weren't kidding though!' Smiley face. What the hell, Adrien?" Nino exclaimed, cutting across whatever Alya was saying. "What made him think that that was a good idea?"

Alya froze mid-sentence, her hands paused mid-gesture. "What?"

"It was a fake! Adrien just made a post about it." Nino passed his phone over to her. "That jerk! That's a crazy prank."

"Ooh! I can't believe them!" Alya was still steaming, even as Nino chuckled over the prank. It was really clever, now that he thought about it, and wow had they ever executed it well. He had absolutely zero idea how Adrien had managed to pull that off within 24 hours of getting to London. There were just so many details, from the dress and tux and flowers to the cleric and the flower gardens, all without alerting the press. Alya had figured out the previous night that the wedding party was made up of assorted people that Marinette worked with (a fact that irritated Alya to no end, since she should have been the Maid of Honor), so they probably had been easy to get a hold of, but the cleric? The garden? The designer dresses?

Absolutely insane. Nino wasn't believing anything Adrien ever said ever again. Or anything Marinette said either, the jerk.

"And I can't believe I fell for it!" Alya stormed. "Ugh, those jerks!"

"They were probably primarily trying to prank Adrien's father," Nino pointed out. Now that he knew that the wedding wasn't real, it hadn't taken him long at all to put the pieces together. Adrien had been grumbling about his father's crazy restrictions for forever, so of course he would probably take the opportunity to pretend that he had smashed those restrictions into pieces the second he was gone. It was completely hilarious.

….well, okay, he was still a little concerned about how much Adrien had spent on the fake wedding, but other than that it was completely hilarious.

That helped diffuse some of Alya's anger. A grin lit up her face. "Oh, man. What I would give to have been in the room when Gabriel saw that first post. He must have flipped, oh my god."

Nino snickered at the mental picture.

"I can't actually believe that they pranked Adrien's father," Alya snorted. "Oh, that's hilarious. But they're still not completely forgiven," she added. "They pranked us, too. They could have at least given us a heads up like they clearly did for Marinette's parents!"

Nino shrugged, still cackling away. As far as he was concerned, the whole thing was completely hilarious. There was no harm, no foul-

"Oh, shoot," Alya said suddenly, interrupting his thoughts as she suddenly lunged across the
blanket for her phone, eyes wide and a slightly panicked expression on her face. "Oh shoot oh shoot oh shoot oh no-"

"What's wrong?" Nino asked, completely baffled as Alya brought up her text messenger on her phone and frantically started scrolling through the messages she had sent. "I'm sure if you said anything rude, Marinette and Adrien will understand it was just said in the heat of the moment."

"No, no- I mean, yeah, I said a couple rude things, but that's not what I'm worried about." Alya tapped Adrien's contact and scrolled up the wall of texts she had sent. "I, uh, might have sent a text to Adrien earlier on basically saying that I had tried to set the two of them up for years, so I was very offended that they didn't even invite me or let me know what was going on. And, uh, if they didn't actually get married, then Marinette probably didn't confess at all and, uh, I just outed her to Adrien by accident."

Next up....more fallout, I think.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! I'm currently planning to update this approximately every six days (since I'm also still making one-shots and posting those as well; any more often and I'd be spending more time on the posting than on actually writing); HOWEVER, this schedule isn't concrete. Like I mentioned (or at least I think I mentioned) back on the first chapter, I do seasonal field work and sometimes wherever I'm working doesn't have internet, or doesn't have days off for 16+ days at a time, etc. (and sometimes something just comes up and I don't have the time to post).

Also, just as a side note- I like reviews! But I don't like reviews that can be summed up as "Update!" I'm glad that you're enjoying the story, but I'm not going to speed up the posting schedule just because I got a lot of reviews along that vein.
Marinette was more than a little bit nervous as she stood with Adrien on the sidewalk in front of Rosalie Fashions as they waited for Mr. Agreste and Nathalie to arrive. She could feel Tikki giving her encouraging pats to her side through the purse that hung at her hip. Adrien had told her that she didn't need to be out here, but she was hoping that maybe having someone else present would make Mr. Agreste tone down his anger.

It was a long-shot hope, but she was Lady Luck.

"I'm sure Nathalie will be on our side," Adrien said, squeezing Marinette's hand. "She's helped me out a lot before. She was the one who talked my father into letting me go to public school back in collège, and I'm fairly certain that she was the one who talked my father into paying for this round of university." Adrien grinned before wincing and adding "Of course, that might be gone now. I don't know. Hopefully not, but I wouldn't be terribly surprised."

They fell silent as a cab rounded the corner and sped up the block towards them. It screeched to a stop in front of them, and Gabriel Agreste unfolded himself from the backseat with a scowl. They could see Nathalie passing some cash forward to the cabbie before she got out as well and rounded the car to pull their bags from the trunk. She crossed the street as the cab zipped off.

As soon as Gabriel laid eyes on Marinette, his scowl deepened. Marinette couldn't help but shrink back a bit, edging a little behind Adrien. It was starting to look like her presence would just make things worse, not better. Perhaps she should have anticipated that. He probably blamed her for giving Adrien the idea of a fake wedding, even though it had been entirely Adrien's idea and Marinette had (very briefly) tried to dissuade him.

"Adrien," Gabriel greeted his son stiffly. "I take it you've settled into London well?"

"I have," Adrien said, squeezing Marinette's hand. "It was really helpful to have someone else from Paris already here to show me the ropes." He smothered a grin. "It's also nice to have one of my old friends nearby. Marinette's shown me around the area and introduced me to loads of people already."

Gabriel blinked, clearly surprised. "And old friend? But you said-"

"That I ran into her yesterday, not that I met her yesterday." Adrien finally let the grin slide onto his face. "I kind of thought that wording wouldn't fool you, especially since Marinette's won a couple of your design contests."

Gabriel blinked several times before turning his attention to Marinette. She tried to straighten up and exude confidence, but it was a little difficult after seeing the string of furious texts Gabriel had sent the previous afternoon.

It really was no wonder that Gabriel Agreste (almost) always got his way. He really was quite intimidating.

"Ah, yes," Gabriel said after a moment of scrutinizing her face. "Now that you mention it, I do recognize you. You went along with Adrien's immature prank?"
"She did try to talk me out of it at first," Adrien said quickly before Marinette could respond. He gave her hand another reassuring squeeze. "Actually, Madam Rosalie jumped on the idea faster than Marinette did."

Gabriel's displeased look only deepened and he shot a scowl at the building behind them. "Naturally. I assumed she was probably involved once I heard it was a prank. She's not exactly mature herself."

"It would have been better if you had told us it was a prank before we paid for plane tickets over here," Nathalie said before either Adrien or Marinette could say anything. "Or at the very least, before we had to reschedule several of today's meetings."

"Sorry, Nathalie," Adrien said, sounding properly abashed. "We just didn't think it would have quite the same effect if I backtracked right away."

"I fail to see why it was necessary in the first place," Gabriel said stiffly, turning his deep from back on his son. "If the press had caught sight of you getting 'married', they would have been all over you. Despite what you seem to think, you are recognized outside of Paris. Any tabloid reporter worth employing would probably recognize you at a glance."

"The ceremony was in a private part of the gardens," Adrien said hastily. "No one saw us, my Facebook profile is private and so is Marinette's, and we both switched our profile photos back to normal photos this afternoon. Only people we've accepted friend requests from can see our pages."

Gabriel knew that. He had had to make a Facebook just to monitor what his son was getting up to. It was really quite irritating.

"Any of your Facebook friends could have leaked the photos," Gabriel insisted. "Any of the models, or the photographer, or your school friends—"

Marinette didn't see the big deal. If the tabloids reported a fake wedding as real, so what? It wasn't as though what the tabloids said would actually affect Adrien that much. Most everyone knew that what the tabloids wrote rarely reflected the truth. Adrien certainly hadn't seemed concerned about it, and he was much more familiar with being reported on by the trashy magazines.

"Madam Rosalie already said that had planned for that," Adrien said. Marinette blinked and glanced over at him, puzzled. That was news to her.

Gabriel raised a thin eyebrow. "Do tell."

"The dress and the tuxedo that Marinette and I wore were Madam Rosalie's designs," Adrien said, spreading his hands. "And the outfits the rest of the 'wedding party' were wearing were her designs as well. She needed to have a photoshoot with them anyway, and the photos she got were good enough for that."

"And the video? It's hardly common to take videos at photoshoots, or to act out an entire wedding for the sake of a fashion ad."

Adrien shrugged. "She wanted more natural photos and I wanted to pull a prank."

Gabriel gave Adrien a look. He didn't look particularly impressed. "You've just thought of everything, haven't you?"

Adrien only shrugged again.
"Gabriel! I didn't know you were visiting." A new voice made them all jump, and they turned to see Madam Rosalie hurrying out of the building. She had an impish grin pulling at the corners of her mouth as she scanned the scene on the sidewalk in front of her. Clearly it wasn't as much of a surprise as she was pretending it was. "I would think you would have a million things to get done this early in the week!"

"I do," Gabriel said, sounding as unamused as ever. "But I rather thought that my son had decided to elope the second he set foot in London. I came over to investigate in person since he couldn't be reached otherwise."

Madam Rosalie didn't seem at all perturbed by Gabriel's tone. "Yes, I've been keeping him busy! Now come on in, I actually wanted to get your opinion on a couple pieces that just came out of the sewing room. There's something off about them and I can't quite put my finger on it." She steered Gabriel forward towards the building, ignoring his stuttered protests. "I need another set of eyes, and my interns are all out at lunch or busy."

Both of them watched as Gabriel vanished into the building, leaving them with Nathalie on the sidewalk. They turned to look at her as one.

"I've booked us plane tickets back for later today," Nathalie said, looking at her tablet instead of the two people standing in front of her. "I guessed last night that this might be a prank, but I didn't tell Mr. Agreste that."

"Uh, why?" Marinette asked, completely and utterly confused. Nathalie clearly had not been happy to have to reschedule meetings on such short notice. "Why not tell him and eliminate the need for a trip?"

Nathalie peered over her glasses at her. "Because I wasn't 100% positive that it was a prank, and Mr. Agreste was too wound up to listen to reason." She glanced away. "And it was funny."

Marinette blinked, taken aback. Adrien only grinned.

Madam Rosalie took up all of Gabriel's time until late afternoon, shortly before he and Nathalie had to head back to Paris. She bounced ideas off of him, gave him a tour of the building, dragged him around again to meet some of the interns, and then brought him to a nearby bakery to try their tarts. Once Gabriel had finished all of that, he didn't have much time to talk to Adrien before he and Nathalie had to go.

"I suppose I can't force you to return to Paris," Gabriel told Adrien as they stood outside the building, waiting for a cab to come pick them up. "And I suppose I perhaps went a little overboard with the list of things you aren't allowed to do. Please just exercise common sense in your actions."

"I can manage that," Adrien said with a grin.

With a nod, Gabriel accepted his son's words and turned to Marinette. She stood up straight, determined not to back down under his gaze. He gave her a once-over before giving her a small nod of approval. Marinette blinked in surprise.
Well, *that* was unexpected.

"Despite your earlier, ah, participation in Adrien's scheme, I believe you have a good head on your shoulders," Gabriel told Marinette, holding out his hand for her to shake. "You seem to be a decent enough influence most of the time, and Madam Rosalie speaks highly of you. I approve of your friendship with my son."

"Thank you, sir," Marinette managed. If she hadn't gotten a very similar response when she was younger, she would have been more than a little puzzled. As it was, she had to wonder what on earth Madam Rosalie had said to Gabriel to make him forgive them for the wedding prank. She had expected to be banned from visiting Adrien, like Gabriel had tried to do with Nino back in collège. Gabriel wouldn't be able to enforce that, of course- he hadn't been able to enforce it even when Adrien lived under his roof- but that never stopped him from trying before.

Gabriel nodded, shook Marinette's hand briskly, and stepped away. With another nod to Adrien, Gabriel stepped away and into the cab that had just pulled up. Nathalie patted Adrien's shoulder before following Gabriel into the cab.

With the roar of the engine, Gabriel Agreste vanished from their lives again.

Adrien let out a long breath and let his shoulders slump in relief.

"That went reasonably well," Marinette said tentatively. "I thought he would be more angry."

"I think Madam Rosalie did a lot of damage control," Adrien admitted, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and dropping his head on top of hers. Marinette could feel the relief radiating from him. "I honestly hadn't thought about what might have happened if some reporters came upon our Facebook pages. Madam Rosalie said that the best way to keep reporters from using the photos to try to sell a story was to release the photos ourselves. That way we have more control over it." He grinned. "And since it was a photoshoot, she could get away with calling in the makeup and hair people."

"Do the other interns know that it was a photoshoot? What about the cleric?" Marinette didn't really mind not being told that their "wedding" photos would be used for ads, since Madam Rosalie had helped them with their prank so much and Marinette was, after all, on Madam Rosalie's payroll. The others, though...

"They knew," Adrien assured her as they headed down the block, back towards their apartment building. "Apparently that cleric is Madam Rosalie's go-to person when she does wedding dress photo shoots, and everyone else was notified when Madam Rosalie initially called them up."

"Oh, that's good." Marinette paused at the street corner to let a car pass before she darted across the street. Adrien followed her. "Would have been nice to know beforehand, but I probably wouldn't have acted as naturally if I knew the photos would be released to the world."

"That's probably why she didn't tell us." Adrien pulled out the keys to his apartment as they approached their building. He glanced back at Marinette. "Are you okay with it?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course!" Marinette mostly wanted to know what Chloe's reaction would be to the "wedding" photos if she ever saw them. Of course, it was fully possible that the other girl was one of Adrien's Facebook friends and therefore had already seen everything.

She still wished she could have been a fly on the wall whenever Chloe first saw the photos, since it probably would include a whole lot of screaming. Last Marinette checked, Chloe was still under
the impression that Adrien was interested in her and they would be getting together any time now. She would have been furious at the idea that "her" Adrien had been stolen away by her collège and lycée nemesis and the tantrum probably would have been a sight to see.

"Are you cooking dinner tonight?" Adrien asked as he unlocked the building door. He opened it and waved Marinette in in front of him. "Because I can take over, if you want to start baking the cake for tomorrow. Is everyone still coming?"

"That would be nice." Marinette flashed a smile at Adrien. "Then it can cool and I can frost it later tonight so we don't have to rush tomorrow. And yeah, everyone is still coming. Lynsey might be a little late, though. She said she had something that she needed to do before coming over."

They split up as they reached their respective apartments. As much fun as it was to work in the same kitchen, they would just end up bumping elbows endlessly if they tried to cook dinner and a cake at the same time. Marinette would just have to get her cake ready and in the oven, and then she would set a timer on her phone before coming over to join Adrien while it baked.

Adrien checked his phone partway through cooking and grinned at the messages he was getting. He was still getting a ton of furious texts from his friends back home- Nino and Alya in particular were still riled up about the prank, though Nino had relaxed some and now was a little more concerned about Gabriel Agreste's visit. Adrien let Nino know that the visit had gone about well as it could have before he went back to preparing dinner. Five minutes later, the dish was in the oven and Marinette was slipping through his door.

"Cakes are in the oven," Marinette reported. "I need to go back in half an hour to check on them."

Adrien perked up. "More than one cake?"

"There's a lot of us, and I wanted to make sure we would have enough." Marinette grinned at Adrien. "And I wanted to make sure we would have leftovers."

Adrien fistpumped and practically danced around the room. Even though they had had cake at the wedding and would be having it again at their little thank-you-for-helping-with-the-prank party tomorrow, more cake was always great. Especially when that cake was made by a Dupain-Cheng.

Marinette had to dash out only minutes after they sat down to eat to check on her cakes. She was back three minutes later.

"I have to get them out of the pan in ten minutes," Marinette managed as she flopped back into her chair and picked her fork back up. "And then I have to make frosting later, and I was planning on doing some piping as well..."

"I'm sure the others won't care if the cakes aren't fancy, Marinette," Adrien said when he noticed how frazzled Marinette looked. "You aren't baking for an actual wedding."

"I know, I'm just used to making things taste and look good." Marinette took a bite and kept talking. "And it really won't take too long to make the buttercream. I can just make a white base and color the stuff for piping. The piping itself can take a while, but it's relaxing."

Relaxing wasn't the word Adrien would use for it- he remembered a particularly spectacular fail when Tom Dupain let him try to pipe designs on a cookie- but perhaps it just came easier to naturally artistic people like Marinette.

"Maybe we should have brought dinner over to your place," Adrien said when Marinette jumped up again to free the cakes from their pans.
"I'll be right back!" Marinette called over her shoulder. "This won't take long!"

The door closed with a *click* behind her and Plagg immediately popped out from where he had been hiding in the kitchen.

"Ooh, a romantic dinner with your wife?" Plagg teased, swirling around Adrien. The kwami had been highly amused by the whole prank and he hadn't stopped calling Marinette Adrien's wife ever since. "How domestic!"

"It's not like that," Adrien said in annoyance. "You know that. Marinette's one of my oldest friends, so of course I would ask her to be the bride for my prank. We've been over this."

"But that was a very hot kiss you gave her," Plagg taunted. The kiss had been Plagg's favorite topic of conversation; he had even downloaded the photos of the kiss and printed it, hiding the photos around the apartment for Adrien to find at random times.

(He just had to hope that Marinette didn't find any while she was visiting; he wasn't sure how to explain it if she found a close-up of him kissing her behind the couch cushions.)

"We had to make it look convincing."

"Uh-huh." Plagg sounded more than a little smug. "Most weddings have a very brief lip-locking, you know, and no dipping and no tongue."

"There wasn't tongue." He had briefly considered it (not that he would tell Plagg that), but he had already surprised Marinette with the dip. He didn't want to make her stiffen because he pressed it too much. "And we were trying to get my father to think that we were so absolutely swept away by each other after a day that we had to get married. Dipping Marinette to kiss her was the most romantic thing I could think of."

"Uh-huh." Plagg looked like he might want to say more, but the doorknob turned and the door opened. He zipped back to the kitchen in a black blur just before Marinette stepped in.

Adrien was going to spend *all* of his time with Marinette if he could be free from Plagg's teasing for even a little longer. Of course, that might just make the teasing worse once Marinette left, but Adrien was willing to risk that. Plagg was bound to get bored of it after a while.

*Right?*

"Cakes came out fine and they're cooling," Marinette reported as she slid into her chair again. "I might have to stick some stuff in your fridge, though. Buttercream is better refrigerated, and I just don't have the space for the cakes in my fridge with all the stuff I have in there right now."

"Maybe you can finish your dinner first," Adrien said teasingly. "I'm finished over here, and you aren't yet. I feel like I'm just staring at you as you eat."

"Eat more," Marinette suggested between bites.

Eventually Marinette finished, and they worked together to clean up their dinner before they headed over to Marinette's apartment. Adrien was strictly banned from sampling the cake ("You'll get to try it tomorrow, be patient!") or the frosting ("Okay, fine, but only after I've finished frosting everything, so get your fingers away from the bowl!"), so he busied himself with shuffling food from Marinette's fridge to his own so Marinette would be able to fit her cakes in her fridge.

"I think that's good," Marinette said after a couple minutes. She was finishing with the base coat of
frosting, and it looked amazingly smooth instead of spackled on like it always turned out when Adrien and Nino made cakes. She was already mixing food coloring into the white frosting. "I can just stack things in there up to free up a little more room."

"Or I can do that," Adrien said from where his head was stuck in the fridge. "You just focus on the cake."

It took another half hour before Marinette finished. She covered the cakes loosely and placed them in the fridge before collapsing on the couch next to Adrien.

"Long day," Adrien sighed, wrapping his arms over the back of the couch. "I'm glad Nathalie booked their plane tickets back for today. She's an absolute lifesaver; I don't think I could handle dealing with my father for an entire day and having to worry if he was going to change his mind and take me back to Paris any second."

"I didn't realize she was so cool," Marinette said, mirroring his position. Her eyes were closed and her hair fanned out behind her head. "She figured out the prank and didn't tell your dad, that's hilarious."

"She gets tired of his crazy overreactions as well," Adrien said with a chuckle. "And she likes looking out for my best interests. My father can afford a few last-minute plane flights, so it was only the meetings that my father would have to reschedule."

"That's kind of a big thing," Marinette pointed out. Still, she didn't sound particularly concerned about it. "But I'm sure if it was a huge deal, Nathalie would have told him."

"My father really doesn't have to be at as many meetings as he thinks," Adrien said with a grin. "I'm fairly certain that Nathalie just sent interns to a couple meetings to take notes for my father to read once he gets back."

"She's efficient."

"Yeah." They fell silent for a bit, and then Adrien spoke again. "Have you responded to Alya and Nino yet? I'm not really sure how to respond to a lot of what they sent."

Marinette snorted. "I just ignored what they said during the freak-out and went back to texting them like normal. I couldn't even figure out what they were trying to say during most of them."

"Ahh. Good idea." Adrien pulled off his phone and shot off a few texts. "Oh, by the way," Adrien added a bit absently, glancing over at Marinette. "What did Alya mean when she texted me and said that she hadn't tried to set us up for years just for us to not invite her to the wedding? When was she trying to set us up? I don't remember that at all."

Marinette paled.

Chapter End Notes

And next....the slow burn finally begins (sort of) and a couple superheroes go out for a spin.
Chapter Notes

So after two chapters in a row where I left on what some considered to be a cliffhanger with Alya's text.....I did a time jump. Whoops.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marinette let herself smile as she carefully pieced together panels for a dress at the end of a long day of work. While it was starting to get late, she was almost done with the base of the dress and it was already shaping up to be just as pretty as she had imagined it. She almost wanted to just forget the time and keep working until the piece was done, but she couldn't. Adrien would be expecting her over at his apartment soon.

Marinette couldn't stop her grin from growing as she thought about her friend. She had managed to avoid any awkward conversations with Adrien ever since she dodged his question about Alya's text (she was still grumpy with her best friend about that, but at least Alya hadn't said anything about "at least she finally confessed" or something like that; Marinette wasn't sure how she could have recovered from that. Instead, she had managed to laugh off his questioning by saying that well, of course Alya had wanted them to get together, because then they could go on double dates and Alya had probably thought that it would be fun. Adrien, the oblivious dork, had taken her at her word). They had been cooking together every night since; it was faster than cooking separately, they didn't have to worry about things spoiling as much as they would have to if they ate alone, and they were having a lot of fun hanging out together.

They might have gotten close during lycée, but they were growing even closer now.

Adrien had started his classes earlier in the week and from what Marinette could understand, he absolutely loved them. They were far more interesting than his business courses had been, at least so far, and his professors were great. The best part, Adrien had told Marinette, was that physicists didn't really seem to care a whole lot about fashion, so none of them had any clue who he or his father were. They weren't about to treat him with kid gloves just because his father was a giant in business.

Also, the physics students had no idea who he was. For possibly the first time in history, Adrien had the chance to make friends without his father's influence hanging over his head.

"The business students all figured it out pretty fast," Adrien had told Marinette over dinner one night. "And they thought if they befriended me, they would be able to get an internship with Gabriel's business department pretty easily. It got old really fast."

Marinette could imagine. It was probably for the best that Adrien wasn't particularly interested in fashion and design because he wouldn't have had an easy time finding real friends there and he would never be able to break free of his father's shadow.

"Are you really still here, Marinette?" Madam Rosalie popped her head around the door. "That can wait until tomorrow, it's already getting dark outside."

"I'm just finishing this up. I didn't want to lose my place." Marinette held up the piece she was
"working on. "I'll only be ten more minutes, tops."

"All right. Good night!" Madam Rosalie called, vanishing back around the door. Marinette resumed her sewing as her boss's heels clicked away down the hall.

"You really shouldn't stay too long," Tikki said, flying out from hiding and perching on Marinette's shoulder. "I know you let Adrien know you were running late, but he can't wait forever."

"Has he sent any more texts?"

Tikki zipped down to Marinette's bag and pulled out her phone, unlocking it. "Just a confirmation that he got your text."

"Can you let him know that I'll be done in ten- no, nine, maybe eight- minutes?" Marinette finished one seam and moved to the next. "I'd hurry, but this can't be rushed. Photoshoot pieces have to be perfect."

"One second- done! Text sent!" Tikki tapped Send and put the phone down. "That's a really pretty design, Marinette! Is it one of yours?"

"Mmm. Partly." Marinette bit her lip as she carefully worked the seam. "The top part of the dress is Madam Rosalie's design, the bottom is mine. She was having trouble figuring out what would work best with the top design and had all of the interns take a shot at it, and mine won. I wanted to do all of the sewing myself so I can get all of the details just how I envisioned them."

"It looks good!" Tikki cheered. A buzz caught her interest, and she held up Marinette's phone. "Adrien said okay, he's started making dinner so just go straight to his flat, it should be ready to eat as soon as you get back."

"Adrien is a lifesaver." Marinette loved not having to cook every night, loved not eating the same leftovers for a week straight, loved having the new recipes Adrien brought with him…. and, of course, loved having the company. She didn't doubt that later on they would have problems with both of them being busy at the same time, but for now they were doing a pretty good job of trading off cooking nights when they were busy.

"He also said that he has a late meeting with a professor tomorrow, so if you can cook then that would be good," Tikki reported.

"It'll be my turn anyway," Marinette said. She snipped a couple threads and turned the dress again to attach the next panel. "And I didn't really have to start the skirt part tonight, I just wanted to get it done. I'll find a better stopping point tomorrow."

It actually only took Marinette seven more minutes to finish all she needed to get done for the night- the zipper could wait, after all- and then she was jogging down the stairs towards the exit. If her apartment were any further away, she would transform into Ladybug to cover the distance faster. As it stood, it would probably take just as long to find a safe place to transform and detransform as it would take for her to just powerwalk the short distance.

"Nice timing," Adrien called from his kitchen when Marinette burst in his door, panting and clutching the cramp in her side from sprinting up the stairs. "I just took everything out from the oven."

"I'll leave earlier tomorrow," Marinette promised, setting her bag down by Adrien's couch and heading over to help set the table. "Sorry about the delay, I just wanted to get one last thing done and it wasn't a thing I could just set down and pick up tomorrow."
"That's fine." There was a clatter from the kitchen. "Do you often work that late? You haven't since I got here."

Marinette finished straightening the napkins and turned to watch Adrien pull out the plates as she thought about the question. "I don't think so? Maybe once. I don't like working so long, it burns me out and then I don't do as well the next day. I think it'll be somewhat unavoidable once we get close to Fashion Week, though."

"Hopefully midterms won't line up with Fashion Week," Adrien said as they served up the baked macaroni and cheese. "We'd both be busy all the time and end up having frozen pizza for a week."

Marinette made a face at that. She really wasn't particularly fond of that idea. Leftovers was one thing; having the same thing day after day sounded absolutely awful. "One of the older interns suggested making stuff in advance and freezing it so we don't end up doing that. I have a couple things stashed away in the freezer already that we could pull out and reheat as needed."

Adrien grinned as they headed to the table. "Like a squirrel. And really, already? Planning that far in advance?"

"It was mostly because I made enough food that I couldn't eat it before it spoiled," Marinette admitted. "So there's, like, half a lasagna and some soup and a couple other odds and ends."

"I have an ice tray," Adrien offered helpfully, thinking of his barren freezer. "And maybe some frozen corn."

Marinette pressed her lips together as she tried not to laugh. "Tasty."

Laughing, Adrien swatted at her. "Oh, shush. You know what I meant."

"Do I?"

Their dinners together continued as Adrien's semester went on and the weather slowly started to get chillier. There were a couple nights when they couldn't get together- Marinette had to work late, or Adrien was invited over by a classmate or a friend of his father's- and there were a few nights when they invited other people to join them, but for the most part it was just Adrien and Marinette.

And that was the way they liked it.

Conversation sometimes hit a lull when Adrien had spent the entire day studying and Marinette had done nothing other than hem things or do paperwork for Madam Rosalie, but then neither of them had a problem with turning on the TV and bonding over commentary on whatever show was showing on TV. Cooking shows seemed to be a favorite of theirs, especially cooking contests. They got way too invested in it, but that just made it more fun.

"Do you want to watch a movie later?" Adrien asked Marinette over the sound of their favorite cooking show running in the background as he collected the plates after they finished eating. "I think there's a pretty good one showing on TV a little later."
Marinette bit her lip. She did, but she also had been planning on going out for a run as Ladybug and she would be too tired after the movie ended to go out. Granted, she could always wait for another day, but she really just wanted to transform and burn off some energy. It had been way too long since she last flew over the rooftops.

In fact, she hadn't gone out since Adrien arrived. They had always spent their evenings together, even if Adrien was sitting at the table studying and she was curled up on the sofa drawing or reading. It was nice to hang out with another person in the evenings, even if it meant that she couldn't talk to Tikki as much.

"I think I might pass," Marinette said at last, raising her voice a little so Adrien could hear her over the sound of the TV and the running water in the kitchen. "I've been having a little trouble sleeping and was hoping to catch up on it tonight."

"Okay." Adrien rinsed the plates off before sticking them in the dishwasher. "That sounds good, actually. I might do the same." He winced. "I had an eight a.m. class today and I forgot how much I hated those."

"Owth."

Marinette remembered those classes. It seemed that despite her best intentions, she had gotten at least one day a week with the early classes, thanks to either scheduling conflicts, filled sections, or classes that were only offered at the early hour. Needless to say, it was very frustrating. She liked sleeping in too much to really be able to enjoy those particular classes.

"D'you want to take off now? I can deal with the rest of the dishes," Adrien offered. "There's really not that many."

"No, I can help!" Marinette assured him hastily, rising from the table to bring the dishes of leftovers into the kitchen. "Besides, I want to know to see if the asshole chef gets eliminated."

Adrien sniggered as he glanced over at the TV, where the chef in question was currently frantically stirring some sort of stir-fry on-screen. It looked like it might be a little charred. "You really have it out for him, huh?"

"He's got a big head. It just rubbed me the wrong way."

Adrien glanced at the screen again as Marinette transferred the leftovers into smaller containers. "He's really sweating. Everyone else seems like they're doing all right, though."

"That's good." They fell silent for a few minutes as Marinette stashed the leftovers in the fridge, rearranging other things so they would fit, and Adrien started washing the things that couldn't go in the dishwasher. The TV prattled on in the background as the timer counted down and the chiefs rushed to finish their dishes. As Marinette and Adrien finished putting the last things away, Marinette's least favorite chef was really sweating. It was looking more and more likely that he might be the one to get eliminated.

"Do you want me to record the rest of the episode for tomorrow?" Adrien asked as he closed the last cupboard. "Or do you want to stay until it finishes?"

Waiting until the episode finished could take another half an hour with commercials. Marinette didn't care about it that much. "Record it, I think. I'll probably enjoy it more if I'm not about to fall asleep. Besides, we can just skip through the commercials if it's recorded."

"Sounds good. Good night, Marinette."

"Good night, Adrien."
Marinette flashed one last smile at Adrien as she stepped out of his apartment for the night. As soon as the door closed, though, the facade of weariness promptly vanished. She unlocked her apartment's door as fast as she could before ducking inside, relocking the door, and making a beeline for her balcony. Tikki popped out of her pocket, just as eager to transform as Marinette herself was.

"Tikki, transform me!" Marinette cried as she darted across the room. The pink light washed over her just before she reached the door, and Ladybug darted out of the door and into the waiting city.

It wasn't like running around in Paris. Even after a couple months, the rooftops of London were still unfamiliar and strange. Unlike in Paris where she was often spotted and would take breaks to come down from the roofs to greet people, she tried to stay out of well-lit areas; while it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world for people to see Ladybug in London, it might put her identity in jeopardy. People would be scouring the city, trying to find people who had been in Paris during the time that Ladybug and Chat Noir were active in an effort to uncover Ladybug's identity. Keeping that in mind, Marinette had asked Tikki to alter her outfit, making it darker and better able to blend into the night. Since it was already fairly dark- she had changed her outfit's design to have black knee-high "boots" and black up her arms and over her shoulders back before she and her partner defeated Hawkmoth- it was mostly just a matter of darkening her trademark fire-engine red suit to a deeper shade of red and extending the black areas just a bit. Even with the changes, she kept up on the rooftops and out of busy areas to minimize the possibility of her being spotted.

Since Marinette hadn't seen any headlines about Ladybug in London either in newspapers or on the Ladyblog, she was pretty certain that she had been successful. It definitely helped that the Londoners weren't looking for her. If they spotted anything on the rooftops out of the corners of their eyes, they were more likely to ignore it and write it off as a bird. And further helping was the fact that Londoners generally didn't go around staring up at rooftops.

Ladybug flew through the air, twisting into a flip and resisting the urge to let out a joyous shout. She loved the feeling of flying, the knowledge that she could let herself drop and she would be able to catch herself without a problem. It was more fun when she could let herself whoop or shout during a particularly intense flip, but that would blow her cover just as much as a bright red suit would.

It really just wasn't the same. Besides, she was definitely missing having her partner by her side. Running around alone was just so much less fun.

Ladybug had only been out for ten minutes when she caught sight of a dark shape running over the rooftops. She immediately landed lightly on a roof, hiding behind a chimney and peeking out to get a look at whatever had joined her in running above the city. The shape apparently hadn't seen her, as they kept running over the rooftops without pausing. Ladybug's mind raced- surely there couldn't be an akuma in London, they had defeated Hawkmoth and the butterfly Miraculous was back in Master Fu's hands- and she was about to worry that the Miraculous had been stolen again when the figure shot up into the air on a long, sticklike thing before helicoptering his way back down to the rooftops in a very familiar manner.

*Chat Noir!*

Ladybug didn't hesitate to take off after her partner, racing over the rooftops as she followed him. He had gotten a head start when she froze in surprise, but she had an advantage because she was far more familiar with this skyline than her partner was. She knew how fast she could run without tripping, where she had to slow down and where the shortcuts were. If she hadn't run over these rooftops dozens of times before, she wouldn't have stood a chance against Chat Noir's night vision.
As focused as Chat Noir was on figuring out his path, he didn't even hear Ladybug racing up behind him. She bowled into him without slowing down at all, sending both of them flying down into the empty street below. Chat Noir yelped and struggled as they fell, and only just managed to twist so they landed on their feet.

"What on earth-" Chat Noir started, whipping around with his baton raised defensively. He froze when he caught sight of Ladybug standing there with a huge grin on her face. "Bugaboo?"

"I didn't know you were coming to London!" It would be harder for them to remain unnoticed if both of them were in London now, especially since they liked calling back and forth as they flew over the city. Still, it would be much more fun going out if Chat Noir was going to be out and about as well. She couldn't race herself across the city, after all.

"Yeah, I didn't know for sure until after you left." Chat Noir put away his baton and stepped forward to envelop Ladybug in a hug. "It's good to see you again! I really missed you."

Ladybug grinned and hugged her partner back. She had missed her kitten a lot as well. He was one of her best friends, after all, even if they didn't know each other's real names. Even after only a week in London, Ladybug had considered trying to track down Chat Noir next time she was back in Paris to see if her partner would be interested in getting a secondary phone so that they could stay in contact while they were apart. Maybe they could set it up now, while Chat Noir was in London. Or maybe- better yet- Chat Noir would be in the area for a while and the phones wouldn't even be necessary.

"Are you in London for a while?" Ladybug asked, voice muffled by Chat Noir's chest. She couldn't let herself get her hopes up- her partner might just be visiting a friend in the city, after all, or maybe he was on vacation. The chances that he would actually be in London for the same amount of time that she was going to be there were slim. If he was in town for a vacation, they would probably only have a week together at most. If he had gotten a job in London, he would probably remain even after she returned to Paris.

*That* would actually be crushing. She didn't want to permanently be apart.

"I am! I'll hopefully be here for a couple years," Chat Noir said as they loosened their grip on each other and stepped back. "And you? Are you going to be in London for a while? I wasn't expecting to see you here!"

"I'm here for a year," Ladybug told him. She was considering the possibility of extending her internship since she was getting a lot of good experience (and because hanging out with Adrien was fun and she didn't want to abandon him in London, even if he could probably take care of himself), but she wouldn't be able to ask about doing that until much later in the year. Besides, things could change between now and then. Maybe something else would come up that would change her mind.

Chat Noir's ears drooped. "I'll be here for three. Are you going back to Paris after this year?"

"Probably." That was what she had originally been planning, because she had absolutely no intention of trying to get a fashion job overseas (she wanted to be able to see her friends and her parents on a somewhat regular basis, after all) and while she liked London well enough, she liked Paris more. There were plenty of labels based in and around Paris that Marinette liked and would gladly apply to. There was no point in getting Chat Noir's hopes up by mentioning the possibility of her staying longer now.

Her partner sighed. "Bugger. At least you're here now, though," he added, perking up. "That's more than I was expecting. I was planning on flying back to Paris once you showed up there again just so
I could let you know that I was out of the country. I couldn't exactly leave a note somewhere hoping you would find it, since it's more likely that it would blow away or something."

"It might get made into a pigeon's nest," Ladybug suggested. "Or eaten by a rat."

Chat Noir grinned, and the familiar impish expression made Ladybug . "Eaten, my Lady? I imagine such terrible news would taste pawsitively awful."

Ladybug just groaned.

Adrien could not believe that Ladybug was in London. What were the chances of both of them ending up in the same city, and in the same part of the same city to boot? It was absolutely fantastic to be able to see her again, even though they would have to be extra careful if they wanted to avoid being spotted. Now he had two friends he knew in London, which was far more than he had ever expected.

It was great.

"I really wasn't expecting that," Adrien told an uninterested Plagg as he washed up for bed. Adrien had jumped on the opportunity to transform and go out when Marinette left early to go to bed. At best, he figured, he would get in a good run and maybe get to do a little stargazing. At worst, he would dry out his skin running around in the cool night air.

Instead, he had been knocked off a roof by a very enthusiastic Ladybug and they had spent an hour running around and catching up with each other before going their separate ways for the night.

Adrien had missed his partner ever since she left Paris. She had told him that it would be a couple months, at the very least, probably at least a year. He hadn't asked for details- even after all of these years and Hawkmoth's defeat, they kept their civilian lives private- but clearly whatever it was that was taking her away from Paris had brought her right to London.

"Are you going to get all sappy over her again?" Plagg asked, annoyance clear in his voice. The kwami had been more than a little exasperated by Adrien's moping in the days and weeks after Ladybug's departure. Adrien thought he had been perfectly justified in his misery; after all, being Chat Noir just wasn't the same when he was prowling the rooftops by himself instead of alongside his Lady. It was lonely going out at night and not running into her, especially since he couldn't keep in contact with her any other way. But now-

Now she was here, in London with him, at least for a year. They wouldn't be able to meet up every night- Adrien wouldn't be able to transform and go out every night without blowing off Marinette, and he was not going to do that, and no doubt Ladybug would have nights when she was busy as well and unable to go out- but at least there was the possibility of them running into each other. It was more than he had expected.

"I wasn't sappy," Adrien said at last, resisting the urge to spin in happy circles around the room. His downstairs neighbor was probably asleep by now, and they would hardly appreciate him clomping around and waking them up. "And we're friends, why shouldn't I be glad to see her again? We haven't had the chance to hang out for forever!"
Plagg rolled his eyes.

"I'm glad she's here. I haven't been able to see her for months." Their accidental meet-ups had gotten fewer and farther between after they both entered university, though they had made some effort to see each other on a semi-regular basis. Both superheroes had thankfully been in Paris that first time around, but Ladybug had an internship of some sort on top of her studies and he had been both a model and a student. Their schedules were packed, and they had been lucky to be able to meet up once a week when they were out and about.

(Or course, not all of their run-ins were due to luck- Adrien always snuck out whenever he saw news on the Ladyblog that Ladybug had been spotted out and about, and it only took him a month to realize that there was a pattern to her outings. Granted, that pattern changed every time the semester switched, but it was still a pattern that he could- and did- take advantage of.)

"I wonder if we could try to set up a schedule," Adrien wondered out loud. He hadn't needed to in Paris- while he lived in his father's home, Gabriel Agreste never checked up on his son after dinner. He was free to take off into the night, so long as he went to bed at a reasonable time so he could be up and alert at a time his father approved of. Here, though, he normally hung out with Marinette until one of them decided to go to bed. They didn't necessarily talk much, but having the company was nice. Adrien liked the little snippets of conversation that occasionally popped up as they worked- or, rather, as he studied and as Marinette read or doodled. It would be rude to Marinette if he started shooing her out of his apartment or dining and dashing when they ate at her place just so he could maybe run into Ladybug. Besides, he liked hanging out with Marinette. She was one of his oldest friends as well, and she also would only be in London for a year unless she got an extension with Madam Rosalie's company. "Maybe if I beg off to go to bed early every night I have an 8 o'clock class..."

Plagg snorted. "And then you'll be miserable and sleepwalking into everything the next day and Marinette will wonder why."

"I don't stay out that late." Adrien glanced at the clock as he turned off the lights and slid into bed. "It's only just now one, and we stayed out longer than we normally do catching up." As much as they could catch up, that was. Despite Hawkmoth's defeat, they had yet to share their identities with each other. Adrien really had to bring up the subject sometime soon and see if Ladybug's kwami had changed her stance on sharing their identities at all. It was really frustrating trying to edit himself all of the time, steering away from subjects that might give away who he was behind the mask. If they could share identities, Adrien would. "And I can drink tea or coffee or something to wake myself up. It'll be fine."

Plagg didn't look convinced.

Adrien was positively dragging the next morning. He hadn't been able to fall asleep right away after getting into bed since he was so distracted with thinking about what Ladybug might be doing in London and how he might tackle asking her about the secret identity thing again, so he was running on far less sleep than he had planned. It had probably been close to two o'clock before he actually fell asleep.
"I toooooold you so," Plagg sing-songed from his jacket collar as Adrien stumbled blearily into class, fingers clutching a mug of green tea laced with sugar and honey. It wasn't nearly strong enough to wake him up, but Adrien had discovered when he got up that his supply of caffeinated drinks was nearly nonexistent. Apparently he had just kept forgetting to refill things when he went grocery shopping, so he was out of coffee and had been running too late to stop at a coffee shop on his way to class. "You talked to your lovebug for too long. Now you're gonna be sleepwalking for the whole day."

"I would be fine if I had actually been able to fall asleep," Adrien muttered back out of the corner of his mouth. Talking to Plagg before class was always risky- people could see him and ask him what he was doing. It was easier in London compared to back in Paris, where people tended to pay more attention to him, but even now it was getting harder since he was becoming friends with a number of his classmates. They wouldn't hesitate to ask him about his apparent talking to thin air while entering class.

Plagg sniggered and fell silent.

"Hey, dude, how's it going?" Adrien's classmate Paul asked as Adrien slid into his seat. "You look like the walking dead."

"I feel like it, too." There was no point in lying. Paul wasn't going to ask; he knew full well that Adrien wasn't a morning person. Paul, the weirdo, was. Somehow he bounced out of bed fully awake at some ridiculous hour in the morning. Adrien suspected that Paul probably was one of those people that ran or swam laps in the mornings before classes, just so they could be super-productive and (inadvertently) rub it in people's faces.

Admittedly, Adrien used to be like that too. He went to bed early and got up early, often before his alarm went off. Years of nighttime patrols and late-night akuma attacks had thrown off his carefully constructed schedule, and then proper Teenagerhood hit and Adrien was trying his best not to sleep through his alarms. He had at one point tried to recover his earlier sleeping habits, after Hawkmoth had been taken care of, but it seemed that Adrien was doomed to not be a morning person.

Adrien didn't particularly care, but his father did. When he was living at home, every day came with a wake-up call at six in the morning, even if Adrien didn't have anything to do that day or if there had been a late-night photoshoot the night before. One of the many things he loved about London was that he could sleep in.

It was fantastic. Eight o'clock classes were less fantastic.

Paul sighed and shook his head. "I've been up for hours, dude. You missed out on a gorgeous sunrise."

"Ugh."

"All these purples and pinks and blues-" Once they had gotten to know each other better and the other boy found out how much Adrien hated eight o'clock classes, Paul had decided to go out of his way to annoy Adrien with his cheeriness when Adrien was still wishing he were in bed. It was much like having another Plagg around him all the time, except a Plagg that was annoying him with incessant cheeriness instead of being a complete and total grump. Paul also didn't constantly scarf Camembert, which was a relief. That was strictly a Plagg thing. "You should have seen it! And I got to enjoy it with my fresh chocolate croissant and a smoothie..."

"Yeah, yeah," Adrien started, rolling his eyes and glancing out the windows. He froze when he
realized that it was overcast outside and had been since the previous night. He turned back to Paul with a suspicious squint. "It's cloudy. You couldn't have seen a sunrise this morning."

Paul grinned.

"And you hate croissants," Adrien continued, giving his friend a look. "You think they're tasteless and dry- which, by the way, you're still wrong about that, they're delicious- so you never eat them. Very funny."

"I thought so." Paul glanced down at his phone, where it was sitting on top of his desk. "But it's supposed to be clear tomorrow morning, if you were interested-"

Adrien made a face, and Paul laughed again.

"All right, settle down," their teacher called as she finally got the overhead projector to turn on. "How is everyone on this lovely morning...no? Okay, fair enough. We're picking up where we left off last time..."

The morning dragged on. Though Adrien found his classes interesting- much better than business, for certain- even his sugar-laced tea wasn't helping him focus much. He was distracted by thoughts of Ladybug. Would they run into each other again soon? Would she be open to sharing identities? He didn't want to push, because if he did Ladybug might take off and avoid him, and then he would never see her again, because she wouldn't go out to patrol until she had left London and then maybe she would move somewhere else, like Italy-

"Dude, are you seriously spacing out right now?"

Adrien blinked and the room swam properly back into view. He sat in front of his computer, stimulated experiment complete, and-

He swore. He had spaced out mid-run and had completely forgotten to time the stupid thing. He would have to set up and run the entire thing again, which meant that he would probably have to stay after class to finish, which meant he would miss his bus back to his apartment and would have to wait another half-hour to get his lunch.

*Darn it.*

Paul raised an eyebrow at Adrien's outburst, but thankfully didn't comment. It probably didn't hurt that Paul spoke no French, so for all he knew Adrien could have been saying "well gee willy wonkers, that's inconvenient".

(spoiler: that wasn't what he said.)

"I need a nap," Adrien decided, switching back to English. "Or coffee. I'm not normally this distracted."

"No kidding. Is everything all right?"

Adrien nodded, even as his attention got divided between Paul and the digital experiment he was resetting. Everything was fine- better than fine, actually, because Ladybug- and the only problem was that he was overthinking things.

"If you say so."

"I just stayed up too late, that's all." With everything set up properly again, Adrien got his
stimulated experiment running again, this time with the timer going as well. He would definitely have to keep a close eye on it this run; after all, he didn't have any extra time to spare. Any mistakes, and it would only add on to the time he would have to stay after class to fully complete his assignment. "And then I had trouble falling asleep."

Paul snickered and shook his head, turning back to his own computer. "Night owl. Strange."

"Early bird. Stranger," Adrien shot back. It was a familiar chorus for them by this point in the semester.

"Whatever, dude." Paul glanced at his computer again and briefly turned his attention back to the data sheet they were meant to be filling out. After scribbling down a number and re-setting the experiment for another run, he turned his attention back to Adrien. "Have you started studying for midterms?"

Adrien frowned. "Er, not really?" Midterms were a couple weeks out still, and Adrien was still mainly focused on getting his assignments and readings for his classes completed. Thinking about it now, though, he probably should start reviewing stuff from the start of the semester at least somewhat soon, and he and Marinette definitely needed to start really focusing on stocking up the freezer in case they both got too busy to actually cook. He also really needed to ask her if she knew when Madam Rosalie would be having her runway shows, just so they could start planning.

"I'm going to start this weekend," Paul said. He paused to check on the progress of his experiment before turning to look at Adrien again. "Any interest in a study group?"

"That would be nice." He hoped, at least. Adrien had always wanted to be part of a study group back when he was in his business program, but his busy schedule and the lack of classmates he was actually close to kept him from meeting up with anyone to study. Such groups usually varied in productivity, according to his friends. Some went well, with people filling each other in things they missed or were unsure of. Others, according to Alya and Nino, ended with people cracking up as they imitated professors or shared goofy things they had written down in their notes during lectures. They were good for blowing off some steam, his friends had said, but not particularly useful for learning anything. He had attended study groups with his friends in collège and lycée, of course, but Alya and Adrien together were good at keeping those groups on task. It was easier to scold people back into focusing when he knew them really well and they spent most of their time together anyway.

Paul nodded, looking pleased, and then both boys fell silent as they focused on their "experiments". By the time the clock hand had ticked to the end of class, Paul had wrapped up his assignment. Adrien was still working.

"Good luck, dude," Paul said as he packed up his bag and slung it over his shoulder. "I'll text you to set up a time for the study group. It probably won't be right away since we should probably figure out what we each need to focus on first, but it would probably be better to not wait until last minute."

"Sounds good," Adrien said, glancing up from his computer to wave as Paul left. Soon he was the only person left in the lab.

"You just missed the bus," Plagg informed him from his bag. "Hurry up, or the next one'll leave without you, too, and you'll have to walk home in the rain."

"I can't rush the experiment, Plagg. The program doesn't work like that." Adrien checked his timer and filled out yet another entry in his data sheet. He was almost done, so unless he got seriously
distracted he wouldn't have any trouble catching the next bus. Hopefully. "I'm almost done anyway. I'll be packing up in probably five minutes."

"And then you're going to go visit your wife before you finally go back to your apartment and give me more cheese. I know how this goes."

Adrien glanced away from his screen for long enough to flash Plagg an annoyed look. "Marinette is my friend and the bus stop is right next to her building. It would be rude not to drop in and say hi."

Plagg gave him a look, which Adrien ignored. "You're going to see her at dinner."

"I know."

"And all evening."

"I know."

"And you saw her yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that, and the-"

"I know that Plagg, thank you."

Plagg floated over so Adrien could see him out of the corner of his eye. "That's good. I'd thought you'd forgotten, considering that you're going out of your way to see someone you literally see all the time."

"I'm not going out of my way. Madam Rosalie's building is on my way from the bus stop to the apartment building."

"The stairs up to Marinette's cubicle aren't on your way home." Plagg floated closer and Adrien ignored him. It wasn't an easy thing to do, since Plagg would just look like a small black shadow right at the edge of his vision, but Adrien had had plenty of practice ignoring Plagg over the years. "You just want to see your wife like a good husband."

"You do remember that Marinette and I aren't married for real, right?" It was something Adrien found himself saying on an increasingly frequent basis, since Plagg insisted on calling Marinette his wife, just like he had insisted on calling Marinette Adrien's Princess for weeks after the Evillustrator incident. Even though it had been weeks since the fake wedding, Plagg had yet to grow tired of the nickname. "You might as well be. You spend all of your time together acting all domestic-like. Believe me, I would know," Plagg added, flying up to perch on top of the computer. "More than a few of my Chosens have gotten married. I know the signs."

"You know how to be annoying is what you know," Adrien shot back absently as his experiment wrapped up and he hit his timer to stop it. He scribbled down the numbers he needed, closed the program, and logged off of the computer. "You know how to be annoying is what you know," Adrien shot back absently as his experiment wrapped up and he hit his timer to stop it. He scribbled down the numbers he needed, closed the program, and logged off of the computer. "Marinette is my friend and we live right next door to each other, of course we're going to hang out a lot." Adrien glanced back at his computer to make sure it was logging off properly before packing his bag and slinging the strap over his head. Plagg quickly abandoned his perch on the computer to fly into Adrien's bag. "That's all it is. I love Ladybug, remember?"

Plagg made an interesting noise that was somewhere between a snort and a strangled laugh. Adrien decided not to ask.

The walk to the bus station didn't take long, nor did the ride to his stop. After that was a short jaunt
up to say hi to Marinette and remind her to actually eat before he headed back to their building to
eat his own lunch.

"Your life is so boring these days," Plagg complained as Adrien put his dishes in the sink, poured
himself another cup of strong green tea and headed back to the table to spread out his books to
study. "You don't go out and do anything, and then what do I get to do with my time? Waste away
with subpar cheese, that's what!"

"I have to study, Plagg."

"That's all you ever do. That and flirt with your wife."

Adrien decided not to comment.

After a few more minutes of moping and moaning around the room, Plagg found a bright patch of
sun to take a nap in and Adrien dove into his notes. Hours passed as he pored over formulas and
theories, jotting down notes on areas he needed to focus on and questions that he needed to ask the
professors to clarify concepts. He was so absorbed in his work that he jumped into the air when
there was a knock at his door. A second later, he was scrambling to answer it.

"Did you lose track of the time?" Marinette asked in amusement as she stepped into the room and
spotted the papers and notebooks scattered across his table. "I thought you would be wondering
where I was since I forgot to text, but clearly no concern was needed."

"Is it late?" Adrien asked in surprise, pulling out his phone to check the time. Sure enough, it was
late enough that normally by this time, they would have already eaten and would be most of the
way through cleaning up. "Wow. Was work busy?"

"I lost track of time," Marinette admitted. "And then I got on a designing kick for the winter
collection, but I still had to get my work for the upcoming collection finished after I got done with
that."

Adrien laughed. That was so like Marinette to get so distracted that she completely lost track of the
time. "Please tell me you get extra time off when you work overtime."

"It would be nice," Marinette said as they headed back into the middle of the room. "Do you want
me to cook tonight? You look like you're in the middle of something."

Adrien's stomach chose that moment to growl loudly and they both startled. Marinette's lips quirked
upwards in amusement as Adrien laughed again.

"Maybe we need to dip into our leftovers supply," Adrien said after a moment. He wasn't certain
how he hadn't noticed that he was getting hungry before, because it was certainly obvious now.
"I'm sure we'll be able to refill it before we get into crunch time."

"Sounds good." Marinette headed for the kitchen and started rummaging around in the freezer.
"Did you have a good day at university?"

"It started too early," Adrien complained as he moved to clear the table. "I couldn't fall asleep and
then my classes started at stupid o'clock."

Marinette's head popped back out of the freezer so she could give him a puzzled look. "I thought
your eight o'clock was yesterday, not today? Or did I remember wrong?"

"It was yesterday," Adrien admitted sheepishly. Right. He supposedly went to bed early last night.
"But I ended up not being able to settle down, so I watched some stuff on TV, and then I still couldn't fall asleep, and then my class started at nine. I probably could have slept for another hour or two."

"Did you take a nap after you finished?"

That...sounded like a really good idea, actually. "No. I should have, maybe, but Paul was talking about setting up a study group and I wanted to be prepared for that. I hadn't really done a ton of review so far this semester, so I just did a ton of it this afternoon."

"Don't burn yourself out," Marinette advised as she pulled a glass pan out of the cupboard to reheat the leftovers and started preheating the oven. "I've done that before and then ended up not studying closer to the actual exams because I was so tired of spending all my time with my face in my books."

"I'll definitely take breaks," Adrien assured her. "I don't want to burn myself out, not in the first round of tests in my first semester here." His breaks would probably come in the form of going out running over the rooftops at night, but he couldn't exactly tell Marinette that.

"That's good." Marinette spun around again to dig through one of his drawers. She found the ladle she wanted within a few seconds, making Adrien smile. Even though she kept things in her apartment in slightly different place, she had been over enough times to memorize where he kept things. "Do you have projects as well? I know sometimes I had papers or projects instead of tests."

"There's a couple projects, but they're on top of exams." Adrien gave her a rueful grin. "So some of my study breaks will comprise of working on those."

"Ugh." Marinette made a face as she wrestled the leftovers into the pan. "That's no fun. And that doesn't count as a break, I hope you know that."

Adrien shrugged. "It's school. At least this time it's in a subject I like. I've been feeling like I'm understanding everything, so hopefully I'll just be reviewing equations and theorems and, y'know, doing practice problems. Not that bad."

Marinette laughed. "That sounds like torture to me, but to each their own."

Adrien grinned as he stacked his notebooks and papers carefully along the wall. He had run into that reaction several times before, both among his friends and among the other models at Gabriel. "I'd say the same about fashion, but I actually do find the process fascinating. I'm just hopeless at designing and I've never tried sewing."

"Never?"

He just shrugged at her flabbergasted expression. "I've never had reason to try. My dad's known for forever that I'm hopeless at drawing and designing- he tried to teach me, and all I could do was draw stick figures. I don't have any groundbreaking design ideas either."

"It's usually more important that things be pretty rather than groundbreaking. I've been looking through some of the runway show archives from around the world and let me tell you, there are some weird things out there." The expression Marinette made told Adrien all he needed to know about what she thought about those looks. "I'm kind of not surprised because there's, like, such a focus on new and never seen before and whatnot in design school, but sometimes designers lose sight of how to make actually flattering and wearable clothes."

"What's the weirdest thing you've seen?" Adrien asked curiously as he entered the kitchen and
started digging in the fridge for the oranges he was positive he had seen earlier. They had to pretend to make their meal healthy somehow.

Marinette bit her lip as she thought. "Oh, gosh, I don't even know where to begin. There was something that looked like a green potato sack with suspenders at a Fashion Week in the United States. There've been oversized coats with weird seam lines, and strange patterns, and...ugh." She shuddered and Adrien hid his grin. "And then you look at some of the big designers and they basically have repeats of the same dress in different colors or different patterns or, y'know, with different embellishments."

"Not very innovative, then."

Marinette shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. They're going for pretty and understandable instead. A lot of people don't understand the really funky shapes that some designers are making. It's too avant-garde for them, and they don't commission those designers. The fashion world loves innovation, the general population tends to value tradition and classic looks more. It's a matter of balancing the two."

Thinking back to the shows he had seen (and participated in), Adrien couldn't help but agree. His father certainly came up with some fantastic ideas, but he stayed well within the boundaries of wearable.

"So what is Madam Rosalie's style like?" Adrien asked. He found the oranges and pulled them out. "How out of the box is she?"

Marinette bit her lip as she thought. "Kind of in the middle, I think? We play with new design elements, but it's more approachable. We try to kind of meet a certain design style so it's recognizable as ours."

Adrien perked up. While he wasn't super interested in fashion, any distraction from his studying was fantastic and design style wasn't something he hand Marinette had really discussed much before. "Is it hard to try to alter your design aesthetic to match Madam Rosalie's?"

"Not really. I had to submit my portfolio to Madam Rosalie when I applied to the internship. She takes design interns that have similar aesthetics, so that everyone meshes together well design-wise."

"Ah, that makes sense." Adrien should have guessed that, maybe, but he hadn't exactly been involved on that end of his father's business. Still, he had seen the entries in plenty of his father's contests and the winners did tend to have design aesthetics similar to Mr. Agreste's own. That should have been a pretty good clue. His father did occasionally pick a surprise winner for their fresh point of view, but it never veered terribly far away from his typical style.

It was starting to get ridiculously late as they sat down to eat, and by the time they finished and washed everything up there wasn't any time to really do anything together. Marinette bid Adrien goodnight and took off as soon as everything was put away. Adrien briefly entertained the idea of going out as Chat Noir- he definitely wanted to see his lady again- but he finally decided against it. If he went out running, he would quite possibly fall off the roof falling asleep mid-jump, even after all of the tea he had gulped down in an effort to stay awake and get some productive studying done.

Besides, he had to deal with Paul again in his first class first thing in the morning. He needed to get some sleep.
So, re: why the text wasn't a big deal- Marinette's grown up, and she's gotten better at making up excuses (and gotten past the ridiculous stammering). She can take advantage of Adrien still being somewhat clueless and willing to accept what she says at face value.
The next day, Paul was sitting at his desk grinning when Adrien plodded in, coffee from a little shop en route to the bus station (laced with sugar and cream, of course) in hand. Adrien paused, slightly unnerved, before continuing his trek to his favorite desk.

"Why good morning." Paul said before Adrien could ask him why he was grinning like that (seriously, it was creepy). "And how are you on this sunny day?"

"I'm...good?"

"Fantastic, fantastic." Paul grinned some more. "So, I learned something interesting yesterday."

"Oh? Let me guess, it was the principle we learned yesterday during lab? Hate to break it to you, but I was there for that."

"No, no. Not that at all." Paul bent over to dig something out of his bag. "My older sister is getting married, and so like the good brother I am, I was helping her looking through wedding magazines, when I found this." With a flourish, Paul pulled out a magazine where, in full color on a two-page spread, Adrien and Marinette were getting 'married'.

Oh.

Whoops.

"Of course, I was more than a little surprised to find one of my friends in a wedding ad," Paul said smugly as Adrien scrambled to find words. "And with the 'friend' that eats dinner with him every night, no less! So I was wondering..."

"Marinette's my friend from Paris," Adrien said quickly before that line of questioning could go any farther. "She works as a design intern at Rosalie's Boutique, and they were doing a photoshoot for their wedding line. I got roped in."

"They don't have their own models for the photoshoots?"

Adrien shrugged as casually as he could. "I think they wanted to have a more approachable photo. If all they ever showed were tall, skinny models, how are people supposed to know if the dress would look good on them as well?"

"So they had one tall, skinny supermodel and one slightly shorter, also pretty skinny intern star in the photoshoot?" Paul asked dryly, setting the magazine down on his desk. "Yay variety."

Adrien shrugged again, hiding his wince. That was just the way it happened. He and Marinette just so happened to both be on the fairly athletic side.

"My younger sister almost screamed her head off when she realized that I was friends with a supermodel," Paul said, putting the magazine away in his bag before anyone else in the class could see it. "And then she wanted to know if you were available."

Adrien blinked, somewhat taken aback. "...like, dating available?"
Paul made a face. "Exactly. I told her no, that I thought you were dating someone. I know you've never said anything about it," he added when Adrien gave him a puzzled look. "But, like- okay, I know you're a good person and you'd probably be a fairly decent boyfriend, but I also know you're older than me and she's younger than I am."

That meant there was at least a four-year gap. Adrien wasn't particularly interested in dating someone that much younger, especially at this point in his life. Technically, it wasn't a huge difference- his parents had been born nearly seven years apart- but the difference was that they had been in their late twenties/early thirties when they met, not one person already graduated from one university program (and in another) while the other person hadn't yet graduated lycée, or whatever the British called it. People matured a lot in university, Adrien had discovered- it sometimes made having classes with younger peers frustrating- and besides, he didn't date fans.

(He didn't date at all, technically, but he especially didn't date fans.)

"Also, I don't like the idea of her dating anyone," Paul added as he straightened his calculator on his desk. "She's too young."

Adrien's lips twitched in amusement at his tone. He wouldn't have called it before, but Paul was apparently the overprotective brother type. Granted, if his younger sister was the sort who asked her older brother if his even older friend was single, maybe Paul had reasons to not want her to date.

"I noticed you didn't dispute the supermodel thing," Paul added with a grin. "You can't even argue there, can you?"

Adrien let out a groan. He had been so focused on the wedding photos that he had completely missed the fact that Paul had apparently found out that he had been- well, technically still was- a model. "I don't know about the super part. I'm just a regular model. And I'm not really modelling right now." His father wasn't happy about that- he had wanted Adrien to return to Paris to do a couple quick photoshoots for a couple weekends, but Adrien hadn't wanted to take away from his studying time at all. It would just throw him out of his groove and he had no real desire to sit posing under hot lights for hours on end. Regular, non-rushed photoshoots were bad enough- hours of back-to-back fittings and photoshoots crammed together all weekend in an attempt to get everything done would be a nightmare. His father could find a couple other male models to fill in. It wasn't as though models were in short supply in Paris or anything. "And I'm planning on quitting for good once I get this degree."

"Aww, really? But you're so pretty!" Paul grinned when Adrien made a face at him. "I suppose you'll be glad to get out of the spotlight. Do you ever have to deal with tabloids reporting on you?"

"Making up stuff about me, you mean? Occasionally." For the most part he was left alone since he was a model, not an actor or musician or anything. Most models didn't have to deal with the same sort of attention that he did, though of course most of them hadn't been modelling since their preteens and didn't have a parent famous in the fashion industry. The models that did get as much attention as he (unfortunately) did were supermodels, and they were far more serious about their modelling than Adrien was. They had worked for it, instead of basically being handed a modelling contract like Adrien had.

"That sucks."

"I've learned to ignore it. They can say what they want, and as long as people I care about don't believe them then it doesn't affect me." Of course, so far there hadn't been any particularly outrageous articles about him and he hadn't had to search for jobs with employers that might have
seen falsified articles about him, so maybe he would change his tune in the future.

Hopefully not. He wouldn't really want to work for an employer who would make hiring decisions based on stories in tabloid magazines anyway.

Paul looked a little dubious but dropped the subject anyway. "If you say so. Hey, so have you started looking stuff over for the tests? I'm thinking a study group this weekend would be good, just to get things started."

Adrien didn't even have to think about it. "Yeah! I'll be free. I started studying yesterday, and I've already marked a few things that I might need a bit more work on. Have you started on your Electronics project yet?"

"I've glanced at it. Took some notes." Paul shrugged. " Haven't put anything together yet, though. You?"

"I've gotten a couple pages put together. I want to get it done by next Monday, and then I can give it some time to rest before I review it." It was a strategy Adrien had picked up during his business program and it almost always resulted in much better papers. If he put things off until last minute, he couldn't get the necessary distance from his paper to actually look at it with a critical eye. "And then I want to clean up my magnets lab."

"And study," Paul added.

"And study." Adrien couldn't help but let out a sigh at that. There were still two full weeks until exams started, and he already couldn't wait until they were done with the tests and he could enjoy a relaxing week off before the second half of the semester started. Once he got his projects wrapped up and his labs organized and turned in things might get more relaxed, but he didn't want to count on that. He had once during his second year in business and let things slide, and he had ended up pulling more than one all-nighter to try to get his studying completed.

Never again. He'd rather get things done ridiculously early than have to deal with too much stuff at the last minute. It was stressful and led to bad grades, which was hugely frustrating when he knew he could do better.

"I get the feeling that I'll be really glad that I'm still living at home," Paul said as their professor came into the room and started setting things up in front. Adrien raised an eyebrow at that; previously, Paul had complained about living at home. He came from London originally and his family lived close enough to the university that there was no point in him renting an apartment of his own. He had been fine with that arrangement at first, but apparently he had made several other friends in his other classes who either had their own apartment or who were sharing with one or two (or three, Adrien wasn't quite sure) other students and they had some fabulous stories about the things they could get up to without their parents there. Adrien personally thought that Paul's other friends sounded a bit immature, but he really couldn't judge that much considering that he hadn't actually met any of them for more than a minute or two at a time.

"Why do you say that?"

Paul shrugged. "Timothy and Eric were talking the other day about how much work it is to clean their own place and cook all of their own meals and it was just something I've never thought of before. It seems like that could eat up a lot of study time."

Adrien shrugged. It hadn't been something he considered to be too much of a bother, but then again he was used to slotting study time in around photoshoots, fittings, and other assorted industry
events. Now that he didn't have those to deal with anymore, simple tasks like cleaning and cooking didn't seem like such a big issue. "It can. I tend to clean during study breaks, and then it helps that both Mari and I are fairly clean people to start with. If we make a mess while cooking, we clean it up right away. It's more work if we just put it off."

Paul snorted. "Y'know, sometimes with the way you talk about Marinette, it really sounds like the two of you are living together. You cook together, you clean together..."

"We take turns cooking and we each clean our own apartments. It's just that we have similar ways of approaching it." Adrien had to admit that if he had to have a roommate, Marinette would be pretty much perfect. They were both mature and got along fabulously. On top of that, their near-identical approach to keeping the apartment clean would probably eliminate almost all of the cleaning-related nightmare problems Adrien had heard about from other uni students.

"Hey, I'm just saying."

"I know." Adrien paused for a moment, thinking. "What you were saying earlier, that you were glad you were still living at home..."

"Oh! Because my parents take care of the cooking and cleaning for me. I help out sometimes," Paul added hastily. "But when I have a lab report to complete and, like, the bathroom needs cleaning, I don't need to worry about it. Or if I don't have time to cook, I don't have to worry about that either. And maybe I'm just assuming, but I'm guessing that that might be a problem you have to deal with? Having to put studying aside to clean?"

Adrien shrugged. "Like I said before, I try to keep it clean as I go. I'll probably do a full cleaning as a study break before cramming time starts, and then it should be fine until after midterms are done. Besides, I can't study all the time."

"And I suppose Marinette will be cooking for you so you don't have to cook and cram at the same time?"

Adrien shook his head at that and then thought about it again and shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. She has Fashion Week to prepare for and it might fall at about the same time. We talked about how that might be a problem earlier in the semester, but we haven't actually compared our schedules at all recently. She'll probably be working late leading up to the runway, so she wouldn't have time to cook either."

Paul looked surprised. "Really? I thought that, y'know, when she gets home then she's done until she goes back to work the next day so she could take care of the cooking and everything."

Adrien shook his head. "Not really. I mean, kind of? She's not required to be working once she leaves for the day, but there's a bunch of extra last-minute stuff left to do once it gets close to runway week so she has to stay longer to get that done."

"Really?"

"Yeah. She just worked late yesterday, actually. We had to dip into our frozen leftovers supply because I lost track of time and forgot to start cooking." Adrien wanted to kick himself for that little blunder- cooking would have been a fantastic study break, and then they wouldn't have had to eat leftovers that they had been saving for when they were both busy. He also wanted to kick himself for not finding out when Fashion Week would be, because that was fairly important.

Best-case scenario, it would be before his midterms and so Marinette would be able to cook for
both of them while he did his exams. Worst-case scenario, both would fall at the same time and they would end up being a huge pile of stress.

He could only hope for the best.

As it turned out, Fashion Week and Adrien's midterms didn't line up, but the run-up to Runway Week did fall right during Adrien's midterms and that was even more of a problem than Fashion Week itself would have been. They went through their entire stockpile of frozen food plus several frozen pizzas during the frantic two weeks full of studying and sewing.

"I'll be glad when this is over," Marinette grumbled as she staggered into Adrien's apartment after a long day at work. A huge number of models had come in for fittings, and she had spent the entire day marking up little changes that had to be done. The following day would be spent joining the seamstresses to help with the alterations so that everything would be finished by the time the models came in for their final fitting. There had also been discussions on accessories, an argument about hair styling, and a frantic frenzy as they organized the shipment of shoes that had only just come in.

It had been a long day in an already long week, and it was still only Wednesday.

"Hey, Marinette!" Adrien called from the kitchen. The smell of baking pizza filled the apartment, making Marinette's stomach grumble despite how sick she was of pizza. They had it for dinner, they had it as leftovers for lunch, and she had even had a piece for a snack a few days prior. She and Adrien tried to mix the flavors up, but there was really only so much they could do.

"Did your exam today go well?" Marinette asked as she entered the dining room area. She couldn't remember which class the test had been for (something math-y, no doubt), but Adrien hadn't been particularly looking forward to it. Now that that test was over, he only had one test left before he got his weeklong break prior to the start of the second half of the semester. Mr. Agreste had called him up several times hoping that Adrien would come back to Paris for the break, but Adrien hadn't quite decided yet if he wanted to or not.

Or maybe he had decided and just hadn't bothered to tell anyone yet for one reason or another. She wasn't going to press too much.

"The test went all right. I don't think I could have handled studying for it for any longer." Adrien flashed an exhausted grin at Marinette. "At least my last test is for a class I actually like. I've been reviewing my notes, but I shouldn't have any problems."

"That's good." At least once one of them was done with their cram time they wouldn't both be on edge. It was hard to unwind when both of them were worried about something and neither had the time to cook.

"At least your finals don't line up with anything," Marinette said, leaning over the short dividing wall that separated the dining area from the kitchen. "I should be able to cook then."

Adrien laughed. "Is that a not-so-subtle way of asking if I can cook next week?"
"You caught me." Of course, it was possible that she would be staying at the Fashion Week buildings late enough that she would have to order out or snitch leftovers from Adrien...or, if he decided to go back to Paris, she would have to fend for herself. She foresaw lots of pasta in her future. "Have you decided what you're going to do during your break week? I can manage to feed myself if you're going to go back to Paris. After all, I'm only actually working on Monday, since that's when Madam Rosalie's show is. I'll just be watching other shows the rest of the week."

Adrien shrugged, looking sheepish. "I don't actually know. My father wants me to come back and visit him, but I kind of want to explore the city more while I'm here." He flashed her a smile, making Marinette's heart skip a beat. She might be more or less over Adrien— or at least that was what she tried to tell herself— but there were times when he was just too gorgeous for his own good. "Plus, I want to be here to see your first runway."

And then he said things like that, and Marinette wondered if she ever had a chance at getting over him. All signs pointed towards no.

"It might be hard getting in the building, but it would be nice to have you there," Marinette admitted. Her parents couldn't get away from the bakery, and both Nino and Alya were busy with their own jobs. She would have her colleagues, of course, but that wasn't the same. They had all seen the outfits a hundred times at this point, so they wouldn't have the same reactions to seeing the pieces as a fresh pair of eyes would have.

Adrien laughed at that. "Actually, Madam Rosalie already got me tickets. She said she normally gets some for my father, but he never uses them. She said it was as thanks for participating in the wedding photoshoot." He rolled his eyes and returned to assembling a salad. "I honestly can't figure out who owes who at this point. It's too confusing. But at least it's the 'no I owe you' mindset instead of both of us insisting the other owes us something," Adrien added. "This is much nicer."

"Fair enough." Marinette leaned over the divider, trying to catch a glimpse of the kitchen timer. Her stomach was growling, but there really wasn't a polite way of asking how soon they could eat. "Is there anything I can be helping with?" Now that she had (finally) left work, she was technically free. Adrien, on the other hand, still had studying to do, even if he was trying to avoid it.

"Oh, sure! I was hoping to have a fruit salad with the pizza. We can at least pretend that we're eating healthy." Adrien pointed to the mango sitting on the counter. He had been planning on cutting that up next, but if Marinette was offering, all the better. "You could get that ready, maybe. We should probably use it up before it gets too over-ripe and we have to throw it away."

"Will do."

A brief silence fell over the room as they worked. Adrien busied himself with chopping pineapple while Marinette peeled and cut up the mango. They got everything done and on the table before the timer went off for the pizza.

"When are you done tomorrow?" Marinette asked as Adrien pulled the pizza out of the oven and started cutting it. "Your test is midday, right?"

"Yeah, it starts at twelve-thirty. Thank goodness it's not on Friday, I don't know if I could actually keep studying much longer." Adrien passed Marinette a slice of pizza before serving up a piece for himself. "I'm looking forward to having a week to relax and get my head back on straight before diving back into classes."

"Is it a lot different than business school?"
Adrien thought about it as he took his first bite of pizza. "Yes and no? I mean, obviously it's different topics, and this time I'm at least actually interested in them. We have more labs now, too. But otherwise? The setup is kind of similar, and it's definitely helpful to have that prior experience of when I need to start studying so that I have plenty of time."

"Do a lot of other people struggle with that?"

"Some. I've heard several people talking about all-nighters they pulled to get a paper in on time." Even Paul, who Adrien had thought was smarter than that, had pulled an all-nighter already to get a paper done. Adrien hadn't been able to resist teasing his friend; after all, it wasn't often that he was more awake than Paul. Paul hadn't particularly appreciated the teasing, but he couldn't deny that he had deserved it. "How are the Fashion Week preparations going?"

Adrien couldn't deny that he was stalling, just a bit. He didn't particularly want to go back to studying, since that was all he had been doing all afternoon. A nap sounded far better, or a run over the rooftops, but he had to be responsible. Once he and Marinette finished up with dinner, he would have to go back to reviewing his notes and doing a few more practice problems from his book. Maybe he could persuade Marinette to let him help with the dishes, just to get a little bit more of a break.

Marinette shrugged. "So far, so good. I mean, we're working overtime to get fittings and photoshoots done, but almost everything is ready. I always got the impression that things were crazier because of, y'know, those TV shows..."

Adrien nodded.

"And I'm sure that the backstage area will be insane once Fashion Week starts, but we're hardly making stuff last minute," Marinette added hastily. "Pieces are finished, we're just polishing them up and getting everything in order. I wouldn't be surprised if we all finish early tonight just because we've been rushing to finish all week. I think there's some hand beading that maybe needs to be finished, and then getting things in boxes and carted over." Marinette shrugged, looking pleased. She polished off her pizza and got up to grab another piece.

Soon enough, dinner was over and cleaned up. Marinette excused herself so that Adrien could study in peace, much to his disappointment. Adrien had rather been hoping for a distraction.

"We're all out of Camembert!"

...a distraction that was not in the form of his kwami, that was.

"Don't we have other kinds of cheese?" Adrien asked tiredly as he flipped through a couple flashcards.

"Yes, but I want Camembert!"

Adrien sighed again. "I'll get you some tomorrow after my test. I'm not going to interrupt my studying again, Plagg. I just found something that I need to review more."

"Really? No more interruptions?" Plagg suddenly sounded decidedly impish. "Not even red-and-black interruptions?"

Adrien's head came up at that. "What?"

Plagg pointed to the window instead of answering. Adrien got up and rushed over, peering out into the darkness. Movement on the rooftops caught his eye and he squinted, trying to see more clearly.
A moment later, the figure went past a streetlight and Adrien caught sight of a red suit dotted with black spots.

"Ladybug's out," Adrien breathed, twisting so he could watch his partner as she ran over the rooftops. His hand twitched towards Plagg, tempted to summon the kwami, transform, and run after Ladybug. He'd been studying for forever, surely he deserved a break-

A snicker from Plagg made Adrien snap out of his Ladybug-induced trance. He suddenly realized that that was exactly the response Plagg was hoping he would have. If Adrien showed any willingness to go join Ladybug, then Plagg would call him out on his excuse for not getting cheese because he was too busy studying. And of course Plagg would say that he would need his Camembert before Adrien could transform, so Adrien would have to go to the store first, buy the cheese, come back, and then transform, by which time Ladybug could very well already be done with her outing.

"Maybe tomorrow," Adrien said with the most dramatic sigh he could muster.

Plagg's mouth dropped open. "You aren't going out? B-but I thought-

"I'm too busy. I have a test tomorrow, remember?" Adrien watched as Ladybug disappeared from view and then turned back to his books. As much as he wanted to join his partner, he couldn't. Besides, it wasn't as though he would be missing anything particularly important. He and Ladybug always did the same thing when they ran into each other on the rooftops of London. "I can't wait for it to be over. I think I spent too much time messing around with the study group. We didn't get much done." Adrien wasn't looking forward to telling Paul that if the other boy tried to put a group together for finals, but the others in the group just hadn't been focused enough and they had wasted hours chatting instead of studying. It might have been fun if it hadn't been so frustrating.

"Have you decided what you're doing next week?" Plagg asked, floating along behind Adrien. "You need to tell your father soon, you know. Same-day train tickets are expensive. So are same-day plane tickets."

"I'm not going back to Paris." Adrien had considered it, sure- he missed Nino and Alya, after all, and it would be nice to see his father and Nathalie and the Gorilla again- but Marinette would be tired from Fashion Week and it would be a shame to miss her first show. She would want to have a friendly face there, and she had already said that her parents wouldn't be able to make it. And then, once Madam Rosalie's part of the show wrapped up and Marinette had seen all of the other shows that she wanted to peek into, they could go explore more of London or maybe make plans to venture a little further on a long weekend excursion. He'd known his plans for a while now, actually, but he just didn't want to tell his father that. Adrien knew full well that if he told his father that his mind was made up and he was staying in London over the break, his father would flood his phone with messages about why it would be beneficial for Adrien to spend the week in Paris. The procrastinating on an answer wasn't preventing that entirely- Adrien was getting a dozen texts and a call per day- but he was waiting for his final test to be over before announcing his decision.

"She might tell Nino or Alya and then my father would interrogate them?" Adrien offered a bit weakly as he paged through his notebook. He didn't really have an answer for that, other than the fact that he had just gotten so used to not telling his father that it had just seemed natural to not tell his friend, either. It was stupid, reasoning, but so automatic at this point. "And she's not actually my wife, Plagg. We've been over this a million times or so."

"You keep saying that, and then you keep having dinner dates with her, and visiting her at lunch,
and texting her all day," Plagg said, smirking. He settled on top of Adrien's computer and peered down at his Chosen. "And you're ditching visiting your father and your other friends to watch your *wife's* runway show."

"It's Madam Rosalie's runway show," Adrien corrected. "And *she* is certainly not my wife." He glanced down at his notebook and frowned suddenly. "And I really *do* need to study, Plagg. Just eat the cheddar or something. Seriously."

"Aww...."

Chapter End Notes

...so I discovered (several months after writing this chapter and the next) that unis in London apparently don't actually have a fall break (my fault for assuming; since the uni I went to in NZ had a fall break and I've definitely heard of other countries having one as well, I just sort of assumed that it was universal). I'm just claiming artistic license on that, since it's sort of impossible to edit that out (since it's kind of important for the next two chapters).

Also, if the Miraculous universe can switch around when mayoral and class president elections are, then I can stick in a teensy-weensy break for plot purposes.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Please review, it really makes my day! :)


As he had with all of his other classes, Adrien had over-studied once again. He answered all of the questions on his last midterm with ease and even had time to go back and check over his answers. He handed his test in at the end of the test period, feeling good about his answers, and headed straight to the grocery store.

"Oh sweet, fabulous cheese," Plagg sighed as Adrien dropped several rounds of Camembert into his basket. "How I missed thee~"

"These have to last for the next week," Adrien warned him as he added two other blocks to his basket. "The people here already think I'm weird for always getting as much cheese as I do every time I shop. I'm not doing any mid-week trips."

Plagg pouted. "Oh, come on. Can't we buy any more?"

"Marinette'll get suspicious if she sees any more cheese in my fridge. You forget, she digs around in there too." Adrien left the cheese section, ignoring Plagg's whining. "And she already thinks it's weird that I'm always running out of cheese for recipes when she saw two kilo blocks in my fridge two days prior."

"You are weird," Plagg said. He promptly shut up when Adrien purposefully dropped a box of crackers on him.

Humming, Adrien continued on his way through the store. He wasn't going to do a full-out shopping trip for the next week like he normally would since he hadn't planned any meals out at all, but he wanted to have enough food for tonight, at the very least. He could make a simple meal and it would probably taste like gourmet after a week of frozen pizza and heated-up leftovers. He swung by his apartment to put things away and then headed straight back out to pick up hot sandwiches for himself and Marinette for lunch. Plagg complained, of course, but Adrien thought that he and Marinette deserved the treat. He added a couple of chocolate chip cookies as a bonus and headed over to see Marinette.

"This is stupid," Plagg groused as Adrien trotted the few short blocks from the sandwich shop to Marinette's workplace. "Can't we just stay in the apartment and rest?"

"This won't take long," Adrien said with a sigh as they reached the Rosalie Fashions building. He reached out, opened the door and ducked inside.

And then he came to a screeching halt.

The ground floor was positively teeming with people. Workers, interns, and models alike were rushing to and fro, some pushing racks filled with covered clothes, others carrying boxes. Some looked strangely stressed, considering that Marinette had thought that things were nearly done. Adrien had to stumble back and hug the wall as several people rushed by him and out the door to the waiting moving van that had just pulled up.

He could only hope that Marinette's floor wasn't quite this insane.

Adrien zig-zagged across the ground floor, alternating between hugging the wall and dashing out
whenever there was an opening. It didn't take him long to get to the stairs (though he did nearly slam into several people on his way) and then he sprinted up to the next floor, clutching his bag of sandwiches.

The first floor was, if possible, even more frantic than the ground floor. There was a sort of worried buzz in the air, which really didn't make that much sense. This wasn't Project Runway; the designers had had plenty of time to get things ready. Unless there had been some sort of catastrophe, they should be busy but not this insane.

"The problem is that, since it's Fashion Week, nearly all of the models are already booked," Madam Rosalie was saying as Adrien rounded the corner into the interns' area. The older designer was standing in the hallway between the cubicles surrounded by several of her workers, Marinette included. "There's only slim pickings left, and there's no guarantee that we'll be able to get them over here fast enough to do the alterations. Even if we did, they could be unprofessional or inexperienced on the runway and that's why they weren't picked up in the first place. We don't have time to train in a new model, and we can't make the models we do still have pick up any more looks. We already have a ridiculously short turnaround time for the models to change clothes."

"We can't just drop several looks," Marinette argued as Adrien drew close, curious. Had something happened to one of their models? No wonder they were so worried. "Could we maybe have a female model step in and just tuck up their hair and go for a unisex look? We'd have to do the alterations still, obviously, but at least we would know that they can walk and they're already on-site- Adrien! Hey! What are you doing here?"

Madam Rosalie spun around at the call and her eyes lit up as she saw Adrien standing there, looking about as puzzled as he felt. "Ah! He has heard our call for help and he has answered! Adrien, dear, one of our models was in a car accident and can't walk the runway tomorrow, you'll be an angel and help us out, right?"

Aha. A model in a car accident and unable to walk the runway would certainly explain a lot of the stress he had seen. And he was a model, and could take the missing person's place. Adrien didn't particularly like doing runway shows, but...

...well, he couldn't exactly say no, especially when Marinette looked so worried about the situation. Even if they weren't actually married, he would do almost anything to help Marinette out. That was what friends did, no matter how much Plagg wanted to read into it.

"Shannon, Emily, can you grab Richard's outfits and his shoes for me?" Madam Rosalie called to two of the other designers before Adrien could answer. His expression must have given his agreement away, or maybe Madam Rosalie was just used to getting what she wanted, just like his father was. Or maybe his people-pleasing reputation preceded him, even here in London. "Adrien looks like he should be the right size, we'll probably only have to do a few tucks to make it perfect. Marinette, can you help Adrien with the clothes? It should only take a few minutes and then you can eat whatever it was Adrien brought for you."

"Are you okay with this?" Marinette asked Adrien as Madam Rosalie whisked off to take care of something else, main crisis now averted. "You don't have to say yes, but it would really be a huge help."

"It's fine," Adrien assured her, resting one hand on her shoulder. "I've finished my midterms and we have next week off classes. I've done runways before. It's no big deal to help out with this one."

"You are an absolute angel," Marinette breathed, relief clear on her face as the other designers vanished, presumably to get the outfits that Adrien would be trying on. "We just heard about this
model half an hour ago, so it was crazy last-minute. We weren't sure how we would get another person."

"Will he be all right eventually?" Adrien asked as he adjusted his bag on his shoulder. At this rate, the sandwiches would be cold by the time they got to them. Maybe the building had an oven or something they could use to heat them back up. "Or is the injury serious?"

Marinette shook her head. "No, he'll be fine. He's got a broken leg and some bruises and cuts on his arms, legs, and face, so he can't walk without crutches and even if he could, they would have to do some serious makeup work on him if they didn't want the cuts and whatnot showing up in photos."

Adrien winced. He knew full well how important looks were to a model's ability to work. If the guy couldn't do runways and wouldn't be able to do photoshoots until his injuries cleared up, he could be out a fair chunk of money. Hopefully he wasn't living from paycheck to paycheck.

"So what kinds of looks am I modelling?" Adrien asked, changing the subject. He was vaguely familiar with the kinds of clothing Madam Rosalie's company produced for women, but he had never really looked into their men's line. After all, he got pretty much all of his clothes from his father's lines.

"Fairly straightforward stuff, really. Shirts, jackets, dress pants..." Marinette shrugged. "There's a couple dramatic looks. Everything is fairly fitted, even for the men. Madam Rosalie hates baggy clothing. She says that it looks sloppy no matter what" Adrien froze. Fitted pants? Normally he wouldn't have a problem with that, since he had worn fitted slacks to his business classes every day (he had promptly traded them out for jeans now that he was in the physics program, since he felt way overdressed otherwise) and he had definitely modeled close-cut pants before, but he had also been wearing different, well, undergarments.

Everyone- well, at least everyone in fashion- knew that one simply did not wear boxers under fitted dress pants. It made them bunch up and lump strangely. Adrien had known that for forever and had never, ever worn boxers to a fitting before. Until now.

Whoops.

"Is there something wrong?" Marinette asked after a moment when Adrien didn't say anything. A blush had started to rise in his cheeks. "Nothing's, like, super tight. We don't make leggings for men or anything crazy like that."

"I am...possibly not wearing the right kind of underwear to make the pants lay the way they're supposed to," Adrien admitted as his bush deepened. He suddenly found himself wishing that he was literally anywhere else but here right now. "I can run back home and change really quick if you want me to, because otherwise things are going to look pretty funny."

"Oh," was all Marinette managed to say. She seemed to have suddenly lost her words and her poise. Her face was quite possibly going redder than his as her eyes darted down almost inadvertently before she caught herself and stared at the ceiling instead. "Uh..."

"Maybe I can try on all of the tops and then while those get altered, I can run home and change?" Adrien suggested, wishing more than ever that he wasn't having this conversation with Marinette. Marinette was his friend, and she didn't need to be hearing about his underwear. Really, this conversation would have been easier with a complete stranger rather than a friend, as strange as that sounded. He wouldn't be worried about embarrassing a complete stranger. Besides, most dressers tended to learn to see models that they didn't know outside of work as walking, talking
mannequins. Any kind of wardrobe malfunction was just seen as an annoying inconvenience rather than something to be embarrassed about.

Marinette just didn't have that kind of professional distance with him.

"Uh, I, uh..." Marinette was stammering, which was a bad sign. She hadn't stammered in front of him for forever. "Uh-

"Emily! Can you run down the road and buy some men's briefs?" Madam Rosalie yelled over the noise of the floor, making both Adrien and Marinette jump. They hadn't seen her hovering near them. Adrien's face flushed impossibly redder in mortification as the other intern trotted over, regarding him curiously. "We need a set for Adrien to change into, let me grab you a company credit card- it doesn't need to be fancy, just a men's size, uh, let me see here-"

Adrien groaned and dropped his forehead onto Marinette's shoulder. It was making his neck crane somewhat painfully since she was so much shorter than he was, but it was better than listening to other people discuss his underthings. "Just kill me now. Death by humiliation." He paused. "They were checking out my rear, weren't they."

Marinette sounded like she was trying very hard not to laugh, which at least was a better sign than the stuttering. More humiliating for Adrien, perhaps, but he still preferred it to the uncomfortable stutters. "They were debating between two sizes. I didn't hear what they decided on."

Adrien was already wishing he hadn't stopped by. He had been expecting a hurried lunch with Marinette, followed by a relaxing afternoon where he would maybe try a new recipe or bake something for when Marinette finally stumbled back to their apartments, not being roped into doing a runway show and then having his underwear size debated by a friend of his parents' and a design intern while his friend stood nearby. Still, if it would make Marinette happy and not ridiculously stressed...

"Marinette, try the shirts and jackets on Adrien while Emily is out," Madam Rosalie ordered as she passed them again, ignoring the way Adrien was still banging his head against Marinette's shoulder. "She should be back soon, since she's taking my car."

"Will do," Marinette assured her boss. "Adrien, come on. Are you okay with changing shirts in my cubicle?"

"That's fine," Adrien assured her as he followed her into what was obviously her cubicle. He set the bag of sandwiches down on a clear spot on Marinette's desk and looked around. Another intern had already delivered the rack with his looks on it and the box of shoes to the small space, making it incredibly cramped. "I might have to duck into the bathroom to change the, uh, y'know-"

"Right! Right, right, of course." Marinette pulled the first hanger off the rack as Adrien shucked his t-shirt. He hung it over Marinette's chair and reached for the shirt she was offering him. It was fairly plain and straightforward, but that was to be expected. The star piece would be the jacket and probably the pants as well. He pulled the shirt over his head carefully, making sure not to stretch it. The shirt fit him almost perfectly, making him wonder how close he was in size to the injured model. The sleeves were a little long on him, though.

"Oh, this fits you better than it did Richard," Marinette said when she finally turned her attention back to Adrien (she had been staring resolutely at the wall, Adrien noted with some amusement). "It was a little tight on him, but somehow the marks got removed before we could alter it. We'll probably have to take in a couple other things." She reached forward to fiddle with the cuffs, tweaking them until they sat properly. Reaching over, Marinette snagged a few pins off of her desk
"Hopefully the shoes fit," Adrien said as Marinette moved to the other sleeve and checked how the length was on him. "I can walk in large shoes, but it might affect my stride a bit."

"Ooh, we'll check those after this outfit," Marinette said, tugging the jacket off the hanger and helping Adrien into it. It was a long cut, dramatic in its shape, and had some nice details on it. "Then if we need to get a new size, we can send Emily out to get it. There's only the one pair for the male models, thankfully. Some of the female models have a couple different shoes."

Adrien grinned as Marinette grumbled and pulled the jacket right back off. It was too loose across the shoulders but fit everywhere else, so Marinette flipped the jacket inside out, put it back on him, marked the changes with pins and chalk, pulled the jacket back off, and waved down a passing worker to take the piece to the sewing room with instructions for the sewers.

"At least your old model wasn't smaller than me," Adrien said helpfully as he removed the shirt, making sure not to disturb the pins. Getting the fit messed up so close to runway week would be the absolute last thing they needed at a time like this. "And- uh, is everything else ready? Or do you have the seamstresses working on other things as well?"

"They were working on some prototypes for the winter line, but they can put everything aside for last-minute alterations for Fashion Week." Marinette hung the shirt up near her doorway and picked up the shoebox. "They work pretty fast, but they're a bit busy at the moment with little last-minute adjustments. There were some fit issues with some of the women's looks, and then- well, long story short, we have a lot of embroidery on some of the pieces and that makes the alterations a bit more difficult. That's putting them behind schedule a bit."

Marinette pulled out the first shoe and handed it to Adrien. He sat down in her desk chair to pull his own shoes off and pull the first one on. It fit pretty well, which was a relief. They were already busy enough without having to track down a pair of shoes that would fit him properly. He pulled the second one on and practiced his runway walk as best he could in Marinette's cramped cubicle. "These work well."

"That's good," Marinette said, relief clear in her voice as she watched him walk and pivot to head back in her direction. "We're already crazy enough in here today without any more, uh-"

"Any more trips to fetch things?" Adrien suggested, blush rising again. God, if this was how awkward they got when merely vaguely referring to Adrien's, ah, underwear problem, then how weird would they actually get around each other when it was time for him to try on the pants?

"Yeah." Marinette waited as Adrien sat back down and tugged the shoes off. She took them back and packed them back into the box. "Okay, now let's try the rest of the outfits. Maybe we can get these all done before Emily gets back."

They got all of the shirts and jackets marked for adjustments and were halfway through their sandwiches by the time Emily returned.

"I got turned around and caught in traffic," Emily said sheepishly as she tossed two packages of
black men's briefs into Adrien's lap. Both he and Marinette turned pink almost instantly at the sight. "I'm not used to driving around the city. And Madam Rosalie and I couldn't decide on the right size so I got two sizes. One of them should fit."

"Right, thank you," Adrien managed before Emily bounced off to go take care of something else. He stared at the packages for a moment, wondering what the best way was to excuse himself.

"Oh! I should get you a bag to put, uh," Marinette's eyes flicked down again and back up. Her cheeks went even redder. "Keep things in. Um-

"If we finish our sandwiches, I can just use the bag from that," Adrien said quickly. He set the packages of briefs down on the floor and picked his sandwich back up, eager to change the subject, even if only for a bit. "We'll both have to wash our hands before we touch the clothes anyway, so we might as well just finish these first while they're still somewhat warm."

"Right, of course." Marinette took another bite of her sandwich and hummed in pleasure, savoring the taste. "Thank you so much for the sandwich, Adrien. It's delicious. Just what I needed after the morning we had."

"I have cookies, too," Adrien said as he polished off his own sandwich in three more bite. He grinned as Marinette perked up. "They're in a smaller bag in this bag, though, so if you wanted to save them for later, we could do that."

"Later might be good. I want to get things over to the sewing room as fast as possible." Marinette finished her own sandwich and stood up, stretching as she did. "Ready?"

The pants all fit perfectly. Marinette let out a sigh of relief as she hung the last pair back up on the rack and waited for Adrien to put his jeans back on. She stared resolutely at the wall until the rustling stopped, and then she waited another ten seconds for good measure before turning around.

"That's it?" Adrien asked, patting down his hair. It had gotten a little mussed from him pulling his t-shirt over his head and probably also from him banging his forehead against Marinette's shoulder earlier. "That wasn't awful."

"We'll probably need you to come back in tomorrow sometime for final fittings," Marinette admitted. "I talked to Emily while you were, uh, in the bathroom earlier, and she said that there were some delays. They're probably still working on the embroidered pieces. I'm really sorry-"

"It's fine, Marinette," Adrien assured her, catching hold of one of her frantically flailing hands before she could whack it against the wall. He only let go when he knew he had her attention. "I wouldn't want the seamstresses to rush on my behalf. I don't have anything going on tomorrow, so I can come in, no problem."

"I know, but I'm sure you would rather go exploring or something instead." Marinette sighed, straightening the hangers that remained on the racks. She fiddled with one of the pairs of pants, making sure the creases stayed right where she wanted them to be. "I know you had talked about exploring London more-"
"It's more fun to go with someone else," Adrien assured her. "Maybe I'll go explore stuff you already visited before while you're busy here, but I would rather go with you to new places."

There was a faint oooh from outside the cubicle. Adrien and Marinette ignored it. Or, well, Adrien ignored it and Marinette turned pink and started fiddling with the hem of the pants on the hanger closest to her.

"So if we are all done, I think I'll take off and go see a museum or something yet this afternoon," Adrien said, stretching. "There's still a couple more hours until they close."

"You know how to get there without getting lost?" Marinette asked, abandoning the pants to glance over at him. "Because I can tell you what bus lines-"

"You already told me a few weeks ago," Adrien reminded her gently. He waved his phone at her. "I wrote everything you told me on my phone. And I can always text you if I have any questions."

"Okay, if you're sure. Oh!" Marinette suddenly jumped, turning to her desk. "The cookies! Here, we should have them before you go."

"Right, I almost forgot!" Adrien accepted his cookie from Marinette and took a bite. It wasn't quite as good as the ones that Marinette's parents made and didn't come close to Marinette fresh-out-of-the-oven cookies, but it was still fabulous. "See you later, Marinette! Don't work too late!"

"I thought you said that we were going to go back to the apartment and sleep," Plagg complained as Adrien headed for the stairs. "This isn't sleeping. This is spending too much time in your underwear around your wife and then wandering around the city."

"Exploring is more fun," Adrien shot back, ignoring the dig about his underwear. "Besides, you can sleep in my pocket just fine." He reached the stairs and starting jogging downward. Amazingly enough, the insane frenzy that had been there before had magically vanished. "It's not as though I'm going to an amusement park. You aren't going to accidentally be flung out of my pocket again."

Plagg grumbled, sticking his head further out of Adrien's jacket when he saw the coast was clear. "I still don't trust you after that." A pause. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Adrien paused at the bottom of the stairs and glanced down at himself, frowning. "No, I don't think so. Why?"

"So you're just going to leave your wife to pick up your underwear, then?"

Adrien froze, then swore and spun around to sprint right back up the stairs. He had completely forgotten to take the bag with his boxers in it with him. That was stupid of him, and he couldn't ask Marinette to have to deal with them. Maybe he should have changed back into his own things, but he did want to get over to the museum before it got too close to closing time.

Marinette glanced up as Adrien skidded back into her workspace. "Adrien? What-"

"I forgot to grab this to take back to my place," Adrien said with a sheepish smile as he snagged the former sandwich bag. "Sorry about that. See you later, Mari!"

"Have fun!" Marinette called after him.

"Which museum are we going to?" Plagg asked as Adrien jogged back down the stairs, bag safely in hand. "Aren't there a ton of museums in the city?"
"Yeah, but I'm not all that interested in some of them." Adrien waved to a few passing workers and headed out the door and onto the street. "Like the Imperial War Museum, or the London Transport Museum, or the National Maritime Museum. The Design Museum would be something I'd be more likely to visit with Marinette because otherwise I really wouldn't get anything out of it, and I want a full day for the Science Museum. Mari and I already visited an art museum, so I probably won't go to another for a bit. I'm thinking I'll do the Natural History Museum. It sounds cool."

"Is there a cheese museum? If there is, we should go there."

"No."

Marinette found herself booted out of the Rosalie Fashions at four o'clock.

"You've been working overtime all week and everything you can do is done for now," Madam Rosalie said as she shepherded Marinette and several other workers towards the doors. "Go home, get your shopping and cleaning and whatnot done before Fashion Week starts, because even once our show is over, I suspect that most of you will hang around the building late watching other shows during the rest of the week. I'll need a couple of you for a couple hours tomorrow for the fittings that couldn't make it today, but otherwise I'll see you bright and early Monday morning."

"That's nice of her," Tikki said as Marinette headed down the sidewalk. "What are you gonna do with your free afternoon?"

"I need to go grocery shopping," Marinette said with a sigh. "Just a supply run, really, but I need some fruit and some bread at the very least. Maybe some more chocolate chips as well," she added, making Tikki squeal with joy. "So we can make more chocolate-chip cookies."

"Oh, well, we definitely should go grocery shopping, then!" Tikki decided, settling into Marinette's purse. "Onward ho!"

Marinette could only giggle as she headed down the street. "Has Adrien texted at all?"

"Nope. He must have arrived at the museum just fine. Which one was he going to?"

"He didn't say." Marinette unlocked her building's door and went in, jogging up the stairs. "Ugh, if I had known that I would have the time to shop, I would have brought my bags with me so I didn't have to come back here first."

"It was nice of Adrien to say he could help out," Tikki said as Marinette ducked into her apartment and grabbed the cloth bags stored by the door. She re-locked her door and headed back down the stairs. "That was scary for a few minutes there!"

"Yeah, I'm glad he showed up." It had been a surprise to see Adrien, of course, and she had been irritated for a few moments because they were in the middle of a crisis, there wasn't time to have a lunch break, but then Madam Rosalie had roped Adrien into filling their empty model spot and everything was all right again. Of course, they had to deal with some embarrassment as Adrien had to get undressed for Marinette to fit things on him (she had tried not to look), but they had got through it.
Eventually. With a lot of blushing. Of course, they would have to do the same thing tomorrow- or, rather, nearly. Since the pants needed no adjustment, they wouldn't have to try them on again at all. Thankfully.

The shopping trip took almost no time- after a couple of months, Marinette knew the place almost like the back of her own hand and besides, she wasn't getting all that much- and then she headed home again, swinging by a bakery that caught her eye on the way back. Adrien wasn't back yet- depending on what museum he went to and if he was staying until closing time, he could be a while- so Marinette got a batch of chocolate-chip cookies going before she contemplated what they could eat for dinner. There was the fruit she just bought, of course, and she could probably pull something together with what she had bought and what she had left in her pantry, but Adrien had said something earlier during the fittings about how he had bought fixings for dinner. Once he got back, she could bring over a salad and maybe some cookies along with the treat she had picked up at the bakery on her way home to go along with whatever Adrien was making.

Decision made, Marinette set to chopping up the fruit and vegetables she had bought.

Half an hour later, her phone charmed with an incoming text. Marinette abandoned her tray of cookies, half-transferred to a cooling rack, and trotted over to the table to check the message. Behind her, unnoticed, Tikki snitched a still warm cookie and took a giant bite.

"Adrien's just leaving the Natural History Museum now," Marinette reported as Tikki tried not to let her eyes bulge out too much at how hot the cookie was. Even after living with Marinette for over six years, the kwami had not quite learned to let the cookies cool some before eating them. "He said it was great and he wouldn't mind going back again on a rainy day." She shot a short text back and returned to the kitchen. She paused when she saw Tikki with a warm, crumbling cookie sitting by her and bulging cheeks. The kwami sent her a wide smile, trying to look innocent and failing.

"That's good he liked it," Tikki managed, trying not to spray cookie crumbs as she talked. "Was that the one with the insects?"

"I told you that you had to wait until the cookies were a little cooler, Tikki," Marinette said with a sigh. She went over to the fridge and pulled out a jug of milk, pouring a small glass of milk before returning the jug to the fridge and handing the tiny glass to Tikki. The kwami took the milk with a smile and took a sip before swallowing her mouthful of cookie. She took a few more sips, emptying the small cup.

"Thank you, Marinette!"

"The cookies will be cool enough to eat in a few minutes," Marinette said with a sigh, picking up her spatula and transferring the last few cookies to the cooling rack. "And they'll still be warm and gooey, but you won't burn your mouth. Think you can wait that long?"

Tikki nodded sheepishly.

Adrien, as it had turned out, had quite enjoyed the museum.
"It's practically right on campus," he told Marinette, grinning. "So, y'know, it was a little difficult to get lost."

"Oh shush," Marinette said with a laugh, swatting at his side as he smirked at her. "You didn't say which one you were going to. For all I knew, you could be heading all the way across the city."

Adrien nodded seriously as he stirred a pot of soup. "All the way across the city and up to Scotland, to be exact. I figured that would be the most sensible thing to do."

Marinette snorted. "Right. Of course." She snickered. "If that's your idea of sensible, I can understand why your father gave you a set of rules to follow while you're here."

"Very funny."

"I thought so, too." Marinette watched Adrien stir the pot for a few more moments, then asked, "Have you let your father know yet that you won't be heading back to Paris?"

Adrien froze, then promptly swore, one hand flying to his forehead. "Shoot! No, I completely forgot. Here, can you stir this while I text him?"

"Of course." Marinette stepped easily into Adrien's place, taking the spoon and continuing with the stirring with barely an interruption at all. "But how did you forget? He's only been sending you several texts per day asking about it."

Adrien just grinned sheepishly. "I just started ignoring it, to be honest. After a while, it just became background noise."

Marinette groaned at him. Adrien laughed.

"Do you think he'll come to London to watch you walk?"

Adrien snorted as he pulled his phone out from his pocket. "Hardly. He's seen me walk before at home. If he hasn't bothered to come to see Madam Rosalie's runway shows before, he's hardly going to start now." He tapped away at the screen, then sent the text. "Done. Actually, the runway gives me a nice excuse not to go home. I was worried that my father would call me every day to try to persuade me to go back to Paris for the break."

Marinette had to laugh at that. "You were never planning on going home for the break, were you?"

Adrien flashed her a sheepish smile. "Well, I mean, I did consider it..."

Marinette waited.

"...for about an hour sometime back near the start of term," Adrien finished, trying for his best innocent look. It didn't quite fit with the strangely familiar smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. "But I knew my father would pester me if I said that right away, so I let him think that I was still trying to make up my mind."

"He pestered you anyway," Marinette said with a sigh as Adrien's phone let out a ding. Adrien had complained about the pestering nearly every day and Marinette had only just refrained from pointing out that it generally was a good idea to make up one's mind about whether or not they would be visiting well in advance so that no one would have to scramble to get last minute plane tickets. She supposed that it probably wasn't a huge deal for the Agrestes, though. They certainly had enough money to buy last-minute tickets left and right. "I fail to see how telling him outright would have made a difference."
"I figured it would be like the difference in my father's behavior when I was considering going to school in London compared to when I made my final decision," Adrien admitted, checking his phone as it let out a ding. "Father was trying to gently dissuade me when I hadn't decided yet, and then once I had, he was coming up with new reasons every day why I shouldn't go."

"Was that him?" Marinette asked, nodding to Adrien's phone.

"Yup. He's not happy, but he can understand. He was just glad that he hadn't already bought tickets for me." Another ding, and Adrien checked his phone again. "Aaaaand... he apparently already had Nathalie look up when I would be walking, so he wants to know if I'll be coming back after my part of the runway show is done."

Marinette raised a curious eyebrow as Adrien tapped out a response. "Let me guess...you 'haven't decided yet'?"

Adrien grinned and sent the message. "Nah. I said that I wanted to stick around to see the entirety of Madam Rosalie's lines walk because this was your first show, and then I want to go with you to a couple of the other shows you mentioned. By the time those would be over it wouldn't be worth the time or the money to go back to Paris."

"Using me as a shield then, hmm?" Marinette teased before glancing down into the pot. "Uh, how long do I have to stir this for?"

"Until the timer goes off." Another ding came from Adrien's phone and he checked it once more. "And hey, it worked. He said that's great and that I should stay."

Marinette raised an eyebrow.

"I might have mentioned that your parents and Nino and Alya wouldn't be able to make it," Adrien admitted with a grin. "So I would be the only person from Paris that you knew here."

Marinette laughed at that, shaking her head. "You're the worst, really."

Adrien's stomach growled before he could respond and they both laughed.

"I brought fresh cookies," Marinette said before Adrien could start snitching from the salad. With her free hand, she pointed to the small basket she had brought over. Most of the cookies she had made she had left for Tikki, but just because the small god loved chocolate-chip cookies didn't mean that Marinette couldn't share some of them. Cookies were best fresh, after all. "Go ahead."

"I'll spoil my appetite," Adrien said, though she could tell that he wasn't terribly opposed to the idea. He drifted forward a few steps. "And I really shouldn't, not until I'm done modelling for Fashion Week..."

Marinette waited.

"But I mean, I did get in some decent walking around today, what with the grocery shopping and going to Rosalie Fashions and walking around in the museum..."

Smiling, Marinette kept stirring. Adrien might try to resist the call of freshly baked cookies, but they were his weak spot. Sure enough, seconds later, there was the sound of quiet munching.

_Hah._ She _knew_ he wouldn't be able to resist.

"What did you look at in the Natural History Museum?" Marinette asked, peering into the pot of
"Surely you couldn't see everything?"

"Some things were more interesting than others," Adrien admitted. He didn't move away from the basket of cookies. "I spent most of my time in the Blue Zone. They have so many specimens, it's amazing. And the blue whale model, and the skeletons-

The timer beeped, and Marinette stopped stirring. Adrien trotted over, cookie hanging half-eaten from his lips.

"Time to eat!" Adrien announced, switching off the heat. He took another bite of his cookie and grinned at her. "If I still have space for it, that is."

Marinette poked his side. "Yeah, yeah. You say that like I didn't just see you put away three whole servings for dinner yesterday. I'm sure you'll survive."

Adrien just laughed.

"Tart?" Marinette offered as Adrien brought his plate and bowl into the kitchen once they were finished with dinner. "I swung past the bakery while I was out on my supply run and I just couldn't resist."

Adrien groaned as he paused. The tarts Marinette was offering smelled (and looked) amazing, and there was nothing more he wanted to do than eat one, but... "Did you forget that I'm being a model again? I'm pretty certain I'm not allowed carbohydrates, never mind sweets. You'll destroy my diet."

"Do some jumping jacks first, then."

He couldn't hold back his laugh. "I don't think our downstairs neighbors would appreciate that."

"Do it tomorrow, then, between your fittings. No downstairs neighbors to worry about."

Adrien grinned and took the plate Marinette was offering before ruffling her hair with his other hand. His friend laughed and ducked away. "You're an awful influence on me, I hope you know that."

Marinette grinned as she patted her hair back down. "Guilty."

"I'm blaming you if I can't fit into my pants during Fashion Week," Adrien said with a laugh as he took the first bite of his tart. He closed his eyes as he let the taste melt on his tongue. "Mmmm. This is delicious."

"Worth the jumping jacks?"

Well, he wasn't about to let her win that easily. "Well, maybe..."

Definitely. It would definitely be worth it, even if Adrien had actually been worried about the extra treat at all. With his tests over, he could just go for a quick run over the rooftops to work off the extra energy from the tart- and from the cookies- in a heartbeat. Besides, it wasn't as though he had
been on a diet in the first place. He had been eating normally, sweets and all, and the clothes had been fit to that.

"So dramatic," Marinette sighed as she settled into her chair with her own tart. She took a bite and sighed in bliss. "I knew these looked good. I just had to buy them."

"Doesn't everything in a bakery look good?" It certainly did to Adrien. He had to restrain himself from popping in to buy something from the bakery on the way to the bus stop every day.

"In a good bakery, maybe. Others are a bit of a mixed bag." Marinette took another bite and Adrien waited for her to swallow and keep explaining. "Some places tend to overbake things, or maybe they didn't do their caramelization quite right, or there's just things off that make me think that they didn't combine things quite right." She shrugged. "It comes with growing up in a bakery. Papa would sometimes experiment with new recipes and we would taste them. Some things were more successful than others."

"I can't see your dad making anything that tasted anything less than delightful."

Marinette laughed at that. "I'm inviting you over next time he goes on an experimenting spree. He almost always does it during the month that we have to be closed for vacation and some of his first round of creations are less than great."

"I can't wait." Adrien took another slow bite of the tart, savoring the flavor. He'd definitely have to buy more in the future because it really was superb. "Does he add new things to the bakery often, then, if his experiments work out?"

"Not often. Normally he turns those things into a special of the month, or holiday specials. Sometimes he finds something that's popular enough that he'll add it to the regular selection."

"Doesn't it make it harder to make everything if he has a wider variety of things that he offers?" Adrien wanted to know. "Because I know that croissants take forever, and decorating takes time, and your family makes so much of everything..."

"And we only have so much shelf space," Marinette pointed out. "But we do have mixing vats for some of the big bread batches, and my parents do have other staff that come in and help get things going in the morning. They wouldn't be able to get everything done themselves, even as early as they get up. My dad bakes throughout the day, of course, so that things on the shelves are fresh all day. Some people pile up the shelves at the start of the day and don't keep baking, but my dad said that just leads to dry, stale bread and a lot of people want warm bread when they come into a bakery."

"It does seem like it tastes better when warm," Adrien admitted. "Whatever your parents are doing, it certainly does seem to be working for them. Their bakery is amazing." He took another bite of his tart. "Do they make anything like this?"

"I don't think so. I should bring a couple to my father next time I go home and see if my dad can come up with a recipe of his own. I think they would be popular."

"You'd never get me to leave if your father made these," Adrien said with a grin before he changed the subject. "What time does Madam Rosalie want me to come in tomorrow? And is there a dress rehearsal before the show?"

"About nine, and no, we just have workers that shove the models into place and out onto the runway. It's less work that way, according to Madam Rosalie. And it generally works, as long as
we have experienced models. That was part of the reason that we really didn't want to have to pick up a new model last-minute, because they might not be experienced enough to handle the way Madam Rosalie does it."

"I'll get to sleep in, then," Adrien decided with a grin. He finished his last bite of the tart, cleaning off the plat, and then he glanced up at his friend. "Well, I have nothing to study and you have nothing to sew. Want to watch a movie?"

"You bet."

Chapter End Notes

Yay, something that resembles some sort of plot! :D (also why I needed Adrien free for a week in the middle of his semester). Next time: Runway week!
Adrien and Marinette arrived at Rosalie Fashion together the next morning. They headed up to Marinette's cubicle right away and found that the alterations for Adrien's outfits weren't quite done yet.

"Another one of the pieces from the women's line had to practically be remade and that slowed down the sewing room," Emily reported from the cubicle next to Marinette's. She was checking the fit on a dress on a female model. "But I think they only have one more piece to finish altering for you and then they'll be done. It should be out in a few minutes."

Marinette elbowed Adrien and grinned teasingly at him. "Look, there's time for those jumping jacks."

"Jumping jacks?- oh." Adrien rolled his eyes at Marinette when he caught on. "Okay, I was kidding. One tart isn't going to make me gain any weight. I don't really need to do any jumping jacks."

"I wasn't joking. I don't want to have to alter these pants right before you walk for Fashion Week." Marinette was trying to sound stern, but Adrien could read her well enough that he could tell she was joking despite her claim otherwise. Her hands were planted on her waist and her eyes were sparkling. "Chop chop- or maybe I should say hop hop?"

Adrien obediently started jumping, grinning the entire time. Marinette might have been joking, but it was fun to play along. The other models and workers nearby were sending glances over at him and Marinette, but Adrien didn't particularly care. They could stare all they wanted, but it wouldn't change the fact that he was having fun.

"What are you doing?" Madam Rosalie asked as Adrien completed his twentieth jumping jack. He paused, grinning and not even remotely winded. "This does not sound like work over here."

"Marinette twisted my arm last night," Adrien reported, bouncing in place with a cheeky grin at Marinette, who suddenly looked a bit sheepish now that her boss was there. "She talked me into eating chocolate chip cookies before dinner and an almond tart thing after dinner, and so now I have to work them off so I fit into my clothes."

Marinette gave him a look. "You wanted to eat it, I could tell. It's not my fault that you somehow thought that one little treat would keep you from fitting into your clothes."

Adrien pretended an invisible force was twisting his arm. "My aaaaaarm. It huuuuurts." He grinned and danced away as Marinette swatted at him. As soon as he was out of her reach, he started twisting him arm around again, making the most pained faces he could manage. Madam Rosalie was trying not to laugh as she watched them.

"You are being ridiculous," Marinette grumbled, lunging for him again. All traces of her former embarrassment were gone. She stumbled when he twisted out of her way. "Get back here so I can swat you!"

"Oh my god, you're practically an old married couple already," one of the passing interns groused. Adrien recognized her as one of the people who had helped out at the wedding photoshoot. It took
a second for her words to sink in, and then both Adrien and Marinette flushed red.

"Don't tease them too much; the makeup people are supposed to drop by in a few minutes to match concealers and they can't do that if our models look like they've been turned into tomatoes." Madam Rosalie grinned at the two of them before dashing off again to make sure things were running smoothly elsewhere.

"They like teasing me," Marinette said with a sigh after a moment. Adrien turned back around to watch as she gave him a sheepish look. "Especially after the wedding thing. I'm sorry they're dragging you into it as well."

"It's fine," Adrien said, though his face was still flaming. "Hey, is that our rack of clothes?"

"It is!" Marinette said in delight as an unfamiliar woman rolled a rack down the middle of the aisle between the cubicles. "Oh, good, this won't take long then. I was worried it might."

"What do you have to do besides the fittings?" Adrien asked as the women left the rack next to them. "Are you in charge of packing things up?"

"Packing things up, checking them off, and loading things into the van to go over to our staging area in the backstage of the Fashion Week runway." Marinette pulled the rack into her cubicle, ushering Adrien in front of her. "Ready?"

Adrien nodded, setting down his coat and pulling off his shirt in one smooth motion. "Which outfit am I wearing first?"

"The green jacket," Marinette said, pulling the outfit off the hanger. "That's the first of your outfits, if I'm remembering correctly. Ah, yes- here's the order card. The green one's first-"

Marinette turned, caught sight of Adrien's chest, and froze.

"Like I said earlier, I don't think one tart is going to make me burst out of my runway clothes," Adrien said with a lopsided grin. He wasn't ripped, exactly- his muscles came from running and flipping around, not from lifting weights and doing pull-ups and push-ups- but he was lean and his muscles were obviously there. When Marinette's didn't respond, Adrien ran a hand through his hair sheepishly. Maybe he should have given her some warning. "Mari? You okay there?"

"Fine!" Marinette squeaked suddenly. "I'm fine- uh, the shirt!" She thrust it at him and Adrien took it, careful not to wrinkle the fabric. The pieces would no doubt get steamed or ironed once they got to the backstage area, but there was no point in creating extra work for the employees there. He shrugged the shirt on and buttoned it up quickly. Marinette flitted around him, tugging on the fabric and checking the fit. It was perfect, thankfully, so Marinette helped him into the jacket.

"Fits like a glove," Adrien said contentedly as Marinette triple-checked everything, giving little tugs here and there to make sure that things sat just right. "Good sign."

"Yeah, we have some great seamstresses," Marinette said as she dusted the jacket down and then started pulling it off of Adrien. "They're fabulous at alterations."

"You're the one who marked the alterations," Adrien reminded her. "Clearly you did a fabulous job as well, or they wouldn't have been able to do as well as they did." He started unbuttoning the buttons on the shirt as Marinette hung up the jacket. "One down, four to go."

They got past the second round of shirtlessness with only moderate blushing, and by the time Adrien shucked the last shirt (fitted to perfection, of course), Marinette's blush had mostly faded.
Of course, it was very possible (or, rather, very probable) that they would have the exact same problem when he had to change pants during the runway show, but that was a problem for another day. Besides, it was completely possible that Adrien might get assigned to a different dresser for the show itself.

"You're finished," Marinette announced, tossing Adrien's t-shirt back to him. "Or at least you're finished in here. I think the makeup artist is sitting near the stairs, and they probably have a hair stylist over there as well."

"Will you be long?" Adrien asked, pulling his shirt on and only further messing up his hair. He tried to smooth it into place, but gave up after a second. It wasn't like it mattered if his hair was in place or not, considering that the hair stylist would probably redo it entirely.

"I shouldn't be. You don't have to wait, though."

"I want to," Adrien said firmly, sending a smile in her direction. "I'll just leave my coat in here then, while I go check out makeup and hair."

"All right." Marinette was already busy carefully packing shirts, jackets, and pants into garment bags, double-checking the outfits against one of the style cards littering her desk. The back of the card had a photograph of the man Adrien could only assume was the injured model taped to it, showing the hairstyle and the makeup that had been picked out. Adrien would have to remember to ask for a photo of his own to replace the old one, or their work today would be for nothing.

Both makeup artist and stylist were right where Marinette had predicted they would be. It was a strange place- right in the middle of everything, and on a normal day there would be no way that they would be able to set up shop there without being in absolutely everyone's way- but it probably was so that the few models that were there could find it without any problem. They only had one person working on makeup and another single person doing hair and both seats were full, but it looked as though they were getting close to finished.

"Ah, you're the replacement I heard about!" The hair stylist called as Adrien approached. "Hang on a minute, we'll get to you soon."

Adrien nodded in acknowledgement and paused a few paces from the chairs, letting himself glance around the room. Emily was already leaving- she must have only had a couple looks to fit on her model- and the room had really gotten quiet. He wouldn't be surprised if he were the last model to finish fittings. After all, he had been a very last-minute replacement.

"All right, Adrien, come on up," the makeup artist called as the model that had previously been sitting in the chair got up and headed the few steps over to wait for hair to free up. "We'll get you done in a jiffy."

Adrien flashed him a smile and settled in the chair. He kept his eyes closed as the man flitted around him, applying foundation and concealer. A light dusting of powder was next. Adrien watched the makeup artist in the mirror as he highlighted Adrien's cheekbones and then applied a few things around Adrien's eyes, making them pop just a little more.

"That looks good, Adrien," Madam Rosalie said, appearing from the stairwell. "Did everything fit this time around?"

"Like a glove," Adrien assured her as the makeup artist stepped away to let Madam Rosalie inspect
his work. "Marinette is just getting everything put away now."

"Good, good." Madam Rosalie glanced around the empty area. "We'll be done here soon. Oh, and I was wondering, how do you want me to pay you for your work? My regular models all have accounts set up, of course, but it's hardly worth the effort for a one-time thing."

"Oh! You don't have to pay me," Adrien said quickly. To be perfectly honest, he hadn't even thought about it. His father had always had an account set up for him and his modelling wages went directly there whenever he modelled for Gabriel or was hired out on a photoshoot for another company. He really wasn't in need of the money from one runway show and really, he was just doing it for Marinette.

"Oh, but I must," Madam Rosalie insisted. "You are doing work for us, after all, and before I used you in the wedding ad without proper compensation or prior warning. If you try to argue, I will simply wire the payment to your father's secretary to direct into your account."

Adrien couldn't help but laugh. Madam Rosalie was certainly stubborn. "If it's not a problem, that would probably be easiest. I'm not entirely certain how to deposit checks in my account. Nathalie has always taken care of that before."

Madam Rosalie made a note on the tablet she held under her arm. "Very well. I'll do that by the end of next week. Have a good weekend, Adrien, and don't slack off on your skincare routine!"

"Have a good weekend!" Adrien called back as Madam Rosalie took off down the hallway.

"Hair is open," the makeup artist announced, drawing Adrien's attention back to him. "And your makeup is done. Don't forget to get your picture taken for the style card."

"Thank you," Adrien said, nodding politely to the man as he moved to the newly vacated chair. The hairstylist got to work on his hair right away, brushing it down before tugging it this way and that. Adrien knew full well that his hair was a bit longer than the hair on most male models and that could make it difficult to style in anything except his normal style. The stylist was experimentally pulling his hair back from his forehead, examining how he looked in the mirror with his hair pulled back tightly versus with a light swoop. Adrien let his eyes close as the man experimented with different variations of the hairstyle for a few minutes, going back to the same one more and more often. Satisfied at last, the stylist squeezed some gel onto his hands and started his work. Adrien sat like a statue until the stylist was finished.

"Your hair is a little longer than I would like, but it still looks good," the stylist said, taking a step back and regarding his work. "Uh, I don't know how long it's been since you've done a runway, since I know you're a sub, but don't forget to wash your hair either the night before or the morning of, and don't put any products in your hair-"

"Jeremy, that's Adrien Agreste," the makeup artist hissed to him. "I'm sure he knows how to prepare for a runway!"

Adrien pretended that he didn't notice as the stylist flushed. He flashed an easy smile for the styling card photo, and then he got sent on his way with the instant photo.

"Oh, good timing," Marinette said when Adrien reappeared in her cubicle. She had already packed everything up. Her eyes fell on the photo Adrien was holding and she reached for it. "Is that for the style card?"

"Yup." Adrien handed it over and then flashed a grin at Marinette. "No comments about how
The rest of the weekend went by in a flash. Adrien and Marinette went to the Science Museum and to the park. Marinette occasionally would get a far-off look in her eyes as she fretted over one thing or another, and then Adrien would have to pull her back before she could worry too much. They both enjoyed their weekend, and then it was Monday.

"At least Madam Rosalie's shows are all today," Adrien said as he and Marinette took an early bus over to the venue. They both had gone to bed early so that they would be wide awake for their five a.m. wakeup call. "Then it's over and done with and you can enjoy the other shows."

"She got lucky," Marinette admitted. "That, and her business is one of the larger ones in London, so they wanted well-known names on the first couple days. Normally she has her part of the show on Tuesday or Wednesday, but she's early this year. It's better for us, since then we can spend the rest of the week looking at other shows instead of only getting the tail end of the week like they did last year."

"Do you get passes for the other shows?" Adrien asked as the bus pulled over to pick up another person. "Because I did, and if you didn't, you can definitely get my passes for the shows you want to go to."

"All of the interns got passes," Marinette assured him. "Just like the regular employees. And then we have the whole week off once we get done with our show, since Madam Rosalie thinks that it's important that we be exposed to different styles for inspiration. I'm not interested in all of the shows, but there are a bunch that look interesting."

"Which ones aren't you interested in?" Adrien asked curiously as the new passenger boarded and the doors closed again.

"There's a couple smaller designers near the end of the week that...well, their aesthetics are kind of out there," Marinette said with a grimace. "And their clothes... well, apparently someone buys them, but I don't know who."

Adrien cackled at that. "Harsh," he commented, still snickering even as Marinette gave him a pout. "I don't think I've ever heard you say anything bad about anyone's designs before."

"I just don't understand their designs," Marinette said with a slight whine. "They aren't flattering, the patterns they use don't go together, and they just have weird proportions. And they're not even supposed to be avant-garde. They're supposed to be streetwear and they look absolutely ridiculous."

"I've very glad that my dad designs normal stuff," Adrien admitted as the bus approached their stop. "There are definitely some designs that I wouldn't have been comfortable modelling, especially when I was younger. I would have felt absolutely ridiculous and uncomfortable and the photos would have turned out awful." He paused to think about it for a second. "...actually, I would still feel absolutely ridiculous and uncomfortable with a lot of those pieces.

"Yeah," Marinette said, and then she yawned. Adrien watched with some amusement as she
struggled to close her mouth again.

"Maybe I should go get coffee for you," Adrien suggested as the bus pulled over at their stop. He got up and then pulled Marinette to her feet before grabbing his bag and handing Marinette her own purse. "Models don't need to arrive for another half hour. There's a shop a block over that looks like it should be good."

"That would be great," Marinette admitted as they left the bus and stepped down onto the sidewalk. "I'm sure I'll wake up eventually, but right now it's dark outside and my brain is saying that it's sleepy time."

Adrien laughed.

It took a little longer than Adrien had anticipated to get coffee- apparently more than a few designers had had the same idea and sent interns or relatives to go grab a cup for them- but once he got Marinette's regular order, Adrien speedwalked back to the closest Fashion Week backstage entrance.

"Aren't you getting one for yourself?" Plagg asked as Adrien walked. The kwami squirmed, pushing his head partway out of Adrien's jacket. "Aren't you tired, too?"

"Drinking coffee before runway shows makes me jittery and ill. I'd rather not go through this feeling like I need to throw up." Adrien rounded the corner, poking Plagg back into his pocket as he did so nobody would see him. "By the time our runway show starts I'll be awake."

"D'you think that the model you replaced had any other designers he was walking for?"

Adrien paused for a moment, thinking. He knew full well that other models sometimes- no, not sometimes, often- walked for multiple designers. They couldn't do sequential shows, since hair had to be re-styled and makeup washed off and redone and all of that took time, but more than one a day and several over the course of a week wasn't at all uncommon. The model probably had left several designers scrambling for a fill-in, but at this point they had probably all found someone or dropped the looks completely.

"Probably," Adrien told Plagg, continuing on his way towards the door. "Not my problem, though. I want to be able to sit back and-"

"Enjoy the other shows with your wife, I know, I know," Plagg drawled. He cackled, knowing full well Adrien couldn't retaliate with other people around. Adrien contented himself with a brief scowl before he flashed his backstage pass at the door guards and entered the bustling area. There were frantic designers ordering people around, hair stylists and makeup artists setting up their stations, models swarming around, people with regular and video cameras dodging back and forth between the madness...

Wait. What?

Adrien frowned and headed forward, dodging a few more photographers. He'd seen people taking pictures backstage before- there were always some artful pictures of models getting their hair done and lining up to walk that ended up in the paper after the Paris Fashion Week- but never in this number. There were definitely some reporters as well, and some of them were ones Adrien recognized as being from tabloids. Nerves suddenly surged into his stomach.

He wouldn't trust those kinds of people to watch his bag for three minutes. He definitely didn't trust them to not snap a picture of him when he was in the middle of changing and then immediately
"Maybe they'll clear out once the show starts," Plagg suggested. "It'll be more interesting out there compared to in here, after all."

"I hope so," Adrien said. He rolled up onto his toes, searching for Madam Rosalie's section of the backstage. It didn't take long to find- since Madam Rosalie had her shows in the morning, it was already bustling- and then Adrien was making a beeline for it. He spotted Marinette as he ducked to avoid a camera, so he waved to her until she spotted him. His footsteps picked up as he practically jogged over to meet her.

"What's with all of the photographers back here?" Adrien asked with a frown as soon as he reached Marinette. It was just strange. And then his eye caught on another strange thing- dark curtains hanging over the entrances to the dressing areas. "And the curtains? What's going on?"

"Somebody's doing a documentary of Fashion Week and wanted backstage footage," Marinette said with a sigh. "And since they're all over and there might be a few people in here that we don't trust, we got curtains to put up to protect our models' privacy while they change."

That was a relief. But... "Doesn't that sort of defeat the purpose of a documentary?" Adrien asked. "If they can't see what's going on?"

"Some of the other presenters were fine with it. Madam Rosalie thought that the photographers would get underfoot. The hair and makeup area is open to reporters, but not the changing area. They're supposed to be getting shots of people lining up and whatnot anyway, not pictures of people getting dressed." Marinette shrugged. "And it makes our models more comfortable. They're fine changing in front of other people, they just don't want to, y'know..."

"Have it immortalized on tape," Adrien finished. That was very much how he felt. He was very grateful that Madam Rosalie had taken the models' feelings into account. From what he had heard before, there were some designers that sort of assumed that models were meant to be comfortable with anything- including his own father, at least when Adrien wasn't the model in question. Maybe it was just how Adrien was raised, but in his experience, that was not how models felt.

"Adrien, there's a chair open in hair right now," Madam Rosalie called over the noise of the backstage. "Drop your things over here and go there right away, if you would."

"I can take your stuff," Marinette offered, holding out her arms. "I need to get over to the dressing areas, after all."

Adrien handed her coffee to her first, then set his bag down on the floor so he could shed his jacket. He caught sight of Plagg diving into a pocket, presumably to sleep for several more hours, as he set the jacket down on top of his bag. He handed both to Marinette and headed off, preparing to be prodded and poked for the next few hours.

Yeah, he hadn't missed this at all.

As Adrien was getting the last touches done on his makeup, Madam Rosalie showed up again. She
was carrying her tablet again and was directing models to workers and interns alike to get dressed. Adrien suddenly felt nervous—he only knew a couple of Marinette's coworkers, what would he do if he didn't recognize the name of his dresser? It had happened before at one of his father's shows and it had been downright embarrassing. He had been left standing around like an idiot, looking around for someone who looked like they might be looking for him.

"Ah, Adrien! That look really suits you." Madam Rosalie appeared by his side, grinning as she took in his appearance. She gave his shoulder a pat. "I came over to tell you that your dresser is Marinette. She's the one who did your fittings, so she's the most familiar with your outfits." She smiled at him and then bounded off to chase down a senior designer before Adrien could say anything.

"Isn't that your friend?" the makeup artist asked. The older woman looked puzzled. "Normally Madam Rosalie doesn't let friends and couples work together for runway shows. They end up getting distracted and giggling together."

"It's probably since I've only ever worked with Marinette," Adrien said, but that sounded lame even to his ears. He had worked as a model for nearly all of his life; even if he had only worked with Marinette at Madam Rosalie's company, he was no stranger to being dressed by people he had met only minutes before. Madam Rosalie would know that. Marinette had no doubt dressed other people before. There really was no reason to treat him differently from any other model.

Shaking himself, Adrien got out of the makeup chair, thanking the artist before he headed to the dressing area. He didn't miss the way several camera-toting reporters suddenly caught sight of him, whispering among themselves as they swung their cameras to follow him.

Yeah, he was definitely glad that Madam Rosalie had invested in the curtains.

Marinette was adjusting a long, embroidered coat over another model's shoulders when Adrien spotted her. He trotted over, dodging around other models in the middle of getting dressed. A seamstress was hurrying for one of the already-dressed male models, needle and thread in her hand. Something must have torn already.

"Runway in half an hour, everyone!" someone called, and Adrien jumped. Was it really already nearly time to start? He had known that he had had to wait for forever to get a chair in makeup and teasing his hair into just the right hairstyle had taken a bit, but clearly it had taken longer than he had thought. He and Mari had arrived around six thirty—well, a bit after for him, because of the coffee run—and it was already nearly nine.

At least his portion of the runway would be over soon.

The other model stepped away from Marinette with a nod, heading towards the dressing area to join the queue of dressed models outside. Adrien trotted forward to join Marinette before any other models that might be assigned to her could take up her time.

"Hey, Adrien!" Marinette said, beaming up at him as he joined her. "So I hear I'm your dresser for the day?"

"Yup." Adrien started unbuttoning his shirt as Marinette reached for the rack, triple-checking the order card before pulling the first dress shirt off of its hanger. He set the shirt aside and reached down to untie his shoes and pull off his socks before tugging on the socks that Madam Rosalie had provided. Marinette pulled the button-up onto Adrien and started doing it up for him, fingers flying as she worked.
"Yo, Agreste, are you wearing the right kind of underthings this time around, or do we need to go run another errand?" Emily called over to them, making both Adrien and Marinette blush. Several other models glanced over at them curiously, either because of the comment or because they had recognized Adrien's last name.

"Don't you worry about it, Emily," Marinette called back, recovering before Adrien did. "Keep your eyes on your own models."

"How am I supposed to do that when your model is so pretty?" Emily teased, wriggling her eyebrows at Adrien. She smirked when he only blushed more and opened her mouth to say more when a senior designer cut her off.

"Focus on your work, everyone! Now is not the time to be messing around!"

"Thank god for Mrs. Kelly," Marinette said with a sigh as she took the pants off of the hanger and turned to Adrien. He watched her for a second, confused, then realized that she was waiting for him to shed his jeans. He fumbled for the button and then undid the zipper, kicking his way out of his jeans before quickly pulling on the pants Marinette was offering him. They fit perfectly-not that he had ever been worried about it, even with the cookies and the almond tart. He pulled on his shoes, and then Marinette was pulling on his jacket and straightening it with a few sharp tugs before sending him on his way.

More workers steered Adrien into his place in the line of models. Stylists and makeup artists prowled up and down the line, checking people's looks against their style cards. Several workers, done dressing models with their first looks, waited nearby to move a curtained off changing tent closer to the runway entrance. Others stood nearby with racks of clothing, labelled with numbers and models' names.

It was very organized, but there was so much going on that it felt deceivingly chaotic.

The show before theirs ended, and their models were shuttled away as the lighting and music were reset. There was a short break, and then the line of models was moving forward, ready to start walking. Madam Rosalie bustled past, and then a minute later Adrien could hear her voice, muffled by the walls, introducing the first part of her show. There was applause, the music started, and one by one models were sent out onto the runway.

Adrien was fifth in line, and he took a deep breath before heading out. It really had been forever since his last runway show and he definitely was feeling a little nervous. He reminded himself that people wouldn't be looking at him, they were looking at the clothes. Most people in London probably wouldn't even be that likely to recognize him. There was no need to feel nervous.

He stepped onto the runway.

The light blinded him for a moment but he couldn't flinch, couldn't turn away. All he could do was keep walking forward until finally, finally the light gave way to a more reasonable level so Adrien could actually see where he was going. He strode forward confidently, mentally counting his paces and trying not to hurry too much.

A powerwalk was one thing, looking like he was trying to escape was another.

Adrien paused at the end of the catwalk, doing a couple poses so the photographers there could get their shots, and then spun and headed back up the walk, passing a model going in the opposite direction. He paused again to pose at the top of the runway before exiting.
"All right, next outfit!" Suddenly Marinette was right there, guiding Adrien to the curtained-off changing area that had been hastily pushed into place. There weren't individual rooms for each model—doing so would take too much time and would just add another layer of unnecessary confusion—but at least it kept them from the prying eyes of the press and their cameras.

"This is insane," Marinette breathed as Adrien shucked his shirt and pulled on the one she was offering. She hung the first one on a hanger and added it to the rack of clothes that had already walked before grabbing the pants and jacket that were supposed to go with the shirt. Her eyes flicked to the ceiling as Adrien dropped his pants (that was never going to stop being awkward) and then returned to him once he pulled on the new set. She tugged in his shirt neatly while Adrien pulled the jacket on (more awkward, and they still had to do this three more times), and then she was adjusting the jacket and fixing his hair before shoving him back into line and reaching for the next model to help. A makeup artist made sure nothing had smeared (it hadn't) and that Adrien wasn't sweating too much (not yet), and then he was right back out onto the runway.

He definitely hadn't missed doing this. Nope, not at all, definitely not.

With the next round, the makeup artist had to blot away a bit of sweat on Adrien's brow and the hair stylists had to spray a chunk of his hair back into place before he went back out. The last two changes went smoothly, and then Marinette was helping him track down his street clothes to change back into so she could pack everything up to get back to their building. They still had another runway—men's fashion had been before women's fashion, and Madam Rosalie had opted to have a space between them since there were so many pieces for each—so Marinette would still be working for a bit.

"Do you want me to go pick up sandwiches?" Adrien asked as he buttoned up his own shirt and straightened it almost automatically before reaching for his bag and jacket. "I have a backstage pass since I'm a model, I can leave and come back in just fine."

Marinette bit her lip. "We aren't supposed to eat near the dresses, but..." She looked really tempted.

"I shouldn't, really."

"Take a short break and eat away from the clothes, then," Adrien suggested, frowning when he heard Marinette's stomach growl. He was pretty certain that she hadn't had much for breakfast and while neither had he (it wouldn't do for a model to eat too much and look bloated on the runway), he at least could leave now and eat anything he wanted. Marinette didn't have that luxury. "You won't be working to your full potential if you start getting dizzy from hunger. And have you filled your water bottle recently?"

"I've been meaning to," Marinette said, biting her lip. "But it seems that I can't step away from the staging area, even for a moment."

"Give me your bottle, then, and I'll fill it and bring it back to you before I get sandwiches." Adrien knew full well how focused Marinette could get and how she could forget to take care of herself when she was on a roll. It kind of reminded him of how Alya got when she was reporting on him and Ladybug—no consideration for eating, or time, or even danger. "Then you don't have to step away and you won't get dehydrated. You won't be able to enjoy all of the other shows if you're feeling bad."

"You're the best, Adrien," Marinette said with a grateful smile. She reached behind herself and grabbed a pale pink water bottle off of the shelf. "I don't know where a fountain might be, though."

"I'll find something," Adrien promised, taking the bottle. He checked his coat to make sure he still had his wallet and backstage pass (and Plagg, who was somehow still sleeping despite the noise).
He looped the pass around his neck. "I'll be right back."

As it turned out, it wasn't hard at all to find a water fountain. All Adrien had to do was ask one of the security people wandering around and he got pointed in the right direction. He noticed with no small amount of irritation that he had a photographer following him, snapping photos of Adrien as he refilled the water bottle.

...well, somebody obviously had to get a life.

He was tailed all the way back to Madam Rosalie's area. Adrien breathed out a sigh of relief as he ducked behind the curtain into the dressing area and finally lost the photographer. He really hated paparazzi taking pictures of him when he was out doing normal things and just living his life. He could understand it when he was modelling or out doing appearances with his father, but for anything else? It was just invasive and rude.

The dressing area had been reset rather quickly. The racks of men's looks had been pushed to the back and covered, and the women's looks brought out and set up. The first of the female models were already coming in from hair and makeup, ready to be dressed. Adrien spotted Marinette near the back, steering what looked to be the last rack of clothing into place along the wall.

"I got your bottle," Adrien announced as soon as Marinette got the rack where she wanted it and had a moment to breathe. He handed the pink bottle over as soon as Marinette turned to him. "What kind of sandwich do you want?"

"Something light," Marinette said as she went back to the area that was apparently her station. Adrien followed. "I know I'm not the one going out there and presenting or anything, but I'm still jittery and I don't think anything heavy would help."

"Okay. Any other requirements?"

"Not messy, definitely." Marinette said after a moment's consideration. "I don't want to be spilling on anything. So no sauces."

"A veggie wrap then, perhaps?" Adrien suggested. "And something a touch more filling for after you've finished?"

"That would be perfect," Marinette said with a grin. She jumped as another model entered the room. "Oh, I need to go! The models are going to start coming in en masse soon."

"Don't get too stressed," Adrien called over his shoulder as he turned to leave the area. He found himself having to dodge around several entering models to avoid running into them, and then he was weaving his way through the milling crowd, trying to avoid anyone he might know— or, more likely, to avoid people who knew of him and who might want to try to strike up a conversation that would eventually lead to them trying to worm their way into getting a job with his father. It took nearly ten minutes to reach the door, and then Adrien found himself barely inching along on crowded sidewalks. Fashion fans from all over the city and beyond were hanging around the building, trying to catch a glance of designers, celebrities, and models.

Adrien winced and wished he had thought to bring along a pair of sunglasses and a hat. They weren't much of a disguise, but his styled bright blond hair had a tendency to catch people's attention.

It took nearly half an hour for Adrien to fight his way to the sandwich shop and then order wraps for himself and Marinette. He got four instead of two, since both he and Marinette would no doubt
be ravenous again come mid-afternoon but would be far too busy to go out again to get more food
to eat, and he picked up a couple apples and a handful of cookies as well. Fighting his way back to
the backstage door took even longer, which meant that Madam Rosalie's last show would already
be wrapping up. That was a pity- he had rather hoped to see some of Marinette's creations walking-
but he had foreseen this happening and had set his TV to record all of the Fashion Week shows that
were being televised. They could watch them together later, when things weren't quite so frantic.
Adrien ate his first wrap while he walked, partly because he was hungry and partly because he
knew he might end up helping put things away while Marinette ate. He tucked a few bits of cheese
into his jacket for Plagg on the way.

The crowds inside seemed positively light after the absolute mountain of people outside, and
Adrien breathed out a sigh of relief as he strode forward. He hated moving along at a snail's pace
and even though he had to dodge all kinds of people in the backstage area, it was already eons
better.

As Adrien had predicted, Madam Rosalie's show was finishing up and the models were heading
back to the changing area to get back into their streetwear. He had to stand back and wait as
models streamed past, first in their last runway looks and then in the opposite direction, wearing
whatever they had come in. Some were wearing their coats- evidently they were done for the day-
while others hurried off to other areas of the backstage to join other designers. Adrien patiently
waited as the stream of models turned into a trickled before he entered the dressing room.

"Hey, Agreste is back," Emily called as she tucked a dress into a garment bag. "Marinette!"

"Hey, Adrien!" Marinette called. She was sitting on the floor, surrounded by a pile of shoes and
shoe boxes. "Over here!"

"You look busy," Adrien said with a grin as he joined her. "That's a lot of shoes."

"No kidding. I just finished doing all of the men's shoes." Marinette leaned back on her hands with
a sigh. "But we need to get this space cleared out soon so another designer can set up."

"I can do that while you eat," Adrien offered. He plopped down on the ground and reached for a
pair of shoes. The models had at least managed to keep their shoes together instead of tangling
them in a giant pile. Most of them had about the same size feet, so it was no big problem to find a
box for the size six shoes he held.

Marinette looked torn. "I should really finish this first..."

"Then I'll just help you finish this faster," Adrien decided. He reached for another pair of shoes and
boxed them, starting a pile next himself of boxed shoes. With the two of them working, the pile of
shoes dwindled and vanished in almost no time. The packed boxes then went onto a cart, which
they rolled out to the waiting van, and only then could Marinette eat her wrap.

"Are all of the racks packed up?" Marinette asked mid-bite.

"Yes, the last one just got rolled away," Adrien assured her. "We're good. They're taking down the
curtains and the signs now, see?" He grinned. "Anyone would think that you're the one running the
show with the amount you're stressing yourself out."

Marinette huffed out a laugh and let herself relax against his side as she ate. "I just want to do a
good job. I really want to have Madam Rosalie as a reference for future jobs, and if I even want to
consider asking for an extension of my internship, I can't accidentally run off and not finish helping
clean up after a show."
"You're good, everything is cleaned up," Adrien assured her. "But if you want to get into the next show, it starts in fifteen minutes and we probably want to get up there soon before all of the seats are gone."

Marinette nodded and took another bite. As she ate, Adrien guided her towards the audience entrance with one hand on her back. She finished eating just as they reached the door and were ushered inside.

"I feel like I should have dressed up more," Marinette said a little breathlessly as an usher pointed them to a couple of the few remaining seats. "All of these famous designers here..."

"But it would have been hard to dress people as fast as you did if you were wearing a fancy dress," Adrien finished. "Maybe you can dress up more on other days. Do you have outfits in mind?"

"Oh, yes. I picked them out forever ago." Marinette reached the seats and scooted into the row, leaving Adrien in the aisle seat. He settled next to her. "Two skirt and shirt combos and three dresses. I would have brought more, but there was only so much I could fit in my suitcase."

"Have I seen them before?"

Marinette shook her head. "No. I've been saving them for special events."

"I'll do your hair," Adrien volunteered. "One of the stylists at my dad's company taught me how to do some stuff last year and I'm not awful at it."

That got a giggle out of Marinette as she shifted to a more comfortable position in her chair. "Such enthusiasm over your own talents. You aren't awful at it."

Adrien just shrugged and grinned. He wasn't bad at all, really, but he wasn't going to claim that he was good and then make a fool of himself in front of Marinette when he screwed up a braid because he'd forgotten how to do it.

The lights dimmed and the audience quieted. The next presenting designer stepped out on the runway to introduce his line, and Adrien sat back in his chair, letting his mind and eyes wander. He had never been particularly interested in the stories behind runway lines, mostly because he never could quite see the connection. Marinette seemed enthralled, though, and she had already pulled out her sketchbook and opened it to a blank page, ready in case she was hit by a burst of inspiration. Adrien watched her as the music started and the first looks stepped onto the runway. Marinette's face had always been so expressive, and now was no exception. Adrien could tell when she was interested by a look, and it was equally obvious when she was bored or unimpressed by a piece. Twice she was clearly inspired by something, and for a few frantic seconds she scribbled in her sketchbook, trying to capture the piece or drawing her own variation on it.

"That was great," Marinette breathed as the show ended and the lights came back on. She turned to Adrien with a grin. "Wasn't that fabulous? I really liked the sixth look, and that skirt with all of the shimmery embroidery on it, that was really great. The way it caught the light was just fabulous."

...Adrien could not honestly say that he 100% knew which looks Marinette was talking about. He had been a little distracted. He had glanced out at the runway a few times, of course, but.

Well.

He'd been to more than a few runway shows before. He had been around fashion for ages. He could enjoy it- he did enjoy it- but watching someone else who got so absorbed by the show was just so much more enjoyable than paying strict attention to the runway itself.
"You don't have to come to the shows with me if you don't want to, Adrien," Marinette said after a too-long moment of silence on his end. "I know you've been to runway shows since forever and this is your break, so if you want to be doing something else-"

"I want to go to the shows," Adrien assured her hastily. "I do enjoy them, really. You were just so into it that I got distracted."

Marinette flushed bright red, which Adrien didn't quite understand. "Distracted? B-by me?"

"You're very expressive when you're focused. It's fun to watch." She stuck her tongue out of the side of her mouth when she got really focused, just like he sometimes did. Adrien was willing to bet that he probably didn't look half as cute when he did that. Plagg had always told him that he looked like a dweeb when he stuck out his tongue while focusing.

"R-really?"

"Yup." Adrien grinned at the expression on her face. When she just continued to stare, Adrien's grin dropped. "I can stop if you don't want me staring. I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

Marinette jumped and blinked, then shook her head. "No, no, it's fine. I just didn't expect it."

"You sure?"

"Positive." Marinette shifted in her seat, biting her lip. Adrien was going to ask her if she was positive that she was positive when her eyes shifted to the Fashion Week schedule that was sitting on her open notebook. "But are you sure you really want to spend your whole break watching fashion shows?"

Adrien grinned. So that was what Marinette was worried about. "It's not my whole break. I had last weekend, and then next weekend, and if there are any chunks of time when there aren't any shows or presentations that you want to see, we could wander around the city or something. Besides, I wouldn't really be doing anything if I wasn't hanging with you."

"I think Friday afternoon should be free," Marinette said, examining the schedule she held. She struck out a couple events right away. "I should look up these designers tonight. I know what I want to see today, but I'm not 100% certain about the rest of the week."

"That's fine," Adrien assured her. "Just don't, y'know, forget that we do need to find time to eat at some point during the day. I know there's a lot to see, but I'm not going to carry you around if you pass out of hunger. Speaking of which-" he dug in his bag and brought out two more sandwiches. "Want anything to eat before the next show starts?"

Marinette positively lit up. "You're the best, Adrien!"

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Please review, it really makes my day :) (also aaaaaay I wasn't late getting this out! My computer has been in the shop for the last three days and I wasn't positive that I was going to get it back today or not. But it is back and the fans actually work now without sounding like drones huzzah)
Quick note about updates over the holidays- I'm going to be at my grandma's house for, like, a week, and I don't actually know if she has working internet or not (she used to share with her neighbor, who just died this past fall, and she has definitely complained about having issues with the internet since then). If not, then I'll just try to post as soon as I get home.
As it turned out, the dresses weren't the only things that the tabloids noticed. There were more than a few pictures of Adrien and Marinette at Fashion Week popping up in the racks in the grocery check-out lines. Some were taken out of context- seemingly intimate photos of Marinette standing close to Adrien and adjusting his lapels before he went on the runway, him giving her encouraging pats on the shoulder, both of them ducking into the changing rooms. The headlines made him blush- Model gets cozy with intern and Romance behind the scenes at London Fashion Week? and Agreste heir finds love?. When Adrien worked up the courage to flip to the article while they waited in line at the grocery check-out, he could tell that more than a little attention had been paid to the fact that he was a last-minute sub in the show. There was a lot of speculation about why the other model had been replaced by him, and most of it involved claims that his father had disowned him (insert photo of his father looking angry, Adrien suspected that they hadn't had to look particularly hard for that kind of picture), so he needed money for his "rebellious" dash to freedom in a physics program in London and his "girlfriend" had set him up with a modelling contract so he could pay for a lifestyle that would no doubt continue spiraling downwards with more rebellious acts such as drinking, smoking, and partying hard.

Yeah, it was a bit of a stretch, especially when they could have done a bit of research and found that the other model was still laid up with a broken leg.

"Oh, there's the wedding photoshoot pictures," Marinette said as they cooked dinner together that evening, and Adrien looked up to see Marinette looking through another magazine. Her colleagues (and Madam Rosalie) had found and bought pretty much every tabloid that had mentioned them and had come stampeding over earlier that afternoon to offload them on Marinette. According to her, they had been grinning deviously when they presented the giant pile to her. "This one's claiming we secretly eloped and used the photoshoot as a cover so your father wouldn't find out."

Adrien snorted and paged through his own magazine. rolling his eyes at the ridiculous jumps in logic that the writers were making. He could see how writers might have thought that he was dating someone if he showed up with a girl on his arm out of the blue, but Marinette had been his friend for forever. It was hardly strange for him to hang out with a friend.

As expected, Adrien got called by his father later that night. Gabriel wasn't furious, which made Adrien guess that Nathalie had already done some damage control (he owed her, like, a dozen boxes of gourmet chocolates), but he wasn't happy that Adrien had ended up in one tabloid, never mind nearly a dozen.

"Like I told you before, the previous model was injured and I just happened to be the right size and walk into the building about ten minutes after they got the call that he wouldn't be able to make it," Adrien explained. "So that's why they didn't call the agency up. And of course I couldn't say no, Madam Rosalie is a friend of yours and mom's, and Marinette is my friend. I couldn't just leave them hanging."

"Yes, yes, I know that," Gabriel said impatiently. Adrien could hear the sound of his father's fingers tapping impatiently on his desk on the other end of the line. "The pre-runway show photos I can understand easily enough. But then they have pictures of you and the girl attached at the hip during the rest of Fashion Week. Arriving together, walking around to presentations together, sitting together during runway shows-"
"It is customary for people to spend time together when they're friends," Adrien said dryly, trying to not let too much sarcasm slip into his voice. "I don't really know people there, and Marinette couldn't really track down her coworkers in the crowd. Besides, we enjoy hanging out with each other."

Gabriel snorted. "They have photos of you wrapping your suit jacket around Marinette and then practically hanging all over her. And kissing her, no less."

"On the cheek," Adrien clarified helpfully. He frowned slightly- he hadn't spotted that photo. It must have been in one of the magazines that he hadn't looked through yet.

There was silence on the other end of the line.

"The show area was a bit on the chilly side Thursday morning," Adrien explained, figuring that this was no time to joke around. Of course, with his father, there was really never a good time to joke around. "Marinette was shivering and the button-up I was wearing under my suit jacket was on the heavy side, so I gave her the jacket. And then I was a little cold, so cuddling was an obvious choice."

There was a long, exasperated sigh on his father's end of the line. "And the kiss?"

"We're French. Cheek kisses are a thing that exists." He and Marinette had been messing around, teasing each other before the runway show started. Marinette had been pretending to complain about Adrien hanging all over her and so he had nuzzled her neck in retaliation before pressing a friendly kiss to her cheek. She had only laughed more and pushed him away with a finger on his nose. It had been fun at the time, being able to tease each other freely like he often did with Ladybug when he was Chat Noir, but maybe Adrien should have known that there would be photographers nearby who weren't only interested in the clothes.

It was a pain being semi-famous, really. There had been a duo straight-up making out before one of the shows a few rows behind them and they hadn't had their pictures splashed all over the tabloids, yet a little cuddling on Adrien's part and suddenly it was some kind of Big Deal.

Gabriel let out a long, exasperated sigh. "You know that's not the way the tabloids saw it. You aren't a child anymore; you need to consider how others might interpret your actions. I suppose there's no real way to prevent the tabloids from twisting things, but do at least try to keep from doing anything that would give them real ammunition."

Adrien was sorely tempted to say "aww, so I'm not allowed to spiral into a life of drinking, smoking, and partying hard?" but he suspected that his father probably wouldn't be particularly amused.

"Of course," Adrien said instead.

"You may get approached by gossip 'reporters' because of these pieces." The disdain in Gabriel's voice was clear. "Nathalie is sending you a list of ones that won't twist your words quite as much as others will. You only need to talk with one to get things straightened out."

Personally, Adrien didn't particularly care if things got straightened out. It wasn't as though the tabloids were trying to say hurtful things about him- Marinette was his friend, after all, and anyone would be lucky to date her- and it wasn't as thought their words actually affected his life. Still, it was probably better just to do what his father wanted. If his father wanted him to give the tabloids the real story and explain that he and Marinette were just friends, then that was what he would do. They could save the snuggling for movie nights in their apartment when they didn't have other
people over.

(Plagg would still tease him about it, but it was better than getting a lecture from his father.)

"Is he angry?" Marinette asked as the call ended and Adrien set his phone down with a sigh. She wandered back into the living room and flopped down to join him on the couch. "The articles weren't your fault."

"He's not happy, that's for sure," Adrien said with a grimace. "He said that he understood the pictures that were during the run-up to Madam Rosalie's runway show, but all of the ones during the rest of Fashion Week..."

"But those were just of us sitting together, right? That's normal friend stuff."

"They got pictures of me giving you my jacket." A pause. "And pictures from when we were messing around and I was hanging all over you."

Marinette groaned at that.

"But I don't know why they're making such a big deal out of it," Adrien said, frowning. "Friends hang out. Friends hug each other." He caught Marinette making a slight face and he frowned. "Don't they?"

"The hugging...it depends, really," Marinette said slowly. "I mean, Alya and I hug each other all the time. Some people don't."

"Is it weird?"

"To some people it is," Marinette admitted, shrugging. "Some people aren't very touchy. You're very touchy."

Adrien frowned in confusion and tugged Marinette over so she would be sitting right next to him on the couch, practically curled up against his side. "Touchy? Like, oversensitive? What does that have to do with the photos?"

"No, no, not touchy like oversensitive. Handsy would be a better word, I guess. You like having your hands on people."

"No I don't," Adrien argued, draping his arm over Marinette's shoulders to tug her even closer and arrange her against his side. "My parents raised me to be a perfect gentleman. I keep my hands to myself."

Marinette raised an eyebrow at him. Adrien raised his eyebrows right back until Marinette glanced down at his arm, still hanging over her shoulder. He blinked, then groaned, pulling his arm away. Marinette laughed and pulled it right back before he could go too far.

"I don't mind, really," Marinette said as she settled his arm back into place. "It's nice. But did you seriously not realize that you do that all the time?"

"Do I really?" Adrien asked, completely dismayed. He hadn't even noticed. "Shoot, I didn't mean to get up in strangers' personal bubbles-"

"Oh, you don't do it to strangers," Marinette assured him hastily, patting his hand reassuringly. "Like, maybe there's the occasional shoulder touch with people you kind of know, but it's not like you go around cuddling random people on the bus all the time."
"You don't know that I don't," Adrien teased, relieved that she wasn't bothered by it. "I take the bus to and from school every day by myself. You don't know what I might do during those rides."

"You guzzle down something with caffeine on the way to your classes and review your notes on the way home," Marinette said, grinning as she poked his side, making him squirm. "Don't tell me you don't."

That was actually...surprisingly accurate. He didn't review his notes on the bus, but he did try to take a chunk out of his assigned readings while heading back after his classes were over. He had had conversations with people on the bus a couple times, mostly when there were fellow classmates he recognized on the same bus or when someone talked to him first, but for the most part he kept to himself or tried to hold a hushed conversation with Plagg.

"Have you been spying on me?" Adrien teased, giving Marinette's shoulders another little tug. "Because that's what it sounds like to me."

"No, you're just predictable."

"Oh, shush. I am not." At least, he was pretty sure that he wasn't. A thought struck him, and he grimaced. "I bet the people at school won't think so, not after all the tabloids. So much for people not knowing who I am here."

Paul was smirking when Adrien walked into his second class of the day on Monday and Adrien found himself repressing a groan.

"You look like that cat that ate the canary," Adrien informed him as he set his bag down on the desk. "Stop smirking, it's disturbing."

"I don't know if I can," Paul said smugly. "You see, I was grocery shopping this weekend and happened upon this most interesting magazine."

Yeah, Adrien could definitely see where this was going. Fabulous.

With a grin, Paul brought out one of the tabloid magazines that had gotten Adrien in trouble. "See, I didn't hear that you were going to be doing Fashion Week! Someone kept that a secret- well, until his face was plastered to every magazine at the end of the grocery lane. My sister was heartbroken to hear that you were apparently already married."

"Oh, is that the story that they're trying to sell with that one?" He vaguely remembered seeing something along those lines in the magazines he and Marinette had gotten. He had stopped paying attention after the first few. Plagg could probably recite the articles of by heart; the small god had been delighted by the pile of magazines that Marinette's coworkers had brought over and once Marinette was gone, he had settled in to read every last one of them. Adrien wouldn't be surprised if Plagg started quoting bits of the articles soon, just to be annoying.

Paul laughed, flipping through the pages of the magazine. "That's what it seems like. You have to admit, it does seem a little suspicious, with those wedding pictures. Even I could tell that there was something different with that photoshoot."
"If you say so." Adrien certainly didn't see it; after all, the photos had turned out lovely and everyone ended up looking very natural. Sure, it had a variety of body types, but Adrien was fairly sure that that was on-trend right now. Besides, they chose the interns that they did based on who fit the dressed Madam Rosalie had on hand. They had been planning to have variety in the photoshoot anyway.

Besides, the runway switch-out that that the tabloids were currently throwing such a fit over? Things happened to models all the time and replacements were hardly uncommon. Designers normally had a little more warning when a switch was needed, but the switches themselves weren't that unusual. His father usually had at least one model switch per runway show, usually two or three. Considering that that was higher than the industry average, Adrien suspected that the high turnover rate of their models probably had something to do with his father's demanding personality and harsh criticisms.

"You know, I've never really been one to read gossip magazines before, but if you showing up in them is gonna be a regular occurrence I might just have to do it more often." Paul smirked at the look on Adrien's face. "What? I'm just saying. This is absolutely hilarious, and the others are just as good."

"Please don't tell me that you decided to actually buy more than one of those magazines."

"My younger sister bought them," Paul said cheerfully, pulling out another magazine and waving it at Adrien. "Well, she and her friends. And then my mother confiscated them because she said they were trash rags, and then I got them from her for teasing purposes."

"Marinette's coworkers practically buried her under all of the magazines and articles they could find about us," Adrien admitted. From what he had heard by text from Marinette this morning, it sounded like her coworkers were trying to make a scrapbook with every tabloid article and picture in it. It would be funny if it weren't so embarrassing. "And then the daily paper apparently had a section devoted to daily sightings of celebrities and for some reason they included Marinette and I-"

"And did a daily update on you two being spotted together, I know," Paul said, still snickering. "I was going to text you and ask if you knew about it, but then I figured that the two of you would probably get all stiff and weird around each other if you knew people were watching you. And then it wouldn't have been quite as amusing."

"Thank you, you're so considerate," Adrien said dryly. Paul was right- he would have probably tried to put a little more space between himself and Marinette and he definitely wouldn't have done the snuggling and the kiss on the cheek had he known that people were apparently watching them- and while it wouldn't have been as fun, it would make trying to explain things during any interviews easier. As things stood, any interviewers would probably think that he was trying to hide a secret relationship because of the faux-wrestling and cheek kiss.

"I think I would get along with Marinette's coworkers," Paul decided as he tucked the magazines away. "If they're teasing the two of you, they're good in my books. Are they putting together a CD or anything of all of the times they showed the two of you together on TV?"

Adrien froze. All the times they showed him and Marinette on TV? "What?"

"I mean, mostly it was short clips of the two of you milling around looking at things or sitting waiting for the runway shows to start, but-"

"Did they have clips of us watching the runway?" If they did, that could be bad. Adrien had had his
arm thrown around Marinette's shoulders for more than a couple shows, and then if they had any clips of him watching Marinette as she watched the runway...

Yeah, those looks could definitely be misinterpreted.

"No, they were a little more focused on the clothes, oddly enough," Paul drawled a bit sarcastically. "And from what I could tell, it was perhaps a little too dark in the rest of the room to be bothering with trying to record people's expressions. Why, were you up to something?"

"No, no, dark lighting can just make things look more intimate than they actually are," Adrien said hastily before Paul could get any ideas. "And the press likes making big deals out of shadows and claiming that there's a hand where there's actually a wrinkle in a jacket or something."

"If you say so." Paul shrugged and changed the subject. "So are you ready for the rest of the semester? I don't know about you, but I have projects for all of my classes and I'm not looking forward to trying to juggle all of them and studying and, y'know, having a social life."

"I don't think it'll be that bad," Adrien said with a small grin. "I've been looking at the write-ups for some of those projects and there's a couple that are pretty short. As long as I don't leave them all until last minute, I think they'll be fine." He had had to deal with projects before for his business major, and they only ever caused problems if he left them off until last minute, got too panicked about them, or- rue the day- if he got stuck in a group project. He was already halfway done with two term-long projects.

He could get anything done and still have time for weekend excursions as long as he had good time management. It was something he had had drilled into him throughout his life (and then driven completely home when he had to try to get all of his planned activities plus fighting akumas plus homework done) and thankfully he hadn't let himself slide at all once he headed off to university. From what he could tell, more than a few of his classmates had trouble with the concept, even including Paul at times. They spent too much time partying or procrastinating and then had to stay up late to get their studying done. Adrien preferred to try to get things done- or at least mostly completed- before going off to do other things.

"I started working on two projects over the break," Paul said. "So, y'know, it really wasn't much of a break. But I guess it really wasn't much of a break for you either, right? Because you were working?"

"Only on one- okay, two- days," Adrien pointed out. "And it was interesting to see some of the fashions going on right now."

"And now you have to deal with the fallout from being there. How soon d'you think the reporters are going to start to swarm? I'm surprised they didn't pounce on you while you were still at Fashion Week."

"Oh, I'm sure they'll turn up soon." Adrien glanced at the window. He was about 90% percent certain that he would run into at least a handful after class was over, hounding him as he tried to head to his class in another building. "Honestly, it's just a matter of time."
Adrien stepped out of the building to see a whole horde of reporters from various tabloids and gossip shows waiting for him right outside the door.

Great.

There was a general cry as they spotted Adrien, and he abandoned his momentary panicked idea of jumping over the side of the stairs and making a desperate break for it. He had faced the press before as himself just fine (and as Chat Noir numerous other times), and just because he didn't have Nathalie at his side this time didn't mean he couldn't do it. He didn't have to answer any questions now, which put him more at ease.

The ball was in his court. He didn't have to tell them anything and they knew that, and they knew that he knew that. As long as he didn't show his nerves, he could handle this.

"Adrien! Can you comment of your relationship with Marinette Dupain-Cheng?"

"Mr. Agreste! Is it true that you and your girlfriend left Paris because your father didn't approve of your relationship?"

"Mr. Agreste-"

"I am not taking questions right now," Adrien said, cutting them off before they could really get going and attract any more attention than they already were. His voice carried easily enough over the clamor of the reporters, much to his surprise, and it also sounded disturbing similar to his father's. He let his eyes scan over the crowd, trying to figure out who exactly was there. He had spent an hour the previous night reviewing the lists Nathalie had sent so he could identify which reporters he should and should not talk to. It hadn't been enjoyable, but it had (rather unfortunately) been necessary. Unlike in Paris, where he knew all of the reporters on sight, Adrien wasn't familiar with the British tabloids at all.

"But Mr. Agreste-"

"I'll talk to one person," Adrien said firmly. "And not now. I have classes I need to be in right now."

The reporters didn't look particularly happy. One- someone who Adrien recognized from Nathalie's 'do-not-talk-to-under-any-circumstances' list- was more vocal than the others. "But this is important! Other things can wait-"

"I beg to differ," Adrien shot right back, letting his tone grow frosty. "My education is far more important than providing gossip to a bunch of tabloid reporters about my friend and I. Now if you'll excuse me, I have places to be and so do the other students."

With that, he strode forward briskly, sending reporters scattering as he did. Adrien kept a carefully neutral expression on his face- if he looked annoyed, the reporters (if he could even call them that) would no doubt interpret it as annoyance that his so-called "top-secret relationship" had been discovered. As he passed the last reporter in the group, he paused and turned halfway, making eye contact with the one reporter that had shown up that Nathalie had approved of.

"Madam Addison, I'll speak with you later. The rest of you needn't stick around."

And then he was gone.
As soon as he was settled in his next class, Adrien pulled out his phone to text Marinette. She had already said that she wasn't going to speak with reporters- and Adrien believed her, she was definitely strong enough to not crack under the pressure of dozens of reporters crowding around and throwing questions at her- but it wouldn't hurt to give her a heads-up. If she wanted to go out for lunch, she might find herself surrounded by pesky tabloid reporters.

"You did good," Plagg commented as Adrien sent his message. "Did you learn that from your father?"

"From Father and Nathalie," Adrien admitted, keeping his voice hushed. He could tell that there were more eyes on him than normal, so he had to be extra-careful. "And you know that Ladybug and I had to deal with the press all the time before we defeated Hawkmoth."

"They didn't bug you about your personal relationships, though."

"They did, actually. They asked if we were dating. And when we said no, they asked if we were dating other people. And somehow they thought that they would get a different answer if they asked a dozen times a year." Actually, it was more like five dozen times a year by the time they defeated Hawkmoth. He could have understood it if it was all different people asking- both reporters and kids, for example- but the question came from the same small handful of reporters nearly every time.

Thankfully Alya had only asked once and then let it be. Adrien suspected that she had noticed the looks of irritation on both Ladybug's and Chat Noir's faces when they got the question from others and decided that there was no point in probing them further. After all, she already got the scoops and seemed to be on Ladybug's good side when it came to getting interviews. There was no point in risking driving the superhero duo away by irritating them with probing questions about their love life or lack thereof.

Adrien's phone buzzed quietly and he checked it. Apparently Madam Rosalie had already chased away several reporters that were poking around, and Marinette had brought her own lunch in anticipation of the problem so she wouldn't have to go outside until the end of the day. There still might be an issue of particularly persistent reporters hanging around to pester her on her way back to her flat- and good lord, they were probably going to make a bigger deal out of the fact that Adrien and Marinette were neighbors than it really was- and if he went to escort her for the few blocks between the Rosalie's Fashion building and their building so that she wouldn't be making the walk alone and followed by harassing reporters, they would make a huge deal out of that as well.

Perhaps she could walk home with several of her co-workers, since several others lived in the same building. They could keep the reporters from crowding in too much. Adrien texted the suggestion to Marinette and then put his phone away before anyone decided to make a big deal out of him texting Marinette and then go trotting to the press to get their two seconds of fame.

He didn't want to think badly of any of his classmates, really, but he just didn't know all of them well enough to be positive that they wouldn't do such a thing. Besides, tabloid reporters sometimes offered money for information and, well, uni students and money...

As he waited for class to start, Adrien mentally reviewed what he was going to say in his interview. It wasn't as though he was trying to come up with some sort of cover story that he would have to
keep straight or anything, it was just that he knew that it could be overwhelming to have to answer questions under pressure and have his answers come out in ways that couldn't be misconstrued, especially since he would be doing the interview in English, not French. If he knew what he was going to say in advance, there was less of a chance that he would be left fumbling for the right words to answer a question.

Even if the woman he was going to be talking to was one of the more reasonable reporters in the gossip business, Adrien wasn't particularly inclined to trust them not to blow things out of proportion if given the chance.

Class went too fast, and then he was leaving again. There would doubtless be more than just the one reporter waiting outside- they would be looking for reactions to their questions, even if he didn't actually answer anything verbally. It was annoying- really annoying- but at least he was prepared for it.

Well. Somewhat, at least. He hoped.

Half an hour later, Adrien had managed to dodge the questions from the still-lingering reporters and was on his way to Madam Addison's studio in her car. The woman was clearly thrilled to be granted the exclusive interview, but she was doing her best to remain in check. For his part, Adrien was trying to keep the nerves from showing.

Yes, it had been a good idea to get the whole circus off campus. If he wanted the whole thing to blow over, he had to keep the visible fuss to a minimum. Magazines on a rack could be ignored; a horde of reporters obstructing the doorway to the academic buildings could not. Still, they were definitely moving onto Madam Addison's ground now, and he couldn't just walk away from her questions like he had with the other reporters.

"We've arrived!" the driver announced as they pulled up to a building, and Madam Addison sprung out, waving Adrien out as well. She steered him into the news building and up the stairs, past staring workers and whispering interns. They ended up in Madam Addison's office, where she settled in her chair behind her desk and gestured for Adrien to sit in the chair opposite of her desk. The cameraman- well, camera lady- sat in another chair and turned her camera on.

"So, Adrien," Madam Addison started. "All through last week, you were spotted looking cozy with an intern from Rosalie Fashions during Fashion Week. It raised a lot of questions, but let's begin with the start of last week. You ended up replacing a Rosalie model just last minute."

"I did. I went into Rosalie Fashions on Friday around noon and found out that they had just gotten word that one of their male models had been in a car accident and would be unable to walk the runway. Since I've had experience walking the runway and was pretty much the same size, it was an obvious choice for me to step into his place."

Madam Addison's eyebrows rose. "And you just happened to be going to Rosalie Fashions... why? To visit a special friend, perhaps? A girlfriend?"

"To visit a friend," Adrien corrected. "Marinette gets very focused and forgets to eat sometimes, especially during crunch times such as the lead-up to Fashion Week, so I went to bring her lunch."

"That is a very boyfriend-like move, many would say."

Adrien shrugged. He wasn't going to get defensive, because he knew how that could be- would be-read. "Perhaps to some people. I'd do the same thing for my other friends if they were stressed and I had time to visit...and if we were in the same country," Adrien added. He knew full well that
without the qualifier, he would have people trying to tail him to see if he actually visited anyone else with lunch, never mind that it should be obvious that the majority of his friends would be back in Paris.

"If you say so." Madam Addison glanced down at her notepad. "So that explains why you replaced a model last-minute, but then you were spotted throughout the week together."

"Marinette and I are friends," Adrien pointed out again. "We've known each other since collège. And friends, y'know, customarily hang out with each other. I had the week off, so I decided to spend it with Marinette instead of just hanging out alone in my apartment."

"But surely you've seen enough fashion shows in your life, for someone who isn't interested in fashion?"

"I'm interested in fashion," Adrien corrected again. He wasn't quite sure where this perception had come from that he wasn't interested in fashion. Maybe he wasn't crazy gung-ho about it, but it wasn't as though it bored him all the time. "I'm not one for designing, but I do enjoy looking at the finished product." A stretch, maybe- he could get tired of looking at the finished products, especially when they were old, rehashed ideas or just a little too weird- but it was close enough that the little white lie could slide.

Madam Addison was looking as though the interview was perhaps not going quite the way she had hoped, but she pressed on. "So you claim that there isn't anything of a romantic nature going on between you and Marinette, and yet we have photos of you throughout the week acting very much like a boyfriend...or something more." She pulled a stack of photos out from an envelope and spread them in front of Adrien. He leaned forward, interested, and then had to quench the urge to roll his eyes because really? They were really going to make a big deal about him filling Marinette's water bottle and getting a wrap for her to eat?

They were reaching, but then again, when were they not? There wouldn't be any news for the tabloids to sell if they didn't make up some of their own.

"Running errands, practically being plastered to her side throughout the week, giving her your suit jacket, cuddling, and-" she pulled out her last photo. "- a kiss."

"On the cheek," Adrien pointed out immediately. "We're French. It's a thing."

"I was rather under the impression that cheek kisses were for hellos and goodbyes, not while waiting for fashion shows to start."

Adrien mentally swore. He should have known that the reporter wouldn't let that slip past her that easily. But he could play that game too. He lounged comfortably in his chair, looking as comfortable and un-ruffled as could be. Sometimes model training came in handy. "I wasn't aware that cheek kisses came with rules."

Madam Addison laughed at that before turning her attention back to the photos. "Fine, then. A friendly cheek kiss. And what about these other pictures, then?"

"Workers really don't have the time to step away and get things to eat or drink before or when the runway show they're involved with is going," Adrien said, pushing the first two photos to the side. "Or directly after the show finishes, for that matter, because they have to clean up their backstage space and move out in time for the next designer to set up. So I decided to be helpful and run a few errands so that Marinette wouldn't get dehydrated or hungry." He moved to the next few photos. "And there's so many people at Fashion Week that if you go there with someone and don't stick to
their side, you'll lose them pretty fast."

"You really do have an explanation for everything," Madam Addison said, sounding less than impressed. "And the jacket and the cuddling?"

Adrien couldn't help the smile. "Well, there was a fairly obvious answer to all of your questions. As for the jacket and the cuddling, it was a bit on the chilly side in the runway room that morning, and Marinette had a light top on, so I gave her my jacket."

"Just like a boyfriend would. Or a husband."

She just wasn't giving up, was she? And what was with those husband comments? "My parents raised me to be a gentleman, and a gentleman doesn't let a lady freeze."

His father would appreciate that comment, if he ever saw it. Of course, it had been his mother and not his father who had been the one to teach him manners, but details like that didn't really matter to Gabriel.

"And then a gentleman tries to squish a lady by hugging her?"

"Well, then I was cold, and she was a wonderful source of heat." Adrien shrugged. "We've been friends for forever, and we joke around sometimes. Occasionally that ends up with us acting a little ridiculous."

"My sources said that you and your friend live in the same building, just across the hall from each other," Madam Addison said, collecting her photos again before sitting back in her chair. "Normally friends don't go to the effort of getting flats right next to each other."

Adrien couldn't help but laugh at that.

"That was actually a complete coincidence, actually," Adrien admitted with a grin. "The building has a lot of Madam Rosalie's interns and workers living there, since it's so close to their workplace. And I didn't actually select where I was going to live- I know it sounds awful, but my father's secretary actually found the place for me. I had no idea that Marinette was even in the same part of town, let alone the same building. That they had just happened to be neighbors was still nothing short of a miracle. "And then I accidentally ran into her as I was leaving my flat on my first day in London. She had been here for a couple months already, so it was great to have a friend here who could show me around."

"Do you explore the city together as well?"

"Of course, when we both have the time." There was no point in denying it. If he did and then the paparazzi saw them traveling places together, they would make a bigger deal about it than if he just admitted it outright. "It's much more fun to see the sights with someone else. She sees things that I don't, and I see things she doesn't. And sometimes the she wants to go somewhere I wouldn't have gone on my own, and then we both end up having a great time."

"So we're likely to see the two of you out and about together," Madam Addison filled in. "Now, there was one other burning question we all had. There was a wedding advertisement a few months ago that, I think, largely flew under our radar. I think everyone in London has seen it now. It features you and Marinette as the bride and groom, surrounded by what my sources say are her coworkers."

"It was a very fun photoshoot," Adrien said with a smile.
"Yes, it looked fun. But I think people were wondering why the models for the shoot were such a mix. I understand that having normal-sized people in photoshoots is a hot new trend- and a welcome one!- but this shoot had a bunch of normal men and women and a single supermodel. It was an odd mix."

"It was," Adrien acknowledged, but he didn't say anything further. He didn't particularly feel like digging himself into a hole with the wedding photoshoot. It was better to get a feel for how much Madam Addison knew before he gave away too much accidentally.

"And even more recently, other photos have popped up," Madam Addison continued. "And the most interesting of the photos was this one." She held up the photo of Adrien dipping Marinette and kissing her full on the lips.

Adrien couldn't help the impish smirk that danced across his lips. He shouldn't have been smiling, really- as far as photos went, that was pretty damning- but at least he looked pretty cool.

"And only this morning, I learned about a video that was taken during the so-called photoshoot," Madam Addison continued when she didn't get the response she wanted out of Adrien. "We have the highlights of the video compiled here." With that, she turned her laptop around so Adrien could see it. It was short and focused on the vows, the signing of the "official" paper, and the kiss.

"So we seem to have fairly definitive proof that you and Marinette are married," Madam Addison finished, with a wide grin at the camera. "And the photoshoot was used as a cover-up so your father didn't find out."

So much for the photoshoot cover. Clearly someone had leaked the video.

"Well, it would have been a bit pointless as a cover-up, since I posted that video to my Facebook," Adrien said, letting his smirk slip onto his face. Honesty was probably the best policy here. It was a prank, and it was a prank that people would probably find pretty funny. "My father was meant to see it."

Madam Addison's brows shot up. "Is this a confession? You're actually married?"

"No, not at all. The wedding thing was one part photoshoot, one part prank." He flashed a winning grin at the camera. "I felt as though I wasn't being trusted to not make any bad decisions while I was studying here in London, so when the opportunity for a wedding photoshoot popped up right after I arrived in London, I hopped on it." He pulled out his phone and opened his Facebook, scrolling downward. The actual posts would confirm his story. "We then extended the basic photoshoot to make it look like an actual wedding, and then I pranked my father by claiming I had just met someone and immediately gotten married." He handed his phone over to Madam Addison so she could see the screen. He could only hope that she wouldn't take the opportunity to try to go through the rest of his phone. There wasn't anything particularly incriminating on there, but the more information tabloid reporters had, the more they could take out of context.

"Oh, this is hilarious," Madam Addison chortled, laughing as she scanned the photos. "You really pranked your father? Your father, Gabriel Agreste?"

"It was fun," Adrien said with a grin. "Madam Rosalie was 100% behind it, which was great. And we only told the people involved and Marinette's family. All of our friends got pranked as well, and their reactions were hilarious."

"For those who are wondering, the earliest post here says, 'Just ran into her yesterday and we decided we had to get married' and it has a whole album of photos from the wedding," Madam
Addison said. She scrolled up. "The next one has the full video and says, 'Some wonderful people took a video of our special day so we could share it with everyone who wasn't there! Apologies for not inviting friends and family back in Paris, but we just couldn't wait! You were really laying it on thick there, weren't you?" Madam Addison asked with a laugh. "Very romantic."

"It worked better than I expected," Adrien admitted. "There were a lot of people who thought we were actually being serious."

"Including your father?"

"Including my father," Adrien confirmed. "And our friends seemed to believe us too, for some reason. They were ticked off that they weren't invited. We got quite a few texts from them complaining about it."

"Perhaps they believed you because they thought that you were already dating?" Madam Addison suggested. "Or that you should be dating?"

"I think it had more to do with the fact that they knew that we had known each other for years," Adrien said with a shrug. "But my father read the post like I meant for him to do, and so he thought that I had only known her for a day."

"That you had only- oh! 'Just ran into her yesterday and we decided we had to get married!' Very nice suggestive wording! I thought it was maybe a little awkward considering that you knew each other, but that makes sense!" Madam Addison was really laughing now. "And then here's your last post: 'Thanks to everyone who helped us pull off the impromptu wedding! In case you haven't already guessed, it was completely fake. I'm slightly concerned by how many people thought we weren't kidding though!' How many people thought you were serious?"

"Too many," Adrien admitted. "There were friends, there were models, there were other people that worked with me and for my father. I was really confused about why they thought that I would just up and marry someone I just met."

"So the photoshoot, then," Madam Addison said, composing herself again (a few more giggles slipped out anyway). "Was it originally meant to be all typical people plucked from the business?"

"I'm not sure," Adrien admitted. "It might have been. I never asked."

"And was Marinette originally supposed to be the 'bride' for the shoot?"

"She was the only person I knew would go along with my crazy plans to prank my dad," Adrien said with a grin. "And to be perfectly fair, she did try to talk me out of it at first. But I brought her around."

Madam Addison finally let out a somewhat defeated sigh. "So it sounds like you and this girl are great friends and partners in crime- or at least in pranks- and we'll see more of these kinds of interactions between you two. You're going to drive all of the gossip reporters insane, you know."

Adrien shrugged. He knew that. He also didn't care, unless his father really thought it was necessary for Adrien to make a statement every time some reporter decided to make a fuss about his and Marinette's friendship. Then it would just be irritating.

"Well, you'll keep things interesting, at least. You do know that people will keep seeing a relationship between the two of you- a romantic relationship?"

"They're trying too hard to see something, then," Adrien said simply. There was nothing else to say
about it. "They're just making a mountain out of a molehill."

Chapter End Notes

Ah, Adrien, you ridiculous blind child. Why. Why must you be this way.

I meant to post this something like two days ago (whoops) but I was hanging out with family for the holidays and oddly enough, they didn't think I should be spending ages fiddling around on my computer (plus I only see them once a year, so...). I should be back to a fairly regular schedule after this. Hopefully. Ideally. Most likely. Especially if I ever perfect the art of just posting without fiddling with little tiny details and getting distracted by other projects.

Please review, it really makes my day! :)
"Madam Rosalie chased most of the reporters off," Marinette told Adrien that night as they sat down for dinner. "And then Emily and Rachel walked back with to the apartment building with me so no one could try to get me alone. Hopefully the reporters will leave me alone within a week."

"That's good. I did an interview today with one of the better reporters," Adrien told her. "If she posts the whole thing, they'll probably pick through it for quotes. I made it clear that I wasn't going to be talking to all of them, thought, and hopefully I channeled my father enough that they'll listen."

Marinette looked interested. "Did it go well?"

"As well as it could, I think. I talked with Madam Addison. Someone leaked the wedding video," Adrien added, figuring that it would be a good idea to give Marinette a heads-up in case any of the other reporters had gotten their hands on it and decided to spring questions about it at her. "So I said that Madam Rosalie had been planning a photoshoot and we used the opportunity to pull a prank. She thought it was hilarious."

"It was hilarious. I couldn't believe so many people actually thought we would get married like that."

"I think that learning about the prank was enough of a distraction for her," Adrien finished. "She really didn't ask too many questions after that. How was your day? You said something about the other interns making a scrapbook?"

Marinette groaned, burying her face in her hands. "They're trying to embarrass me. They were getting all of the photos from the wedding photoshoot, plus ones they've taken, plus all of the tabloid articles..."

"The press will find another target soon enough," Adrien said soothingly, reaching over and patting her shoulder. "And your coworkers will get bored of teasing you eventually."

"I'm more concerned about the press than my coworkers," Marinette said with a sigh. "I just don't like them digging around about my life."

"Ah, but what would they find?" Adrien said, giving Marinette's shoulder a gentle shake before going back to buttering his bread. Marinette really didn't have much anything to hide, as far as he knew. "Class president, designer of Jagged Stone's favorite glasses and three CD covers, most popular kid in class all through collège and lycée-"

"I wasn't the most popular kid in class," Marinette protested, a blush rising on her cheeks. "I- I wasn't'- Why would you think-"

"You were, though," Adrien said with a laugh, grinning as Marinette turned even redder. "Chloe might have tried to claim that she was the most popular, but you were the one that everyone actually liked and listened to. Wherever you were, that was where people wanted to be."

Marinette closely resembled a tomato at that point and she seemed to have forgotten her dinner completely. "B-but- okay, but they didn't- I mean-"
"Don't even try to deny it, Mari," Adrien said with a laugh, ruffling Marinette's hair and grinning even more when she squealed and ducked away. "Ms. Most Popular Girl."

"I didn't even have any real friends before Alya came!" Marinette blurted out at last, batting away Adrien's hand. "I mean, I hung out with people sometimes, but I didn't, like, sit with anyone, or have someone I hung out with when I wanted to do something."

Adrien blinked. He hadn't known that. He had always assumed that Marinette had always been popular, simply based on the photos he had seen of the class in previous years. "But everyone has photos with you from before Alya came!"

Marinette bit her lip. "I hung out with people, sure, but it was more during whole-class things instead of small groups. I was shier then, and Chloe always picked on me. I was a floater, really."

"And then you came out of your shell, and people flocked to you," Adrien pointed out. "Does it really matter what you were like before? That was more circumstance than it was actually you."

"I suppose," Marinette admitted. "But I still think that you're exaggerating."

"I'm not. Ask anyone- actually," Adrien corrected himself. "Not everyone, I guess. Chloe and Sabrina would disagree, probably, but they're biased."

"I think you're the biased one," Marinette muttered with another blush. Adrien grinned, then changed the subject before he made Marinette too uncomfortable.

"So what do you think next week's tabloid headlines are going to look like?" Adrien asked, cutting into his dinner. "Will they just drop things, or will they pick and choose quotes from the interview?"

"They'll pick apart your interview to try to find inconsistencies, and then they'll make as big of a deal as they can about the wedding video. They'll play the kiss over and over on T.V.-."

"And a damn good kiss it was too."

"-and say that we look too into it, or something." Marinette was on a roll. "And they'll probably make a big deal about the signing thing, even though you showed her the picture of the fake certificate-"

"I'm tempted to bring it in if they don't believe me," Adrien said with a laugh. He gestured to where the framed piece of paper hung on the wall. Plagg groaned about it endlessly and Marinette didn't understand why he kept it, but Adrien still thought that it was hilarious. Besides, he didn't exactly have a ton of photos or posters to hang up, and the walls looked too bare without a little decoration. "It's not like they can deny that it exists then."

"Except they could just say that you printed that up yesterday and we both sighed it last night," Marinette pointed out. "Or that we signed two papers, one a legal wedding document and one a fake decoy."

Adrien grinned at her. "Wow, that's some nice speculating. You planning on giving up on the designing and becoming a gossip reporter instead?"

Marinette snorted. "I'm fairly certain that it would be considered a conflict of interest if I were to report on myself."

"Oh, but you'd get the best scoops! Imagine how the world would go mad if they knew that we ate
dinner together every night, or that we share a blanket while watching movies on the couch, or-

"Or if they found out how much of a dork you are," Marinette teased, flicking his nose. "That cool guy image, gone in an instant-

"Someone released the photo of me dipping you for the wedding kiss," Adrien reminded her smugly, tapping her nose in retaliation. "And I look pretty darn cool."

"You're lucky I didn't freak out when you did that," Marinette said with a laugh, dodging out of his reach before spooning some fruit salad onto her plate. "You gave me, like, a half second's warning before I was falling backwards."

"Your squeak was adorable," Adrien assured her, pulling the bowl of fruit towards himself. "And thank you for not looking supremely uncomfortable with the kiss. I was worried that it would be really awkward, but it turned out looking like we were both really into it."

Marinette turned red again and stuffed a forkful of food into her mouth instead of answering.

---

That night, Adrien just happened to see Ladybug streak past his window. Grinning- it had been so long- he transformed and raced after her, glad that Marinette had opted to turn in early tonight. He only had to run over a couple buildings to catch up with his partner as she raced along.

"Chat Noir! What a coincidence!" Ladybug exclaimed in delight, only slowing her pace slightly as he joined her. "I was hoping I would see you tonight, but we really don't have a schedule at all or anything and London is so big so I wasn't sure-

"You went right past my living room window," Chat Noir admitted with a grin. "I was lucky that I glanced up at just the right time. And I wasn't particularly busy tonight, so here I am!"

Ladybug had gotten a weird expression on her face at his words, making Chat Noir's grin falter. He hadn't said something weird, had he? He mentally reviewed his words- and no, nothing weird there. So what...?

Ladybug shook herself and her expression settled into something more normal. It wasn't completely normal, though. She was still distracted by something. "I'm glad to see you, Chat Noir. I'm sorry I haven't been around recently, but I was terribly busy."

"So was I," Chat Noir assured her. "I haven't gotten out for forever. I wanted to go out Thursday two weeks ago-" he wasn't going to tell her it was because he had seen her, she had already reacted oddly to the same comment tonight "-but I couldn't go. I probably could have spared the time for a quick run, but then my kwami would have insisted on a trip to the store as well for more of his favorite cheese and I really couldn't spare that much time."

"It's fine. It's not like we're actually doing anything while we're on patrol." Ladybug snorted a laugh. "Did we ever get anything done on patrol?"

"I think we might have caught a shoplifter once," Chat Noir said, returning her grin. "Not exactly busting huge crime rings or anything."
"I'm sure the shopkeeper appreciated it, but there were probably better uses of our time."

"There's no better use of time than spending it with you, my lady," Chat Noir purred back automatically, sweeping into a deep bow. He knew she was right, of course- when they were in collège and lycée, both of them had had homework to do and sleep to catch up on and patrols got in the way of that and sometimes left him scrambling (and probably her as well). Still, he wouldn't trade it for anything. Akuma attacks really hadn't been good times for goofing around and learning about each other.

Well, learning as much as they could about each other without giving themselves away. It had actually turned out to be a surprisingly large amount. And Chat Noir had fallen deeper in love with her with every little detail she let slip.

"I remember a few nights where another hour or two of sleep would have definitely been a better use of time," Ladybug said with a short laugh, raking her bangs back with one hand. "I was running on caffeine and a few hours of sleep. Not exactly top form to fight akumas."

"You always did a fabulous job," Chat Noir claimed as they started up their run again. They leapt in easy unison over the street and landed with a roll on the rooftops on the other side. Ladybug managed to laugh even as they rolled to their feet and continued their run.

"That was the caffeine, not me."

Chat Noir laughed at that and was about to argue his point- it wasn't all the caffeine, she really had to give herself more credit- when something wet hit his face. He let out a quiet hiss, wiping away the droplets just in time for more to hit him.

"It's raining, I think," Ladybug said with a sigh, slowing to a stop. Chat Noir did the same. "We should probably cut this sort and head back home before the rooftops get too slick."

"As much as I hate to leave you, I think you're right. I don't want to fall." Chat Noir spun around, following Ladybug as she jogged at a slightly slower pace than before back towards his building. "And I don't want my kwami to get sick. I don't know if there would be any kwami doctors in London and the dude never told me what he did to cure Plagg whenever he got sick."

"Yeah, I wouldn't want to have to try to explain that sudden trip back to Paris if my kwami got sick again," Ladybug agreed. Her bangs were starting to get plastered to her face as the rain soaked her hair. "Hopefully we don't have a lot of nights like this. It's bad enough trying to see in the dark; I can barely see my own hands in front of my face with this rain- whoa!"

Chat Noir reacted immediately, catching and steadying his partner before she could fall on the slippery rooftop. His brow furrowed in concern. "Do you want me to escort you back to your place? I can see in the dark, it's no problem for me-"

"I'll be fine," Ladybug assured him, as he had suspected she would. "There's enough lights near my place that I'll be able to see where I'm going. I'm just being grouchy."

They jumped over a street and Chat Noir paused to make sure Ladybug had landed all right. He could see the lights from his building up ahead, only a couple blocks more. Hopefully Ladybug didn't live too far past the building.

"You might want to take the streets back home, Bug," Chat Noir said as Ladybug slipped again and he caught her before she could hit the roof. "You okay?"

"It's not far," Ladybug assured him as they slowed to a brisk walk over the rooftops. He kept his
arm wrapped around her waist to steady her- well, and because she was warm and smelled nice, but he wasn't about to tell Ladybug that. She probably suspected it anyway. "I'll be fine, promise. We've fought akuma in the rain before, remember?"

"Not when it was dark and raining!"

"And now it's dark and raining but I don't have any akuma to dodge," Ladybug teased him with a laugh as he poled them across the street. She hung from his side as naturally as ever as they swung through the air. They landed lightly and headed across the next set of rooftops. "That makes it easier for sure."

"True, true." Chat Noir couldn't argue with that too much. Still... "Are you sure?"

"I'm wearing a supersuit," Ladybug reminded him. They reached another street, and Ladybug reached for him again. "We've fallen off of roofs before and been fine. We've fallen from higher than roofs before- higher than the Eiffel Tower before- and have been fine. If I slip and fall, I'll still be fine." He knew that. He just fussed a lot when it came to his Lady and her safety.

"We should probably split up here," Chat Noir said as they landed across from his building. He could see his room- he had left his dining room light on in his hurry to chase after Ladybug. From their position, he could see that across the hall from his apartment, Marinette's lights were already off.

Apparently she could really get ready for bed quickly when she wanted to. He had rather been under the impression that she dragged her feet and got distracted most of the time when she was tired, which made her whole going-to-bed process a hundred times longer.

"Sounds good," Ladybug said with a smile, stepping out from under Chat Noir's arm. She pulled her yo-yo off of her waist and gave it a little spin. "It was good seeing you tonight, kitty. Don't forget to dry off when you get home."

"And the same goes for you, bug," Chat Noir said, ducking down to kiss her hand. "Get yourself a hot chocolate or something."

Ladybug nodded and waved to him before she tossed her yo-yo and took off. Chat watched as she vanished over the building next door before he made the easy vault across the street and over the building to his balcony. He didn't waste any time in ducking in his door and detransforming. Plagg spiraled out of the ring, groaning the whole way.

"It wasn't raining that hard," Adrien said with a sigh, digging a fleece that he kept just for this purpose out of a drawer in the kitchen. He bundled Plagg up and plopped him down next to the baseboard heater before digging in the fridge for a slice of Camembert. "And I wasn't out for long."

"It was long enough."

"It was not! I haven't seen Ladybug for forever and we only got to talk to each other for a few minutes before we had to head back." Adrien sighed as he opened his refrigerator and pulled out his milk to make some hot chocolate. "It's really a pity. I wanted to hang out with Ladybug again. We don't get to do it often enough here."

Plagg only rolled his eyes and let out a long sigh.
Ladybug circled around the block and waited another three minutes for good measure before swinging down onto her balcony. She yanked open the door and dashed inside, just starting to shiver as she did. She detransformed as she dashed down the hallway to her room.

"I h-h-hate the rain," Tikki complained, even as Marinette grabbed a fluffy wool scrap to wrap around her. "The cold is fine, but I can't stand the rain and the wet!"

"We'll get you warmed up in no time," Marinette promised, bundling her kwami up and pulling a sweatshirt over her own head. She picked Tikki up and headed back out to the kitchen, turning her lights back on as she did. "Do you want hot chocolate with your cookies or just warm milk?"

"Hot chocolate, please!"

Marinette fell into thought as she heated up the milk and stirred in chocolate. A small crease formed between her eyebrows as she puzzled over what Chat Noir had said earlier. Tikki watched, confused as she nibbled away at her cookie, and finally spoke up.

"Marinette, what's wrong?"

"Chat Noir lives in my building," Marinette murmured, then repeated herself louder. "Chat Noir lives in my building! I've probably talked to him as a civilian, oh my god-

Tikki looked startled. "He does? How did you find that out? Are you sure?"

"He said I swung past his dining room," Marinette said with a frown, remembering what Chat Noir had said. "But I had literally just gotten out."

"You were several rooftops away when he caught up with you though, right?" Tikki asked. "So couldn't he live in one of those buildings?"

Marinette shook her head. "Once I got past this building, I was running across the rooftops, not swinging down in the street between buildings. If I really did swing past his window, it would have been someone in this building."

Tikki looked curious. "Do you know which windows you swung past?"

"No, because I swung away across this side of the building and then decided that I wanted to go the other way, so I kicked off the next building over and swung back around the building to the other side. It could be almost anyone living here." It had definitely taken her by surprise. Part of her itched to look up who else lived in building, while the other part knew she shouldn't. She needed to respect her partner's privacy.

"Do you think he saw you two weeks ago?" Tikki asked.

"Maybe. He mentioned wanting to go out two weeks ago, specifically on Thursday- and that's when I went out." That had been strange. Why mention such a specific day? "Either he saw me or we were just thinking eerily in sync again." It had happened before, not just with akuma fights but also with things like heading out for spontaneous patrols. Still, she was putting her money on Chat Noir having seen her either heading out or coming in.
Frustratingly, she couldn't even remember which direction she had gone out on that particular night so she couldn't even narrow down which side of the building Chat Noir lived on.

Not that she wanted to. Obviously.

"Do you think he knows you live in this building?" Tikki asked. She took another big bite of her cookie, finishing it off, and reached for the next one. "Should we be more careful leaving the apartment?"

Marinette shook her head. "I don't think he knows. And would it really be so bad if he found out now? Hawkmoth is gone. If anything else pops up, we might need a way to contact each other, especially if we're in different countries."

Tikki looked pensive.

"But if you think it would be a problem, I suppose I can go down to the street to transform," Marinette said with a sigh. She poured out two cups of hot chocolate, one normal-sized and one in a shot glass for Tikki. "It's just so much easier to transform in here and jump off the balcony. I really didn't think anyone would find out. I mean, I transformed in my room and headed out from my balcony for years back in Paris."

"I think it might be fine," Tikki said at last. "If he just happens to find out, I mean. You're right, it's easier to transform in your room, especially with Adrien next door. He'd ask questions if he just happened to open his door and saw you heading downstairs when you said you were going to be going to bed. And unless Chat Noir sees you leaving your room or if you say something about happening to see him going past your room, there's not a huge chance of him figuring you out."

"Yeah, well, I'm not about to tell him that," Marinette said. His confused kitten expression would probably be hilarious if she let him on to the fact that they were in the same building, but it wasn't worth it. If Tikki wasn't 100% on board, then she wasn't going to tease her partner. No matter how fun it would be.

The tabloids, as expected, had varying responses to the released video of Adrien's interview. Madam Addison was, of course, the friendliest of them all. She had clearly believed him and had focused quite a bit on the prank. There was of course some speculation about if Adrien and Marinette would get together- or, rather, how soon they would get together, if did not seem to be a question- but nothing too bad there. Other tabloids were a bit more skeptical of what Adrien had said.

"They're probably just sore that we refused to do any interviews with them," Marinette said from where she was curled up on the couch, sketching on the tablet on her lap. Adrien had been glaring at one particularly scathing magazine for five minutes straight. "Just ignore them, Adrien. Your father can't say you didn't try."

Adrien snorted. "That's not going to stop him from trying to blame me for what they write. He'll say that I was too rude to them or something."
Marinette couldn't hold back her own snort. "You, rude? Wow. Pot calling the kettle black at all? Has your father forgotten what the tabloids have written about him when he's been rude to them? And that was actually justified."

Adrien ducked his head, trying to hide his grin.

"Most of the world knows that that rag is trash anyway," Marinette said, returning her attention to her tablet and erasing a line that wasn't quite where she wanted it. "And it's not that big. I think that was one of the ones that Abbey and Sarah took forever to find."

"That's good. They're speculating on your 'motives'," Adrien said with a disgusted look. "Because, y'know, up and coming designer and son of fashion designer."

"Really?" That... okay, maybe she should have expected that. But the magazines that she had bothered reading hadn't done any speculating of that kind.

"They clearly didn't do their research," Adrien sniffed, thoroughly offended on his friend's behalf. "You don't need any help getting your foot in the fashion industry. Pretty much all of the other magazines managed to figure that out on their own."

"They dug around in my life, you mean," Marinette said with a sigh. She was just thankful that they hadn't found anything questionable- no one from her school days had said anything about her obvious, cringe-worthy crush on Adrien, thank god. Clearly they hadn't interviewed Chloe or Sabrina at all.

"Nothing bad. Other magazines talked about all of the fashion design contests that you've entered and either placed in or won, and then obviously they talked about your Jagged Stone glasses line and the CD covers you did for him." Adrien beamed over at her. That was the only good part of the whole ordeal, honestly. Marinette worked so hard and she deserved to be recognized. "So people know how very talented you are."

Marinette felt herself turning red from the praise. Adrien had said it so casually, like her being talented was common, unquestionable knowledge. He had a habit of doing that on a fairly regular basis and even after years of knowing Adrien (and months of daily hang-outs), she still wasn't used to it.

"Paul thought that the articles were hilarious," Adrien added, closing the magazine and tossing it to the side. "Or, rather, he thought they were funny but he didn't get why me pranking my father was such a big deal, and then he looked him up."

Marinette snorted. It was truly difficult to understand what Gabriel Agreste was like without meeting him in person. It was one thing to hear about his strict, snappish nature; experiencing it was a whole different story.

"Paul said that he understood why everyone found it so funny once he saw a few news reports and interviews with my father," Adrien added with a snicker. "And then he was asking how in the world we actually dared to prank him. Paul said that he would have been too intimidated to pull something like that."

"I can't blame him," Marinette said with a grin. "I was really nervous about pranking your father, too." Her tablet let out a beep and she glanced down at it. There was a pop-up for a software update, and she dismissed it. She didn't want to change anything on the tablet without Madam Rosalie's permission. With the pop-up gone, she could start doodling on the designing program.
Adrien glanced over at Marinette, noticing her distraction. Interested, he pushed the magazines in front of him to the side and turned his attention to his friend. "What are you up to over there?"

Slightly startled, Marinette looked up from her tablet. "What? Oh, this?" She glanced down at her tablet— which, Adrien couldn't help but notice, was not her normal one. This was newer, and looked a lot higher-end. "I'm designing prints! Or, well, I'm trying, at least. Madam Rosalie heard about me designing CD covers for Jagged Stone through the tabloids, and then she looked at them and really liked them. So she lent me one of her designing tablets and asked me to design some prints. If she likes them, we'll produce them and use them in some of our designs!"

Adrien couldn't help but frown. Even though it was definitely fantastic that Marinette was being recognized for her design skills outside of clothing, Marinette was meant to be able to relax once she left work. Designers never fully stopped, Adrien knew that— inspiration could hit at any time, and this certainly wasn't the first time Marinette had designed something at home— but if Madam Rosalie was piling this on top of Marinette's other work without further compensation, that wasn't cool. He had seen his friends—including Marinette, at her university internship in Paris— bend over backwards trying to satisfy and impress their supervisors. Adrien could understand how tempting it was— he had certainly gone overboard to try to get his father's praise before— but it wasn't particularly fair or healthy. If Madam Rosalie was adding to Marinette's workload, maybe the older woman just hadn't realized it and would adjust accordingly if Marinette just said something.

In Adrien's experience, though, interns in Marinette's position rarely said anything.

"Are you getting paid extra for that?"

"No, but Madam Rosalie said I could count it as working from home." Marinette made a mark on her screen before glancing back up. "So then I can have more vacation time, because I already would have worked the hours. It's nice, because then if I go back to Paris for a weekend or something I could stay a couple extra days without tearing through all of my vacation days."

He couldn't help but grin. "Oh, that is nice!" He knew that Marinette really missed her family at times, and it really wasn't worth it to go back to Paris for only two days to visit. Adrien crossed the room and scooted over on the couch so he could see what Marinette was working on. At the moment, it looked like a whole lot of aimless scribbling and random color streaks. "Is it a lot different from designing CD covers?"

"Yeah, definitely. I mean, I just got this today so I'm still trying to figure out how it works, but there's just so much to consider. Patterns can repeat normally, like you normally see on, like, couch cushions or patterned button-ups, or they can repeat in one direction only. That's easier, and it's closer to what I was doing with the CD covers."

Adrien blinked, confused. "...what? Repeat in one direction only?"

"See, it's like— oh, I'll just look up an example." With a flick of her finger, Marinette navigated out of the program she had been playing with and opened Google. In a few seconds, she had pulled up a page full of different fabric pattern images. "See, this one has a pattern that repeats along the length of the fabric, but one edge looks obviously different than the other."

"Right, right, of course." The picture Marinette was pointing out had fabric that was patterned to look like a sunset behind some trees. One edge of the cloth was purple and then it graded into red, then orange, then yellow vanishing behind the treeline. "But what would you even make with a pattern like that?"

"A dress, probably. Or a skirt, depending on the width of the fabric. Maybe a dress shirt. Mostly
casual clothes."

Adrien tilted his head. Okay, yeah, he could see how the fabric might be used. It was just a little more, well, fun than most of the things his father designed. "Wouldn't the skirt be mostly the same basic pattern but with different fabrics?"

Marinette shrugged. "Yeah, mostly. But there's a lot of people who don't necessarily want the most fashion-forward, never-seen-before skirt designs. Basic can be good when we're working with a pattern like this that's already attention-grabbing. If we overdesign, then things can become unwearable."

"Makes sense. So here, the pattern would be what makes it designer and not the silhouette."

"To be fair, some high-end companies take a completely normal off-the-rack shirt, slap their logo on it, and call it designer," Marinette pointed out with a grin. "Your father's done that before, haven't you noticed?"

Adrien's brow furrowed as he thought about it, and then it came to him- the casualwear lines that his father produced. He had sweatshirts in his closet (very upscale, of course, only the finest materials but still comfortable) that were stamped with a giant Gabriel logo. They were more fitted than the average sweatshirt from a department store, maybe, but there really wasn't much anything special about them if you took the logo away.

...huh. Yeah, he hadn't thought about it that way before.

"So which kind of pattern do you think you're more likely to make?" Adrien asked. "Repeating one direction or all directions?"

"One direction," Marinette said immediately. "Especially to start. I have to make sure the pattern can repeat without it being obvious about where the repeat is."

"Is that hard?"

"A bit, yeah." Marinette turned her tablet around so Adrien could see the screen. "But this program is nice. I can move the pattern around so that- see, here it moved what used to be the bottom of my pattern up to the top, so I can draw right where that dividing line used to be, and the same thing happens for the sides. I'm mostly figuring out how the program works right now."

"Do you have any pattern ideas?"

"Some. They need work, though." Marinette drew another absentminded line. "I need to make sure that I make designs that aren't super-similar to ones that are already out there, and it's hard to visualize how wide the fabric for the pattern will be once it's printed. It was easier for the CDs, because the cover size and the tablet screen size were close enough in size."

"I still can't believe the level of detail you got on Jagged's covers," Adrien said with a laugh, shaking his head. He had every CD, of course, all signed by his friend. They were propped up next to the fencing trophies on his shelves in his room in Paris. "They're amazing. I was just looking at a picture of the last cover the other day and I kept noticing little details I hadn't seen before. How you draw so well that small is beyond me."

Marinette snorted. "There's a zoom feature. See, if I want to draw something small here, I zoom in and draw it." She picked a fairly clear section and zoomed in before drawing a star with a smiley face on it. A pattern of dots decorated the outer edge before Marinette zoomed back out.
"That's nice," Adrien said appreciatively as Marinette cleared her entire page and started doodling again. "So how is this tablet compared to your old one? Is there a lot of difference?"

"This is more sensitive," Marinette explained, showing Adrien the screen. He really couldn't see any real difference right away, but he was sure Marinette knew what she was talking about. "It has both pressure and tilt sensitivity, and there's more options for line stabilizing, and there's higher resolution and reports per second, and there's almost no lag when I want to zoom or rotate. My old one didn't use to lag as much as it does now."

"Well, if you look at it in electronics years, your tablet from collège is pretty much a senior citizen at this point," Adrien said with a grin, deciding not to get too bogged down in the technical talk. He could ask for more details some other time if he was really curious. "Maybe you should get a cane for it."

Marinette looked puzzled. "Electronics years?"

"Like dog years," Adrien explained, grinning. "You know how one human year is, like, seven dog years, right? So a dog might be twelve and actually be an elderly citizen."

"Right, right. I get it." Marinette was trying not to look too amused, Adrien could tell. "Yeah, I'd like to replace my old one or at least get some work done on it, but I can't exactly justify the expense. I don't do detailed enough work often enough to really need a new graphics tablet. Once the screen goes, though, then I'll buy a new one."

Adrien made a absent humming sound and made a mental note to look into graphics tablets. Depending on how expensive they were, maybe he could get Marinette a good one for Christmas. He would have to ask around to figure out what the best one for what she did would be (or maybe he could sneakily get her talking about the subject), but it would be a lovely present for her, and one that she would definitely use if or when (when, definitely when) Jagged Stone asked her to design another CD cover and if she decided that she liked doing fabric pattern designing on top of clothing design.

"So do you have to actually be actively be creating a pattern for it to count as work time?" Adrien asked as Marinette played with the color wheel. "Did Madam Rosalie say?"

"She didn't say. I'll count some of my learning time, I think, but not all of it." A streak of blue appeared on the screen as Marinette tested something out. "After a point, I'm just screwing around and doodling instead of actually learning anything new."

Adrien couldn't help his grin. "Funny, I think I've seen you doing that before when you were supposed to be designing clothes."

Marinette flushed and stuck her tongue out at him before returning her attention to the tablet in her lap.

"Do you have any more ideas of what else we could go and explore around London?" Adrien asked, changing the subject. As much fun as teasing Marinette was, he probably shouldn't get too carried away. "I've been looking around, but I'm kind of tired of museums at the moment. I asked Paul what else there was to do about here, but, y'know..." He shrugged. "He lives here. Everything seems normal and boring to him since he's used to it."

Finally Marinette set the tablet aside to focus on Adrien. Apparently she had gotten tired of the doodling. "Yeah, actually! A couple of the other interns went up to Stonehenge and Bath a few weeks ago, and they were talking about it the other day. It sounded really interesting so I asked
them a few questions about their trip, and they said that we could probably do both on the same day without a problem. I've been meaning to tell you about it but I keep forgetting."

"Ooh, that sounds good! It would be fun to get out of London for a day. We would take a train there, right?" Adrien had done a bit of research on exploring those areas at one point, since they were so iconic, but he had yet to visit either despite their relative proximity to London. He had kind of been a little busy with other things.

"Yeah. They said that we would have to start early and would get back late if we want enough time to really look at things, but it would be a fun day out." Marinette pulled out her phone out and navigated to a train schedule to show him. "See, we would take a train to Salisbury. There's a bus that runs out to Stonehenge and there's a stop right at the train station. It's the off season, so the bus comes once an hour."

"So we would have to pay attention to the time while we're out there. It wouldn't be any fun to accidentally miss it."

Marinette nodded. "Right. And then we would take the bus back into town and maybe poke around the Salisbury Cathedral- it's supposed to be pretty- and then we'd take another train to Bath."

"That sounds like fun," Adrien said cheerfully, already looking forward to it. "A whole day of being a proper tourist. We can pack a lunch so we don't waste any time trying to find a place to eat. Maybe you'll even get some inspiration for patterns while we're out!"

"That would be nice," Marinette agreed. She glanced down at her phone again, checking the train schedule one last time. "Does Saturday work for you?"

"Of course." Adrien grinned at her. "I can't wait."

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Please review, it really makes my day! :)
A Trip out of London

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They woke up bright and early Saturday morning. Neither Adrien nor Marinette were particularly cheerful about it—weekends were for sleeping in, darn it—but if they wanted to fit in everything that they planned, they had to catch the earliest train out of London to Salisbury.

"I'm gonna sleep the whole way there," Marinette announced as they boarded the bus, breakfast in hand and lunches in backpacks. "How long is the train ride? An hour and a half?"

"Something like that." Adrien stifled a yawn. "I'll check and then set my phone alarm so we wake up five minutes before we get there. I'll probably drop off too."

"Funny thing, I remember you being an annoying morning person when we were younger," Marinette said as they settled into their seats and the bus rumbled off towards the train station. "I was the only one always running late."

"I grew out of that good habit," Adrien said with a laugh that immediately turned into a jaw-cracking yawn. He only just managed to cover the yawn with his hand. "I'm hoping to find a reason to move into my own apartment when I get back to Paris after I graduate, because my father gets up at five and thinks that everyone else should, too."

"Yuck."

"I usually managed to push back my wake-up to six, but that was still too early. Especially on weekends." He yawned again just remembering it. "And wake-up was six-thirty most days when I was younger, and earlier if there was a morning photoshoot. Once I was in school, the sunrise photoshoots were on the weekends."

"I would have said to greenscreen it," Marinette managed through another yawn. "Too early. Not worth it."

"They were nice pictures," Adrien admitted. "It's hard to mimic that kind of lighting in a studio. And it wasn't that bad most of the time. I was used to it." He'd be a walking zombie if he tried that now, though. The makeup artists would have to spend half an hour just covering up the bags under his eyes and trying to make him look awake, and then they would lose the lighting that they had wanted to get.

Marinette just yawned in response and let her head droop onto Adrien's shoulder.

"You aren't allowed to sleep yet, Mari," Adrien insisted, jiggling his shoulder. "Eat your breakfast before you fall asleep and drop it."

Marinette groaned, lifting her head and shooting a disgruntled look at Adrien before she sat up and started eating the toast-and-jam sandwich she had made for her breakfast. Adrien had to smother a snort at how incredibly grouchy she looked. He hadn't known it was even possible to look so disgruntled while eating.

It was actually pretty cute.

They fell into an easy silence as they ate their breakfasts. The bus stopped and started up again,
pulling over at stops every few blocks as it rumbled towards the train station. Marinette started leaning against him again once she finished eating, and Adrien had to grin as he nudged her back upright. Marinette obviously was very determined to fall right back asleep.

"You know, I was kind of kidding about sleeping on the train," Adrien said as Marinette grumbled and rearranged her head on his shoulder again. "I kind of thought we would both be wide awake by the time we got there, since we have to, y'know, walk around and pay for our tickets and find the platform-"

"Less talking from the pillow," Marinette ordered.

"Yes ma'am," Adrien responded immediately, and then he noticed where they were. "Actually, Mari, we're almost there. Up up."

Marinette's only response was another long groan.

"If I need to carry you into the station, you know the tabloids will be all over us again," Adrien warned her, prodding her side. "C'mon, do your zombie walk off of the bus and to the ticket office. You can sleep on the train, but not before we get on."

"I hate early mornings," Marinette grumbled as Adrien shoved her upright and steered her off of the bus. "They should be outlawed. It's not even that light out yet."

"You didn't complain this much during Fashion Week," Adrien pointed out, amused. Sleepy Marinette was honestly adorable. "You got up early then and functioned just fine."

"I was running on a half-dozen liters of caffeine," Marinette admitted, yawning. "Coffee and tea and more coffee and more tea and-"

"Okay, okay, I get the picture," Adrien said, cutting off Marinette before she could ramble too much. "Maybe we should buy some tea along with our tickets."

"But then I wouldn't be able to sleep on the train," Marinette protested. She leaned against Adrien as they headed down a set of stairs. "And I wanna sleep."

"Right, tea at the station in Salisbury, then." Adrien steered Marinette towards the ticket office. "You think you can make it to the train without falling asleep again?"

"Ugh."

Marinette did, in fact, manage to get to the train without falling asleep again. Somehow she also managed to not wake up further while she and Adrien were walking around the station.

"Your yawning is making me tired again," Adrien said with a laugh as he herded Marinette onto the right train, making sure that she didn't trip as she stepped into the train. "If you keep that up, I'm going to fall asleep on the train ride too."

"I thought that that was the plan?"
Adrien didn't correct her as they settled in their seats. Adrien took the window seat— he was more likely to be awake, so he could admire the countryside rushing past, and he could also deal with the sun in his face— and Marinette settled in the seat next to him. She was still yawning, which in turn was making him yawn.

"I'm starting to think I might end up dozing off as well," Adrien said as Marinette settled her backpack in her lap. "You're making me tired."

"'kay," Marinette mumbled through another yawn. Then she frowned. "But if both of us are sleeping, who's gonna watch our bags?"

"I'll take your backpack," Adrien offered, holding out a hand. "If it's between my side and the wall it should be safe, even if both of us are asleep."

"Great." Marinette handed over her pack and immediately dropped her head onto Adrien's shoulder. "Good night."

Adrien snickered.

Despite his worries, it didn't take Adrien long at all to drop off. Marinette's head on his shoulder made a perfect pillow for him. They both slept soundly as the train rattled from London towards Salisbury and then, just as planned, Adrien's phone woke them up shortly before the train pulled into their station.

Marinette groaned and buried her face in Adrien's shoulder. "I was sleeping."

"We should have gone to bed earlier," Adrien said as he tried to dislodge Marinette. He wasn't having a whole lot of success. She could be as heavy as a boulder when she wanted to be. "Come on, time to get up."

"Ugh."

The train started slowing down as they approached the station. Marinette finally let go of Adrien's shoulder, sitting up and accepting her backpack as Adrien handed it back to her. They waited for the train to come to a stop and for the doors to open, and then they were stepping out into the crisp fall air.

"I'm glad that it's actually nice outside," Adrien said as they headed for the bus stop right outside of the train station. "It would probably be miserable if it were raining."

"Oh, that would be awful," Marinette agreed around a yawn. "I mean, maybe Stonehenge would look more mythical if it was foggy outside, but I would probably be tempted to run up, snap two photos, and then immediately run after the bus again. Being outside wouldn't be any fun."

"How long do we have until the bus to Stonehenge comes?" Adrien asked. Just down the street there was a little shop that looked like it might sell tea and if he had a few minutes, it would probably be a good idea to buy something. Both he and Marinette were still a little drowsy and could probably use a bit of a jolt so they could actually enjoy their day.

Marinette checked her phone. "Ten minutes. That's if it's on time. Emily said that it was running a little behind when they came."

"All right! I'm gonna go check out that shop, all right? Hopefully they would have something that wake us up."
Marinette looked interested. "Yeah, yeah, that would be good! Just- I mean, don't cut it too close. We don't want to miss the bus."

"I'll be back with plenty of time," Adrien promised. It couldn't possibly take that long to grab two cups of tea and maybe a cheesy treat for Plagg. "Green tea?"

"Yeah. And a little sugar, please."

Adrien nodded and turned, jogging up the block. The small cafe was nearly empty, but Adrien still had to wait in line for a few minutes before he could place his order. Plagg vibrated excitedly in his jacket when Adrien ordered a cheese bread bun- as he had expected- and then Adrien had to wait for several agonizingly long minutes as the tea was made. He wouldn't be even half as impatient any other day, but he had a bus to catch.

Adrien tucked a bite of the cheese bun into his jacket for Plagg and then jittered his leg impatiently.

"Two green teas for Adrien!" the barista called, and Adrien practically rocketed to the counter. He plopped a few sugar cubes into each, snapped the travel lids on, and was out of the building as fast as he could go. He could see the bus coming up the street towards the stop where Marinette was waiting.

Shoot.

Adrien broke into a jog, trying to keep the tea from sloshing too much. He could see Marinette's expression turned relieved as she caught sight of him. She waved down the bus and boarded as he drew closer. Adrien got on seconds behind her, just in time to see Marinette paying the tickets for both of them.

"Cutting it just a bit close, eh?" Marinette teased as Adrien followed her back to one of the empty seats. "I was starting to worry."

"Yeah, there wasn't much of a line but I failed to take into account steeping time," Adrien replied, handing one of the cups over to Marinette. "But hey, I got us our caffeine."

"Perfect." Marinette popped the lid and took a careful sip. "We might actually be functioning human beings by the time we get there."

---

Stonehenge was awesome.

Marinette and Adrien made a beeline for the stones themselves first. They couldn't walk right up to the stones, of course, but they could stand behind a rope about ten meters out. Since they had gotten there pretty much as soon as the place opened, the crowds were light.

"This is so cool," Marinette said as she snapped a few photos. "And to think that no one knows why it was built in the first place! That's just... wow."

"Right," Adrien agreed. As soon as Marinette turned back to admiring the stones, Adrien glanced
inside of his jacket at Plagg. "Plagg! Do you know why Stonehenge was built?"

"Wasn't around this part of the world at the time," Plagg said, yawning widely and only sparing the stones a bored glance. He peered up at Adrien. "Do you have any more of that cheese bread?"

Adrien sighed but passed Plagg another bit of the bread anyway.

From the stones they headed to the visitor center. Adrien found the science more interesting than Marinette did ("I think I vaguely recall some of this stuff from, like, lycée," Marinette said after Adrien had to clarify what one of the signs was saying), but they both had a lot of fun exploring.

"Ooh, we might want to get going soon," Marinette said after a bit as she checked her phone. "The bus is coming soon, so unless we want to hang around for another whole hour we should probably make our way in that direction."

"Ooh, good catch!" Adrien pulled away from the board he had been absent-mindedly staring at to glance at the time on his own phone. Sure enough, the bus would be coming in ten minutes. They probably wanted to give themselves five extra minutes of wiggle room just to be sure that they wouldn't miss the bus by accident. "Yeah, I think I'm done here. I think I've read everything that I would be interested in. After a while, it just starts getting to be a bit much."

"Agreed," Marinette said as they wove between displays. "It's one of the reasons why I love that some of the museums in London don't have a fee for general displays. I don't have to feel like I have to see everything to get my money's worth."

"Yeah, yeah! I like that. You read a couple exhibits one day, then come back another day and read a few more so it doesn't get too overwhelming." Adrien glanced around at the exhibits surrounding them. It was a lot of information to look at and take in. "This is cool but any more and my brain is gonna explode."

"I got some lovely pictures," Marinette said, holding up her camera with a grin. "And I think I have a couple pattern ideas I want to play with. I might try to get a couple rough sketches done on the bus so I don't forget anything."

"Always working." Adrien mock-scolded with a playful grin on his face. "And while we're out on an adventure, no less. Shame, shame."

"It's killing time on the bus," Marinette shot right back. Adrien immediately snorted. "I- oh, what are you snickering about?"

Adrien grinned at her as they left the building and headed to the bus station. "Well, if you hear it the right way, it's killing time on the bus. Like, time to kill-"

"That is not what I meant," Marinette groaned as she caught on to what Adrien was saying. She reached out to swat at his side. "Really, Adrien, how on earth did you hear it like that?!"

"I was just reading about the theories that Stonehenge might have been the site of religious sacrifices," Adrien pointed out, still grinning at Marinette's exasperation. "So I do actually have an excuse for the somewhat morbid turn that my thoughts took."

"Uh-huh. If you say so."

They fell quiet as they joined the small crowd waiting for the bus. They hadn't been there for long when the bus rolled up and they boarded. Marinette settled by the window and pulled out her tablet to get her rough sketches started.
"Isn't that your old tablet?" Adrien asked as Marinette opened her drawing program and started making a few quick lines. "You aren't using the one from Madam Rosalie?"

"This one still works," Marinette reminded him. A color wheel popped up on her screen and she made a few quick swipes before selecting a dark green color. "And the other one is expensive. I didn't want to have to worry about losing it, or someone stealing it, or dropping it in our rush to get somewhere."

"Fair point," Adrien admitted. He watched as a lovely pattern took shape on Marinette's screen. It was actually surprisingly neat for what was supposed to be a rough sketch. Marinette switched between colors and pen thicknesses with ease as she filled in the screen. After the first rough draft was done, Marinette saved it and started a new page. By the time they got back to Salisbury, Marinette had three designs started.

"Maybe you should start a line of English Attractions-patterned skirts," Adrien suggested as they headed over to the Salisbury Cathedral. "Is that what you were going for?"

"A little bit, maybe. I don't know." Marinette checked her map and kept walking. "Mostly I wanted to draw my ideas while I had them. I'll figure out what I'll do with them later."

"I bet you'll get inspired to do something stained-glass related when we get to the cathedral," Adrien said confidently, guiding Marinette around a light post before she could run into it. "They're supposed to be gorgeous."

Marinette made a face at that. "I don't know. People have already done stained glass designs, y'know? It's not anything new."

"Maybe, but they aren't you, and you haven't done stained glass windows," Adrien said, patting Marinette's shoulder. "And nobody else can do things exactly the same as you do. Don't let the stained glass patterns that already exist prevent you from getting inspired."

"Maybe you should go into inspirational speech writing instead of Physics," Marinette teased, grinning. "Ooh! Look, the Queen Elizabeth Gardens!"

"Do you want to pop in?" Adrien asked. It wasn't on their list of places to visit today, but they could change their plans easily enough.

"I don't think so. It's late fall, so there wouldn't really be any flowers blooming or anything." Marinette peered in through the fence regardless, glancing around the part of the garden they could see. "Maybe we can come back in the spring. I can't imagine that it would be that different than the parks near us, though."

"Fair enough." Adrien waited as Marinette snapped a few quick pictures through the fence and then they were on their way again. "How long do we have until we need to catch the train to Bath?"

"An hour and a half. It's not super-long, but if we want to explore Bath while there's still daylight..."

"We'd better march, then. Chop chop, hurry along!"
By the time they had finished touring Bath, the sun was almost completely set. Adrien and Marinette hurried to the train station in the semi-darkness, exhausted, footsore, and very, very hungry.

"We should have packed a bigger lunch," Adrien said as they waited for their train. The smell of food was wafting over to them from the two cafes at the station, tempting him and making his stomach rumble. If it weren't for the fact that the train was about to arrive, he would definitely have bought something. As it was, the combination of the time and the long lines for food made it a definite no. "How long will it be until we get back to London?"

"Ninety minutes. And then we'll still have the bus ride back to our building." Marinette glanced at her watch again, checking the time against her ticket. "I really thought we had packed enough. I mean, I figured that we might get a little hungry near the end of the ride back to London..."

"We're buying chips the second we set foot into the London station," Adrien said decisively as their train pulled into the station, clacking to a stop in front of the waiting passengers. "We can eat those on the bus back to our building."

Marinette gave him a dubious look. "Uh, I see two problems with that. One, the food inside the station is bound to be at least a little more expensive than the places nearby and besides, the lines will probably be awful. Two, I don't think eating is allowed on the bus."


"No, just practical. C'mon, let's get on the train."

Adrien followed with a pout. He knew Marinette was right, but it was going to be a long, long ninety minutes with a complaining stomach and the countryside too dark to see anything interesting. Add in a few whiny young children that were bound to be sharing a carriage with them, and Adrien already couldn't wait for the ride to be over.

"It's nice to get away for a day," Marinette said as they settled into their seats on the train. "Especially this weekend. I would have gone mad if I had to stay in my apartment this weekend."

"Why, because the weather is so gorgeous?"

Marinette shook her head. "No- well, okay, partially. But you know how my next door neighbor got married and moved out? There's a new renter there now and they were moving in some stuff late yesterday and were making a ton of noise. I bet they were going to move the rest in today and I really didn't want to listen to them banging around."

Adrien raised an eyebrow at that. He could maybe understand hearing a lot of thuds if a neighbor upstairs was moving in, but a next-door neighbor? He hadn't heard so much as a peep from his next-door neighbor, who was another Rosalie intern. "Surely they couldn't have been making that much noise?"

"I thought it was impossible too. I was wrong." Marinette rolled her eyes. "I don't even understand what they could have possibly been moving around! The apartment is already furnished, so it's not like they had to get furniture in. That I would have understood."

"They might still be moving in some other furniture," Adrien reminded Marinette. "Another few living room chairs and, I don't know, another desk or something. The stuff that came with the place is kind of basic even by, y'know, normal standards." He grinned, remembering his own room back
in Paris. "Maybe they're moving in a Foosball table."

"It sounded like they were moving an entire mansion in," Marinette grumbled. Her lower lip jutted out in a pout. "And then playing Jenga with the furniture."

Adrien snorted.

"I'm hoping that they'll be quieter once they've gotten everything settled," Marinette added with a sigh and a pout. "I mean, at least I'm not studying in the evenings or anything like you are, but still. If they're going to keep being loud..."

"Let's not get too worried about it unless something actually happens, eh?" Adrien suggested, wrapping an arm around Marinette's shoulders and tugging her into his side. "They may be perfectly nice people who just aren't particularly skilled at moving."

A small smile slipped onto Marinette's face. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I'm just not used to hearing anything over there. My old neighbor on that side was as quiet as a mouse."

"And maybe this one will be, too," Adrien said. He smiled at her. "And besides, you know that you can always go over and complain if they're being too noisy, right? Just ask them to turn it down. Maybe they're used to having their own place out in the country or something and aren't used to having neighbors. And if they don't stop, then just talk to the landlord. I'm pretty sure there's some article of the lease we signed that says something about noise levels."

"That's true." Marinette fell quiet as the train started up again, slowly chugging out of the station before starting to pick up speed. They both turned to watch the lights of Bath fade away as they sped away towards London.

"Did you get inspired by any of the stuff we saw in Bath?" Adrien asked, breaking the silence once the lights from the city faded away into pinpricks in the distance. "I thought the architecture and decorations were pretty cool."

"They were. I took some pictures of the stuff I want to play with." Marinette smothered a yawn with her hand and continued, leaning her head against Adrien's shoulder. "And you know how the steam kind of blew around so one moment things were kind of muted and the next, the steam blew away and you could see people on the other side who were wearing really bright clothes? I want to experiment with something like that, I think. It could look really cool- or like a disaster, if I do it wrong."

"It'll look good," Adrien said, completely confident. Marinette could make anything that she put her mind to, he was sure of it. Maybe it would take a little trial and error first, but Marinette was both determined and crazy creative.

"I still don't quite get how some people visit every month," Marinette said, referring to a couple they had passed earlier in the city. They had overheard the two talking about their monthly visits to Bath, which both of them had been a little surprised to hear. "I mean, I can get coming back maybe twice a year or something, but every month?"

"They were probably referring to the Bath Spa," Adrien pointed out. "I wouldn't mind coming back and checking that out sometime. Maybe we could do that next time when I have midterms and you have a runway show. Or whenever," Adrien added hastily after a moment. He had almost forgotten that Marinette was only supposed to be in London for a year. It was very possible- very probable, really- that Adrien would finish his fall midterms the next year and go back home to an empty flat. He wasn't looking forward to that. "It would be a nice, relaxing day trip."
"That would be nice." A pause. "Aaand then reporters would be on our backs about a 'romantic getaway' to a 'romantic spa'."

Adrien only grinned. "Then I would just point out that going by myself would make me look like a pathetic loser with no friends. Stuff like that is always more fun with another person. Besides, it's not like it's a nude resort or anything, it's completely normal-" At Marinette's giggle, he rolled his eyes. "And I just made it weird, didn't I."

"I didn't know that you knew that nude resorts even existed. I thought that you were supposed to be the socially clueless kid." Marinette giggled again. "Should I even ask, Mr. Agreste?"

Adrien flushed. "It's- okay, I'm socially clueless, maybe, but I grew up with a computer in my room. The internet is a dark, dark place."

"Ooh, spicy!"

Adrien turned even redder. "No, I didn't mean- that's not- I didn't-"

Marinette cackled.

"Someone mentioned their existence online and I googled it," Adrien finally managed. "I didn't just, y'know, decide to look it up or anything, and all of the photos on the websites are censored anyway-"

Marinette choked, snorted, and then laughed even harder. Adrien frowned for a moment, reviewing his words, and then he flushed even deeper as he realized what he had implied. He spluttered helplessly, protesting as best as he could. "That's- no, I wasn't looking at websites to look at pictures, I was just curious about- I mean, not curious about the people, I was curious about what they actually were and how they actually worked, I swear I wasn't-"

"I know, I was just teasing you." Marinette cackled again, wiping away a few stray tears. "I know we joke about you being all oblivious and pure and all, but apparently we should have looked at your internet search history before coming to that conclusion."

"Oh, shush you," Adrien said with a laugh, elbowing her lightly. "You forget that I was young and oblivious once and didn't have any friends to answer my questions for me, to I had to look it all up on the Internet. And then I would look one thing up, and it would mention another thing that I didn't know about, so I would search that, too."

"Corrupted from a young age and we didn't even know it," Marinette sighed dramatically as Adrien groaned. She giggled at his distressed look and finally took pity on him. "So you were saying about the spa?"

Adrien perked up. "I think it would be fun to go for part of the day. Maybe we wouldn't do any of the treatments or massages, but swimming around in the hot pools could be fun."

"How much did you look up about the spa?" Marinette asked, curious. "It sounds like you know at least a little bit about it."

Adrien pulled a pamphlet out of his bag and waved it at her with a grin. "I snagged this from the train station when we came in and then I flipped through it a little when you were taking pictures of that one bit of wall. It sounds interesting."

"Some of these treatments just sound weird," said Marinette, who had snitched the pamphlet from Adrien and started flipping through it. "I mean, bamboo rod massage? For nearly an hour? What
do they do, roll a stick back and forth on your back?"

Adrien shrugged. "Or do taps. I've heard of that, too."

"And a candle massage where they drip melted wax from a candle on you? How is that relaxing?"

"I think it's a special wax with a lower melting temperature," Adrien offered. "No burns involved."

"Yeah, that would probably be bad for business." Marinette regarded the pamphlet again before handing it back to Adrien. "It sounds like it could be fun. I've never done something like that before."

"Then we have to do it. Someday, somehow." Adrien tucked the pamphlet back in his bag before glancing over at Marinette again. "Uh... you did bring a swimsuit to London, right?"

"I did. But even if I hadn't, it's not as though I never visit Paris," Marinette pointed out. "I mean, I can't imagine that we would be going to the spa this fall or this winter. I'll be back in Paris for a bit over Christmas." Still, she didn't look particularly convinced. "I just... I'm a little concerned about the cost. I mean, the occasional trip by itself isn't bad, but for multiple trips... Even if we make reservations ages in advance and apply promotion discounts, train tickets add up, and then there's entrance fees for the baths themselves. I don't know how much stuff costs, but..."

...oh. Adrien really hadn't considered the cost much, but Marinette was right. He really should have. Their visits to the museums and other sights around London really hadn't cost much, but their current trip had been more expensive. They were hardly traveling every weekend or anything, but Marinette was living on an intern's salary and from other conversations that they had had during their dinners together, it sounded like Marinette had wanted to start getting some proper savings built up sooner rather than later. Going on big trips wouldn't exactly help with that.

"There are a lot of different levels of pricing," Adrien hastened to assure her. "Just the baths themselves really aren't that expensive. And actually, now that I think about it, it might be fun to do one of the treatments while we're there. Just to see what it's like."

Marinette looked supremely unconvinced. Adrien suspected that the cost might still be holding her back.

"We don't have to make any sort of decision about it now," Adrien pointed out when Marinette didn't say anything more. "It was just an idea to keep in mind for the future, if we wanted to go traveling again."

"It does sound interesting," Marinette allowed. "But it looks like a lot of the treatments are only offered Monday to Friday, so on top of the cost I'd also be missing work and using up one of my vacation days, and I'd really rather not do that."

Adrien frowned a bit. "Do you not get many days off? I thought you said that you were getting more from your pattern design time."

Marinette nodded. "I am, and I'm really glad that I am, but I didn't have many days to start out with and I had wanted to save them for trips back home...even though right now it looks like that will mainly just be at Christmas and Easter."

"So you don't want to use up those days on a trip out here again," Adrien finished. "Like I said, we don't need to decide anything, and we don't even need to come back again. It's just an idea."

"I'll keep that in mind," Marinette promised, then she glanced up at him. "So how long of a break
"Do you have for Christmas?"

Adrien perked up at the mention of the holiday. He hadn't really thought about it much before since he had so many other things demanding his attention, but it was starting to get relatively close, and the start of his break even closer. "About three weeks, give or take. I'll be coming back after two, though. I told Nathalie that I needed the time to get ready for the start of the second term." He realized with a start that Marinette wouldn't have anywhere close to that amount of time off. They had never actually discussed it, but talking about the upcoming holidays reminded him that he didn't know any details. Even with all of the time they spent together, they seemed to spend most of it talking about their day or just talking about nothing in particular. "How long do you have off?"

"Not long enough," Marinette muttered a bit rebelliously. She huffed out a short breath and then sighed. "I get several days off for Christmas, and then like I said I'll be using a couple vacation days. I guess it's a decent amount of time and all once that's taken into account, but it's just not as long as I'm used to getting, and a couple days are going to be used up travelling to Paris and back."

"Right, right, of course."

They fell silent again, watching blurry shapes rushing past the train windows. A rain had started up, streaking the windows and making it even more impossible to see out. Adrien let his thoughts wander back to the upcoming holidays and what he would be doing with his time in Paris. He was fairly certain that he wouldn't have his two full weeks in Paris actually off, nor had he ever been able to relax completely and do absolutely no work during his school holidays. There were photoshoots to do and functions to attend scattered throughout his time back. He was tempted to check with Nathalie to see if he had bookings throughout his break or if he could either leave London later or return even earlier than he had initially planned so that Marinette didn't have to be by herself for so long around the holidays-

Except that she had planned to be in London by herself, Adrien reminded himself before he could get too involved in the idea. It wasn't as though they had planned to come together. Marinette had her friends at work to hang out with, and they probably had a holiday party before everyone left, too. She wouldn't get too lonely.

Of course, he could always hang around more and spend most of his nighttime hours prowling the rooftops and trying to run into Ladybug. She hadn't mentioned at all what her plans for the break were, so he wasn't actually sure when she would be going back to Paris- or, technically, if she would be retuning at all. Like with Marinette, he had sort of just assumed what her plans were without actually asking.

"If you take the train back, you could always draw patterns then and count it as work time instead of as a day off," Adrien spoke up again, breaking the silence between them. "...or you could draw regular clothes designs too, I suppose."

"Thank you for the permission, O Great Fashion Guru," Marinette deadpanned, making Adrien grin. Sassy Marinette was fun. "I don't suppose I could wrangle permission to design a couple hats or some jewelry, could I?"

"Does Madam Rosalie make hats and jewelry? I didn't know that." His father did, Adrien knew that. He didn't make a ton of jewelry, but the pieces he did make tended to be simple and elegant.

Marinette shrugged. "She dabbles in it, I think. But if I come up with a hat or necklace design, I can design an entire outfit to go with it. It's a good jumping-off point."
They fell silent for a bit after that. Adrien scrolled through the pictures on his phone as Marinette did a few more rough sketches for pattern ideas and doodled a design for a filigree necklace. By the time they pulled into the London station, though, both of them were poised on the edges of their seats, ready to get off and make a beeline to the bus station so they could get back to their flats, where there were leftovers that were definitely calling their names.

"Can't this bus go any faster?" Adrien grumbled once they were on the bus back to their apartments. He fidgeted in his seat and pressed a hand to his growling stomach. "We should have bought a snack before we got on the bus, Mari. I don't know if I'm gonna survive the ride home."

"If we had stopped to buy something, we would have missed this bus and would have had to wait half an hour for the next one." Still, Marinette couldn't help the annoyed huff she let out when the bus pulled over yet again to pick up another couple people. Seriously, wasn't it late enough that there shouldn't be that many people taking the bus? "I'm sure you'll survive. I'm not dragging your lifeless body up the stairs to your flat."

Adrien only grinned.

Adrien was, in fact, still living as the bus pulled up to the station closest to their flats. They still had to walk a few blocks to get to their building, but it wasn't a bad stroll at all. Or at least it wouldn't have been, if Adrien had been able to stop his impatient jittering.

"I'm this close to just sitting on you until you stop," Marinette said grouchily as Adrien made to dash forward again. Really, he was just as bad as Chat Noir had been when their fights went on for too long and they missed a meal. Both boys got impatient and a bit whiny when denied their food, apparently. "I've heard that if you're hungry for long enough, you just sort of stop feeling it after a while."

"Cruel and unusual punishment," Adrien claimed immediately, all but jogging in place as Marinette caught up to him. "Do you really hate me that much, Marinette?"

Marinette could only sigh.

Another five minutes, and Marinette found herself sighing again as Adrien dashed up the stairs in their building. She couldn't help but let her own feet speed up as she followed, only to nearly slam into Adrien in front of his door. He was staring down the hallway towards her new neighbor's door. Music floated down the hallway, not ridiculously loud but still clearly audible.

Marinette groaned. There was really only one explanation for that look. "Are they really still being noisy?"

"There was a really big bang a few seconds ago," Adrien admitted. "I can see what you were talking about earlier. I'm kind of curious now about what exactly they're doing that's making that much noise."

"I don't care, as long as they cut it out soon," Marinette grumbled, edging past Adrien to get to her own door. If she had to put up with moving noise, she was going to do it with food in her stomach. "I won't be able to sleep if they keep doing that."

"I'm sure they'll stop moving things around by the time you go to bed," Adrien said, even as he cast a nervous glance down the hallway. "We've always had nice neighbors here before. Surely it won't be that bad."

Marinette could only hope he was right.
Chapter End Notes

....gee, famous last words, maybe? Can't possibly imagine what that might lead to :D
And yes, this chapter was 100% the result of too much research that I didn't want to let
go to waste. There might have been an abandoned storyline that used that research
initially and I couldn't quite let go of all of it.

Reviews are always much appreciated! :)}
Wednesday night, Adrien was awakened by the sound of someone pounding at his door. "What on earth," he groaned as he rolled out of bed. Plagg whined in protest as he was jostled. "Who in the world would be at my door at half-past midnight?"

"Paparazzi hoping for a picture of you in your pajamas," Plagg suggested sleepily.

"How would they even get in the building?"

"Don't know, don't care," was his only response.

Adrien rubbed at his eyes as he stumbled down the hallway towards the front door. He was too tired to deal with this right now. If it was reporters hoping for a picture, he wouldn't hesitate to call the police on them. He peered through the peephole on the door, expecting to see someone clutching an oversized camera.

Instead he saw Marinette, looking exhausted and clutching a blanket around her shoulders.

Adrien didn't hesitate to unlock the door and pull it open. "Marinette? What are you doing still up?"

"My neighbor is playing music pretty loud," Marinette said, yawning. She looked absolutely miserable. "I tried earplugs, I tried noise-cancelling headphones, I tried sleeping on my couch but that wasn't much better. I can't fall asleep, so I was wondering-"

"You can sleep over," Adrien said immediately. Now that he was out in the hallway, he could hear the music. It was ridiculously loud, especially considering that it was both late and a weeknight. "Of course, come on in."

"Thank you," Marinette breathed as Adrien ushered her in. The blanket she had wrapped around her shoulders dragged a little behind her as she walked and there was an odd bulge on her side that Adrien suspected was her pillow. "I'm sorry about waking you up."

"It's not a problem," Adrien assured her quickly as he locked the door again. "Did you lock your flat up?"

"Uh-huh," Marinette managed around a yawn. She fished a hand out from under her blanket and deposited a set of keys and her phone on the table next to the couch. "I figured you would say yes." She yawned again as she flopped down on his couch. She reached into her blanket and pulled out the pillow, fluffing it under her head and shuffling her blanket around to huddle under it. Adrien watched in amusement as Marinette slowly vanished under the blanket. Messy strands of black hair poked out from the top.

It was cute.

"You are not sleeping on the couch," Adrien insisted after a moment, suddenly realizing what Marinette was doing. "I'm serious. It's no good for your back. I've tried to take naps on it before, and I always regretted it. I can share the bed, it's definitely big enough."
Marinette's head popped up from under the blanket, eyes wide as she stared at Adrien. "I couldn't-"

"I'll be the perfect gentleman, I promise," Adrien said, holding up his hands. "Really, Marinette, your back will be killing you tomorrow. We can share the bed. It's clean, I swear. I just washed the sheets yesterday."

Marinette bit her lip, looking uncertain, and Adrien waited. He didn't want to push her- if she was uncomfortable sharing the bed with him, he wouldn't push it and risk making her uncomfortable- but he just had to make sure that she knew that he didn't mind. He didn't snore (according to Plagg, at least; the kwami didn't exactly have any reason to lie), he didn't steal the blankets (much), and they were both on the leaner side, so in theory sharing the bed should be fine.

(Of course, Marinette might snore and steal blankets, but somehow Adrien doubted that.)

"I suppose," Marinette said at last, rolling off the couch and shuffling towards Adrien, still wrapped in her blanket. Her pillow dangled from on hand. "Thanks."

"It's not a problem," Adrien assured her, snagging her pillow and following her back to his bedroom. He grinned as they entered his room. "Imagine what a frenzy the tabloids would go into if they could see us now."

"Ugh, don't even joke." Marinette sounded exasperated as she rounded the bed and claimed the far side for herself. "Everyone at work is still joking about our prank and the first round of tabloids. They would be impossible if anything else came out."

Adrien suspected that Marinette's colleagues probably found Marinette's reactions when the subject was brought up more hilarious than the actual articles about the two of them, but he wasn't about to tell Marinette that. After all, he rather enjoyed seeing Marinette getting flustered himself. She just had such an adorable way of being flustered, where she would stutter and turn red and her hands would fly all over.

"Good night, Marinette," was all Adrien said instead as he slid back into bed and pulled his pillow from the middle of the bed to his side. "Sleep well."

"You too. Good night, Adrien."

The next morning, Adrien woke up to the sound of an unfamiliar alarm beeping. He frowned for a moment- maybe Plagg had been fiddling with the settings on his phone again, it certainly wouldn't be the first time- before rolling over and picking his phone up from his bedside table.

It wasn't going off. In fact, there was no alarm set at all, since he didn't have classes until later in the day on Thursdays and he normally took the opportunity to sleep in.

A groan on the other side of the bed made Adrien jump, and then he remembered that Marinette was sleeping over. She shifted in the bed, and then the alarm shut off as she picked up her own phone. Adrien frowned- he definitely didn't remember either of them remembering to pick Marinette's phone up when they moved to the bedroom, maybe Plagg had decided to be useful for once and had moved the phone for Marinette- before pushing himself up onto his elbows, watching
as Marinette dragged herself out of bed with a grumble. Her hair stuck out all over the place, and there were pillow lines on her cheeks.

It was cute.

"Good morning," Adrien said with a yawn, sitting all the way up. He wasn't going to fall asleep again, so he might as well get up and at least pretend to be productive. Marinette squeaked in surprise, whipping around with wide eyes and nearly tripping over her own feet. "Did you sleep well?"

"I- yeah, I did," Marinette managed. After a moment, she jumped and clapped a hand to her forehead. "Oh! Right, I forgot that I came over."

"I figured." She had practically jumped out of her skin when she saw him. "You're welcome to come over whenever, if this keeps being a problem."

"Thank you." Marinette reached over to give him a hug. "I'll try to come over earlier next time. I just kept hoping that they would turn the music off and I wouldn't have to bother you."

"You're not a bother," Adrien assured her, swinging his own feet out of bed to get up. "You could never be." He had actually slept better than he ever had before with Marinette sleeping right next to him. Contrary to Nino's horror stories about how awkward it was to sleep next to someone for the first time, Adrien had dropped straight off without any issues. "And hopefully it was a one-time problem. You've never had a problem with your neighbors before, have you?"

"They're new," Marinette reminded him. "Remember? The old person left a few weeks ago- I think they got a new job across the city- and a new person moved in a few days ago."

"Right, right, of course," Adrien said as he followed Marinette to the door. She had grabbed her blanket back and had wrapped it around herself again, probably so any neighbors wouldn't see her in her pajamas. "See you later?"

"Of course," Marinette agreed, rolling up on her toes to press a friendly kiss to Adrien's cheek. "I'll leave by five today, I promise. I'll cook."

"Sounds good." Adrien waved as Marinette scooped up her keys from the couch and headed back down the hall to her flat. He let the door click closed and headed back to his room. As long as he was up, he might as well get dressed and maybe do a bit of review before he had to eat lunch and head to class. As much fun as sleeping in was, it also threw off his sleep schedule.

Plagg zipped out of his closet as Adrien reentered the room. He circled around Adrien, a wide grin on his face. "So a sleepover with your wife, hmm? Spicy!"

Adrien swatted at the irritating kwami. "Her neighbor was being too loud for her to sleep. We just slept, nothing happened."

Plagg knew that, of course he did. He just liked being irritating more.

"I hope this was just a one-time thing," Adrien said as he pulled a t-shirt out of his dresser. "I'd hate for Marinette to be chased out of her apartment by rude neighbors."

"You mean you don't want her to stay over again? You were practically purring in your sleep!"

Adrien flushed, pulling out the rest of his clothes and starting to get dressed. He couldn't deny that the warmth of another human body nearby while he was sleeping had been incredibly soothing. If
Marinette needed- or wanted, just for kicks and giggles- to sleep over again, he definitely wouldn't turn her down. It was nice being that comfortable with another person.

"I'm not hearing an objection," Plagg sing-songed tauntingly, spinning around in a circle. "Suspicious suspicious!"

"She was warm," Adrien blurted out at last. He turned redder. "I mean, I would probably have the same reaction with an electric blanket. It's your darn cat influence! I like sleeping next to warm stuff! Stop laughing!"

Plagg only cackled more.

By the time Adrien got home, he had resolved that he wasn't going to let Plagg's teasing influence him at all. So what if he and one of his best friends shared a bed? He wasn't going to make it weird just because Plagg said that it was romantic. Adrien valued their friendship too much to mess it up.

And if they got weird, their friends would definitely notice. Alya and Nino had just texted him earlier mid-day, asking if they could come visit Adrien and Marinette that weekend, even though it would only be a couple weeks before Adrien and Marinette went back to Paris for the holidays. Adrien had texted Marinette to check before replying- if she had had any plans for the weekend then that could be a problem- and Marinette had responded enthusiastically. Nino and Alya would have to sleep on their couches (or Adrien and Marinette would have to take the couches for the weekend and give their friends their beds), because while it would have probably worked quit well in theory for Adrien and Marinette to share one bed and for Alya and Nino to take the other one, they would never hear the end of the teasing.

"Madam Rosalie has an air mattress large enough for two," Marinette reported that night as she stepped into Adrien's apartment. She stepped into the kitchen and made an excited noise as she spotted the stew Adrien had brewing on the stove. "She said we could borrow it when she overheard me mentioning that Nino and Alya were coming over. According to her, the couches are way too uncomfortable to have guests sleeping on them."

"Oh, that's fantastic," Adrien said, grinning. He hadn't really wanted to subject Nino to the horrors of sleeping on his couch, not when he had just insisted on Marinette not sleeping there. It was decent enough to sit on, but sleeping a full night on it really was a horror. "So what do we still need then for their visit? Do we just put normal sheets on the air mattress?"

Marinette looked a little dubious. "We can try, I guess. I think it might be a little too thick for that. If Nino and Alya could bring sleeping bags, they could just use those."

"We should probably get the air mattress a few days early and try the sheets first," Adrien said. He let out a short huff. "And I want to see how big the thing is. We should probably have them stay over here, in case your neighbor is loud again."

Marinette grimaced, though whether it was at the thought of her neighbor being noisy or at the thought of what Alya and Nino might say if they caught her sneaking into Adrien's flat to get some sleep, he didn't know.
"-and I want to know how much floor space I'll have left," Adrien finished. "Would that be the kind of thing that I would deflate during the day so we can actually move around?"

Marinette only shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know. I'll have to ask."

As it turned out, Madam Rosalie had special sheets that went with the air mattress, and even a couple extra pillows to go with it.

"Actual lifesaver," Adrien sighed as he and Marinette wrestled the mattress into place and started the machine going to inflate it. "Does she have people visit her regularly, is that why she has all of this stuff?"

Marinette shook her head, then shrugged. "I think she has enough interns and regular employees that come from out of the area, live in these flats and have people visit. It sounds like she lends out the air mattress fairly frequently."

Adrien looked thoughtful. "So we were lucky to get it this weekend, you mean? We might not be so lucky if people want to visit closer to the holidays or something."

"I think you at least would be going back to Paris for the holidays," Marinette pointed out. "I mean, I will be too, of course, maybe just not for as long."

"You could always use some of your pattern-making bonus time for an extended Christmas break," Adrien reminded her. They had talked about it before- well, okay, they had briefly mentioned it in a conversation once- but he still thought it was a good idea. The fact that he had recently found out that he would definitely have to stay in Paris for pretty much his whole break had absolutely nothing to do with him bringing it up again. "Have a couple extra days. More time with your parents and Nino and Alya." And him, of course.

Marinette shrugged, not really responding to his suggestion. Adrien gave a small internal sigh and decided to drop the subject. After all, how Marinette wanted to spend her vacation days and hard-earned extra days off was up to her, not him.

"If we're going to get visitors at all frequently, I might look into getting an air mattress of my own," Adrien commented, going back to their earlier topic of conversation. "So we don't end up trying to get it the same weekend as someone else and make Alya and Nino or your parents sleep on the couch."

Marinette snorted at that. "You mean you might have Nathalie look into getting us an air mattress. I think we shouldn't rush it," she added. "It's not as though air mattresses are in short supply or anything. We could just wait until a conflict comes up before going out and buying one. We don't need the most top-of-the-line model, Adrien," Marinette said when she saw him opening his mouth, about to protest and make some argument for why they absolutely needed an air mattress of their own. "We can always ask Madam Rosalie where she got hers and what brand it is if we ever can't use the mattress some weekend."

Adrien stuck out his bottom lip, ready to pout, and then he realized that she was right. The jutting lower lip quickly retreated. Marinette laughed at him.
"This is actually pretty nice," Adrien commented as the mattress really started to swell up. The pump was surprisingly quiet as it worked. "I'm kinda curious how comfortable it actually is."

"Probably not quite as good as your bed back home," Marinette joked. "But it'll be better than the couch and that's what's important, right?"

Adrien grinned ruefully. "Yeah, my father probably won't be sleeping over on this any time soon. Not that he would come over here unless he felt that he had to anyway." He waited for the mattress to finish filling all the way and then disconnected the pump. He tossed one edge of the sheets to Marinette and together they put the air mattress bed together.

"I'm definitely not keeping this out during the day," Adrien said as they plopped the pillows into place and flopped onto the mattress themselves. It actually wasn't all that uncomfortable at all. He wouldn't mind sleeping on it for a few nights. "It's too big. We would trip over it all day."

"Plenty of space to spread out, though." Marinette stretched, her arms spreading out and taking over most of the mattress. One of her hands brushed against Adrien's arm and then rested there a bit limply as she relaxed next to him. "It'll work. Do I have to get up?"

Before they knew it, the week was over and they were meeting Alya and Nino at the train station. They didn't both need to go, of course- their friends were hardly carrying a lot of luggage for the two day visit- but neither had wanted to hang back and wait any longer to see Alya and Nino.

"Hey, you two!" Alya called cheerfully as soon as they spotted each other outside the station. She elbowed her way through the crowd, Nino following along in her wake. She threw her arms around Marinette first, hugged her tightly, and then attacked Adrien with the same sort of bone-crushing hug.

"Good to see you too, Alya," Adrien choked, patting her on the back. Alya laughed and released him so that Nino could say hi.

"So you two are neighbors, huh?" Nino said as they finished their greetings. "Funny coincidence."

"Really convenient, too," Adrien admitted as they turned and headed for the bus station. "Marinette knew where everything was by the time I arrived. I would have gotten lost if it weren't for her helping me."

"Mmm-hmm. I bet it's convenient," Alya said in a bit of a sing-song voice. She exchanged a look with Nino that Adrien couldn't quite read. The two of them smirked at each other, and Adrien exchanged a confused look with Marinette. She looked strangely resigned for some reason, and Adrien made a mental note to ask her about it later. If she knew why Alya and Nino were acting so oddly, he would certainly appreciate an explanation. He was rather lost.

"Anyway, it's been nice having someone in the city that I know," Adrien said before the strange quiet could hang on for too long. "Someone I can talk to in French, after hearing nothing but English all day." Technically he had Plagg to talk to as well, but none of the others knew that. Besides, Plagg wasn't the greatest conversationalist ever. He only ever wanted to talk about cheese and he already knew everything that Adrien had done that day.
"Well, you are in England," Alya pointed out. "I would expect that you might hear a fair bit of English."

"It's just nice to have a break, that's all," Marinette chimed in before Adrien could respond. "It's nice to have a conversation where you don't have to really think about the words at all."

"I can see that," Nino said. He glanced around them and then shrugged at the group. "Like, you don't have to give 100% of your attention to the conversation to be able to follow it. It got exhausting just during those classes at school; I can only imagine how tiring it can get if everything you hear all day is in another language."

"Very tiring," Marinette said with a shudder. "Especially when people use these technical terms that I know perfectly well in French, but in English? It's better now, but at the start I felt like an idiot for having to ask about everything all the time. Thankfully Madam Rosalie understood and she would just tell me the word in French instead of trying to just explain everything at a very basic level like some of the other workers did."

"Same with some Physics terms," Adrien added. He and Marinette had talked about it before, when his semester was just starting, and Adrien had been thrilled to learn that he wasn't the only one who had the problem with having to relearn technical terms for everything. "It's a pain, especially when I'm trying to take notes. It's hard to understand concepts if you're building off of things that you can't quite place. Some stuff I can figure out based on context, but other things I have to go back and look up. Hopefully it'll get better by the end of the semester."

The group moved on to different topics as they waited for the bus and rode back to Adrien and Marinette's building. They chatted about Marinette's first Fashion Week and about Alya's most recent news article assignment, and then moved on to discussing the odd jobs Nino was picking up as he tried to nail down exactly what he wanted to do with his life. His most recent gig had been organizing the music and being a cameraman for a small indie film. According to Nino, it had been an interesting experience but he hadn't really been all that interested in the contents of the film. He entertained them all with stories from the small and apparently somewhat disorganized set as the bus rumbled towards their stop.

"I'm making dinner and Marinette is making cookies for dessert," Adrien said as the group hopped off the bus and headed for their building, pulling Alya and Nino's bags as they went. "We were planning on each of us using our own kitchen, but we could probably make it work in one if we want to stick together and catch up while we're cooking."

Alya and Nino exchanged another one of those glances before turning back to Adrien and Marinette. "Separate is fine," they said together. "I'm sure Marinette and I want to talk about stuff that you and Nino wouldn't care about," Alya added before Adrien and Marinette could look too confused. "And you and Nino want to talk about stuff Marinette and I wouldn't be interested in. Better all around."

...somehow Adrien wasn't quite buying that.

---

Nino hung over the divider between the dining area and kitchen, watching Adrien as he chopped
vegetables for their dinner. "So... you and Marinette, huh?"

Adrien glanced up and frowned at Nino. He was a bit confused by the sudden and unexpected change of topic. "We're friends."

Nino looked unconvincing. "Uh-huh. Right. Dude, I've seen pretty much all of the photos of you that have been popping up in the papers. Alya hordes them like a dragon. You don't look at a girl like that if there's not something going on."

"Like what?" Adrien was pretty certain he didn't look at Marinette any differently than he would look at any of his other friends, like Nino or Alya or Ladybug-

Okay, not like Ladybug. He knew full well that he often gazed at Ladybug like she hung the moon and the stars, so she probably wasn't the best example of people he looked at platonically.

Nino gave him a long look. "Like- oh, I need to pull up a picture. You won't be able to deny it when you see- oh, let me see-" He scrolled frantically through his phone and then his face lit up. "This! Right here!" He spun the phone around, so Adrien could see a photo of himself gazing adoringly at Marinette at their mock wedding.

Adrien let out a long sigh. "Dude. That was a staged photo. We were trying to trick people into thinking that we were madly in love."

"You look madly in love."

"It's called acting," Adrien pointed out, going back to his veggies. "I was trying to be convincing. I've done that before, you know- modelling for photoshoots required that I look happy when I'm not, or sultry when I'm actually tired and grouchy and ready for a nap."

"Fine." Nino took his phone back and started scrolling again. "No wedding 'photoshoot' pictures. That's fine, I have plenty of other pictures to choose from."

"If you say so." Adrien wasn't particularly convinced.

"Oh, I say so all right," Nino said, pausing in his perusal of photos to wave his phone at Adrien. He turned his attention back to his phone for a minute. "Aha! Here, look at this and tell me what you see."

"I'm seeing a photo of me smiling at Marinette," Adrien said dryly as he glanced over at the photo. The picture was nothing too exciting, just something snapped of the two of them while they were waiting for a runway show to start. Marinette was laughing and he was grinning at her. "I don't see what you're trying to prove, Nino."

"It's an adoring smile!" Nino insisted, waving his phone at Adrien. "It's obvious!"

Adrien rolled his eyes. "It's an amused smile, Nino. She had just told a good joke. What, am I meant to be as straight-faced as the Queen's Guards whenever I'm in the presence of the fairer sex?"

Nino only let out an exasperated huff as he returned his attention to his phone, presumably to find yet another photo.

"And you do realize that all paparazzi photos are going to be taken out of context, right?" Adrien added. "They publish things that fit what they want people to believe. For that picture you just showed me, they probably took a dozen photos and discarded the others because my smile wasn't
Adrien dumped his chopped veggies into a bowl and reached for the next tomato. "And then there's Photoshop to make those last little alterations."

"Fine. But you can't deny that you're hanging out with her practically 24/7. That is the behavior of someone who is interested in a certain someone." Nino wiggled his eyebrows. "'C'mon, Adrien. Admit it."

"I have school and she has work," Adrien reminded Nino, who had apparently forgotten those tiny details. "It's hardly 24/7. And of course we hang out, we're friends, we live right next to each other, and all of our friends and family are in a different country."

Yeah, it was definitely a good thing that he and Marinette hadn't decided to share one bed so Alya and Nino could take the other. Their friends would just make a huge fuss about it and pretend that it was a bigger deal than it actually was. They definitely wouldn't be able to mention the sleepover earlier in the week, the cuddling that went on during movie nights (their friends would probably try to cry date over the movie nights themselves), and the sleeping on each other on the train. They were lucky that Alya had shared an apartment with a journalist friends for a semester abroad while she was in university and that the two had cooked meals together and taken turns when they were busy, because otherwise Nino and Alya would no doubt be calling date on that as well.

Having friends that were determined to matchmake between him and his other friend was exhausting sometimes.

What confused Adrien the most was the fact that Nino had once told him that everyone perceived closeness and contact with other people differently. Some people showed romantic affection in little ways that would be considered friendly touches by other people. Some people, like Adrien, liked being close to others in ways that people who didn't know him would see as romantic. Nino had assured him that it wasn't weird- and at the time, Alya had agreed- but clearly they weren't willing to listen to their own words now.

Well, actually Adrien didn't know about Alya for sure, but the sly look on the reporter's face as she left to join Marinette as she cooked dessert made Adrien suspect that Marinette was getting the same interrogation as he was.

"But, like, travelling with each other," Nino tried again. "And going out to explore the city. Whenever you text me about whatever you're up to, you're always with Marinette."

Adrien rolled his eyes. Seriously, that was reaching.

"Travelling and exploring are more fun when I'm not by myself," Adrien said. He stirred the pot that was just starting to simmer and dumped the first batch of vegetables into the broth. "If I go with someone else, it's more likely that we won't forget something important or get lost. We find more things to explore with two sets of eyes, we're less likely to miss a train or bus because we got lost track of time, and we're interested in seeing the same things anyway, so why should we go to all the trouble of going somewhere separately?"

"Dude, you are so oblivious," Nino groaned, letting himself collapse into a chair. "It's a wonder that the magazines don't bother you more often, really."

"I'm boring," Adrien said dryly. He pulled the first few of the spices he wanted off of the shelf and started measuring them. "Besides, they focus on more famous people. Movie stars and royalty, not mere models."

Next door, Marinette was getting the same interrogation from Alya.

"Well, you two have certainly gotten a lot closer," Alya said as a starter. She, like Nino, was watching Marinette work in the kitchen and hadn't offered to help, though perhaps it was because no one in their right mind would interfere with a Dupain-Cheng baking.

Marinette sent her a confused look. After an awkward first year back in collège, she and Adrien had already been pretty good friends before either of them came over to London. "...I don't understand what you're talking about."

Alya only snorted and rolled her eyes. "Sure you don't. I've seen plenty of photos recently that say the contrary."

"Photos?"

"Uh-huh. Ones of you and Adrien sharing quite the steamy kiss, of him making googly eyes at you, of you making googly eyes at him. You two are hardly subtle."

Marinette couldn't contain the snort of laughter that escaped her as she started pulling out the ingredients for the cake. "Really? You're still going on about the fake wedding photos?" That had been forever ago, and really, it should have been quite clear by now that it had all been faked. They had since posted what the other interns called "behind-the-scenes" photos of the mad rush to get everything set up, and then photos that clearly showed the cameraman from behind and the sparse "audience". There had even been a couple goofy photos from when Madam Rosalie had been coaching Adrien and Marinette on how to act like they were madly in love before the "ceremony" started.

Well, okay, it hadn't exactly been hard to act like she was completely in love with Adrien—far from it—but she had exaggerated her expression just a bit and Adrien had certainly done his fair share of acting.

"And the ones that have come out since," Alya said with a grin. "You've gotten Adrien's attention, even if he hasn't admitted to it in any of the interviews. I can understand him not wanting to tell reporters about you dating because they would never leave you two alone. But I know him and I know you and I know that there's more to the story. Talk."

"I would, but there's not anything more," Marinette said. She carefully measured out the flour and sifted it into her batter. "We're friends that happen to live next door to each other and do things together, because that's what friends do. The only reason they're making such a big deal out of it is because he's a guy and I'm a girl."

"And because Adrien's famous, I presume," Alya added with a laugh. Then she narrowed her eyes at Marinette. "...you aren't actually serious, are you?"

"I don't know why you don't think I am," Marinette shot right back. She measured out the sugar as well. "Adrien and I are friends. We enjoy each other's company. Just because I used to have a crush
on him doesn't mean that we can't just hang out without it being something more."

Of course, she still had a crush on Adrien, but she wasn't about to admit that to Alya. She would just make a big deal out of it. It wasn't as though it mattered, anyway. For them to even consider a relationship- which wouldn't be a good idea anyway, not with the tabloids watching their every move and Mr. Agreste still firmly against the idea of his son dating- Adrien would have to feel the same way about her. He didn't, though. He saw her as a friend, and he had hardly given any sign that that was ever going to change.

Alya let out a long groan. "I knew I should have cornered Agreste on his own instead of sending Nino over to try to finagle any information out. You're too used to my questioning and Nino probably just gave up when Adrien said you guys weren't dating."

Marinette whipped around, shocked. Her hand narrowly missed batting the eggs off of the counter. "You had Nino asking Adrien about- about us? Alya!"

"What?"

"I only barely got Adrien to forget about that text you sent him after the fake wedding," Marinette said with a groan. "You know, the one where you said something about me confessing? He's gonna put the pieces together and think that I still have a crush on him and then everything is going to be all awkward!"

Alya looked slightly abashed before her expression went back to confident. "He wouldn't get awkward. Believe me, if that boy figured it out, he would definitely be dating you."

"You don't know that!" Belatedly, Marinette realized that she had forgotten to deny her still-present crush on her friend. Alya would take that as confirmation that Marinette was still madly in love with Adrien and would secretly appreciate any matchmaking efforts she made while she and Nino were visiting.

Marinette made a silent vow to herself that if anything did happen between herself and Adrien- which it wouldn't, she was positive, Adrien didn't see her like that- she wasn't going to tell Alya right away, just because she didn't appreciate the meddling in her relationship.

"I totally know that," Alya said, though Marinette knew full well that Alya was just guessing. After all, Alya had insisted all through their first year together that Adrien was definitely interested in Marinette, even though they almost never talked. Once Marinette had calmed down and gotten to know Adrien better, she and Alya had learned that Adrien wasn't even remotely interested in dating someone that he didn't know that well. Whatever so-called 'signs' that Alya had seen that made her believe that Adrien might see Marinette as more than a friend were completely wrong.

"So how is your newspaper internship going?" Marinette asked, making the executive decision to change the topic. Alya would probably read too much into it, but she didn't particularly care. It wasn't as though it mattered. "I know you said the most recent article went well, but what about the rest of it?"

"I know what you're doing," Alya warned her, but she didn't try to resist the change of topic. "It's going pretty well, for the most part. I know I complained about one of my articles to you a few weeks ago, but that was really a one-off more than anything else. Sometimes I have a deadline that feels a little too rushed for the research that needs to go on or I can't get a response out of someone for an article, but my boss is pretty reasonable most of the time."

"Have you settled on a specific area of interest?"
Alya made a face. "...not really? I get to cover any Ladybug and Chat Noir stories, of course- I was so happy when my supervisor said that, I thought that one of the senior writers would get first dibs for sure- but that area is kind of slow right now, with Hawkmoth defeated and all." Alya looked disappointed, which Marinette found slightly exasperating. It seemed that Alya never quite considered how disruptive the akuma attacks could be to Paris- and to Ladybug and Chat Noir- and she only paid attention to the heroes' appearances. Back when Hawkmoth was taken down, Marinette had been ecstatic. Alya had been deeply disappointed.

Marinette loved her friend and all, but she was sure exasperating sometimes.

"I've been doing local news pieces," Alya said after a pause. "It's interesting, and it does at least keep me at home. But I'm thinking of applying to this program through the paper where I would get to travel around the world for half a year and do these pieces from all over. But that would put Nino and I in a long-distance relationship, and I just don't know..."

"You two have been together for forever. I'm sure you could make it work." Marinette checked the temperature on the oven before returning to her work. "And maybe he could come visit you and get inspired by the local music."

Alya perked up. "That's an idea. And when I go places he can't come and visit, I could buy CDs for him." Her shoulders slumped again. "Ugh, why am I even considering it? There's so many applicants, and I don't know if I could come up with a good research topic. That's in the application requirements," Alya explained after a moment's pause. "We need to know what we're going to be mainly researching and doing stories about. That's how they figure out what countries the winner is going to go to. Everybody who applies has a topic that they wanted to explore, something that they're known for. All I'm known for is superheroes."

Another pause, as Alya sulked and Marinette was hit with an idea.

"Do that, then," Marinette suggested, deciding after a moment's internal debate that any research Alya did couldn't possibly threaten her secret identity at all. If the years that Alya had spent chasing Ladybug and Chat Noir hadn't already turned up anything that would connect Marinette and Ladybug, any additional research on other superheroes wouldn't do anything. "Research Miraculous superheroes throughout history. There have to be legends."

It was as though someone had flicked a switch in Alya's head. She snapped upright and Marinette could practically see the gears whirling in her head. "Miraculous users throughout history? I haven't heard of many, really, just Ladybug back in ancient Egypt, but I bet you're right. Ladybug and Chat Noir and the Butterfly and I bet there's others, it wouldn't make sense to just have the three. I'd have to do a ton of preliminary research and honestly, I don't know how much I would actually have to travel for most of the research, but it would be an interesting piece even if I didn't get to go. It would get me attention from my boss for sure."

Marinette smiled but didn't say anything else. She knew full well that there were several other Miraculous- there was the turtle, obviously, and the peacock and the bee- but since it didn't make sense for her to know that, she didn't tell Alya anything. Maybe she could subtly steer Alya in the right direction later on, once Alya started doing her research in earnest, but Alya wasn't quite at the point where Marinette could do that without being suspicious yet.

"I'm gonna start doing research for that as soon as I get home," Alya decided. "I don't know if I'll be able to get enough together in time for a super-strong application for this year's selection, but it's worth a try!" She bounded into the kitchen and tackled Marinette into a hug. "Thanks for the idea, Marinette! You're the best!"
"I do try," Marinette joked as she hugged her friend back before extracting herself so she could reach for the mixer. "So, how do you think you're going to start your research?"

Naturally, Alya was still talking about the research she was going to do by the time the two of them joined Adrien and Nino over in Adrien's apartment for dinner. She had decided to start with what little they had heard from the Egyptian exhibit so long ago.

"I'll have to ask Mr. Kubdel when the papyrus was from," Alya said, ignoring her food completely to gesture with her fork. Nino looked somewhat puzzled at where the topic and where the sudden enthusiasm for it had come from, but he hadn't questioned it yet. "And then I can look into legends from around that time and see what's there. That's the only lead I have right now, but maybe Mr. Kubdel would might have heard other strange legends." Alya flopped back in her seat with a loud sigh. "Ooh, it's gonna be so much work. And I've already been so busy that it would be impossible to keep up with the Ladyblog if things were still, y'know, happening." Alya let out another long sigh. She suddenly looked despondent. "Of course, I'd be able to keep up with the occasional sighting, if there were any. They've both been missing for ages."

"It's very weird," Nino told Adrien and Marinette, clearly glad for the slight change of topic to something that he actually knew a little about. "You know how they were still occasionally seen out and about after Hawkmoth went down? I think the longest without a sighting was maybe one week, maybe two, and now they're both missing for months. They didn't say anything. It's weird." He looked suddenly concerned. "D'you think something happened to them? Maybe whoever gave them their Miraculous took them back."

"They're hardly obligated to tell the city when they'll be gone," Adrien reminded them both, surprising Marinette. She had remembered Adrien as having a bit of a crush on Ladybug when they were younger, so she had expected him to seem more concerned. Maybe he had spotted her and Chat Noir at some point when they went past the building. But then why wouldn't he say anything? "Maybe they were going to be, I don't know, travelling or something, and telling people would risk their identities."

"That's true, I guess," Alya allowed, then she perked up. "Both of them missing at the same time-they're together, they have to be! Maybe they're a couple now! What a story that would be! The entire city has been rooting for them to get together for forever."

"I thought Ladybug vanished before Chat Noir did," Marinette protested, ignoring the last part of what Alya had said. She had been in London for months before her partner popped up. Maybe they had just been missing each other before, but she was almost positive that he had made some indication that he had only recently arrived. If Alya got her teeth into the idea that she and Chat Noir were dating, she would never let it go. It had happened before, and it was months before Alya stopped talking about it. Marinette couldn't say anything to Alya about it, of course, but it was always a bit awkward to hear her best friend speculating about her relationship status with her superhero partner.

Alya looked let down. "But..."

"She's right," Nino pointed out, and then he gave Marinette a quizzical look. "I thought you didn't
pay attention to Ladybug and Chat Noir."

Marinette tried not to wince. Her apparent lack of interest in the superheroes from when they were younger really did backfire on her sometimes, but there were really so many theory sessions about herself that she could sit through without getting bored beyond belief. But she had gotten significantly better at coming up with excuses compared to when she was younger. "I... I just remember a conversation I had with someone back when Ladybug hadn't shown up for several weeks. Chat Noir was still around then."

"Yeah, there was definitely quite a gap between when they left," Adrien agreed. "Like, months of difference. Maybe they ended up in the same place somewhere, but they definitely didn't leave at the same time."

"That's a pity," Alya sighed, shoulders slumping. "Drat. I've been trying to figure out where they went, but there haven't been any sightings at all. I've been keeping an eye out whenever I travel somewhere, just in case either of them are in the same place."

Marinette froze. She really should have thought to warn Chat Noir about Alya's impending visit. It would be hard to explain how she knew that Alya would be visiting without giving away her own identity, but she probably could have thought up something. It would have been worth it, especially now that she knew almost for certain that Chat Noir lived in her building. Of course, maybe Chat Noir didn't go past Adrien's window. He had never mentioned seeing either of the superheroes to her, and he wasn't saying anything now either, even with Alya clearly frustrated about the lack of superhero sightings.

Maybe Chat Noir would be too busy to go out while Nino and Alya were visiting. He was obviously in London for some reason, and that reason could very well keep him sufficiently busy for the two days that Alya was there. She could only hope. As much as she loved her friend, Marinette didn't exactly want Alya to be in London every weekend and spending the entire time scouring the city to try to find her and Chat Noir. Having to dodge Alya at the end of every fight hadn't been fun when they were younger, and trying to avoid an older and more experienced Alya sounded like it would be about the same amount of fun.

That was to say, absolutely no fun at all.

"The possibility of that is pretty much zero, though," Nino pointed out. "I mean, if they happened to be in London for some reason, they could easily be on the outskirts on the other side of the city. You might hear about it over the internet, but you probably wouldn't just happen to see them."

"You almost always had to go searching for them even in Paris," Marinette agreed. "Even when you had a good idea of where they would most likely be active."

"It's still worth a shot, though," Alya insisted. "Especially now that I want to do research on them! If I could find them, I could ask about where the Miraculous were in the past and I could ask about if there are other Miraculous that exist. I'm sure they would be willing to answer a few questions to help me get started!"

"If you can find them again," Nino pointed out.

"They might end up back in Paris over the holidays," Adrien suggested when Alya's face fell at Nino's comment. "I mean, a lot of people go back home to their families over Christmas. If Ladybug and Chat Noir grew up in Paris, they probably have family there that they would go back to visit."
Alya perked up immediately. "Do you really think so? That would make sense! But what if something happened to them and they aren't Ladybug and Chat Noir anymore?"

"Maybe just wait until the holidays are over with before you assume the worst," Marinette suggested. "You can't forget that Ladybug and Chat Noir have their own lives to live, Alya. I mean, if you think about it- how many of our old classmates live somewhere other than Paris now?"

"Quite a few," Alya admitted. "I mean, there's you two, and then Sabrina moved to Nice, and Nathaniel is living somewhere in the country now, and I think Rose and Juleka are both living right outside the city. So I guess that makes sense that they might move now that Hawkmoth is gone."

"And who knows, maybe they're making up for years of vacations they couldn't take because they had to stay in Paris," Nino added. "I know that if I had been in their place, I would have left Paris to go travel 'round the world as soon as Hawkmoth was defeated. They probably decided to be all responsible and go to university first, though."

"Well, it wouldn't be like they could tell their families, 'Hey, I just spend the past zillion years fighting a supervillain, see ya around'," Marinette pointed out, spearing some of her salad with a fork. "I mean, they still had to keep their secret identities secret, right?"

Alya snorted at that. "You can't tell me that their family and close friends hadn't figured it out. I mean, I

"definitely

would have known if any of you guys were superheroes."

"Exactly," Nino chimed in. "And I'm no reporter, but I definitely think I would have noticed as well. I mean, how would you miss something like that?" He grinned and exclaimed, "Dude, just imagine how cool that would be, though! Being best buds with Ladybug or Chat Noir?"

"That would be pretty cool," Adrien agreed, though he looked somewhat amused for some reason, his lips quirking up at the edges. "But what, Nino, am I not cool enough for you?"

"But Chat Noir, dude." Nino was starry-eyed. "I bet he's super-chill. Like, did you see the way he always hung around to comfort the akuma victims? And, like, looking back, I can see a ton of times when he and Ladybug totally would have been within their right to get irritated about something, but they didn't. Like, remember Reflecta? He was trying for a sneak attack and I went and gave away his position like an idiot. And that happened to them a ton. They were, like, super-patient."

"Well, they had to be to be superheroes," Alya insisted. "They're supposed to help people and not get annoyed by it."

Nino fixed Alya with a look. Adrien and Marinette exchanged an uncomfortable look and silently resolved to stay out of it. "They're supposed to save people, and that's what they did. To the best of my knowledge, there was nothing in their superhero job description that said that they had to be super-nice to people while they did that. There was also nothing that said that, say, they had to give interviews or constantly haul reporters out of danger while they were trying to fight a supervillain."

Alya huffed, then deflated a bit. "Well...I mean..."

Nino waited.

"...I suppose I can see where people might have gotten in their way a bit," Alya finally admitted. "But they were superheroes and getting to report on superheroes had been my dream since, like, forever! And I did get better at staying out of the way later on."

"Right, right, of course," Nino sighed, and then he perked up as a new thought hit him. "Oh! Have
"Why did you say that about Ladybug and Chat Noir earlier?" Plagg demanded once the evening was over and Adrien had bade good-night to his guests and closed his bedroom door. The black kwami flew after Adrien as he shucked his jeans and slid into his sleeping pants. "You're gonna make them suspect you when Ladybug and Chat Noir do show back up at Christmas- or were you not planning on going out while transformed then?"

"They aren't going to suspect me, because I did say that," Adrien refuted. "I reminded them that a lot of people go back home over the holidays. That way, they're less likely to see Chat Noir back in town and then correlate that with just me getting back." Adrien shucked his shirt and tossed it in the laundry basket. "And I'll definitely want to wait a couple days after Adrien shows up at Christmas before I go out transformed."

Plagg looked somewhat mollified. "Oh. I suppose. But you couldn't have waited for someone else to say it?"

"I can't read minds, Plagg. For all we know, no one else would have thought about it." Adrien reached for his brush and started working through the tangles in his hair. "But you have to admit, hearing Alya and Nino claim that they would have known if they had a superhero for a friend was pretty funny, right? I was a little freaked out at first, because I thought maybe they were just trying to hint that they had figured me out, but..." Adrien grinned. The expressions on their faces had been all the clue he needed to know that none of his friends had guessed that he was Chat Noir.

Well, Marinette's expression had been a little funny too, but she would have told him if she had figured him out, right? She definitely would have said something, he was positive.

"They definitely have no idea," Adrien finished with a quiet laugh. Oh, but their faces would be precious if he ever did get to tell them one day. The wide eyes, the dropped jaws...

It would be great.

The weekend flew by in a heartbeat. Before any of them knew it, it was time to bring Alya and Nino back to the train station so they could go back to Paris.

"I wish we could have stayed longer," Nino said mournfully as he hugged Adrien good-bye. "It's so different not seeing you guys every week! I can't believe you're staying away from me for three years, dude."

"Oh, I'll be back before you know it," Adrien said with a laugh. "And we can still call each other,
you know. It's not like I'm all the way around the world or anything."

"You might as well be," Nino grumbled, but he let himself be patted consolingly on the back.

"Oh, look at the time!" Alya said suddenly, catching sight of the clock on the wall. "How did it get to be so late? C'mon, Nino, we gotta go or we'll miss our train."

Nino jumped as he saw the clock as well. Both of them hugged Adrien and Marinette again, and then they were flying towards the entrance to the train station.

"Good luck on your Miraculous research!" Marinette called after Alya, waving at her friends. They waved back one more time, then vanished into the station.

"What is she doing this research for?" Adrien asked as they headed back to the bus station. "I forgot to ask Alya before they left. Is it just a side project to keep the Ladyblog active now that the superheroes aren't in Paris, or something for work?"

"It's to try to get into this program that would send her all over the world," Marinette told him. Alya had shown her the advertisement for the contest on her phone, and Marinette had to admit that it looked like a very cool opportunity. "She has to come up with this topic to research and the paper will pay for her to go do research all over the world for half a year! She'd have to write little travel updates once or twice a week or so, but then there would be a big piece after it was done. She wants to research past Miraculous holders and what kinds of things they fought."

Adrien blinked and suddenly he looked a bit wary. "Uh, does Nino know why Alya's doing her research? He didn't mention anything about Alya taking such a long trip abroad to me."

"Well, it's hardly finalized yet," Marinette admitted. "Alya just heard about the opportunity recently, and then I helped her come up with her topic. She had wanted to enter before, but obviously she didn't have a chance if she didn't have a topic ready yet." Still, Adrien brought up a good point. Had Alya discussed the contest with Nino at all? That seemed like something that would be important, considering how long they had been dating and especially since Nino already seemed a bit down about Adrien and Marinette both being out of the country.

Adrien still looked concerned, and Marinette couldn't blame him. That would be a bit of a nasty shock for Nino to just one day suddenly find out that his longtime girlfriend was taking off around the world for six months when he hadn't had any prior notice. Even if he could visit Alya while she was gone, it would be nothing like their routine now, where they lived together and saw each other every day. There would probably be times when Alya would be too busy or in a far enough off time zone that they wouldn't be able to call or Skype each other for a while.

She really hoped that Alya wasn't going to put off telling Nino for too long.

"I'll talk to Alya about it," Marinette assured Adrien. "She should be telling Nino for sure, even if nothing is even remotely close to being nailed down yet."

Adrien's shoulders relaxed. "Thanks, Marinette. I know she wouldn't do anything to purposefully hurt Nino, but I think he's having a hard time with us being, y'know, not nearby."

"It's just part of growing up," Marinette responded with a sigh. She certainly missed her friends in Paris, and she definitely missed her parents. It helped to still have Tikki with her, and it was absolutely fantastic to have Adrien living right next door, but it still could be hard. She had to admit that she had kind of fallen out of touch with some of her old friends now that she wasn't bumping into them every few days.
"Yeah." Adrien's smile was a bit misty too. He bumped her with his hip gently to catch her attention again and then he smiled down at her. "I'm glad I have you here, though. It definitely made moving away from home easier."

"Right back at you, model boy." Marinette grinned as she hip-checked him back teasingly. It was hard to be melancholy with one of her best friends at her side and another hanging out in her jacket pocket. She didn't let herself think of next year, when Adrien might be alone in London. That was still months away. "Right back at you."

Chapter End Notes

Yaaaaay, sleepovers and the start of stuff for another arc! Next time...is Christmas, I think. In January. (that really didn't line up well whoops)

Reviews are always appreciated! :)}
What was left of the rest of the semester went fairly smoothly. Adrien hadn't had many projects and since his classes were mostly building a basic foundation to the rest of his degree, it wasn't hugely difficult. Before he knew it, he and Marinette were riding the bus to the train station, where he would take the Eurostar back to Paris. Marinette would be following nearly a week later.

"It's gonna be weird living at home again for break," Adrien said mournfully as he watched London pass them. Surprising no one, it was raining again, and that combined with the dropping temperatures made the day quite miserable. "Waking up early, doing photoshoots again..."

Marinette shot him a surprised look. "Your father is making you do photoshoots over the break?"

Adrien shrugged. "Yeah. And I'll be doing a lot of them, to make up for not doing any earlier. There's a couple winter ads still to go, and then the spring line. I wouldn't be surprised if he tried doing a summer shoot or two as well."

Marinette looked nothing short of incredulous, and Adrien couldn't blame her. "Doesn't your father have any other models he could be using?"

This time, Adrien really couldn't help the amused snort that escaped him. "Of course he does. But I'm 'the face of the brand', you know. I think he wants me to appear at least once per season, and since I'm not going to be doing runways for him anymore and I missed some of the fall and most of the winter photoshoots..."

"He's overcompensating," Marinette finished. "That's frustrating."

"And then it really cuts into the time I get with you guys." Adrien flopped back into the seat, frustrated. "Which is super not cool. I mean, it's supposed to be vacation." Then he glanced over at Marinette somewhat sheepishly. "I sound like a brat, don't I. I'm the one still in school while all of you guys are already working and you only get a couple days off for the holidays."

Marinette shook her head furiously. "No, not at all! It makes sense that you wouldn't want to work during your break. You do work really hard during your semester, I know you do." She paused and looked at him again. "...that's not the only thing that's bugging you, is it." She had noticed over the past few weeks that Adrien seemed a bit less like his normal cheerful self than normal. "...Adrien?"

Adrien let out a long huff. "It's nothing, really, I'm just being stu-" He quailed under the look Marinette shot at him. "Okay, okay. I just- it's just been bugging me that I'm so far behind the rest of you guys. Like, you and Alya both have internships, Nino's working on indie films and DJing, all of our other classmates are working, too...and I'm still in school."

"That's not your fault, Adrien!" Marinette said immediately. "If you had been able to do a Physics program right away like you wanted instead of getting a business degree, you would be done with your undergrad by now. It's not like you're just taking a longer than normal time to finish your first degree- not that there would be anything wrong with that, either, but really. You shouldn't be so hard on yourself. It wasn't like you were dithering around playing video games for three years while the rest of us got our degrees."

"I know, I know." Adrien was practically pouting. "It's just...I'm not used to being behind the
curve. Like, I was usually ahead of the curriculum in class in collège and lycée because of my tutors, and I was the first one to really have a job. And now..."

"And now you have one completed degree, just like the rest of us, and you're doing another one," Marinette reminded him. "You know, Max is still in school, too."

"Doing his Masters," Adrien finished. He huffed. "And if I decide to do a Master's on top of this degree...god, I'm gonna practically be thirty before I get a job. I'll be that creepy weirdo who's still living with his father and who's never had a job besides looking pretty in front of a camera."

Marinette smothered a snort. "Oh, woe is you. You had to look pretty in front of a camera and got paid for it."

Adrien still pouted.

"Plenty of people don't go straight into uni once they've finished lycée," Marinette added, figuring that this maybe wasn't the best time for joking around. "Not everyone knows what they want to do at first. No one who knows you will think you're a creepy weirdo, Adrien." She paused and frowned. "And you really think you'll go back to living at your father's house once you finish your degree?"

Huffing, Adrien ran a hand through his hair, only succeeding in messing it up more. He was going to have to comb it before they got back to Paris, or he would have both Nathalie and his father scolding him for his appearance. "I don't want to, of course, but unless I have a good reason, he'll just pester me nonstop about living at home until I cave. I tried floating the idea moving into my own apartment closer to campus when I was getting my business degree, but he wouldn't hear of it. He said there was no point in me living elsewhere when there was plenty of space in the mansion, and that it would just make things unnecessarily difficult when scheduling fittings and photoshoots and runways if I lived somewhere else."

Marinette blinked, stunned. "...you don't need your father's permission or approval to do anything. If he's upset, then he's upset."

Adrien cringed. He knew that, but... "I guess it's just easier to do what he wants instead of having to deal with the pester and nagging. And, well, he did have a lot of good points when he said it was a bad idea for me to live on my own. I didn't really know how to cook for myself then, and I didn't really have the time to be setting up a whole new place of my own. Besides, pretty much all of you were still living at home as you went to uni, right?"

"Right," Marinette confirmed. "It was cheaper, and then I could focus on my studies and all of the money I earned from commissions I could keep or use to pay for fabric for my own designs, instead of having to spend it on housing or groceries. I wasn't that far from campus, either."

"Are you going to go back to living with your parents once you finish your internship?"

Marinette had to think about that. She hadn't thought about it before, really, especially considering that she wasn't even sure if she was going to apply for an extension. "I...don't know? I guess I'll just play it by ear. If I get a really good job and it's not close to my house, then I'd probably get an apartment of my own. If I get another internship that doesn't pay much...well, I mean, I don't mind living at home."

Adrien tried not to make a face. He had been worried that he would get that sort of answer. It only strengthened his father's arguments on why he should return to Agreste Mansion after he finished his degree in London. Convenience. Familiarity. Saving money.
Of course, that last point wasn't a real concern. Adrien had plenty of unspent money in the bank from years upon years of modelling. He wasn't quite certain how much there was there, but it could probably easily cover a couple years' rent if he didn't go for something too upscale. And he could always keep modelling while he searched for a job that he actually wanted.

"Nino and Alya moved out of their families' homes," Adrien said instead. Their friends had found a fairly small apartment to share only a month after graduating from university and apparently hadn't looked back. Adrien had been there quite a few times before he left for London and thought that it was a nice enough place, but he might go a little stir-crazy in something that small, especially if it was that small and he was sharing the space with another person.

Marinette shrugged. "Yeah, but they're dating. They couldn't exactly live together in one of their old rooms. Besides, it would have been a pretty long commute for both of them if they stayed with their families." She glanced over at him. "You really don't want to go back to living in the mansion, do you?"

"I've gotten too attached to living on my own, I think," Adrien said, running a hand through his hair a bit sheepishly. "Being able to cook my own meals, set my own hours for getting up, take naps in the middle of the day if I need them...it's a lot of work, sure, but it's definitely worth it. And the mansion is just too big. I feel like I'm just rattling around in it."

"It's definitely your choice," Marinette said with a shrug. "Don't try to base what you should be doing off of what other people are doing. Everyone has a different situation. Just because Alya and Nino still live in Paris and moved out or because I might move back in with my parents when I go back doesn't mean that that should have any bearing on what you do."

Adrien managed a bit of a laugh as the train station came to view and he got up. "How did you get so wise? You sound like you've had way more experience at life than I have."

Marinette shrugged, a small smile playing at the edges of her lips as she followed him off of the bus. "Maybe I have. I did find my apartment all on my own, after all."

Adrien groaned and whacked her shoulder with his own. "That's not fair. I didn't get the choice."

"I know. I'm just teasing you." Marinette giggled at his expression before sobering. "Seriously, don't judge yourself based on other people. You've had different things to deal with than we have. Whatever feels right to you, do it."

It was definitely strange being back in Paris and living in such a large space again. His entire apartment could probably fit easily into his bedroom with space to spare, and it was just him and Plagg hanging out in it again. His father for once decided to join him at dinner his first night back, though there wasn't a whole lot of conversation going on as Gabriel also had decided to bring a pile of financial reports to peruse to the table.

It was a far cry from dinners with Marinette. While they sometimes fell into companionable silence, they almost never brought things to the table unless they had something that urgently needed to be done, and even then they made comments about whatever they were doing and took breaks to have actual conversation.
And even though they were nearby, so far he hadn't had a whole lot of time to see his friends, aside from their brief get-together when he got in at the train station. He had fittings nearly all day on his first few days back, with only short breaks to use the bathroom and get something to eat or drink. Nino and Alya were still working during the day and their breaks didn't line up at all with his, and then he was still being prodded and pinned when they got off for the day. The next few days were filled with several shoots for TV commercials, and they ended up having to do take after take because the director was picky, there were several models involved, and everything had to be just right.

Once Marinette arrived late on Friday she was similarly busy, since the bakery was being absolutely flooded with customers and she was helping her parents keep up with the rush. She had texted him several photos of the work she was doing, and Adrien hadn't had the heart to ask her to stop tempting him. The piles of delectable treats in her photos were making him hungry, and he couldn't eat real meals during his fittings since it could make him slightly bloated, which in turn would throw off the fit. Instead of complaining about his rumbling stomach (he was eating, but only very small amounts at a time), he sent back compliments of the gorgeous treats Marinette was making. She deserved it, after all. Even with the amount of pressure they were working under, everything looked as perfect as always.

(He would ask if she could bring something when they did get to meet up, but he knew full well that there was no need. Of course Marinette would bring holiday treats to share with her friends. She didn't need to be asked.)

Every day, by the time he got back to the mansion, all Adrien wanted to do was eat a proper meal and go straight to bed. As much as he wanted to go out as Chat Noir, he would fall right off the rooftops if he even tried it right now and besides, in their last (very rushed) run-in before Adrien had to go back to Paris, he and Ladybug had agreed that they shouldn't show up until closer to the holiday itself. After all, most people didn't have that much time off near the holidays.

Besides, now that he was at home, his father expected him to get up early. If he went out as Chat Noir and ran into Ladybug and didn't get in until one or two in the morning, he would be a zombie in the morning and would get a scolding from his father for being unprofessional, winter holiday break or no. It was best to avoid that.

Several busy days into his so-called holiday, Adrien actually got to see Nino for nearly forty minutes over Nino's lunch break. The went to a nearby cafe and though Adrien wasn't allowed to have more than a light salad (bloating was still, after all, a concern, as much as he hated to admit it), it was nice to be able to talk to his friend in person again.

"Isn't your father going to let you have any rest at all over your break?" Nino asked incredulously when Adrien admitted that he still had several more fittings and photoshoots yet to go. "Like, doesn't he realize that you want a break after studying hard all semester? He can use regular models. They're actually paid to do this stuff."

"I'm getting paid too," Adrien pointed out. "Dunno how it compares to normal industry level, but I've always gotten paid for modeling for my father. I've only just gotten access to that account recently, but I think either Mom or Nathalie insisted on me being paid from the start so I could
"I have some savings built up once I graduated."
"Can't you just, like, say no to it, though?"
"I have said no to it. I didn't do the fall campaign, and most of the winter campaign. And I don't like how he's approaching it now, with cramming everything in at once so he doesn't have to call in the photographer and the rest of the staff and other models every day, but I did technically agree to do it."
"You didn't say no, you mean," Nino said with a sigh. "Dude."
"It'll be over for the most part by the holidays," Adrien assured him quickly. "And there's obviously nothing over Christmas itself, because the photographer and all of his staff charge extra for holiday work, or they just refuse to do it altogether. I forget which. It might depend on the holiday."

Nino could only sigh.

"And I'll be able to eat proper holiday treats again once I'm not doing photoshoots and fittings," Adrien added with a grouchy stab at his salad. "Marinette's been sending me pictures of the delicious things she's been making, and I want to try everything. It looks amazing, and all I can eat is this so I don't end up bloated in the photos."

"Salad's a sad holiday meal, dude," Nino said, snorting. "Even if it does make you pretty for the photos."

Adrien tried to hide his grin. "Oh, no," he said as seriously as possible. "The pretty part comes naturally. The salad is so that the clothes fit perfectly."

He laughed when that garnered an eye-roll from his friend, and then they moved on to a different topic of conversation. Nino talked about the current film project he was working on, and how the director was absolutely impossible to work with.

"Everything has to be re-filmed a dozen times, and then he'll come back the next day and tell us that half of the scenes we did the previous day weren't good enough or he changed something, so we have to re-do them all over again," Nino grumbled. "We're way behind schedule with getting things filmed. And he keeps having me re-do the music because it wasn't quite what he envisioned, but he never tells me quite exactly what to do. He just keeps throwing buzzwords around instead like they're supposed to mean something to me. The project is gonna crash, I can tell you that already."

Adrien's brow furrowed. If the project crashed, that could really hurt Nino. He knew that projects of that size (aka small) sometimes waited to pay their workers until after it showed and started making money. "...are you getting paid for this in advance?"

"Of course," Nino assured him. "I haven't forgotten what your photographer told me about making sure I get paid. The director wanted to pay me after, of course, but I negotiated to get paid as we went. He kept telling me that I would get paid more if I waited until the end and I wouldn't get paid more than negotiated 'when the film became a smashing success'." Nino rolled his eyes- "but I'd rather have a guaranteed source of income than have a bunch of empty promises that I'm depending on."

"Smart."

"I think a lot of the others on set are really regretting not doing the same thing now," Nino added.
"They look more worried every time the schedule gets set back. At least people aren't giving me the cold shoulder just because I'm getting paid and they aren't- at least, not yet. They might be a little more chilly once the end of the project arrives and they don't get a great paycheck. Or any paycheck, if we end up going over budget for filming."

"I don't even understand how that's remotely legal," Adrien said, shaking his head. He was everlastingly grateful to his normal photoshoot photographer for giving Nino helpful hints about what mistakes he should be avoiding when he was freelancing. It seemed that there were all sorts of pitfalls that one might not normally think to look for, ones that could easily end Nino's career or force him to pick up a second job- well, third, technically, since Nino was already working as a DJ as well- to make ends meet. But with Vincent's advice, Nino had only had had to fight for his proper pay once.

Nino shrugged. "I think it's in the contract," he suggested. "That their level of pay depends on the success of the project. It's probably worded more delicately than that, to suggest that they'll be paid no matter what and waiting to the end for their pay could mean more money. Otherwise I think more people would be doing what I'm doing."

"Ugh. That's just playing dirty."

Minutes later, Adrien's phone chimed and he had to get back on set. Regretfully, he downed the rest of his salad and waved good-bye to his friend, promising to try to set up another get-together as soon as possible.

After all, Nino was right. The holidays weren't supposed to be about work.

The last photoshoot of the day thankfully went smoothly, and Adrien was able to go home and eat dinner at a relatively reasonable time. It was a bit on the late side to try to get together with his friends but he didn't have to get up early the next morning, which only meant one thing. 

*Chat Noir time.*

Adrien bid good-night to... well, to the empty entryway- and then locked his bedroom door before transforming and launching himself out of his bedroom window. Minutes later, he was getting pretty close to the center of the city. As he slowed for a moment to take in the city (*his city, at last*), he caught sight of a familiar red-clad figure bounding across the rooftops.

"Hey, Bug!" Chat Noir called, speeding up again so he would catch up to her. He poled across the street and landed neatly next to her on top of a roof. "When did you get back?"

"Just recently," Ladybug answered, reaching out to give him a hug. "And you?"

"I've been back for a bit. I haven't gone out until today, though, and honestly I was a little surprised that I *could.* I've been crazy busy." It seemed that all of his waking hours had been scheduled, but at least the worst of it was (for the most part) done.

"Breaks when you've been away aren't really that relaxing, are they?" Ladybug surveyed the city around them and waved to a couple pedestrians down below that were eagerly pointing up at the
Chat Noir nodded frantically. *Boy*, could he ever relate. Even if his father *hadn't* been loading up his schedule with fittings and photoshoots, he had had *so. many. people.*, that he had wanted to see and catch up with. There was Nino and Alya (and Ladybug), of course, but he had also wanted to talk with most of their old classmates that were still in the area as well. Chloe had tried to practically attach herself to his side the second that she heard that he was back in town- apparently she had gotten over sulking about his marrying-Marinette prank- but a combination of fittings and a holiday cruise that Chloe and her father were going on kept him from having to tolerate his former friend for too long. Chloe had been put out, of course, and had tried demanding that her father get Adrien onto the cruise as well so they could spend two whole weeks together, but Adrien had straight-up refused.

Once upon a time he had admired the pushy attitude that had gotten him enrolled in public school without his father's permission, but that time had long passed. He had grown older and wiser and able to see the consequences of bullying people to get something, and Chloe had not.

"It seems like the people are glad to see us back," Chat Noir said before he could dwell too much on his failed friendship. He joined Ladybug in waving down at the crowd fast forming below, and then he grinned at her. "Race you to the Eiffel Tower?"

"Oh, you are *on*, kitten."

It was freeing to be able to run and shout again without worrying about people seeing or hearing them. The two superheroes teased each other as they took turns leading the way to the Eiffel Tower, banter flying free and loud as they raced. They drew quite a few eyes, but it didn't matter. Not here in Paris. They reached the Tower as one and practically *flew* up it together, drawing more and more attention as they neared the top.

"Ah, I missed Paris," Chat Noir said as they landed on the uppermost platform and paused to catch their breaths. The city spread around them, wide and sparkling. "London just isn't quite the same."

"I miss making noise when I run around," Ladybug agreed, holding on to the platform's railing with one hand and hanging out over the city. Her eyes scanned the horizon, a habit ingrained after years of fighting akumas. "I miss talking to people during patrols. I love London and all, but Paris will always have my heart."

Chat Noir couldn't help the way his shoulders slumped at that. It definitely sounded like he would be losing both Marinette and Ladybug back to Paris after the year was over. He hadn't been expecting them to be in London at the same time as him in the first place- really, he should be looking at the time they had together as a *bonus*- but it was going to be very, very lonely next year when they had both headed back. He was doing his best to enjoy the fabulous company while it lasted, but he couldn't help but linger on what the following year would be like. Still, it was the holidays, and he had Ladybug and all of his friends all in the same area. Moping would have to wait.

"Are you still keeping up with the Ladyblog?" Ladybug asked suddenly, effectively startling Chat Noir out of his mopey thoughts.

He raised an eyebrow at her, somewhat surprised by the change in subject. "It isn't really active anymore, but yes, I do occasionally peruse it." It was useful for keeping an eye out for if there were any rumors of superhero sightings in London. Alya kept an ear to the ground for all things superhero, so if someone noticed the French superheroes in London, she would know within...well, maybe not a *day*, not now that she had a job to deal with, but a week. Either way, it was fast
enough to do damage control if they were spotted. "Why?"

"Did you see that she's doing a research project on historical Miraculous users?"

He hadn't seen. He had heard about Alya's project of course, both from Alya herself during her visit and from Marinette's occasional updates, but he hadn't seen a Ladyblog post about it yet. Of course, he hadn't been checking the Ladyblog during finals, so maybe it was a recent post. "No. That's cool!"

"She's been having some trouble," Ladybug continued. "Because most users were pretty quiet about it. So I've been thinking of asking my kwami some questions about past holders, to see if I can give her any guiding hints without putting my identity at risk at all."

*Funny, he had been thinking of doing something similar.* Of course, he would have to be more careful about it than Ladybug since he did actually know Alya, but he could probably at least give some guidance. "Are you thinking of holders of other Miraculous, or ours as well? Has she already figured out that you aren't two thousand years old?"

Ladybug snorted merrily at the reference to the akuma battle so long ago. "Oh, she figured that out ages ago. She might not have posted it, but one of her friends told me when she figured it out. By that time, Alya had at least figured out that trying to expose us online wasn't a great idea anymore, so she didn't post anything."

*One of Alya's friends?* Adrien hadn't heard anything about that particular discovery, and the only other people that Alya would have told would have been Nino or Marinette. He couldn't quite see Nino flagging Ladybug down to tell her that Alya had figured out her identity diversion, but Marinette...

Marinette had always been against Alya trying to figure out the duo's secret identities, even if she hadn't been as vocal about it at first. She had worked with Chat Noir before, and it was completely possible that she and Ladybug had done something similar during one of the battles where Adrien was held up, unable to transform, and arrived later in the game. She was totally the type to wave Ladybug down just to warn her about something like that.

"What were you planning?" Chat Noir asked, deciding not to question the thing about Alya's friend. It didn't really matter at this point anyway. "Search down the Ladyblogger tonight 'accidentally' and see if she asks about it and then give her the info another night?"

Ladybug bit her lip and then shook her head. "No, I don't think we need to find her tonight. Since the Ladyblog is public, we just say that we spotted the post and wanted to help. That we were interested as well, so we asked, uh..." She paused, frowning. "Uhhh..."

It only took a moment for Chat Noir to catch on. "Right, we can't exactly tell her about the kwamis. But maybe we can say that we have, y'know, some papers or something referencing past holders, or maybe we can say we ran into a holder of a different Miraculous recently and they told us some stuff, just bits and pieces. That would explain why we can't just, y'know, give her the papers so she can analyze them herself."

"And then if we find out about other holders that we want to tell her about later on, then we can just say that we ran into that holder again," Ladybug concluded. She grinned and reached out to scratch his chin. "I like that, kitty."

Chat Noir grinned, leaning into the chin scratch as much as he could. Ladybug's fingers still left him all too soon. "And we can go talk to Master Fu, too, if we want. He could maybe think up
more historical users that Alya would be likely to be able to find stuff on. He's been active so long, and he's seen the other Miraculous in use, so maybe he would have some clues."

"We're gonna end up overwhelming her," Ladybug said with a laugh. She was grinning, though, clearly excited about their plan. Chat Noir had to wonder why- sure, he was excited about the opportunity they would be giving Alya (though he had to admit that he still was concerned about whether or not Nino had been told and what his reaction might be), but again, he knew Alya. He was her friend and of course he would be excited about being able to help her. Ladybug, though- what was she getting out of this that was making her so excited? Was she just as curious about the past users as Alya, even though she had her kwami (a more cooperative one than Plagg, or so he had gathered from their occasional conversations about their magical companions) to answer her questions? Was she really eager to find out about other Miraculous users? Or did the idea of helping someone really make her so excited on its own?

...or was it possible that she knew Alya?

_Nah._ How improbable would that be? Both of Paris' superheroes knowing the city's most prominent superhero-focused reporter and both coming out of it with their secret identities intact? Ladybug was probably so cheerful as a result of a combination of being able to help someone, being able to run like normal again in Paris, and because of the fast-approaching holidays. That was just the kind of person she was.

They stayed out for another hour before Ladybug, surprisingly, tapped out first. She had to be up early the next morning, she explained, and if she wanted to actually be awake for the day she had to go to bed earlier than usual. Chat Noir only stayed out for a few minutes after she left before deciding that it wouldn't be a bad idea at all to go to bed at least _somewhat_ on time. He waved to a few more fans, paused for a couple photos, and then took off for his father's house. The light were still on in his father's home office, of course, but other than that the house was silent. He landed lightly and made sure that the window glass was tinted completely dark before detransforming. The green light lit up the room for half a second and then faded, leaving Adrien blinking away the spots dancing across his vision as he headed for his desk, where his phone was blinking an alert that he had a message.

Or fifty, Adrien corrected dryly as he opened his phone. That might have been an exaggeration- he didn't _quite_ have fifty messages- but Alya and Nino at least had been blowing up the group chat. He had to scroll up a way up to figure out what had started the flood. Apparently they had been trying to see if they could set up a group get-together early in the day on Christmas Eve since Marinette would still be busy until then, and then when they didn't get a response out of either Adrien or Marinette (who, Adrien assumed, was probably hanging out with her parents or going to bed early since she would surely be tired from helping her parents with the holiday rush), they decided to start bombarding the duo with suggestive comments. Adrien rolled his eyes as he scrolled through one hint after another that he and Marinette might be hanging out, possibly alone and not with either of their families. Were their friends _trying_ to make things awkward between him and Marinette? He wasn't going to let it work.

After shooting back a quick text message (_Do you guys REALLY think that I'd be checking my phone every ten minutes if I'm in my father's presence?_), Adrien washed up for bed. There was no real reason for him to dignify Alya and Nino's antics any further.

Besides, he and Marinette were just friends. Just like before, Nino and Alya were seeing things where there wasn't anything.
Chapter End Notes

So this is Christmas Part 1! Next chapter will be the rest of the holidays.

As always, reviews are much appreciated! :)

The day before Christmas Eve, Adrien finally got enough of a break to be able to hang out with his friends—well, with Alya and Nino, at least. Marinette was still helping her parents weather the last of the holiday rush.

"Photoshoots all done, then?" Nino asked as they settled into a booth at a cafe. "Are you actually going to be free for the rest of your break?"

Adrien's nose wrinkled. "No such luck," he admitted. "The worst of it's done, since the rush photoshoots for the tight deadlines had to be all packed together and they figured that they might as well get most of the fittings done at the same time, but my father still wants some late winter-spring shoots done and there was no point in doing a rush job for them, so they'll be after the holidays are over."

"Dude."

"It'll only be a couple days, really," Adrien said quickly. "Because they will try to get as much done as possible, but for shoots with a completely different theme, it would be hard to get the make-up completely off everyone and redo it from scratch. It just takes forever, and it's easier to just have people in another day. That way, Father doesn't have to always have major set-changers on standby for the entire shoot and he doesn't have to pay the photographer for the time where he's just waiting around during make-up changes and set switches. He only does that when he needs shoots all done really fast."

"Like when you only come back home for a couple weeks," Alya filled in.

"Or when Hawkmoth was active, he just wanted to get things over with so a last-minute akuma attack wouldn't keep things from getting to press," Adrien added. He frowned over that for a second. "...actually, I think that was something Nathalie insisted on. She got tired of having to reschedule shoots in a really cramped time frame- y'know, because models are busy, and so are the good photographers and staff, so she couldn't just say 'Hey, show up tomorrow at two-fifteen' and expect people to actually be able to make it."

"I think a lot of people ended up shifting how they did things while Hawkmoth was active," Alya pointed out. "I've heard a lot of stories when I was poking around. And speaking of supervillains and superheroes- did you hear? Ladybug and Chat Noir were spotted last night!"

"Here in Paris?" Adrien asked, playing dumb. He had checked the Ladyblog this morning, of course, and had seen Alya's excited post and the links to some of the videos and pictures that people had taken of him and his superhero partner. But he had supposedly been busy in his father's presence the night before and he had had photoshoots that morning, which in theory meant that he shouldn't have a clue. It also meant that he had an alibi. "Really? That's great!"

"Yes! Here in the city! You guys were right, they did come back for the holidays. I need to see if I can flag them down before they take off again and see if they have any hints for my research." She looked determined, and Adrien suddenly guessed that she would probably be out trawling the city until she found and waved down the two superheroes.

Hopefully Ladybug would be able to go out that night so Alya wouldn't be trying to go out on Christmas itself. He could definitely sneak out— he would be expected home for a late dinner with his father, but then didn't have anything scheduled for after that. He could have a few minutes to sit
down and interrogate Plagg more properly about some past users and where (and when) they had been active. His kwami hadn't been as forthcoming as he had expected during his first somewhat absentminded questioning, which was something Adrien had to figure out before he headed out to (hopefully) catch Alya.

Nino looked somewhat exasperated at the change in topic, which made Adrien guess that he probably was worried about Alya skipping out on their planned holiday activities to try to find the superhero duo. It was a problem the two of them had had when Hawkmoth was active and Alya sometimes was late to (or altogether missed) dates with Nino because of akuma attacks that she wanted to cover, and Nino had been thrilled when Hawkmoth had finally been taken down because it meant that Alya wouldn't be missing as many dates as before (and, of course, because she wouldn't be putting herself in danger on a daily basis. That was also a bonus).

Somehow Adrien suspected that Alya hadn't told her boyfriend about the potential six-month trip around the world to research past Miraculous holders yet. He wouldn't try to stop her, not at all- Nino wouldn't stand in Alya's way, and he was nothing if not a supportive boyfriend- but he would probably look a bit more apprehensive about the topic. Everyone in their group knew that if Alya was determined to do something- which, in this case, she definitely was- she would get to do it.

"I wonder if they'll still be doing their old patrol routes," Alya continued, apparently oblivious to the slightly wary expressions on both boys' faces. "I could find them super-easily then, but based on the photos I could track down from last night- I can't believe that Ladybug and Chat Noir were out for over an hour and I didn't catch it-they were just all over the place, but then they did spend a bunch of time at the Eiffel Tower. So maybe I could just, like, hang out there-almost like i was invisible-"

"Babe, don't you think that Ladybug and Chat Noir might spend most of their time hanging out with their family on Christmas?" Nino pointed out. "I know they've shown up on Christmas in the past, but that was when Hawkmoth was still active and there was an akuma that they had to fight."

Alya pondered over that for several moments before letting out a long sigh as her shoulders slumped. "Okay, okay. If I don't find them tonight, then I'll wait until after Christmas is over to go out again. I just really want to catch them before they go back to wherever they've been again."

Adrien really hoped that Ladybug was planning on going out that night, because he didn't know how long she was going to stick around in Paris. Considering that she had a job that she, like Marinette, would have to return to, she might be heading back right away after Christmas, or maybe she would be sticking around until New Years, like Marinette was. If she headed back right away, Alya might not have the chance to talk to his partner.

...darn it, they definitely needed to get better at communicating.

"So, do you think that Marinette will get free soon?" Alya asked, glancing at her watch and then at Adrien. "I know the bakery is closed Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, but she's mostly been helping with baking and decorating. They finish up with that part of the work by early afternoon, right?"

Adrien checked his phone, but he didn't have any new messages from Marinette. "She might be helping with clean-up once the baking and decorating gets finished. And if there's a lot of customers, she might be helping her mother at the front counter. When I went past earlier, there was a line out the door."

"And didn't Marinette say something about an order for the mayor's holiday party? They might still be doing the work for that after they finish up with the normal baking for the day," Nino pointed out. "It would be hard to keep all of that separate during a normal day's operations. You've seen the
inside of the bakery kitchen during the day before, right? The place is chaos. Organized chaos, but chaos."

"They probably have a couple orders," Alya admitted. "And yeah, I can see where they would want to get stuff from the daily work cleaned up first. Pretty much every flat space in that kitchen is spoken for during the day." She made a face, presumably at the thought of her best friend having to do so much work during what was supposed to be her vacation. "At least their workload will go back to normal after the holidays, right?"

"Not if they have New Years' parties to cater for," Nino pointed out. "Adrien, did Marinette say anything about that?"

Adrien could only shrug. He didn't know any better than they did what Marinette might be doing, right now or in several days. For all he knew, she could be buried under a mountain of pastries right now.

"But why can't we know more about past holders?" Marinette asked Tikki in confusion as she worked to decorate the veritable mountain of cookies and other pastries she was practically buried under. It was growing steadily smaller as she worked, but she still had a couple hours of work left to do before she finished up all of the orders for the holidays. "Should Chat Noir and I not be helping Alya?"

"It's not that I don't want you knowing about past holders, Marinette," Tikki assured her, even as she eyed the tempting pile of cookies in front of her. "But in the past, the Miraculous generally worked secretly, out of the public eye- and for good reason. We didn't want potential supervillains to find out about the powers we have at our disposal. Obviously staying completely secret isn't possible anymore. I'm just trying to determine how much I can tell you to pass on without giving too much away. I think I can give you locations and general times, but then it's up to Alya to research the rest. Then I'm not risking exposing more knowledge than the world already knows."

Marinette frowned, setting her icing piping tip aside for the moment. "But how is telling me just location and time any different than telling me who the users were?"

"Because sometimes the users were really good at blending in, and the only evidence that Alya would have would be your word. If she can find the users when she knows when and where to look, then that's one thing. I'm kind of curious myself to see what people noticed and remembered, or how much might link them with the Miraculous in hindsight. But too much guidance can sometimes be a bad thing." Tikki landed on Marinette's hand and blinked up at her. "I know you want to help Alya as much as possible, Marinette. But sometimes it's better if Miraculous users stay secret, or at least as unconfirmed users."

Marinette was still a little puzzled, but she shrugged and acquiesced. If Tikki said that she had reasons for not being specific about users, then she shouldn't push. Maybe she didn't understand fully, but she didn't know the situations that Tikki was thinking of. Maybe there were powers that the Ladybug and Chat Noir Miraculous had that past users had had but she didn't, and Tikki wanted those powers to stay secret. Maybe there would be some users that fought in a war and the Miraculous didn't want to seem like they were taking sides.
Maybe past holders fought some sort of Great Evil that Tikki didn't want Alya finding out about and spreading around, in case it caused some sort of panic in the general population.

Several hours later, Ladybug jumped off of her balcony and headed for the center of the city, list of time periods and locations clutched in her hand. Tikki had finally decided to scratch a couple off the list because of unrevealed reasons, but most of the past holders had stayed on. They were all Ladybug holders, because she and Tikki had decided that unless Alya discovered that there were other Miraculous out there, they weren't going to say anything else.

Tikki was guessing (and Marinette agreed) that Alya would probably figure it out, if not right away then eventually. The fact that Hawkmoth existed and was obviously another Miraculous user was a pretty good hint that she and Chat Noir weren't the only users out there, and apparently some of the historical Ladybug and Chat Noir duos had worked with other Miraculous users. Still, they weren't going to give Alya too much right away.

"I think Alya will feel a larger sense of accomplishment if she figures that out by herself anyway," Tikki had concluded when they discussed it earlier. "If you give her too much, there's not much for her to figure out. No big discoveries, you know. After all, most past users worked from the shadows."

"Will you tell me more about the users after I give Alya the list?" Marinette had asked hopefully. Now that Alya had brought the subject up and Marinette had had time to think about it, she was intensely curious. Were there any historical figures that she had heard of before that were Ladybugs or other Miraculous users? Had they changed history in big ways? She was curious, darn it.

Tikki had giggled and promised to fill Marinette in on more details as Alya figured out past users. Still, there were things that even Marinette wouldn't be able know unless a... situation arose.

Marinette hadn't asked, and Tikki hadn't elaborated.

It didn't take long for her to find Chat Noir once she got close to the Eiffel Tower. Her partner had apparently been waiting for her, since he popped out of the shadows he had been lurking in the second she got close. He bounded up to meet her and, without any greeting, announced, "The Ladyblogger is headed for the Eiffel Tower, I just spotted her three minutes ago."

Ladybug could have guessed that. Alya had texted her several hours earlier, informing her that until further notice, she wouldn't be available evenings except on Christmas. "Because I need to talk to Ladybug and Chat Noir before they go back to wherever they've been," Alya had texted. "So guess who's staking out at the Eiffel Tower until they show up?"

At least it was nice of Alya to make herself very easy to find.

"What did your kwami tell you to tell her?" Ladybug asked as they set off for the Eiffel Tower at a more sedate pace. She was curious about whether or not Chat Noir's kwami, who she had heard was a bit less cautious than Tikki, would have had the same concerns as her kwami. "Mine just gave me general time periods and locations."

Chat Noir looked surprised. "Really? Mine, too! He said that he didn't want to make it too easy for Alya, and then he snickered for a while. I told him to stop being a snarky ass, but he refused to give me any more. But I thought that you said that your kwami was more cooperative!"

It didn't take a genius to figure out that Chat Noir's kwami had probably had the same concerns as Tikki, but had decided to just give the same more information in a more flippant manner. "She is. She has some reservations about certain holders being found out, though, and she said that there
really isn't much information out there about past holders- or at least there shouldn't be- so if I give Alya too much information, then there won't be anything for her to discover. Besides, Tikki said it was a good test to see how good Miraculous users were at blending in."

Chat Noir frowned. "Is she okay with giving Alya any information at all, then? Because if Alya finds something, she'll publish it. There's no take-backs then."

"She pulled a couple dates for users that she didn't want Alya digging around. The rest she said would be fine."

"We should double-check our lists against each other, then," Chat Noir decided, opening a pocket and digging out a sheet of paper. "I mean, I bet that was what Plagg was thinking, too, but he has a reputation as a uncooperative ass to keep."

Ladybug couldn't help the splutter of laughter that left her. "Chat Noir! That's no way to talk about your kwami!"

He laughed too, loud and deep. "Plagg deserves it, though! He's a little cheese-eating monster. He could have just told me that some users had to be kept secret and, y'know, the other stuff that your kwami told you, and he would have gotten out of a solid hour of interrogation. But nooo, he just had to make it difficult for both of us. You have no idea. I never told you about how he was trying to make things weird for my friend and I, did I?" One look at the puzzled look on her face told him that no, he hadn't ever said anything. "Right. We had to kiss each other once for this, ah, thing, and anyway, there were photos. And Plagg just had to go and blow them up and print a bunch out and hide them all over my apartment. They were under pillows, in the kitchen cabinets, in the freezer- it's been months, and I'm not even sure that I've found everything!"

Ladybug's shoulders shook as she tried to hold in her laughter and then she positively exploded cackling. She ended up sitting on the rooftop, snickering away as Chat Noir shook his head in exasperated acceptance next to her.

Of course Ladybug would find Plagg's antics funny. If the two of them ever met...

Well, if they ever met, they would either be best buddies or drive each other insane. She probably wouldn't find the kwami's stubborn attitude so charming if she was the one trying to reason with Plagg.

Ladybug took several minutes to calm down, and Chat Noir took the time to carefully tug the list she was clutching in her hand free and compare it to the one Plagg had given to him. All of the dates and places were the same, which made Chat Noir wonder if his kwami and Ladybug's perhaps had some way to communicate wordlessly when they were apart, or if whatever users they had excluded were somehow so very obvious for some unspoken reason.

"It looks like our Miraculous have always been active at the same time," he commented over the sound of a still-snickering Ladybug. "And it looks like my kwami excluded the same users that yours did. I wonder what made them so different?"

"From what I could tell, it sounded like we would only be told that on a need-to-know basis," Ladybug finally said, pushing herself to her feet even as a stray giggle escaped her. "Maybe it would be dangerous to know somehow, or maybe it would make us unnecessarily worried about an evil that's not even active right now."

Chat Noir grinned and extended a hand to help pull her all the way up. "Well, you know what they say about cats and curiosity..."
"That they need their inquisitive little noses squirted with water?" Ladybug asked teasingly, poking his nose lightly with a wide grin. He automatically wrinkled his nose and nipped at her finger. "Should we go find that Ladyblogger now?"

It really didn't take long. Even with the crowds out enjoying the holiday cheer, Alya was easy enough to pick out. Instead of admiring the holiday decorations, she was scanning the rooftops of the buildings around her. The superhero duo barely paused before bounding right through her line of sight and then heading for a quieter road. They knew full well that Alya would have spotted them, and then they could have their discussion in a little more privacy.

Sure enough, it only took a minute for Alya to come charging around the end of the block. She slipped a little on the ice but regained her balance almost immediately. True to character, she didn't let it slow her down at all.

"Did you know that I was looking for you guys?" Alya demanded as she skidded to a stop in front of them. They nodded, and she looked flabbergasted. "How?"

"Well, you posted something about wanting to do research on past Miraculous holders on the Ladyblog," Ladybug pointed out right away. "And we figured that we might be one of the first places you looked for information. So we did some poking around, and we came up with locations and general dates of activity. We just compared notes, and it looks like our Miraculous were always active at about the same time."

"But not always in exactly the same place," Chat Noir added, and Ladybug shot him a startled look. She hadn't really done more than glance at the sheet he carried so she hadn't noticed any differences, but if Chat Noir said that there were, then she trusted him.

Alya's eyes positively lit up and she reached for the sheets that Chat Noir was holding out to her. "Really? Oh, wow, this is- this is more than I hoped for! I wasn't even positive that you guys would know about past users, or if you did that you'd be willing to share since, y'know, you once claimed that you were 2000 years old." She gave Ladybug a look. "Which I believed for, like, two years, but then I got smarter."

"How did you figure that out, buy the way?" Chat Noir asked curiously. "We thought we were pretty convincing."

Alya gave them such a clear I-can't-believe-you're-this-dumb look so clear that even strangers couldn't have misinterpreted it. "Uh, you obviously got older. And you got older at a normal rate. I compared photos of you when you first started to ones that I had just taken then, and by comparing your heights to the grown-ups around you- you know, the mayor and the police officers- I could tell that you had gotten taller. Someone who had been alive since Ancient Egypt wouldn't be growing now."

"Betrayed by the meter stick," Chat Noir said with an exaggerated sigh. "Bugger. That probably means that everyone in Paris noticed too."

"And I don't know how much it helps, but I did hide that video with the, y'know, the history book. Anyone who remembers it would probably be able to remember that the video was from your first year of crime fighting, but hopefully they wouldn't remember which history book it was or from what year in school it was from. And I looked for plagiarized versions of it too," she added hastily. "Just to make sure that it wasn't floating around. But that wasn't one of my best recordings of a fight ever, so no one really bothered ripping it off." She shrugged. "I just figured, if you guys ever have to face a supervillain that's, uh, more competent than Hawkmoth was, that maybe I shouldn't just leave a trail of crumbs online that would help them find you guys."
"Good thought," Chat Noir praised after a moment's pause, when Ladybug didn't seem like she was going to reply. He guessed that she was just as startled as he was- Alya, removing something from the Ladyblog? This wasn't something small like a troll's comment in the forum section, it was actual fight footage. She was all about reporting integrity and getting the truth out, and for her to think of how an old video could affect the superheroes in the long run was, well, **new**.

New and a *very* good sign. That meant that she might be more likely to edit out anything she discovered about past heroes that could be dangerous for the public to know.

"This is a *really* long list," Alya said a moment later, surprise evident in her voice. "Like...wow. Okay. Okay, I definitely have a *lot* of work to do."

"There might be quite a few of them that don't have anything recorded about them," Ladybug warned her. "Most Miraculous holders weren't as visible as Chat Noir and I are. Some might not have used their powers in obvious ways. Some weren't active for very long at all. So don't be surprised if there's nothing there to find."

"If there's something to find, I'll find it," Alya promised, the gleam of a challenge evident in her eyes. "Thank you guys so much, I would have had *so* much material to dig through otherwise. And I still have a bunch to dig through, but not, like, as *much*. And I can spend more time where I need to, so that's great." She gave the papers another gleeful look and then carefully tucked the papers away in her purse, latching it shut and double-checking that it was properly closed. Then she glanced up. "...I don't suppose you'd give me any clues about where you guys have been the past few months?"

The only reply she got was a dual snort.

By the next day, Alya was still running high on the excitement of having the superheroes giving her such good leads. She was practically vibrating still when Marinette arrived at the apartment Alya and Nino shared, and it took her nearly a minute to realize that her best friend had shown up. It looked like she hadn't gotten any sleep at all- which, Marinette soon learned, was not far off.

"Ladybug and Chat Noir gave her a list of when past holders had been active and she decided that she *had* to start research right away," Nino said, a hint of fond exasperation in his tone. "So she got *maybe* two hours of sleep last night, and she only got that much because she was so tired that she couldn't read the words on the page anymore. That, and the holders she decided to research first were British and so, y'know, all of the sources were in English, and it's harder to translate while tired and- why am I telling you that, you know that already. Because you've been living in London. Obviously."

Marinette smothered a laugh. It sounded like Alya wasn't the only one to not get a whole lot of sleep.

"That's great that they did that for her!" Marinette exclaimed, pretending that it was news to her. She mentally ran through the list that she had given Alya and wondered which of the British holders Alya had investigated first. There were a couple that she remembered, and there easily could have been a few more. "Did she find anything?"
Unsurprisingly, Nino shook his head. "Nothing concrete. I think she said that there were a few possible leads in the last thing she read, but she was so exhausted that she just decided to recheck them later, when she could actually understand what they were saying." He glanced over at his girlfriend, who was talking to a somewhat concerned-looking Adrien over by their kitchen. "...I think she might need a lot more sleep before she tackles it again, though."

"Weren't there any French users she could have started with?" Marinette asked, knowing full well that yes, there had been. There weren't many- holders tended to pop up when needed, not just willy-nilly- but there had been a couple other pairs that had been active in surrounding countries as well that could have easily gone through France at some point.

"Not super recently. Alya wanted to start with more recent users, since it would in theory be easier to find information on them." Nino glanced over at Alya again. "So far, not much luck. But maybe she's looking for the wrong signs. Like, with our Ladybug and Chat Noir- it's impossible to miss that they're superheroes, right? You can't just say that they're, say, normal people who are just super good at what they do. But I kind of wonder if most of the past users that just passed as just that- normal people who just happened to be super-good at doing something."

Marinette tried not to react to that too much. Nino had hit it right on the head, which maybe shouldn't have been as surprising as it was. Nino could be startlingly perceptive at times, probably because he tended to be able to get some distance from situations with his laid-back personality. Of course he would be able to pick out the reasoning behind why Miraculous users like Ladybug and Chat Noir had been active before but (aside from the Egyptian exhibit) never heard of. It was one of the (many) reasons why Alya and Nino worked well together- Alya had a tendency to charge into things, while Nino held back and got a better idea of what was going on first. He tended to join in wholeheartedly once he had gotten a better idea of what was going on, of course, but that pause had helped them on more than a few occasions.

And, it appeared, it would probably serve as a great help to Alya's research.

"So, have you guys run into any of your other friends yet?" Nino asked as Adrien joined them in the living room. "I mean, you haven't seen them since you pulled that wedding prank."

"I ran into Rose, actually," Marinette volunteered. The two of them had talked with each other for a while, actually- though perhaps saying that they talked with each other was a bit of an exaggeration. Rose had talked at Marinette for a while, cooing over the wedding prank and how cute Adrien and Marinette had been together. She had wanted to know if the two of them were dating, then why they weren't dating, then had tried grilling Marinette over whether or not she still like-liked Adrien before rattling off a whole list of reasons why Marinette and Adrien should be dating. Marinette wasn't exactly going to volunteer all of that, though.

Adrien grinned. "Let me guess, she just wanted to talk about how the wedding looked and she didn't even care that it was all a prank."

Marinette couldn't help but laugh. "Yeah, pretty much."

"Rose is the best. You saw the comment she left on the initial post, right?" Adrien shook his head, smiling slightly to himself. "She totally believed us."

"Heh heh, yeah." Marinette's smile turned slightly strained. Had she seen Rose's comment? She definitely had, and she definitely remembered it. Rose had gushed about 'all of the signs!', and she had definitely referenced Marinette having liked Adrien when they were younger.

(Thankfully Adrien was apparently still somewhat socially clueless when it came to girls, because
he had somehow completely missed that.

"Well, you guys were very convincing," Nino commented as Alya came up to join them. "I mean, there was no other reasonable explanation for you doing a wedding that elaborate."

"Are you guys talking about the fake wedding again?" Alya asked as she finally set her laptop aside and joined them. "Nino had to keep me from flying over there and killing you guys for that stunt."

"So you've told us before," Marinette said somewhat dryly. "By text, and in messages on our phones, and when you visited before break. But I think you secretly found it funny."

Nino snickered. Alya tried to look disapproving, but even she couldn't help but smile and shake her head at the memory of the prank.

"But that's old news," Adrien said, thankfully cutting off further discussion of their fake wedding. "So...you guys said you had some holiday movies for us to binge-watch?"

"Yeah, if Alya can step away from her research for a bit," Nino joked. Behind him, Alya stuck her tongue out and rolled her eyes before going over to shut her computer down as Nino stepped over to his own computer, hooked up to the TV so they could all watch. "So I've pulled up a few that I think we'll all enjoy, and then a cat-themed one for Adrien. I figured you might want to do something fun over your break, since you couldn't come to dinner with Alya and I's families."

"I wanted to, but I can't exactly skip out on my dad," Adrien said, sounding a bit regretful. Marinette glanced over at him in confusion- that was the first time she had heard about Nino and Alya's offer, and she had to wonder what Adrien had said to make Nino decide to invite Adrien over for Christmas dinner. "It really did sound great, but..."

"No worries, man," Nino assured him with a shrug. "I get it. Family dinner is family dinner. And I wouldn't want to upset your father, either."

"It's tradition," Adrien said with a sigh. "It's not that fun most years, but at least he hasn't invited business partners this year." He paused. "...actually, on second thought, that might make it more enjoyable. Then he wouldn't be able to grill me about how things are going in London."

Alya looked surprised. "He hasn't already done that?"

"I've been busy, he's been busy," Adrien explained simply. "...and I've been avoiding him a bit, just so he can't try to persuade me to drop things there and come back, but I can't exactly do that forever. And if I missed Christmas dinner, then he would be eating it alone and that's just...kind of sad."

"What about Nathalie and the Gorilla? Couldn't they eat with you guys?" Nino wanted to know.

Adrien shook his head. "Most of the household staff have Christmas off these days, so they both have gone back to join their families. Gorilla's sister has a family just outside of Paris that he joins, and Nathalie has some friends from school that invited her for dinner. I heard her saying that she was going to bring some side dishes, and then a day later she was complaining about everything burning. She apparently did a test run and it hadn't gone so well."

Marinette couldn't help but laugh. "So what is she doing instead?"

"She probably bought something from a store, just like she's done every other year that she's joined them."
They all laughed.

"She seems so put-together normally, so it's hilarious to think that she can't cook," Alya chuckled as they settled in on the couch in front of the TV. "How does she manage normally?"

"She normally eats at the mansion," Adrien admitted. "She might as well, she spends all of her time there anyway."

"All right all of you, pipe down now," Nino announced as the TV screen lit up and music started playing. "Let's have some Christmas fun!"

Adrien straightened his collar in the mirror and considered the tie sitting on the bathroom counter in front of him. He wanted to put his best foot forward, of course, but he didn't want to look too formal, even if it was Christmas dinner with his father.

Tie on...or no tie on?

"Do you have any holiday ties?" Nino asked, his voice coming over the speakerphone a bit scratchy. Adrien had called him for a second opinion since Plagg was useless, but he was fast finding that Nino wasn't particularly helpful when it came to fashion. He was much better at hosting holiday movie-watching parties, even if he had forgotten about the prepared refreshments until halfway through their movie-watching spree. "Maybe that would be the perfect middle ground."

Adrien snorted. "Holiday ties bring down the formality. Father considers them garish. I don't think I even own any."

Nino huffed. "Okay, fine. Don't listen to me, then. How-"

"Who're you talking to?" Alya's voice came through, a bit faint. "We need to leave for dinner with our families soon."

Nino's voice faded as he pulled back the phone to talk to his girlfriend. "Adrien. He wants to know if he should wear a tie to dinner with his dad."

There was a sudden shuffling, and then Alya's voice came clearly over the phone. "Are you going out to a restaurant?"

"No."

"Is it usually a formal meal?"

"Pretty formal, yeah. There were years when they hadn't even had the dinner- they had bypassed the tradition for three years following Adrien's mother's disappearance- but all of the other years, they had had a rather formal dinner."

"And what are you wearing right now?"

Adrien clamped down the snarky response that question immediately brought to mind. "Uh. Black
"slacks, green long-sleeved button-up. Black dress shoes."

"Maybe have a suitcoat but no tie," Alya suggested. "How does that look?"

"I don't know yet, I can't make suitcoats appear out of thin air," Adrien said dryly, picking up his phone as he headed back into his room to dig in his closet for one of his suitcoats. "But it should look good. Thanks, Alya. I don't know why I didn't think of that."

"No problem," Alya responded cheerfully. She paused for a moment, then added, "But I don't know why you didn't just call Marinette. Like, I love Nino and all, but even I know that my boy isn't the best person to come to for fashion questions."

There was a muted "HEY!" from the other end of the line. Alya ignored it.

"Or even better, you could have asked her to come over and dress you," Alya continued. "That way you could be sure to get it right."

"I can dress myself, thanks," Adrien said, letting his voice go dryer yet. His friends were just as bad as the tabloid reporters when it came to hinting that he and Marinette were more involved than just friends. Worse, even, because Adrien couldn't avoid them. "Been doing it since I was a kid."

Alya just snickered.

Ten minutes later, the suitcoat was properly buttoned up and Adrien headed down to the dining room. It really was ridiculous to dress up like this for a family meal- a meal with just his father, actually- but it was tradition. A tradition that had become more and more frustrating as he learned about how his friends and classmates spent their Christmas dinners. Most did dress up a bit more than usual, of course, just to get into the festive spirit, but none reached the level of formality that the Agrestes did even if they had rarely-seen family members over.

If Adrien wasn't still worried about his father changing his mind about helping him with tuition, Adrien would have been very, very tempted to dress up at Santa and stroll into dinner that way, just to lighten things up a bit. His father wouldn't be at all amused, though.

Gabriel Agreste was already seated at the table when Adrien arrived. The cook was setting out dishes on the table. While there was definitely enough for both Gabriel and Adrien, there wasn't a huge abundance. The cook knew from experience that while the Agrestes would eat leftovers once or twice, they didn't want to have leftovers every meal for a week. The cook would make just enough for two people to have two meals and that meant that, well...

The dishes weren't exactly heaping and they weren't really screaming Christmas feast. It looked tasty, of course- their cook was absolutely fabulous- but not that festive.


Adrien sat.

They both fell silent as they dished up their food. Adrien made sure to not pile his plate too much, since experience told him that it would just lead to stomachache and feeling ill, no matter how delicious the food was. Once he had what he wanted, Adrien dug in. It was tasty, but it was a bit awkward to eat in silence. He had gotten used to eating with Marinette, joking and swapping stories about their days. It could take them forever to eat with all of the talking they did, but it was fun. Comfortable. Relaxing.

Dinner with his father was none of those things.
"How are your studies going?" Gabriel asked after a few minutes of silent chewing. "Have you decided to continue for all three years, or will you be returning home at the end of the year?"

Adrien raised an incredulous eyebrow. Surely his father wasn't serious? "I'll be continuing, just as planned."

Gabriel took a small sip of wine. Adrien noticed, with no small amount of exasperation, that he had not gotten wine like his father; instead, he had water in his second glass. "Surely your business degree will be more helpful in the long run. There's more opportunities, and business has more potential for financial success."

"But I enjoy physics more," Adrien pointed out, doing his best not to snap back. "And doing something that I'm interested in and enjoy is more important to me than making a boatload of money. Money doesn't buy happiness."

"But money does prevent financial instability, which causes unhappiness," Gabriel retorted. Adrien couldn't hold back the snort. While it was true, that was also a ridiculous argument. "You're acting as though positions in physics barely pay anything. That's hardly true."

Gabriel only shrugged, which made Adrien guess that he perhaps hadn't actually bothered to look up how much physicists normally made on average. He shouldn't have been surprised, really, since his father apparently was still under the impression that he would drop the Physics program, but it was still frustrating, to say the least.

A few more minutes passed in silence. Adrien tried not to fidget as he continued eating. The silence was growing increasingly uncomfortable, but his father didn't seem terribly concerned. Gabriel was probably used to uncomfortable silences, since he caused so many of them on a regular basis.

"I heard that you've gotten plenty of attention from the British tabloids," Mr. Agreste commented after another minute. "It seems like there's something new every other week."

"They're very persistent," Adrien agreed. It was frustrating to no end; it seemed that every time he and Marinette were seen out together was fuel for the fire, and then he had to give another interview saying that no, he and Marinette weren't dating, and yes, the constant questions about it were very annoying. The only upside was that in recent weeks, the hounding seemed to be dipping, just a bit. After all, there was only so many times that tabloids could try to use their supposed relationship as a headline (and subsequently have it refuted, again) before it stopped selling. "But I think they'll drop it after another month or so. They're trying to sell it as some big scoop and I think it's really falling flat."

"Very well." Gabriel reached across the table and served himself up more ham. "But this is why I've banned dating while you're abroad. The tabloids would sink their teeth into that, and if you were actually dating someone, there would be endless fodder for them."

Adrien hmmmmmed in way of response, still dubious of his father's explanation. He was just a model, son to the founder of Gabriel or no, and most people didn't know him and didn't care about him enough to read articles about him and his boring, normal relationship week after week. Most of the tabloids had been more focused on the supposed "scandal" of a fashion designer's son "dating" an aspiring fashion designer, and if Adrien dated just an average woman off the street, there wouldn't be that so-called scandalous aspect to it. They might do an article or two about it, but then they would leave him alone. Of course, if he dated someone from London now they might eke out a few more articles claiming that Adrien had cheated on Marinette or spinning sob stories about Marinette being "tossed aside" for a new love, even despite all of their earlier interviews, but
Adrien really doubted that news coverage was what had driven his father to banning dating.

"Nathalie reported that you said your apartment was working out well," Gabriel commented after another few minutes of eating. He didn't look particularly pleased, even though 'the apartment was working well’ meant that Adrien could actually be a functioning adult. It was probably because Adrien might be able to live on his own once he got back to Paris. "I am... pleasantly surprised."

Yeah, you really sound like it's a pleasant surprise, all right, Adrien thought a bit sarcastically. He managed to swallow that particular thought back. "Yeah, it's going pretty well. Marinette helped teach me everything that I hadn't already known about living on my own. It's been really nice to have her nearby if I have any questions."

Gabriel's expression twitched; to anyone who didn't know him as well as Adrien did, it would have looked like a neutral expression. But Adrien knew that his father wasn't pleased. If Gabriel had his way, he would probably move Adrien to a different building away from Marinette so that Adrien might be more likely to move back to Paris. Thankfully, the apartment lease was in Adrien's name and while his father (well, Nathalie) was still paying the rent, only Adrien could re-sign or break the lease.

"And taking the bus to school?"

Adrien worked to school his expression. Surely his father wasn't going to try to revisit the possibility of trying to get a chauffeur? That would be absolutely ridiculous. "I enjoy it. I've had some very nice conversations with other regulars on the bus."

"It's not as convenient as having a chauffeur, especially if it or you are running behind schedule," Gabriel commented. "Are you sure-"

"It makes me more responsible if I have to keep an eye on the time," Adrien said firmly before his father could make his mind up to order Nathalie to look into private drivers in London again. "And I rarely take the bus late in the day, and if I do, Marinette is with me."

Gabriel snorted at that. "Yes, because that's definitely much safer, having a tiny girl that comes up to your shoulder with you."

Adrien frowned at his dismissive tone. "Marinette isn't that short. And she's fierce. Someone tried to steal her purse a few weeks ago, and they ended up unconscious on the sidewalk and missing a few teeth to boot. Marinette wasn't even ruffled."

Even Gabriel couldn't hide all of his amusement at that. His lips twitched, and he promptly sipped from his glass of wine to try to hide his smile. "Really."

"Yeah. I had turned around for a minute, and then next thing I know Marinette was kicking this guy, yanking her purse back from him, and then very thoroughly beating him up. Apparently she took some self-defense classes when she was in university." Adrien grinned at the memory. He had barely taken a step forward towards Marinette, ready to help, when the man fell to the sidewalk unconscious. Marinette had dusted off her shirt, scowled down at the unconscious form, and then turned to stalk off. She hadn't gotten far, though, before a policewoman trotted over, wanting to know what was going on. Adrien and Marinette had had to answer a few questions before they left, and the would-be thief was hauled away to the police station.

It had been quite the exciting evening out.

"And I've heard that you've been exploring the area with Marinette," Gabriel said after another few
minutes. "How is that impacting your studies? I'm sure it's a bit of a distraction."

Adrien couldn't keep from frowning at that. If his father was seriously concerned about distractions from school, then he was hypocrisy central. "It's no different than having time taken up by photoshoots or other activities during the school year. I have all the time in the world to study during the week, and if I'm going to need more time to study for finals or something, then we don't do anything that weekend. It's good to have a break every once in a while, and if I'm gonna be over there, then it makes sense to explore."

"Wandering around the city for entire days at a time is hardly the same thing as an occasional photoshoot."

Adrien had to do his best to keep a lid on his temper, but his father really wasn't making it easy. "I am fully capable of managing my own time wisely. I got great marks last semester, all solid As. The professors used my work as examples several times throughout the semester." He had been rather proud of that, actually, and he had texted Marinette in glee every time it happened. She had made cookies to celebrate every time.

(Marinette was the actual best, and no one could deny that.)

"Just don't get too carried away," Gabriel warned, and Adrien only just refrained from rolling his eyes. If anyone was guilty of getting too carried away, it was his father. Adrien had had to get ask Nathalie to back off on the activities and photoshoots when he was in lycée so he could stay on top of his assignments, and he had had to do the same thing during his first degree when there were too many photoshoots right before finals. His father had questioned it both times, probably because he hadn't been pleased about having to reschedule photoshoots.

The rest of the dinner passed in a combination of awkward silences, the sound of forks and spoons scraping across plates, and the occasional attempt at conversation. Following dessert, they quickly exchanged a few presents before each retiring to their own rooms. Adrien slumped against his door and sighed as soon as it closed behind him.

"Long dinner?" Plagg asked from over on Adrien's desk. The kwami was flat on his back among the remains of a giant wheel of Brie and he didn't make any attempt to move. "You were gone for forever."

"Father was being ridiculous. He wants me to come back to Paris, so he complained about everything from me taking the bus to me daring to spend some time on weekends exploring." Adrien let out a frustrated huff. "...and I got a set of fancy pens as a Christmas gift. Yay."

"...didn't you get him a tie?"

Adrien pushed himself off the door and headed over to the desk to join Plagg. There was no reason to have to yell their conversation across the room, after all. "Yeah, but I didn't know what else to get him."

"Maybe he didn't know what else to get you," Plagg suggested.

"Maybe," Adrien agreed. "But he got me that scarf before, and that was the best gift he's given me in a while. I'd love another scarf, or maybe a coat or something. Anything but more pens." He huffed, tossing the package of pens onto his desk. "...I'm never gonna need to buy a pen in my life. I'm gonna have to start donating them soon."

There was a pause, and then Plagg spoke up. "Wanna go out and crash one of your friends'
"Christmas dinners?"

"Not as Chat Noir," Adrien objected immediately, frowning. "I don't want to have to interact with people as a superhero tonight."

"So just be Chat Noir to get out of your room and to their house, then." Plagg pushed himself off of the desk and lazily floated over to Adrien. "I'm sure they'd be happy to have you."

Still, Adrien hesitated. "But it would be rude to just show up. It's late, for one. And I don't think anyone really wants to answer their door when they're spending time with their family."

"So text someone and ask first, then," Plagg suggested, just as Adrien's phone dinged. "Maybe whoever just texted you."

"It might just be an email," Adrien pointed out, but he pulled his phone out anyway to check. As it turned out, Plagg was right. He did have a text. "Oh. Marinette wants to know how dinner with my dad went."

"Tell her it was awful. She'll probably invite you over and then you can join then and I can look for cheese bread while you play Mega Strike with them," Plagg suggested. He floated over to perch on Adrien's shoulder and watch as Adrien typed out a response. "I don't think you even need to ask if you can come over. I think your wife will just invite you on her own."

"She probably would," Adrien agreed, sending the text- an then he froze and turned his head to scowl at Plagg. "And she is not my wife. How many times do we need to go over this?"

Plagg just snickered.

Ten minutes later, Adrien found himself drowning in an oversized holiday sweater on the Dupain-Cheng's living room couch. as Tom offered his a plate of cookies. Marinette had invited him right over, just as both Plagg and Adrien had guessed she might, and her family was just as welcoming. Marinette even had a couple presents for Adrien that she had been planning to give to him when their group of friends got together the next day.

"You might as well open them now," Marinette had told him when Adrien protested. "There's no point in waiting if you're here and I have them- and no, I don't care that you don't have anything for me with you, Adrien! Just open the darn present already!"

Laughing, Adrien had opened his presents. Marinette had made a quilt for him and knit a lovely warm hat. He exclaimed over both, feeling warm and loved as he pulled the hat on and wrapped himself up in the quilt.

(Ten minutes later, he had to set both aside as he was feeling a little too warm. Marinette, who had warned him about such an outcome, snickered at him when he admitted defeat. He had pretended to complain about her being mean to him, but Marinette had only laughed at him more. Adrien couldn't do anything but smile at her amusement.)

As the night came to an end, Adrien headed home with full arms, a light heart, and a spring in his
It was a pity that he couldn't spend the entire break with Marinette and his other friends, but the time he did spend with them was great. He still had the next day's get-together to look forward to, where he and his friends would exchange gifts properly and he could give Marinette the present he had ordered just for her, and probably several other get-togethers before Nino and Alya had to go back to work and he and Marinette had to head back to London.

Maybe his holiday wasn't what other people would consider perfect, but for Adrien, it was enough.
After the holiday break was over, it didn't take long for things to get back to normal. Adrien dove into his second semester of classes with gusto, eager to get into some deeper subjects. He was most looking forward to getting to explore what different specialties he could go into with Physics, and they would be getting more of an introduction to that with one of his classes that semester.

Over at Rosalie Fashions, Marinette was having fun with the spring line. Spring was one of her favorite seasons, both because of the weather warming up again and because the range of weather meant that she could make a whole range of different styles and still have them work.

"I'm making this gorgeous raincoat," Marinette told Adrien mid-January as they worked together in his kitchen. "Well, designing it, at least. I need to finish the design completely before I do any sewing."

"Isn't designing coats difficult?" Adrien asked. He hip-bumped Marinette. "Stove, please."

Marinette frowned in confusion as she stepped out of his way. "Why, because they need to be able to work as coats still? I think it can be fun. I mean, even though we have some restrictions on sleeves and necklines and whatnot so they keep their function, there's still a lot we can do with them."

Adrien just shook his head as he flipped the chicken cooking in the pan on their stove, still impressed. In all honesty, if he was asked to draw a coat, he would have the most basic silhouette in existence. Maybe he would be able to find a fun fabric to use, but that would be it. He just wasn't that creative.

"And we have to sometimes do twists on classics, too," Marinette added. "We could lose an entire section of our customers if we just focus on innovation and not tradition and comfort. Some people just want a classy, low-frills coat, one that's a bit more upscale than what you would find at just any store but that isn't crazy."

"Timeless style," Adrien finished. That was something his father had always talked about. They needed to have lines that were either on-trend or trendsetting, but also classical, timeless lines for the crowd that didn't want to completely redo their wardrobe every year just to not be out of style. "So what do you like doing better, timeless styles or innovative designs?"

Marinette hummed under her breath as she thought about it, absently kneading some bread dough as she did. "I guess it depends. I like making new stuff, but sometimes I just don't understand the trends. Timeless is always gorgeous, though. It's just a matter of being able to do something original with it."

"I've always wondered how you can just keep on creating new stuff day after day," Adrien said, squeezing a lemon over the sizzling chicken. "Don't you run dry after a while?"

Marinette twisted to look over at him as she continued working. "I mean, sometimes? And when we do, then we help with something else. Sometimes there's hand embroidery to do, or beading something, or there's some paperwork to help out with, or inventory to do, or we help out in the sewing room. Or we sew our own designs, I've done that before too. I enjoy that more than having
to make a technical drawing for the seamstresses so they can do it, really. I like being able to work with the fabric myself and see how it drapes with the style lines I have in mind, but Madam Rosalie insists on us doing technical drawings for some things so we can make sure we're doing it so the sewers can interpret things correctly. All of it's important to learn how to do to keep a fashion business of any size going."

Adrien frowned. While Marinette had been gone from her desk a few times when he dropped by, most of the time she had been either designing or filling out order forms. He had assumed that the order forms were for her own designs, but maybe Marinette had been on inventory duty. Maybe she hadn't hit a really bad creative block yet, or maybe Adrien just had ridiculously good timing with his visits.

If it was the latter, his good timing didn't just extend to his civilian life. Whenever he had the opportunity to go out as Chat Noir, Ladybug was usually out as well. Most of the time they ran into each other within a few minutes of him going out; the rest of the time, all Chat Noir had to do was glance at the tracker app on his baton and Ladybug wasn't far away. There had been a few times where they had each gone out solo, of course, but most of the time they ended up together.

The probability of both Ladybug and Chat Noir going out on the same night once in a while was...decent, he supposed. They both went out twice a week on average. Adrien's outings were based entirely on when Marinette needed more sleep and headed off to bed early or when he pleaded the same thing. He didn't know what Ladybug's decision to go out was based on, but somehow it yielded nearly the same "patrol" schedule. And that? The probably that they would both go out at the same time that often?

Not high.

Of course, he did have to take the Miraculous into consideration. He and Ladybug were two halves of a whole, so maybe there was some mystical power pushing them together as often as it could.

"So when do you have your next runway?" Adrien asked as Marinette set the bread aside to rise before she baked it. "I know it seemed like my father was always doing one runway or another."

"There's a spring/summer show. We're starting work on it, but it's still early on enough that we aren't too fussed about it yet." Marinette peered over his shoulder at the cooking chicken before heading into the dining room so she wasn't in his way. "We have far more photoshoots, but Madam Rosalie tries to space them out so we don't have a zillion outfits that all need to be ready all at once."

"I think my father does that too," Adrien commented. "He says the outfits can have a better fit and finish if he doesn't try to have everything done for one large photoshoot." It wasn't just about the clothing fit, either. Photoshoots could drag on and on for the models, and after a certain point it got very hard to hide fatigue and boredom. They had to plan out the length of the shoot in advance and take into account shots that had to be redone or ones where the model just didn't quite get the emotion what the photographer wanted. The longer a photoshoot was, the more off models could get and the more impatient photographers would get, resulting in subpar photos that would just need to be re-taken, making the whole process even longer.

Shorter photoshoots that were a week or so apart were much better, both to give seamstresses time to finish and fit properly and so models and photoshoot staff alike could perform at their best.

Chicken finished, Adrien turned the heat off and stepped back to let the meat rest before they cut it up. He joined Marinette at the table, settling into the other seat at the table as they waited for the
chicken to be ready.

"How are your classes going?" Marinette asked, breaking the comfortable silence after a moment. "I think you said something about one of them having a bit of overlap with the stuff you learned in your business courses?"

Adrien nodded. "Yeah, one of my classes has a partial focus on professional skills. And, you know, we covered that in business. There's some differences, but the basic concept is the same."

"You wouldn't think that there would be as much emphasis on that," Marinette commented, looking puzzled. "I mean, wouldn't the science be the biggest part?"

"And the math," Adrien agreed. "Yeah, the professional skills classes aren't worth much. At least they're worth more than the class I had last semester, that really basic one-"

Marinette giggled. "The one you complained about all the time because it was so easy?" She looked deeply amused. "I can't believe that they would make you do something basic."

Adrien had had a hard time believing it too. It had been a very, very easy class, and Adrien hadn't even found it at all useful, not like the Mathematics class that had helped him brush up on his math skills after three years of nothing but Business-level math. Apparently it was to make sure that all of the students had the basic skills for all of the courses in the Physics program.

Adrien was of the opinion that all of the concepts covered in that particular class could have been covered in a reading or in brief intros in other classes. It would have been less of a waste of time.

"Overall, classes have been much more interesting this semester, at least so far," Adrien added, answering the rest of Marinette's question. "Even though my schedule is awful. It's still largely the basics, but at least most of it isn't stuff that we covered in lycée. Next year gets into the interesting stuff."

"The painful stuff, you mean," Marinette said with a laugh. "I glanced at that list of classes once and yikes. That's heavy stuff."

Adrien couldn't hold back the laugh at that. He had heard the same thing from Alya and Nino, plus several models that he had worked with over the break who had asked about his coursework. "I'm sure the design classes you had would probably sound awful to me, since I can't draw anything but stick figures, I can't sew, and I can't design anything to save my life. But I really understand the math and science, so it's actually a lot of- well, fun might be an exaggeration, but enjoyable enough. I enjoy challenging myself." He got up and headed back into the kitchen to cut up the chicken. "It's not like the business degree. I hated a bunch of those classes."

"I'm glad you like the Physics classes," Marinette said, joining Adrien in the kitchen. She peered over his shoulder and let out an appreciative hum when she saw the chicken. "That looks fabulous, Adrien."

"Thanks." Adrien picked up a plate, serving up a portion and passing it to Marinette before serving himself. "So, how soon is this latest bit of weather going to stop? Going outside is actually miserable right now."

Marinette paused to think about it as they headed back to the table and settled into their chairs. "Uh, I really don't know. I think the weather will probably will be like this for a bit yet. It's a pity, because I kind of wanted to go outside and wander around the neighborhood more, instead of exploring downtown all of the time."
"It would be nice to know the area like the locals do," Adrien agreed. "I'm not really interested in restaurants and whatnot, but finding little shops would be interesting, I guess." He suddenly snorted, shaking his head. "It's funny, I can't even think of what kinds of places I like at home. I spend a bunch of my time either hanging out with you guys at your places or in my room, or sometimes at cafes, and then all the rest of my time doing photoshoots, or, you know, whatever."

"Yeah, it's funny how much of the neighborhood I really don't know super-well," Marinette agreed. "I've lived in the same building my whole life, yet there's shops only a few blocks away where if they changed hands I totally wouldn't notice. It would be nice to just wander around the neighborhood a bit and just discover the little shops in the area."

That sounded nice. Adrien probably wouldn't want to do it for hours on end or if it were raining heavily, but it might be interesting to poke around. Maybe he would find a little shop with potential Christmas gifts for the next year. There was only one small potential problem. "I don't know if the reporters would leave us alone if we did that, but it would be fun for one weekend, at least."

"It would pass the time a bit, at least," Marinette agreed as they both dug into their dinner. She huffed, glancing out towards the window. Rain streamed down the glass. "Though if this keeps up, all I'm gonna want to do is stay inside with some popcorn and a blanket. I can't wait until January is over."

Valentine's Day came and went, bringing with it a few more scattered attempts from reporters to make Marinette and Adrien's relationship appear to be more than just friends. Marinette and Adrien ignored the articles and made pizza from scratch for dinner before settling down in front of Adrien's computer to watch an old Disney movie and then separating to their own apartments to sleep.

(Well, to "sleep". Chat Noir and Ladybug appeared on the rooftops later that night and ran around for an hour, somehow unnoticed by the assorted couples milling around on the streets below, before actually going to bed.)

What Marinette was more interested in, though, was what came after Valentine's Day. The due date for Alya's Miraculous research proposal had been on the thirteenth, and Marinette couldn't wait to hear how soon Alya would find out about her chances of winning her newspaper contest. Alya hadn't known prior to entering- she had been more focused on doing the primary research instead of finding out when a decision was normally made by- and Marinette knew better than to call her friend on Valentine's day herself. Alya would absolutely kill her.

The day after, though, was totally fair game.

"So, when do you hear from the contest people?" Marinette asked as soon as Alya answered the video call. Marinette had been impatiently waiting the entire day to be able to call Alya after she was done with work. "Do you know? A week? A month? Do they tell you if you get past the first round of the committee?"

Alya suddenly looked a bit shifty, glancing away from her phone screen, chewing on her lip. Marinette frowned. That hadn't been what she had been expecting Alya's reaction to be. Marinette had thought that Alya would be nervous, definitely, or maybe overflowing with things that she wished she could change, or even already planning where she would be going or more research that
she needed to do. But instead, Alya looked uncomfortable.

"...Alya?"

"I...didn't enter," Alya admitted after a short pause. She bit her lip, glancing away and then back again, but never quite making eye contact. "So I won't be hearing from them at all this year."

Marinette blinked, stunned, then found her voice.

"What do you mean, you aren't entering?" she demanded, staring at Alya's face on her phone. "Alya! But you had such a great idea! And you had already made some good progress on research, I thought! That was what you told me before I came back to London!"

Alya held up her hands in defense - well, one hand up, at any rate. The other was still holding the phone. "Hey, I know, I know. But I still hadn't gotten enough preliminary research done by the due date to do the topic any justice. I'll have a stronger case this time next year, and a better idea of where I need to travel to get the most out of my time. Besides, I..." Alya glanced to the side, abashed. "...I know I told you that I was going to tell Nino that I was entering, but then there was never a good time. So now I actually have time to, y'know, bring it up."

Marinette groaned at that. Nino had been actively helping Alya do her research, but clearly she hadn't corrected his incorrect belief that the research was just for the Ladyblog. "Alyaaaaaa..."

"I know, I know! But then Nino kept talking about how much he hated the gang being broken up with you two in London right after you guys left after Christmas, and I just couldn't say anything then. I wanted to, but then I was still having trouble getting the research really going even with the hints Ladybug and Chat Noir dropped and I started thinking about pushing back my entry by a year, so I wasn't even sure if there was a point in bringing it up since I wouldn't be going this year." Alya looked uncomfortable and was clearly trying to dodge the look Marinette was giving her. Finally she gave a huff. "There just wasn't ever a good time! Besides, he never straight-out asked why I was trying to get all of this research done. I would have told the truth then, I swear."

Marinette barely refrained from facepalming. Really, her friend drove her crazy sometimes... but it was probably karma considering how much she drove Alya crazy with her Adrien drama when they were younger. "Okay, okay, I can maybe see your point. But you have to tell Nino about the contest by fall, okay? Promise me. Give him some time to get used to the idea before you win."

"I will," Alya promised. Then her serious look fled in favor of the eager I-just-found-a-Ladybug-related-lead expression that Marinette knew so well. "I almost forgot to tell you! I think I found another lead for my research. There were some odd fables in Ireland about a century back, in one of the time periods that Ladybug and Chat Noir mentioned, and from what I've seen, there's some of overlap with Ladybug and Chat Noir's powers. And there's other fables that are super-similar but they talk about other superheroes! It's not much and some stuff could be completely made up, I know, but then I can compare the animals that they mention to the ones that the Chinese fables talk about, and the Egyptian ones as well!"

"And then you can start looking for times when those superheroes popped up on their own without Ladybug and Chat Noir," Marinette finished. She had been wondering when- or even if- the other Miraculous users would ever pop up with the historical Ladybug-Chat Noir duos. "Congratulations, Alya! That's great!"

"I know, right? And just based on that, I think I've found a couple other stories that are probably about those other Miraculous users. They were active during a war, though, not fighting akuma, so that's strange. And one of them talks about a butterfly hero, so I don't know what to think about
"It probably depends on the user," Marinette pointed out quickly. She knew full well that the Butterfly Miraculous and Nooroo were meant to be forces of good, but Alya and the rest of the civilians in Paris apparently did not, even after the comments that Ladybug and Chat Noir had made after Hawkmoth's defeat about how the man behind the mask was the evil one, not the Miraculous. They maybe should have elaborated on that a bit more, or else they might find that next time Master Fu tried to assign the Butterfly Miraculous to someone, they would reject it out of fear that they would turn evil.

...actually, that alone made it suddenly Critically Important that Marinette steer Alya towards focusing at least part of her article on properly heroic Butterfly holders from the past. Maybe it was a bit manipulative, but Marinette was definitely not above using Alya's reputation as a superhero reporter to get the word out that the Butterfly Miraculous was not inherently bad.

"Actually, didn't Ladybug and Chat Noir say something about that after they defeated Hawkmoth?" Marinette asked innocently as a lead-in. "About the Butterfly Miraculous being used by heroes in the past? Maybe you could spend part of your article talking about that. I mean, there have to have been Ladybugs and Chat Noirs in the past that weren't entirely good, too." Granted, Tikki had never mentioned having a corrupted Ladybug before, but that didn't mean that it hadn't happened.

...maybe those users were the ones that Tikki had very deliberately excluded from the list that she had made for Alya. Marinette would have to ask.

Alya made a dubious noise. "I don't know, Marinette. Ladybug is a superhero. She wouldn't be corrupted-"

"Not this one, but don't you remember Hawkmoth trying to get her Miraculous? What if he had? Then he would have used it and his Ladybug sure wouldn't have been a hero!"

Alya looked thoughtful. "Yeah, I guess you're right. So maybe it would be important to do a bit on that with both heroes and supervillains with the same Miraculous, so people know not to jump to conclusions in the future if a particular Miraculous shows up. It could be dangerous if someone like Hawkmoth got Ladybug's Miraculous and people automatically trusted them."

"Exactly! Besides, it's interesting." Marinette would definitely have to do some behind-the-scenes manipulation so that Alya would just so happen to stumble upon some corrupted users. They were probably far and few between, and if many of them were like Hawkmoth and worked behind the scenes... If that were the case, finding any documentation of them would be very difficult.

"I'll definitely have to research this butterfly hero more, then," Alya decided, already clearly distracted. Marinette suspected that she was itching to get back to her research. Hopefully Alya wasn't neglecting her actual work when she got leads like this. "And what about the war heroes? Do you think that's an actual lead?"

"Why not?" Marinette asked, waving to Adrien as he poked his head through the door to let her know that dinner was ready. He paused, staying quiet so Alya wouldn't notice him and make a big deal about it. "They're not always going to have a Hawkmoth to fight. Why not fight in a war and try to minimize some of the destruction to their side?"

Alya nodded again. "Yeah, I forgot about that. So maybe I should be doing a lot of looking at war records for odd occurrences that Miraculous holders might have been responsible for. That makes
sense that they would be more active around then. A She grinned at Marinette. "Are you sure you
don't want to become an assistant reporter for me? You're the one who keeps coming up all of the
ideas for me!"

Marinette giggled. "Hardly! Anyone could do the same thing I've been doing. Nino could probably
help come up with ideas too. He's super-smart and he's more interested than superheroes than I am.
Besides, he was the one who originally gave you the lead about them not always appearing as
superheroes. That was a huge breakthrough, I think."

Alya snorted out a laugh. "I still can't believe that you aren't that interested in them. I think you're
one of the only people in Paris who isn't."

Marinette shrugged as Adrien grinned in amusement in the doorway. She couldn't exactly just out
and say that she wasn't that interested in hearing endless theories about herself and her partner
when she knew the truth (well, most of the truth- she knew that Ladybug and Chat Noir weren't
dating, that they hadn't been bitten by radioactive animals, that they weren't in fact thousands of
years old but their kwamis were, that both Ladybug and Chat Noir were currently located in
London, not missing- in fact, pretty much the only thing that she didn't know was her partner's
identity). If she weren't Ladybug, then she could definitely see herself being interested in the
superhero duo- maybe not as obsessed as Alya, but definitely interested.

"Well, I gotta go and make dinner," Alya said, glancing over in what the Marinette assumed was
the direction of a clock. "I'll let you know if I have any more breakthroughs with my research."

"Sounds good!" Marinette answered.

"Alya found something?" Adrien inquired politely as Marinette hung up and slid her phone back
into her pocket. "And what did she say about the contest?"

"Well, she's not entering this year, for one," Marinette responded as they stepped out of her
apartment. She paused to lock the door before heading across the hall to Adrien's apartment. "She
hadn't gotten enough initial research done."

Adrien's eyebrows shot up. "Really? But she seemed so pumped about it at Christmas."

"She decided that she didn't have enough information to make a really strong proposal this year, so
she's waiting for next year," Marinette explained. They stepped into Adrien's apartment, and
Marinette paused to take a deep breath of the delicious smell coming from the kitchen. "I always
thought that she would enter anyway, just to try even if she didn't think it was the strongest
proposal ever. There would be time afterwards to iron out more details."

Adrien let out a long hmmmm at that. Marinette raised an eyebrow at him, and Adrien shook his head
at her. "I actually was surprised that she had been considering entering this year at all, considering
that she only had a couple months' worth of research to go on. I looked up winners from previous
contests, and most had done at least a year or two of independent research before entering. She
could have entered, sure, but then she would lose the initial surprise and interest value of the
topic." He shrugged and headed into the kitchen with Marinette trailing behind. "This way, she gets
a double whammy next year of both an interesting new topic and solid research, instead of just the
research. She probably knew that and decided to wait because of that."

Marinette had to admit that it was a good point. She had mostly based her guess on what Alya
would do on her friend's tendency to dive headfirst into things, sometimes without thinking them
through all the way first. Alya had gotten better about it as she got older, sure, but she was still
very much a 'act-first-ask-questions-later' kind of person. Still, Adrien's reasoning had missed one
very important reason for Alya to wait. "I guess. She also hadn't told Nino about the contest yet. This gives her a bit more time."

At that, Adrien's expression turned displeased. "She hadn't? But I thought she promised to!"

"Apparently Nino was still down about the two of us being out of Paris, and she didn't want to add the possibility of her leaving for half a year to that, especially now that she's pushed entering back for next year." She could understand it, but that didn't mean that she liked it. Nino didn't particularly like being left out of the loop, especially for so long.

She should have made Alya promise to tell Nino before summer or, better yet, before Easter. Fall was far too far away. Nino let a lot roll off his back, but that would be testing his patience far too much.

"There's absolutely no way that Alya won't win once she enters," Adrien said confidently as they dished up their meal and headed to the table to eat. "And Nino will know that, too. I'm mostly curious about where she'll end up going. Like, what fables could she possibly find by going somewhere instead of researching? I think that'll be the only sticking point the contest people might have."

"I think it would probably be a lot of finding artifacts that reference the potential superhero," Marinette said. She had thought about that problem as well, since it was a good point. She didn't want the contest people turning Alya down just because they thought that she wouldn't gain anything of value from travelling around the world. "And sometimes even the best researcher in the world can't come up with the right keywords to find just the right fable, so she might have to talk to local folklorists instead of Googling. She'd be able to find them online and probably email, but then could go there to interview them in person if they knew any promising stories."

Adrien grinned. "You've certainly though this through. Have you mentioned all of that to Alya yet?"

Marinette paused, fork in the air, and then groaned as she slumped in her seat. "No. You're right, I totally should have. But I guess there's not exactly a rush to bring it up now. I'll just try to remember it when I call Alya next so she can keep that in mind as she does her research."

There was a pause as they both ate in silence for a minute, and then Adrien spoke up again. "It's nice that Alya could get the opportunity to travel somewhere new. She's always seemed the type that probably would have done a study abroad if she could have, but it seemed like she didn't want to leave Nino when they were in university."

"Probably because they had just gone through a bit of a rocky patch," Marinette pointed out. "I didn't blame Alya for not wanting to leave the city then. Nino was so busy with his program plus his job that it would have been impossible for him to leave to go visit. They wouldn't have seen each other for months."

"Not a good thing, when they had been arguing about not being able to see each other on a regular basis because of their course loads and jobs," Adrien agreed. "But I guess Nino could take time off now to go visit Alya a few times. I always thought he would travel more, too, but I guess it's easier when you have, y'know..."

"The funds to do it?" Marinette finished. "Yeah, I agree. Hopefully some of the places that Alya'll get to visit will be close enough that he can go without it costing him an arm and a leg. Like, I know that there's one Alya mentioned that was active further north, and that's not that big of a trip, really-"
"Look at us, planning out what Alya and Nino should do," Adrien said with a laugh. "And all before Alya even enters. Talk about planning for the future. Maybe we should wait for Alya to actually enter first, yeah?"

"Oh, I suppose," Marinette sighed. "Fine. Fine. So, how are your classes?"

Chapter End Notes

filler chapter whoops
....more stuff happens next chapter I promise.
As always, reviews are much appreciated! :)
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It didn't take long for Adrien to absolutely hate his schedule for the second semester. He had a ridiculously heavy load on Tuesdays and Thursdays, only a couple things on Mondays and Fridays, and absolutely nothing on Wednesdays. It hadn't sounded bad when he initially got the schedule, had been slightly annoying at the start of the semester, and now?

Now he was very tired of being alternately overwhelmed and having nothing to do.

"Just before the bell, just like usual," Paul commented as Adrien dashed into his Quantum Physics lecture classroom ten seconds before three o'clock. "Jeez, Agreste, did you run here from your lab?"

"Yeah, I did," Adrien admitted, settling into his seat and immediately diving into his bag to dig out his notebook. "It ran over just a bit. I had to leave my lab partner to clean up the last few things, since he doesn't have class for another hour and I had to leave."

Paul just shook his head in disbelief. Somehow he had been luckier than Adrien with getting his schedule, and his labs were more spread out through the week.

"It makes me miss Wednesdays," Adrien grumbled as the professor came in and started setting up. "Yesterday I had nowhere that I had to be and I didn't have to run around campus like a chicken with its head cut off."

"I thought you hated not having anything to do."

"I do," Adrien admitted, flipping through his notebook to find where he had left off. "I got bored of studying and surfing the internet by noon, so I went over to have lunch with Marinette before she had to go back to work. And then I went home and studied some more and was sick of being alone by three. But it's better than having to rush around campus because I have back-to-back classes all day."

"And you really do need a break after labs," Paul agreed. "I hear that they tend to run over more and more once you hit the higher levels. That's what an upperclassman told me, at least. Not every lab, but often enough."

"That's not gonna be fun," Adrien sighed. He'd have to take it into account when making his schedule, and that would force him to have weird breaks during his day. "At least those labs should be more interesting, though. As long as I actually have a break after them and I don't have to worry about getting to my next class, I don't think I'd actually mind that much."

Before Paul could respond, the professor called the class to order. Adrien sat up and forced himself to focus. He couldn't let his studies suffer just because he had been in class all day and had another class yet after this lecture ended. His father would just blame it on his traveling instead of on his class schedule.

Despite himself, Adrien couldn't keep his mind from wandering just a bit as the professor did a quick review of what they had covered in the previous class two days prior. It had been difficult getting out of bed that morning, partly because he had been dreading his class schedule that day, partly because he had been out a little later than he had intended with Ladybug, and partly because
Marinette had been sleeping over because her neighbor had been loud again and the bed was lovely and warm and he didn't want to leave her.

He had been really lucky that Marinette hadn't come over until after he got back from being Chat Noir. If she had come over while he was still out or, worse yet, had been in his living room when he detransformed, then he would have been in trouble. He hadn't really thought it through before giving Marinette an extra key to his apartment, but he hadn't run into any problems yet and it was easier for Marinette to let herself in than for her to have to knock, especially when her neighbor started up the music pretty late and Adrien was already asleep.

They had also been lucky that the tabloids had, for the most part, lost interest in him and Marinette. He had only had to do one interview since the semester started (well, an "interview". A reporter had cornered him at the bus station and had annoyed him into answering a few questions before the bus came by and saved him), and he sincerely hoped that it would be the last. Once again he had been forced to confirm that no, he and Marinette weren't dating, because apparently having been told that a good five times previously wasn't enough.

And that was all that they were going to get from him. There was no way that Adrien was going to tell them (or anyone else) that while he and Marinette weren't dating now, it wasn't exactly impossible to think that they might in the future. The realization had snuck up on him over time, but Adrien had found just recently that he couldn't exactly deny it anymore.

He had always thought that Marinette was amazing. She was headstrong and opinionated, but that didn't keep her from being kind and willing to help others. Her talent for design was absolutely undeniable, but she wasn't at all conceited about it and she shared that talent with others through gifts designed specifically for the recipient. Adrien thought that she was just an amazing person overall, and it didn't hurt that she was absolutely adorable besides.

Now that he was thinking about it, he probably should have guessed that he felt more than just friendship towards her after spending most of Fashion Week delighting over her reactions to things going down the runway.

It probably also didn't hurt that Marinette strongly reminded Adrien of Ladybug. Both women had very similar personalities, enough that it was fairly obvious that Adrien had a type. Still, he wasn't going to act on his newfound crush for several reasons.

One, he was still very in love with his superhero partner, and it wouldn't be fair to Marinette if he got into a relationship with her while still having feelings for Ladybug, especially when he still saw (and flirted with) Ladybug at least once a week.

Two, he didn't actually know if Marinette was interested in him. After all, he hadn't exactly seen any large changes in her behavior towards him since the school year had started and he was fairly positive that she hadn't been interested in him like that then. He didn't want to make things awkward by asking her out and then being turned down.

And three... well, his father hadn't exactly lifted the ban on Adrien dating. And Adrien was planning on complying, at least for now.

A sharp elbow to the side pulled Adrien out of his thoughts and he glanced to the side to see Paul gesturing to the front. The professor had moved on from the review to new material, which meant that Adrien should be paying attention.

He sighed, picking up his pencil and starting to take notes. He could figure it all out later, he supposed. After all, he had to focus on getting through the day in one piece first.
February turned into March, bringing with it weather that was occasionally actually decent enough for Adrien and Marinette to want to be outside for more than a minute at a time. Naturally, both suddenly developed a tendency to "go to bed early" on nice days, and soon Ladybug and Chat Noir would be out enjoying the cool evenings.

"Are you enjoying your time in London?" Chat Noir asked as they jumped over rooftops. "I know I am, even though we can't go out during the day."

"It's been fun," Ladybug said. She paused on a particularly tall rooftop to survey the city, letting the breeze tease her hair. She was wearing it mostly down today, with a bit pinned back out of her face. It looked quite a bit like the hairstyle that Marinette had been wearing earlier, and Chat Noir had to wonder if that particular hairstyle was in trend at the moment. He didn't know; after all, he didn't exactly pay attention to trends in women's hairstyles normally. He'd have to try to remember to ask Marinette about it sometime.

"It's amazing that we haven't been noticed yet."

Ladybug nodded. "Yeah! I mean, I know we've been careful, but even so, you would think that someone would just happen to glance up at the right time and see us jumping over the street. It's possible that people have glanced us and just not believed their eyes, I suppose, but it's not like we're hanging out in different areas each time we go out. If someone saw us more than once, then they might figure out that they weren't just seeing things."

"So... do you think we should be trying to go to different parts of the city, then?" Chat Noir asked. He really didn't want to, mostly because he knew these rooftops now, and if it started raining or sleet (as it was prone to do at this time of the year), then it would be that much farther to get back to his apartment, and Plagg would be that much more likely to catch a cold. "Or, since no one's spotted us yet, are we still fine?"

Ladybug bit her lip, puzzling over that. "I...don't know. I mean, maybe we could try to shake up what direction we go in, but I don't know that it would make too much sense to go too far. I think for now, we should just stay as-is."

"Purr-fect." Chat Noir grinned at the exasperated look Ladybug gave him for the pun. "What? I happen to like this neighborhood quite a bit."

"If you say so." Ladybug suddenly looked a bit reserved, like he had maybe said something that he shouldn't have. She looked like that sometimes when he mentioned something that might reveal his secret identity, but he hadn't, had he? Unless she somehow thought that his comment about liking the neighborhood meant that he himself lived there and therefore it was too much information, but that was ridiculous.

After all, loads of people lived in the neighborhood that they roamed through the most. There were more than a few apartment buildings and townhouses nearby. Besides, he was fairly positive that he had once made some comment when they were in Paris about his family's house not being far away. Surely his comment now was far less revealing than that.

He decided not to worry about it too much. Maybe Ladybug was reacting to something else entirely. Maybe she lived in the neighborhood too, and she was just a little jumpy because of that.
That made a *lot* more sense.

"I can't believe how fast the year is going by," Ladybug said, breaking the silence as they started to move again. "Soon it's going to be properly warm again, and the days will be super-long..."

"Oh, that's gonna make things hard," Chat Noir realized with a bit of a jolt. "We'll have to go out really late if we want to stay hidden." That wouldn't be fun. He had been applying to jobs in London for the summer, and if he stayed up late to hang out with Ladybug and still had to get up early then he'd be tired for work. And, unlike in the classroom, his supervisors would probably notice.

Of course, depending on when Ladybug headed back to Paris, maybe it wouldn't be a problem. If she went back early, then there would be no real reason for him to go out as Chat Noir, because all he would be doing would be running around. He wasn't going to lie to himself and try to claim that meeting up with Ladybug was the *real* reason why he went out so often. Once she went back to Paris, he would probably only go out on occasion to stretch his legs and get some fresh air.

Or maybe he would go a little stir-crazy without Marinette across the hall to hang out with and he would go out every night just to enjoy the sounds of the city. It could go either way, really.

Maybe he would find himself trotting back to Paris over the weekend more often next year, simply because he wouldn't have either Marinette or Ladybug nearby and the homesickness would get to him. Part of him thought that it wouldn't be terrible, but the other part knew that it would be exhausting to always be traveling back and forth.

Besides, then he would never get out of doing any photoshoots.

"Being out too late would probably be a bad idea," Ladybug pointed out, pulling Adrien out of his thoughts. "I have a lot of stuff that I'll have to be getting done, and I'm never on top of my game when I've been up all night."

"It makes getting up in the morning impossibly more difficult," Chat Noir agreed. He glanced up to where the moon was occasionally visible, peeking out from behind the clouds. It had gotten pretty high in the sky while they were out running around, which meant that it was probably pretty late and he was going to regret this in the morning. Almost as though she was reading his mind, Ladybug sighed and slowed down before turning around.

"It's getting late. Let's head back, kitten."

Chat Noir pouted at her, and Ladybug only laughed. Reaching out, she scratched under his chin lightly until he purred. "C'mon, we've been out for ages. It's late, and I swear I'm only upright because of the suit. I'm gonna be half-asleep by the time I'm getting ready for bed."

It didn't take long for them to get back to where they had run into each other at the start of their "patrol". His apartment building was only a block over, so Chat Noir dawdled a bit on the rooftop so Ladybug wouldn't accidentally see him landing on his balcony and heading inside. Only once she was out of sight did he pole quickly over to the building and drop down onto his balcony.

And then he heard the music.

"It's not even the weekend yet," Chat Noir grumbled, stepping inside. The music wasn't particularly loud in his apartment, but he could still hear it faintly floating under his door. "That's not coo- oh, shoot!"

Music going late meant Marinette coming over once it was her bedtime. It was just after one in the
morning, according to the clock in the kitchen- wow, he and Ladybug had sure been out for a while- which meant that Marinette had probably already come over ages ago and found him not in the apartment. This was bad, this was very bad, this was very, very bad- what if she had heard him come in and found Chat Noir instead?

Diving into the kitchen, Chat Noir detransformed, flinging open the fridge to provide a little more shelter and to try to disguise the light from his detransformation. Plagg took the open fridge door as an invitation to dive right in and help himself, but Adrien ignored him, standing very, very still as he listened for any sign of Marinette.

There was the sound of a key in the door. Adrien froze, grabbed a half-filled glass of water off of the counter so it would look like he had just come to the kitchen for a drink, and closed the fridge before popping innocently into the living room, ignoring Plagg's disgruntled "Hey!" from inside the fridge.

Marinette blinked at Adrien curiously as she stepped inside and re-locked the door. "Adrien? I didn't expect to find you awake!" She paused, getting a better look at him. "...are you really still dressed?"

...shoot. He was, in fact, still wearing his jeans. He really should have changed into his night clothes before transforming and going out.

"Did you fall asleep doing homework again?" Marinette asked, sounding a little exasperated. "Adrien."

"No, I was just reading and fell asleep before I could finish getting ready," Adrien claimed, pretending to take a sip of his water. "And then I woke up and needed something to drink. What about you? I would have thought you would have come over earlier."

"Fell asleep early on my couch," Marinette said after a pause. "So I slept through the start of the music, and only just woke up. So. Yeah. And now I'm here."

"And now you're here," Adrien agreed, still a little jumpy after nearly being found out. "Ah, so I still have to wash up and all, but you go ahead to bed. I'll be there soon enough."

Marinette nodded through a yawn, running a hand through her hair. "Okay. Good night, Adrien."

"Night, Mari."

As Marinette headed down the hall, Adrien slumped a little against the wall, letting out a sigh of relief and silently thanking Ladybug for deciding to turn around when she did. If he had gotten back any later than he had, he would have really been in trouble. He couldn't think of any plausible excuse that would explain away why he was out of his apartment after one in the morning. Marinette knew him too well for any of his normal half-baked excuses to work properly, even when she was tired beyond belief.

"Hey! Lemme out!"

...and at least Marinette was now in the bedroom and he didn't have to explain why his fridge was yelling. That would have been really hard to explain.
The rest of the first half of the semester positively flew by, even with Adrien's less-than-ideal schedule. Rosalie Fashions went through another Fashion Week, this time with all models present and intact. The man that Adrien had replaced for the fall Fashion Week was as good as new, and Adrien was pleased to hear that he had recovered quickly from the car accident and hadn't been too badly impacted. A bit after that was midterms, and then after that Adrien had the chance to breathe a little as the last, partially due to the classes themselves and partly because of his crummy schedule alternating between making him scramble across campus and boring him to death, so the break was welcome.

But short. Way too short, and it went by way too fast.

Adrien had more time at home than Marinette, who had to use another couple of her hoarded vacation days to extend her stay long enough to see her parents properly. Adrien himself had to suffer through another round of photoshoots while he was at home, this time for late spring and early summer looks, before he could go out and visit his friends- and by that, he mostly meant Nino, since Alya had just gotten a potential lead about an old Miraculous holder and she could only tear herself away from the computer for a short while to say hi to Adrien before diving back in.

It was amusing, but also slightly concerning. Adrien decided that Marinette's concerns about Alya potentially neglecting her actual work to keep researching her own project when she found a promising lead were probably well-founded and likely at least a little accurate.

"I'd say that we would visit you guys in London again soon, but I don't know if I could drag Alya away from her work for long enough," Nino had told Adrien, sounding a little exasperated. "It takes almost everything I have to even get her to set things aside long enough for a date night, let alone any longer trips."

"But she is still getting her work for the newspaper done, right?" Adrien wanted to know. Nino had just made a face.

"At the moment, yeah. She lets things slip when she gets like this, though."

Adrien could only sigh and hope that Alya would take a few steps back and realize before it was too late that the Ladybug research stuff could wait, but her actual job really couldn't. He was sure that one reprimand from her boss would set her straight in a hurry and she would do everything she could to get back in the newspaper's good graces, but it still wouldn't look good to have that on her record.

After the too-short break, Adrien and Marinette were back in London. Alya had sworn up and down that she and Nino would come visit again later in the semester, but neither Adrien nor Marinette had particularly believed her. After all, whenever she wasn't eyeball-deep in Miraculous research, she was scrambling to catch up with the things she had neglected at her job during her research spree. They would have to content themselves with video calls for the time being.

Besides, it wasn't as though Adrien and Marinette really had the time to spare to host their friends again. Now that the second half of the semester had started, Adrien found that he had several more projects that needed to be worked on on top of his normal homework. Marinette had shown Madam Rosalie the results of hours upon hours working on potential fabric patterns and now she was working with an experienced fabrics designer on the staff to make her designs reality. It involved a lot of printing out short sample pieces and going over what proportions worked and what ones didn't and then editing and reprinting, over and over and over to get a pattern that would read well. On top of that, it was Marinette's turn to get a bit more experience working with models and photographers on photoshoots, so she was rushing from one to the other to try to get everything
done. It resulted in more than a few long days and working on weekends to get everything done.

They were both badly in need of a break. So when Adrien heard about a local festival in mid-April in a town a ways to their north from a classmate of his who was from that area, both of them were eager to check it out. It would be an overnight trip, both because it was a ways away and because they wanted plenty of time to explore the festival, because the classmate had made it sound like it was a pretty big deal.

They had assumed that *a pretty big deal* for a town that size just meant that *locally*, it was a big event. Like, everyone in town would go, and maybe people who had families there would go back, and maybe a couple people from neighboring towns would show up as well. That assumption was apparently wrong.

"Nearly all of the hotels in the area are booked, and absolutely all the nice ones are *completely* full," Adrien reported as he clicked on yet another link. "But those would be out of our preferred price range anyway. And then there's a room with two single beds in it in a midrange hotel, but it's a smoking room."

"Nope," Marinette said immediately from where she was putting dishes away in the kitchen. She had been unfortunate enough to once not check on the smoking designation of the room, and she hadn't been able to sleep at all because of the stench. She was *not* doing that again.

"Then the only non-smoking rooms left only have one bed each," Adrien reported. "And there's only- *oh*. There's only one room left. That's it."

There was a pause.

"Well, it's not like we've never shared a bed before," Marinette offered. Since her neighbor hadn't yet kicked the habit of playing music late into the night several days a week (at least they had been largely confining it to Fridays and weekends after too many noise complaints), Marinette had found herself slipping over to Adrien's apartment to share his bed. He had never minded, even though the bed was perhaps a little small for both of them to really spread out, and Marinette herself definitely didn't object. "As long as the tabloids don't follow us there and then find out that our room is a single bed. And I don't think they will. I haven't seen anything printed about us for months." The reporters had been bad right after the runway and then spiked again after Christmas (apparently since they had been spotted hanging out in Paris, which was honestly *ridiculous*) and then again at Valentine's Day, but after several further rounds of interviews (generally at Mr. Agreste or Nathalie's request) where Adrien had to reiterate that *no*, he and Marinette's relationship status had *not* changed and they were *not* dating, they seemed to get bored.

It was really about time, in Marinette's opinion. She didn't understand what their appeal even *was*. Sure, Adrien was a model. Sure, maybe he was somewhat well known in the fashion world for his work as a model. But that was it- he was well known in the *fashion* world. Normal people out in the street probably wouldn't recognize him, if it weren't for the tabloids' seemingly constant coverage. She didn't particularly approve of their hounding of actors and other *actually* famous people either, but she could understand where people's curiosity about them came from, at least. With models, they were supposed to be pretty much vehicles for showing off clothes. Sure, they were gorgeous (her eyes slid over to Adrien; even in a simple t-shirt and jeans combination, he looked *amazing*), but there were *plenty* of gorgeous people who *didn't* go into modeling.

The sound of a few more clicks came from the other room, and then Adrien spoke up again. "So just share the room and the bed?"

"If you're comfortable with that, yeah." Marinette paused in the middle of putting things away. Was
that an uncomfortable edge to his voice that she was hearing? She had thought that Adrien would be fine with it, since they had shared a bed so many times. Maybe somehow sharing a bedroom and not having the rest of the living space made it different somehow, but she couldn't understand how. They would have a bathroom that they could change clothes in, and-

"Yeah, I'm fine with it. I just wanted to confirm before booking it." Adrien's voice cut off Marinette's sudden internal panic-induced monologue and she let out a relieved breath. She had been worried that she had somehow crossed some invisible line in their friendship for a moment there. How, she wasn't sure, considering the number of sleepovers they had had thanks to the blaring music from her neighbor, but she supposed that there might be some difference if someone else- in this case, the receptionist- knew that they were sharing both room and bed. "Booked."

"Great. I'll get the train tickets after I finish this." Marinette paused for a moment as she tried to remember where Adrien normally kept his ladles. A second later, it hit her and she turned around to toss the utensil into the right drawer. "You said you can be ready to go by midday Friday?"

"Yeah, my one o'clock class is cancelled."

With the last of the dishes put away, Marinette drifted out of the kitchen to join Adrien at the table. "Did your professor say why?"

"A conference of some sort that he has to go to, I think." Adrien shrugged and made a face. "I can't remember the details, but he did give us extra homework to make up for it."

Marinette could only giggle. "Aw, that's too generous of him. He shouldn't have."

"Yeah, he shouldn't have all right. One of the problems is a real beast and I have no idea how to solve it. I'll have to see if some of the others in the class want to get together mid-week and work on it together." Adrien didn't look terribly pleased. The majority of the study groups that he had gone to hadn't been terribly productive, largely because of how easily some of the others got pulled off task. "That's why I like the class discussion groups better. The professor does a great job of keeping all of the groups on-task so we actually get stuff done."

Thankfully for Adrien's sanity, the classmates he found for a study group actually were pretty focused. They all came to the mid-week session with as much of the homework done as possible, and then they worked together through the sections of the problems that they had had trouble with. He left the study group satisfied, with his completed homework sheet tucked away carefully in a folder in his backpack.

"I only have a little bit of homework left that I want to finish over the weekend," Adrien told Marinette that Friday as they boarded the train. "Hopefully I can get it done on the train. Neither are things that are due right away on Monday, but I like starting the week without the little stuff still hanging over my head."

"Well, we do have a few hours of travel before we get there," Marinette pointed out as they settled into their seats. "Hopefully we won't have any loud kids or anything in our carriage. Did you bring anything for any of your projects?"

"Just a book to read," Adrien said. "I didn't want to over pack. I brought post-its and that highlighter tape stuff so I can mark up anything I think is important for later. I was gonna bring a couple papers to read, but I'm pretty sure that I won't even get through half of the book during the trip."

As the train started up and sped out of London ten minutes later, Adrien was already neck-deep in
homework problems and Marinette was paging through a book, iPod earbud wedged in one ear. They had gotten largely lucky with their train carriage- the only members of the under-twelve crowd in the carriage was two babies that were currently fast asleep- but they had spotted a large family getting onto the train in the next section up just prior to departure. From the slightly exasperated expressions on the faces of the other passengers that they could see through the carriage windows, it looked like the family wasn't being particularly quiet.

Several hours (and several relatively short crying baby episodes) later, Adrien and Marinette hopped off the train and headed down the street to the hotel Adrien had found. The town was bustling with activity, and banners and posters alike hung from windows, advertising the local holiday.

"Well, at least there's so many people here that we shouldn't stand out," Adrien commented as they dodged around the family that they had spotted on the train earlier. The youngest kid was already hanging off of his mother's arm, begging for pastries from a stall set up on the street nearby. "And there should be plenty to do."

"You mean plenty to eat," Marinette corrected with a laugh, glancing around the crowded street. "That pastry stall smells pretty good, and believe me, it takes a lot for me to notice things like that."

Adrien grinned and made a sharp turn to detour over to the stall, tugging Marinette's arm so she followed him. "That, I can believe. I remember when we went to fairs and whatnot when we were in lycée and you almost never bought pastries from the food stalls while the rest of us were already digging out our wallets with the first whiff."

Thankfully the line at the pastry stall wasn't long, and soon Adrien and Marinette were continuing their journey down the road with a pain au chocolate each. It took all of the self-control Adrien had to not just scarf the whole thing down, but then again he had had the same problem with nearly every other pain au chocolate he had ever encountered. Marinette was only halfway done while he was licking the last traces of pastry and butter off of his fingers.

"We're going back to that stall again," Adrien announced as he finally got the last traces of his pastry off of his fingers. "I know the pastries from that shop near us are pretty good, but I always feel guilty about going there more than once a week."

Marinette laughed. "And somehow going back to that stall will be different?"

"It's a holiday, Marinette! All rules about feeling guilty are off the table when it's a holiday, don't you know?"

Marinette only groaned.

There wasn't much of a line when they arrived at the somewhat run-down hotel. Adrien and Marinette waited for a small family in front of them to check in with the bored-looking receptionist, and then it was their turn. If someone was going to make a big deal about them sharing a room, it was going to be now.

"Name?"

"Adrien Agreste," Adrien said, sounding a bit nervous. Now that they were here, he was thinking that they probably should have made the reservations under Marinette's name instead, since his was much more recognizable than hers was. "One room, queen bed."
"Uh-huh." The receptionist didn't even blink as she brought up the reservation. In fact, she looked impossibly more bored as she glanced up at them. "Card?"

Adrien handed over his card. A minute later, he and Marinette were setting their bags down on the bed in their room. After another moment, they both burst out laughing.

"We were all worried for nothing," Marinette chortled. "She didn't even care! We could have had the Queen along and she probably wouldn't have even had a change in expression."

Well, I have heard that customer service sucks the soul out of people," Adrien offered, flopping back into a chair. He was still grinning. "I've never actually seen it in person, though."

They fell silent for a moment and then Adrien spoke up again. "So, what should we do first? I don't suppose we can go back to that pastry stall, can we?"

Their overnight bed-sharing trip went so well that Adrien and Marinette decided that, should they take any more overnight trips like that (and Adrien hoped that they would), they were more than willing to share in the future as well.

"It is a pretty easy way to save money," Marinette commented as they sorted through the bills from their last trip. "One room with one bed is almost always the cheapest option, and I think it worked really well."

"And it's nice and warm if the room is cold," Adrien added a bit dreamily, remembering how lovely it had been to slip in between the sheets and find them already warm because Marinette had been there already for a few minutes. He hadn't even minded that she took up more than what was strictly her fair share of the bed (how she did that when she was so small was beyond Adrien), because now that they had been sharing a bed a couple nights a week they didn't really worry as much about keeping space between themselves as they slept. If Marinette rolled over to take up two-thirds of the bed, Adrien would just curl up next to her instead of clinging to the edge of the bed to make sure she still had her space.

Adrien certainly didn't mind the proximity, and neither did Marinette. She occasional grumbled if he jostled her too much when she was about to fall asleep (or was already sleeping), but she never minded him occasionally falling asleep practically on top of her.

Of course, if she complained, she might be a bit hypocritical. Marinette sometimes moved around a lot in her sleep and ended up half-draped over Adrien. She had apologized the first few times it happened, but Adrien had hastened to assure her that really, he didn't mind it at all.

(Plagg teased Adrien about it mercilessly whenever Marinette wasn't in the apartment, insisting that Adrien was far more clingy with his "wife" than any of his past kittens had been with their mates. Adrien had finally decided to ignore him, but that approach just led to Plagg cackling about it even more in an attempt to get a rise out of him.)

Marinette's snort snapped Adrien back to the present, and he grinned a bit sheepishly at her amused look. Her cheeks were just as red as his felt, and Adrien had to wonder why. After all, he had been the one to wax poetic about sharing a bed with his friend, not the other way around...
It hit him like a slap to the face, and Adrien had to shake his head at his own momentary oversight. Of course Marinette was embarrassed by his comment about how much he enjoyed sharing a bed with her. It wasn't exactly something that most strictly platonic friends did, after all.

"I kind of want to go back to that town again next year for the festival," Marinette spoke up, breaking the slightly uncomfortable silence. "It was fun, and that food was great."

"I really liked the dances," Adrien agreed, and then he did a double-take, hope starting to rise in his chest. "Wait, next year? Won't that be a bit too far to travel if you're back in Paris? Or...?"

Marinette's cheeks turned slightly pink at his expression. "I've been considering asking Madam Rosalie if I could stay another year. It's not unheard of," she added when Adrien looked like he was going to ask about that. "One of the head designers I work with a lot was an intern for three years before getting offered a proper job. And I do enjoy getting to work there, it's a lot of fun, and I'm learning a lot, and, uh. Yeah. I've made friends there, and it looks better to have been working somewhere for more than just a year."

"Right, of course," Adrien said, trying not to smile. It certainly sounded from Marinette's sudden nervousness that she maybe wasn't entirely telling the truth, which in turn suggested that maybe him being in London had been part of the reason behind her considering an extension. Either way, he was all for it. After all, Adrien enjoyed Marinette's company very much. She was one of his best friends, after all.

Now if only whatever had brought Ladybug to London would get extended as well...

Chapter End Notes

yay stuff actually happened! And next chapter.... well, let's just say I like next chapter quite a bit :D

As always, reviews are always appreciated!
Unfortunately, even the best planning in the world couldn't stop Adrien's schoolwork from taking over his life as they neared the end of the second semester. Professors added on extra homework and pushed on through their lessons, wanting to make sure that they had covered absolutely everything that was in the curriculum so that the students would be prepared for their exams. On top of that, the pressure was on for Adrien to get all of his assorted projects completed. He didn't want to slack on them at all, which meant that instead of riding the bus or the tube with Marinette to explore sections of the city they hadn't been to yet, he was taking the bus over to the school library.

It wasn't quite as exciting.

"At least we have another year to explore together," Adrien said as he and Marinette headed to bed one Friday night. Marinette's university-aged neighbor was once again throwing a late-night rager, like they did nearly every Friday despite the flurry of noise complaints that they got every time, and so she had come over again. "I know I want to go back to the museums again, and there's a zoo that Aaron just mentioned to me the other day that sounded interesting. I haven't been to one of those in ages."

Marinette raised an eyebrow at him. "Really? I think Nino and Alya go to the zoo in Paris, like, six times a year at least."

"Yeah, well, that's because they got together there," Adrien pointed out. "And because Alya's dad works there. Most people don't go that often."

Marinette's lips twitched up into a smile. "Uh-huh. And I take it that your not going there that often has nothing to do with any irrational fears about loose panthers and giraffes?"

Adrien just spluttered at that. "How- what- no, why would you think-?"

"I overheard Nino mentioning it to Alya once when you turned down a trip to the zoo with us," Marinette admitted. Adrien made a face at that. He had told Nino that in confidence, darn it. "So why the change of heart for this particular zoo?"

"It's different," Adrien said, shrugging. "It has some species that the Paris one doesn't. The setup is different, too. And I've grown out of any irrational fears I may or may not have had about giraffes and panthers," he added, making Marinette giggle. "And you can tell Nino that, too."

"Uh-huh. If you say so."

Adrien stuck out his tongue out at Marinette and decided to change the subject. While Marinette had mentioned that she was going to be sticking around for another year, they hadn't really talked much more about it. "Did it take Madam Rosalie long to decide to extend your internship?"

Marinette shook her head, thankfully not questioning the change in subject. "Not at all. I think she knew that I had been considering it before. She did ask that I put in a request earlier if I want to extend it again next year, just so she knows for sure how many interns to hire."

Adrien perked up. Was that even something Marinette was considering? It would be great to have
Marinette next door for the entire time that he was in London. Once he got to his final year of university, he probably wouldn't have the time to go back to Paris to visit his friends and from what he had heard, he might even get so busy that he would forget to socialize. Having Marinette right next door would mean that he would get to see her, at least, and she could probably pull him out of study mode every once in a while so that he wouldn't forget to have fun.

"I'm not thinking that far out yet, though," Marinette added before Adrien could get too excited. "I just- it's hard to tell where I'll be in a year, if I happen to hear about or see any job openings at fashion companies in Paris."

"Right, I wouldn't want you to miss a chance to get a permanent job in Paris," Adrien said quickly. "Do you think you would ever go for a spot at my dad's company?"

Marinette had to pause and think about that. "I- I don't know. Maybe? I mean, he definitely focuses more of an elegant style than what I'm doing right now at Madam Rosalie's, but I think I would enjoy working with that kind of style, too. At least for a bit." Marinette paused and yawned, then continued. "And, I mean, I haven't exactly heard the best things about, y'know, not being yelled at for small mistakes and whatnot there. I got lucky with my internship with Madam Rosalie. She has high standards, of course, but she understands mistakes. She's open to critique. And she's a really good teacher, too. If we don't understand something or why something doesn't work, then she stops and explains it."

"And my father doesn't do that," Adrien finished. "...actually, I don't think he even interacts with his employees most of the time. He goes in sometimes to double-check that things are running smoothly and to check up on people's progress, but most of the time he's just working from his office at home. It probably helps keep the employee turnover down if they don't actually have to see him."

Marinette giggled.

"So you would just work there until something better comes up?" Adrien asked as they slid into his bed. He paused for a moment, feeling like he might be forgetting something, then shook the feeling off and refocused on what Marinette had said. From what he had heard, that was a fairly common strategy among a large portion of Gabriel's designers. There were a couple that had been there since Adrien was a child, but others stayed from anywhere from a few months to four or five years before leaving. The turnover didn't particularly bother his father.

As long as the work got done and people didn't question Gabriel's authority, he really didn't care about the turnover. The designers that he liked the most, the ones that really made Gabriel shine- they ended up sticking around, probably because they got preferential treatment.

Well. As preferential as Mr. Agreste got, at least. It usually involved pay raises and less yelling at them.

Marinette shrugged. "I guess. There's a couple smaller design houses based in Paris that would probably be a better fit for my design style and that would have a way better working environment, but it's impossible to tell until I've actually worked there for a bit or talked to people who have worked there. They might be smaller than Gabriel, but I don't mind that, really. You get to know everyone then."

"If there was one thing you could change about Rosalie Fashions, what is it?" Adrien asked, curious about what Marinette was looking for. Marinette rarely complained about her work, and when she did, it was mostly about a design not turning out quite right or something else going wrong by chance, not the working conditions themselves.
Marinette just took a few seconds to think about it. "Location, I think," she finally said. "If it was based in Paris instead of London, it would be perfect. I'm enjoying being here, of course, and having to set up my own apartment was an important experience, and I'm glad I get to spend time with you, of course-"

"Obviously," Adrien chipped in, grinning when Marinette kicked him under the blankets.

"But I couldn't do it long-term," Marinette finished. "I couldn't live that far away from my family and friends permanently. It's easier with phone calls and video chatting, of course, but I got used to seeing people in person a few times a week, and being able to just go over and visit my parents whenever, you know? I can't really envision leaving Paris permanently."

Adrien could understand that, at least partially. While he wasn't close to his father at all, he *was* close to his friends. He had a whole network of people to talk to in Paris if he was having trouble with something, while in London he only had a handful of people that he knew, and even fewer people that really understood him and who he would be comfortable sharing his problems with.

On top of that, Chat Noir was most at home in Paris, where he could run and shout with Ladybug in full view of the city instead of staying hidden all the time.

"I'll definitely be returning to Paris as well once I graduate," Adrien said, realizing with a jolt that he hadn't responded to Marinette. "I get what you mean, with not wanting to be away long-term. It's fine now, but sometimes I find myself going 'Oh, I'll just pop over to see Nino tonight' or 'maybe our group should get together this weekend' or something, and I realize how much I miss Paris."

They both fell silent for a moment. Being homesick wasn't something they had really talked about much before, probably because it wasn't really a big problem. Sure, there were times that Adrien wished that he could call Nino up to hang out somewhere and then he was let down when he remembered that it wasn't possible, but then he would remember that he had a study group with Paul to look forward to, or a video chat with his friends on Sunday evening and this time Juleka and Max would be able to join in with Nino and Alya. It was different, but not necessarily *bad* different.

"I'm glad I came to London, though," Marinette said, breaking the silence. "It's nice to see what else is out there and to see how much I can do on my own without my parents to run to for help. Not that they haven't helped," she added, shrugging. "When I first arrived, there was some problem with my credit card and I had forgotten my checkbook back in Paris. My dad paid my first apartment bill and called up the credit card company to get things figured out and my mom sent my checkbook. I would have been in real trouble if they hadn't helped."

Adrien hadn't heard about that particular incident before. Knowing that Marinette, who always had seemed so on top of things, sometimes slipped up at well... well, it helped to know that she wasn't above mistakes sometimes.

"It's nice to be able to ask for help," Adrien agreed. While he probably wouldn't go to his father, he knew that Nathalie would help him out if he ever asked. In fact, she would probably have his problem resolved within a minute of receiving his message.

Her efficiency was a little terrifying sometimes.

Actually, come to think of it, the efficiency of *all* of his father's household staff was a little terrifying. That was probably a requirement for employment.
"I'm always happier when I don't need to ask for help, though," Marinette finished, settling fully into bed. "It feels like more of an accomplishment if I can solve problems on my own instead of calling people up, but sometimes it would just take too long for me to figure things out on my own." She yawned, then shuffled a bit more to get comfortable before closing her eyes. "But anyway. Good night, Adrien."

"G'night, Marinette," Adrien replied through a yawn of his own, turning over and flipping off his lamp light. He stayed awake for a few minutes more, listening as Marinette's breathing evened out as she fell asleep. He could hear the faint sounds of music from Marinette's neighbor coming through the walls still, but Adrien couldn't find it in himself to be irritated about it at all. After all, it brought Marinette over to sleep next to him, and for whatever reason, Adrien had always been strangely comfortable around Marinette. But right now, he was feeling jittery, itchy, like he had forgotten something.

It was probably nothing. And even if he did forget something, there was no reason it couldn't wait until morning.

---

Marinette woke up earlier than she would have liked Saturday morning, but she didn't immediately get up. She was comfortably warm under Adrien's sheets and still a bit sleepy yet. She was sure she would fall back asleep for a few hours if she just stayed where she was.

It was Saturday; there was no hurry. She had a couple fabric pattern designs that she wanted to clean up, but they could wait until the afternoon. Right now, sleep called to her.

"ADRIEN! Adrien, it's an emergency, we're out of Camembert!"

...unfortunately, the universe had other ideas.

Marinette groaned and buried her face in Adrien's pillow to try to block out the loud voice, positive that she was dreaming. Surely the voice would go away, obviously it was just a dream, because why else would it be so weird-

"We ran out of my Camembert yesterday, and you didn't leave out anything for me to eat last night. It's an emergency, we need to go grocery shopping now-"

"What the hell-" Marinette started as she woke up completely and realized that the voice wasn't a dream, fully intending to chew out whatever weird friend Adrien had that had somehow gotten into his flat, because clearly that was what was going on. Really, it was ridiculous that someone would barge in, complaining about Camembert cheese, of all things. And how had someone gotten close to Adrien so fast that they had already somehow gotten access to a key to his door without Marinette knowing about it? She had been positive that she knew all of Adrien's friends.

Marinette pushed herself up, ready to snap at whatever idiot had made their way into the apartment. But when she turned towards the source of the voice, she came face to face with a small, floating, catlike sprite.

*What.*
"Whoops," the black thing said.

Marinette furrowed her brow as her brain tried to catch up with the scene in front of her. The sight of the black thing rang a bell for some reason, like she had heard about it before.

_Small floating black cat...small floating black cat...small floating-

"CHAT NOIR?"

Next to Marinette, Adrien jumped, finally startled awake. He flipped over with a groan, nearly landing on Marinette, and squinted up at Plagg. His expression became somewhat alarmed as he looked between his kwami and his startled friend.

"Uhhh..."

"You're Chat Noir," Marinette breathed again, staring at her friend. How had she missed that? She spent practically all of her free time with him, and looking at him now, with his messy bedhead, the resemblance to Chat Noir was _really_ strong. Looking back, she should have made the connection—he was missing or late when she was, he had the odd tendency to show up near akuma attacks after they were finished, she had never seen him and Chat Noir at the same time—ugh! Oh, she _definitely_ should have guessed, just from the times Chat Noir had inexplicably vanished when Adrien had to make an appearance. She had thought it was strange at the time, but she hadn't ever entertained the notion that _Adrien_ might be _Chat Noir_, even once she got to know Adrien and his _ridiculous_ sense of humor.

She had once grumbled to Tikki about how the boys in her life all had an _awful_ sense of humor—and loved _puns_ far too much—but she hadn't made the connection. Tikki had giggled about that for _forever_, which made sense now. She probably knew, the little imp.

"I guess the cat's out of the bag," the black kwami said, floating closer. "Hi, I'm Plagg. I need cheese, and we're _out_. Do you have any Camembert in your fridge?"

"Er, no," Marinette responded, glancing back at Adrien. His eyes were wide as he mouthed something at his kwami. She was guessing that it was something along the lines of 'WHAT ARE YOU DOING?', but she couldn't tell for sure. For all she knew, he could be cheering the kwami on.

"Pity." Losing interest, the kwami floated over to Adrien. "We need to go to the grocery store _now_. I'm _starving_. And this idiot forgot to give me any cheese last night. I'm going to wither away and _die_."

"You- you can't-" Adrien had regained some of his voice but clearly was still at a complete and utter loss for words. "You can't just _do_ that! What-? You said _no one_ can know-"

"She's fine," Plagg said with barely a glance at Marinette. "Besides, you were the one who brought her in here last night without warning me and then forgot to _feed_ me. Now can we get my cheese?"

Marinette was suddenly very, very glad that she hadn't gotten Plagg. Tikki was _much_ nicer.

"She- what-"

"Breathe, Adrien," Marinette suggested, reaching over to rub his shoulder. The shock of the reveal had worn out for the most part, and now she needed to focus on her panicking partner. "It's okay-"

"It's _not_!" Adrien exclaimed, throwing his hands up in the air. "No one's supposed to know who we are, even now that Hawkmoth's been defeated! Plagg can't just come waltzing in here and _expose_
"Not exactly a civilian, but okay," Marinette said helpfully, figuring that if she knew Chat Noir's identity it would probably be fine if he knew hers, especially since she now knew that he was one of her closest friends, but Adrien didn't seem to hear her.

"You can't tell Alya," Adrien suddenly blurted, swinging around to face Marinette. "I mean, I love Alya and all and I want to think that she wouldn't publish anything, but she's just been a huge fan for so long and then there's the Ladyblog, and I don't want her trying to score interviews on demand because that would be just exhausting, and-"

Marinette tuned him out as she scanned the room, looking for any signs of Tikki. A flash of red caught her eye, and she spotted a big blue eye staring back at her. She beckoned, and Tikki flitted up just out of Adrien's sight. Marinette raised an eyebrow, mouthing "Can I?"

Tikki paused for a moment, exchanged a glance with Plagg, and then nodded furiously. Marinette scooped the kwami out of the air and brought her up to sit in her lap while Adrien jumped out of bed and paced up and down the room, running his hands through his bed-mussed hair. His hair was really sticking up all over the place now, and he wasn't paying attention to her at all as he freaked out.

"-and at least Hawkmoth is gone so I don't have to worry about him and I won't have to make up lame excuses whenever I want to go out and run into Ladybug- I mean! Not that Ladybug is necessarily in London, I meant once we go back to Paris to visit people then I can run into Ladybug- not that she's necessarily there right now either-"

"Can we take bets on how long it'll take him to catch on?" Plagg asked as he perched on Marinette's knee and watched his Chosen with interest. "I'm guessing it'll take him at least five minutes."

"That would be rude, Plagg!"

"It's funny!"

"-and maybe someone finding out was inevitable but I didn't think that it would happen today and I kind of thought that Ladybug and I would probably reveal our identities to each other first- I mean, you're good too, of course, but- EEEEK!"

"Like I said, not exactly a civilian," Marinette said dryly as Adrien continued to gawk at Tikki as she sat in Marinette's lap. "Are you done freaking out now?"

"B-but that's a kwami!"

"My name is Tikki," Tikki piped up, waving up at Adrien. "It's nice to meet you properly!"

"You're Ladybug's kwami!"

"I've had her since collège," Marinette said helpfully. "She likes cookies. Especially chocolate chip ones."

"You're Ladybug!"

"Are we done pointing out facts now?" Plagg asked dryly from his perch on Marinette's knee. "If so, great. If not, I'm hungry."
"You're _always_ hungry," Tikki pointed out. "And there's some Gouda in the fridge, I saw it yesterday. Unless you've eaten it already-"

"I wanted Camembert." Plagg flew into the air and straight into Adrien's face. "Can we go grocery shopping now?"

"Maybe we should give him some time to adjust," Tikki said after a moment. She flew up and grabbed Plagg by the tail. "C'mon, let's give them some space."

"But what about my Camembeeeeert?"

Plagg's whining faded away as Tikki forcibly dragged Plagg out of the room and down the hallway. Adrien's eyes tracked his kwami until he vanished from sight, and then his eyes snapped immediately back to Marinette. They were the approximate size of saucers as he gaped at her. Marinette waited, waited some more, then finally decided that she would have to say something if she wanted to jolt Adrien back into responsiveness.

"Um...hi?"

Adrien only blinked.

"Adrien? Chat Noir?" Marinette waved a hand in front of his face. "Kitty?"

That seemed to knock him out of his daze. Adrien blinked, shook himself, then breathed, "You're _Ladybug._"

"Er. Yes?" Marinette tried for a smile. "Uh...surprise?"

"I had no clue," Adrien breathed, shaking his head. He finally seemed to be snapping out of his startled daze. "Just- _wow._"

"I already knew that Chat Noir had to be someone in this building," Marinette admitted, figuring that she might as well admit it now that everything else was out in the open. "Because you had said that you saw me- well, me as Ladybug- go past your living room window once, and I had literally _just_ headed out and the only windows I had gone past were the ones on this building."

It took Adrien a moment to remember what she was talking about, and then it clicked. "Oh! Right, last fall! I wondered what on earth I could have possibly said to make you make that face. I thought I had said something horribly offensive."

"No, I was just startled." Marinette let out a short laugh. "Imagine what my expression would have looked like if I had only passed your windows that evening! I probably would have fallen off of the roof in surprise."

"I guess I can't even fault you for the funky expression back then when I froze up for an entire minute," Adrien said, shaking his head with a short laugh. "I can only imagine what my face looked like when I saw Tikki and put things together."

Marinette giggled. "It was pretty funny. But I'm sure I was just as bad when I woke up with your kwami right there."

Adrien froze, and then his lower lip jutted out in a pout as he let out a whine. "Aww! I didn't even get to enjoy your expression! That's no fair!"

Marinette could only giggle.
"I was too busy freaking out over you discovering me to appreciate your face," Adrien grumbled, flopping back down onto the bed next to Marinette. Then he sent a sly look her way. "I mean, not that I don't always appreciate your face. It's a fine face, after all. Absolutely gorgeous."

"Aaaand he's back," Marinette teased, reaching over to boop Adrien's nose. He automatically wrinkled it at her. "Flirty kitty."

Adrien shrugged, utterly unabashed. "Honest kitty."

Before Marinette could think of a response (and before Adrien noticed the color rising fast in her cheeks because how was she supposed to stay calm and collected when her kitty- who was Adrien- was saying she was gorgeous), Plagg popped back into the room. "Are you done being sappy? Can we get my cheese now?"

She had never seen Adrien whip around so quickly. Color rose fast in his cheeks. "P-Plagg! I- I'm not being sappy- I mean, did you really have to come in right now? You couldn't wait a few more minutes?"

"I haven't been fed since yesterday afternoon," Plagg complained again. "I'll waste away if you spend all day making gooey eyes at Lady Luck instead of feeding me."

"It's not exactly like I find out my partner's secret identity every day," Adrien argued, deciding to recline further on the bed instead of giving in to Plagg's demands. "Give me some time to get used to the idea, why don't you?"

Plagg scoffed, folding his little arms. "Uh-huh. You say that like you don't spend every waking minute that you can glued to her side."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Adrien demanded, perplexed. "Sure, we hang out, but what does that have to do with me finding out that she's Ladybug?"

"Yeah, Plagg," Tikki piped up, reappearing in the doorway and looking smug. "What does that have to do with how much time they spend with each other?"

"It means that they shouldn't be that surprised! C'mon, hurry up, I want my cheese!"

"I like how Tikki is waiting patiently and not harassing Marinette and I," Adrien shot back. Tikki smirked and preened at the praise.

"Maybe if you just got him some normal cheese he would agree to back off for a couple hours," Marinette suggested when the stare-off between Adrien and Plagg didn't seem like it would end any time soon. "And then you can go shopping for, uh, Camembert later on."

"I like her," Plagg decided. "For now, at least. So whaddya got for me to eat?"

Adrien only sighed.
....okay, so how many people thought that I was going to have them start dating before the reveal? :D

As always, reviews are much appreciated! :)
Now that Marinette and Adrien knew each other's secret identities, Plagg saw absolutely no reason to be remotely subtle with his pranks, much to Adrien's exasperation. His only comfort was that Plagg did at least refrain from constant references to "your wife" and any crush that he thought Adrien might have on Marinette... at least for the most part. For now, at least.

"Adrien, why do you have this tucked under one of the couch pillows?" Marinette called, and Adrien frowned as he set his laptop back down on his bed and headed back into the living room. What on Earth could Marinette possibly be talking about? He didn't keep anything besides a few pillows and a spare blanket on the couch. He was pretty positive that he hadn't accidentally left anything else there.

In the living room, Adrien found Marinette holding up a printed photo of the "wedding" kiss and was looking very, very perplexed. Adrien groaned loudly.

"Plagg, get your ass out here!"

There was a grumble, and after a pause Plagg came floating very slowly into view. "Whaddya want?"

Adrien narrowed his eyes at the kwami. "I thought I told you to quit it with the hiding pictures all over the place."

There was a quiet 'Aha!' from Marinette. Plagg just snickered.

"That stopped being funny months ago, Plagg," Adrien scolded, still irritated. "If anyone else had found that, I wouldn't be able to explain it."

Plagg shrugged. "But they didn't."

"So are you gonna stop doing that, then?" Adrien demanded. "You're going to make my printer run out of ink again. And that stuff isn't exactly cheap, you know. Especially the colored stuff."

Thankfully, it was Tikki that spoke up next. "Plagg, you really shouldn't do that. It might have been a little funny this time, but you know how often Adrien has people over."

Unsurprisingly, Plagg scoffed, completely unrepentant. "How often he has people over? He doesn't! If he studies with other people, he does it at school, not here. Marinette has people visit more often, and they mostly pop into her apartment and only for a short while to talk about work. No one was gonna find it except her."

"Which would have been awkward if she hadn't found out about you!" Tikki argued. "And don't try to tell me that you only started after Marinette found out, because it's obvious that you didn't!"

"He was doing that back in the fall," Adrien said with a sigh, plucking the picture out of Marinette's fingers and tossing it in the recycling. "I swear I found at least two or three a day, and I was terrified that Mari might find one and think I was a giant weirdo."

Marinette giggled. "You are a giant weirdo," she told him fondly. "A giant punny weirdo. But yeah, I would have thought it was really weird. I did think it was really weird."

Adrien had the sudden urge to murder Plagg for that. If Marinette had found those photos before,
when he couldn't tell her about Plagg being the one to blame...

(He just really, really didn't like the idea of Ladybug thinking that he was actually weird. He could deal with goofy-weird, just not creepy-weird.)

"You know, I think I liked it better before the reveal," Adrien announced loudly, giving Plagg a stink-eye. "Then Plagg actually hid and didn't annoy me when Marinette was over. It was nice and quiet then."

Marinette sniggered. Plagg only shrugged, unaffected.

"Yeah, but then you wasted your time going out to run around with Ladybug after you had seen her all day instead of, oh, I don't know, sleeping."

"Plagg, you don't actually care about how much sleep I get. You just don't want to work," Adrien pointed out dryly. "And it wasn't a waste of time. I liked getting out and running around."

"But he does have a point," Marinette said, making Adrien pout at her. Was she really taking Plagg's side over his? "You have all sorts of papers and projects due soon, and if we hadn't figured out each other's identities, you can't tell me that you wouldn't have not gone out until your finals were over, even if it meant sacrificing some of your sleep."

Adrien opened his mouth, ready to argue that. He would have done the responsible thing- he would have gone to bed, he would have done his homework- after all, he had done it before- but then he paused.

Could he honestly say that he wouldn't have pushed himself to the limit to see Ladybug, when he hadn't yet known that Ladybug would be staying in London for another year? There was no way of knowing how soon she would have remembered to bring it up, and if she only mentioned it after the school year was over, he totally would have lost time going out to meet up with her. Maybe he would have tried to schedule get-togethers for nights that would work better for him, but he would definitely have tried to go see Ladybug. That was just what he did.

"Yeah, he can't even deny it," Plagg scoffed. "He would go out of his way to see yonnmmph."

Adrien laughed at the disgruntled look on Plagg's face. Clearly the kwami didn't appreciate having his taunting cut off with a chunk of cheese shoved in his mouth. Still, he couldn't help but wish that Marinette had maybe done that a little sooner, considering that Plagg seemed intent on revealing information about Adrien that would make him seem like a lovesick kitten.

He was a lovesick kitten, but Marinette didn't need to know that.

"Well, it's good that you don't have to waste time right now, at least," Marinette pointed out as Plagg floated grumpily down the hall and away into Adrien's bedroom to sulk- or, more likely, take a nap. "Don't you have a few projects due next week?"

"Yeah, I do," Adrien admitted. "As much as I wish I had more time, it's good to get it over with before I really have to dive in with studying for finals. I'll probably be pulling some late nights later in the week to get everything done."

Marinette let out a quiet, playful hum. "Funny thing, I remember you saying something last semester about irresponsible classmates having to scramble last-minute to get things done and how you were never going to do that."

"I'm not pulling all-nighters. There's a difference," Adrien called over his shoulder as he headed
back into his bedroom to grab his laptop again. "I just had a little more homework than planned last week, and then there was the concert that we went to that I hadn't taken into account. I'll be a little rushed, but I have everything under control, I promise."

By Thursday evening, Adrien was wishing that he hadn't been so confident earlier in the week. Everything that could go wrong with his projects did go wrong- or, well, almost everything. Thankfully the files hadn't been lost and he hadn't forgotten any of his numerous projects, but books had been misplaced, his notes had fallen off of the table and had gotten into complete disarray, and several of the papers and articles online that he had marked on his computer had somehow vanished completely from his bookmarks and it took several hours of sifting through his site history before he found them all again. That meant that Adrien had pulled more late-night study sessions than he had anticipated, and he wasn't even able to see Marinette as much since she was going back to her own apartment after they finished cleaning up from dinner so that Adrien could focus better.

While being alone definitely forced Adrien to actually work instead of talking with his best friend, having no one to talk to (Plagg had been strongly suggested into going to bed early, meaning that Adrien wouldn't get distracted by him, either) meant that his mind sometimes drifted off a little more than it should.

A light knock at the door followed by the sound of it opening shook Adrien out of the light doze he had accidentally slipped into. He jolted upright, grabbed onto his computer to steady it, and glanced up from the screen to see Marinette slipping in through the door, wrapped in a bathrobe. She was probably wearing pajamas underneath, but the robe was tied shut securely to ward off the eyes of any too-nosy neighbors. She raised an eyebrow as she caught sight of Adrien in front of his computer. "Adrien? I thought you were going to bed early tonight."

"I was," Adrien admitted, even as he glanced down at his computer. "But I have a couple finishing touches to put on the project that I have due tomorrow. It's not much, just proofreading and then sticking in a few details that I remembered today during class. But I hope to be in bed by one. Go on ahead- that's what you came over for, right?"

Marinette's cheeks turned pink and she looked a little sheepish. "I- I mean, yes, but if you're going to be busy, I don't want to hog your bed, I can sleep in my own-"

Adrien snickered. "You're too small to hog my bed, My Lady. And go on ahead, I'll be there soon enough." He had to admit, seeing Marinette flustered about sharing his bed- even though they did it regularly, and there was nothing remotely inappropriate about it- was adorable. "Go on and warm up the sheets for me."

"You don't want company while you finish that up?"

"As much as I love your company, I think you'd be more of a distraction than anything," Adrien assured her. "And you need to sleep. Shoo, little bug."

Marinette shooed. Adrien smiled to himself as he listened to the rustle of fabric as Marinette took her bathrobe off and hung it up on his closet door, then the click of a light switch and more rustling
as she crawled into his bed. He let the sound distract him for a few minutes, and then he refocused on his paper. Right. Editing. The sooner he got done with this, the sooner he could go join Marinette for a well-deserved night's sleep. The thought spurred him on, and it didn't take long at all for Adrien to make the last change, save the document, and send the finished paper to his professor. He was about to congratulate himself with a hard-earned chocolate-chip cookie (baked fresh only hours earlier) when a note in his planner made him freeze. Because right there, written under the assignment that he had just completed, was another note.

_Data sheet marking- due at noon! Summary + write-up._

Adrien knew _exactly_ what assignment that was. He knew what class it was for, he knew what he had to do for it...

...and to the best of his recollection, he hadn't finished it. Not even close.

It wasn't as though the assignment was particularly difficult, Adrien reflected as he reopened his computer. It was just using a computer program to mark a bunch of old scanned datasheets into categories based on the amount of time it had taken each datasheet to run, and then it would take maybe a minute after everything was marked to run the data through a program that would summarize everything nicely. The process was so easy that anyone could do it, and Adrien hadn't had any trouble with the program when he did the first few pages. It was just that it would take a whole lot of time to go through everything.

Except he didn't _have_ a whole lot of time anymore, because he had been a _complete freaking idiot_ and forgotten about the assignment until last minute. Unless his memory was seriously failing him, the project was due in less than thirteen hours.

In short, he was screwed.

"I'm an idiot, I'm an idiot, I'm an idiot," Adrien groaned as he opened the program and confirmed that yes, he had in fact forgotten to go through most of the data. He had done a handful of the pages- maybe a couple dozen, tops- but that left _hundreds_ of pages to go. He was going to have to stay up most of the night, and he had already had a short night of sleep the previous night after he stayed up late studying a concept that he was having a bit of trouble with and then had to wake up early for an eight o'clock class. This was the worst possible night to find out that he had an assignment he hadn't done due the next day.

_Stupid, stupid, stupid._ How on earth had it managed to slip through the cracks? Adrien knew that he had had a crazy number of projects to do that semester, plus he had gotten that crash course in applying to and interviewing for jobs partway through the semester and _that_ had definitely added to his workload, especially since he had had to look into whether or not he needed a work visa and _especially_ especially because he had never applied to a job before. He had had to keep calling Marinette over to help explain things to him. Still, even with all he was trying to juggle, he shouldn't have forgotten a project entirely. That was just plain irresponsible.

With a growl, Adrien buckled down to plow through the pages. He could do it, he could do it, he could do it...
He couldn't do it. Several hours later, Adrien was bored out of his mind from staring at one nearly-identical page after another. He had perked up a little an hour in after inhaling nearly half a dozen cookies, but the sugar high had long since worn off and left him plodding miserably through his assignment.

Adrien yawned again before forcing himself to focus on his screen. He was *really* starting to drag now, he could tell, but he couldn't go to bed yet. He still had a solid hour of data left, at the least, and more if he kept slowing down like he was now.

He really *had* to stop thinking about how much his bed was calling him, soft and already warm with Marinette sleeping there already...

Adrien shook himself yet again and refocused on the screen. If he weren't worried about waking Marinette up, he'd make himself some coffee to jolt himself awake. Maybe he should invest in some green tea in case this happened in the future.

Of course, he'd have to either worry about the teapot whistling or he would have to make it in the microwave like a heathen. Maybe he should ask Marinette if he could borrow the extra key to her flat so he could make his coffee in her place when she stayed over...

A noise down the hallway made Adrien jump. He glanced down towards the bedroom and saw Marinette exiting his bedroom, hair messy and eyes bleary. She blinked at him before meandering down the hall towards him.

"I didn't wake you up, did I?" Adrien asked, reaching out an arm to pull Marinette down onto the couch next to him. She plopped down and snuggled up against his side without missing a beat. "I've been trying not to make any noise, but-" he yawned and clapped a hand over his mouth. He glanced sheepishly over at her. "I'm sorry, I really did want to go to bed earlier."

"I thought you were going to come to bed by one?" Marinette glanced down at the time on Adrien's computer screen. "Adrien, it's already past three."

Adrien cringed at the reminder. It was really getting *ridiculously* late. He was fairly certain that he had never stayed up so late before, with the only possible exception of him having to get up in the middle of the night to fight an akuma. "Yeah, I know. But I remembered that I had this thing due tomorrow at noon, and since I have class until eleven, I need to get this done. I forgot about it with all of the other projects-" he yawned again, long and loud "-all the other projects that I had. It's not hard, just really time-consuming."

Marinette leaned over to watch as Adrien did a couple pages. "So what are you doing?"

"These are the results from this experiment people have done over the last few years. We're summarizing the data by tagging each of these sheets with what time category they fall in- you know, like how long it took for the experiment to run."

Marinette curled into his side a bit more and peered at the screen. "There's several times, though?"

"Yeah, each page has several runs on it. I'm supposed to tag all of them, because not everyone did the same number of runs in different years and so the averages would be not as accurate...or something." Adrien yawned again. He was so tired that it was questionable if he could even get a decent write-up done later. If he went to bed now he could probably get just enough sleep to function decently well until after all of his classes were finished, but that wasn't going to happen.

He was *definitely* going to have to be more careful about keeping track of his projects after this,
even if that meant programming every single last one into his calendar so that he would get a dozen reminders a month about each and every one.

"And then I run them through a program that compiles all the tags and gives me a summary of the data, and then I do a short write-up about it and turn it in with the summary sheet." Adrien let his head drop onto Marinette's, relaxing for a long moment. "I completely forgot about it. It wouldn't be a problem normally."

"Is that it? Just tagging?"

"Yeah. It's just that there's so much to do." Adrien yawned again. He was about to fall asleep right here, right now, with his head resting against Marinette's. He really needed to sit up and get back to work before he conked out just like that. "I probably have at least another hour just with the tagging, and then running the summary sheet will only take a couple minutes after that. I was planning on doing the write-up after my last morning class and before lunch, just so I can get some sleep."

"I can tag things, Adrien. You go to sleep." Marinette nudged Adrien's side, then nudged harder when he didn't respond. "Seriously. I'm more awake than you are right now. Go get some sleep. It'll only be, like, four hours, but it's better than nothing. You can run the summary in the morning or before lunch. Shoo."

Adrien straightened up and blinked at her, startled. "Mari, this is my homework, I can't ask you to do it for me-"

"You aren't asking. I'm telling you I'll help." Marinette wrapped an arm around his waist and gave Adrien a hug. "And you helped out when we were in a pinch at Fashion Week. Let me help you now."

Adrien blinked blearily at his computer. Marinette was right, she definitely wouldn't have any trouble with the tagging. She was smart, she could figure out the tagging pretty fast. He'd get to sleep- well, not a decent amount, but a passable amount- and actually would be able to function the next day. He'd have to take a nap in the afternoon before he could get any productive studying done, but at least he could do that and didn't have classes all day, just in the morning-

Wait.

"You have to work tomorrow," Adrien protested, even as Marinette slid his laptop from his lap to her own. "I can nap in the afternoon, you can't-"

"Adrien, I've been sleeping since ten. I've already gotten five hours of sleep. You said that this will take an hour, so I'll be back in bed a little past four. I can go into work a little late if I really need to, so I'll get another two or three hours of sleep. I'll be fine." Marinette pushed at his back. "I've got this, I promise. Shoo."

Adrien shooed.

He was asleep the minute his head hit the pillow. Adrien woke up briefly around four when Marinette crawled into bed next to him, and then he was sleeping again until his alarm went off at seven. He groaned his way out of bed and out of the bedroom, rubbing sleep out of his eyes as he got ready as fast as he could. Adrien could smell breakfast cooking in the kitchen- Marinette must have decided to just cook at his place so both of them could eat, she was an actual lifesaver- so he hurried out to the kitchen as fast as he could.
"You are amazing, have I told you that yet?" Adrien said as he hung over the short dividing wall to the kitchen. Marinette was piling toast onto a plate and had jam and butter already on the table with a small bowl of chopped fruit. The smell of coffee filled the morning air, along with the smell of cooking bacon. "Wow, you really went all out."

Marinette turned and grinned at him. "Hardly! The fruit is from last night, the toast was easy, and the bacon and coffee were both quick. I figured you might need it this morning."

"Yeah, I really do. I slept in as much as I could. I don't even have time for a shower this morning." Adrien ran one hand through his hair, wincing. It wasn't as though his hair was greasy or anything, but he could feel the traces of product left over from the previous day. It wasn't a particularly pleasant feeling.

Marinette laughed at that as she came to the table with the plate of bacon. "You'll survive. Besides, you can wash your pretty-boy hair this afternoon once you've finished class." She reached over and ruffled his hair, ignoring his laughing protests as he tried to bat her away.

"Plagg, the mean woman is making fun of me," Adrien managed to mock-whine between his snickers, batting Marinette's hands away. "Make her stooooop."

Plagg, who had been lounging on top of the refrigerator with a chunk of cheese, peered down at them and made a face. "Ugh. You're so gross together."

Adrien made a face at Plagg in response as he rearranged his hair into something that would less resemble a bird's nest. He and Marinette weren't gross. They were just friends having fun.

"Any problems with the data tagging last night?" Adrien asked Marinette as she started to spread jam on her toast.

Marinette shook her head. "Not at all. It was easy."

Adrien let out a sigh of relief. "Fantastic. Thank you so much for doing that, by the way. I probably would have taken forever and then had to run on an hour of sleep."

"It's not a problem. You do still have to run the summary sheet, though. I didn't want to do that and mess everything up somehow."

"Oh, that's fine," Adrien reassured her hastily. "I've done that before in class- with smaller data sets, of course- so it'll only take a couple minutes for me to do. I'll try to get it done before I leave, and then I can think about what I want to write during class." He chanced a glance at the clock and winced. He'd be cutting it close with the bus, probably, but he could always run to the station.

Marinette caught his glance and followed his gaze. She looked a little concerned. "Maybe you should do that now and then eat your breakfast while you're walking. You won't be cutting it as close that way."

"Right, right, of course. Mari, have I ever told you how much of a lifesaver you are?"
Predictably, Plagg didn't stay quiet for long after they left the flat.

"So your wife helped you out with your homework last night, hmm? How domestic!"

Adrien groaned quietly as he hurried down the street, toast in hand. "Plagg."

"What? It's true!"

Adrien really couldn't debate that. Marinette had made him breakfast, after all, and they had slept in the same bed together like it was normal- which it was for them, he reminded himself- and then she had made sure that he had everything before he left for school. The kiss that she had pressed to his cheek as he raced out the door only added fuel to Plagg's arsenal.

"So domestic," Plagg sighed. Then he made a small retching noise. "It makes me sick."

"You could stop thinking about it all the time," Adrien suggested. For someone who claimed to hate romance, Plagg sure seemed to be incredibly interested in his own love life. Adrien guessed that he might never figure that little mystery out.

Plagg blew a raspberry at Adrien.

The morning flew by, and soon Adrien was handing in his project. The summary sheet wasn't quite up to his normal standard, but it was good enough to get his a pretty good grade. There were more than a few other people in the class that looked a little bleary-eyed, which made Adrien suspect that he wasn't the only one who had forgotten the project until last minute. He just happened to be incredibly lucky that he had Marinette willing to sacrifice her own precious sleep to help him.

He had the best friend in the world, honestly. Adrien was pretty positive that most people would have given him a coffee and a few encouraging words before going right back to bed.

Class dragged on, and Adrien did his best to pay attention when his eyelids felt like lead and every blink was an effort to force his eyes back open. Finally class was over and he was done for the day, and Adrien hopped on the bus back to his neighborhood. The ride woke him up a bit- well, the ride and the small iced coffee drink he had picked up on campus so he wouldn't do anything stupid like falling asleep on the bus- so he decided that before he went back to his apartment to sleep, he should do something nice for Marinette. After all, she still had several hours of work left before she could get back to the apartment and take a nap herself.

What to do...what to do...

Just when Adrien was just about to give up for the moment and go home to sleep on it and figure out a solution later, he caught a whiff of something delicious. It smelled warm and welcoming, like baking bread and sugar.

Of course! Their favorite bakery (at least, favorite in London; Marinette's parent's bakery and the pastry stall from the festival up north ranked a bit higher) was nearby. Marinette would no doubt welcome something warm and sugary, since it was still a bit cool outside and really, when wouldn't something warm and sugary be welcome?

Six minutes later, Adrien headed down the sidewalk, pastry bag in one hand and carrier of hot chocolates in the other. He hoped he wouldn't be interrupting anything- he hadn't texted Marinette to let her know he was coming, and maybe he should have- but his luck had held out so far. And if she were busy- well, Adrien didn't have to stay for long. He could just drop off one chocolate-filled croissant and Marinette's hot chocolate at her desk, or have another worker bring them to her.
Luckily for him, Marinette was busy at her desk. A sketch of what looked like a lovely summer dress filled her computer screen, and she was busy making notes in a small notebook. Adrien tried to crane his head to get a peek- was she coming up with a list of fabric she would need? Was she making notes about current fashion trends?- but before he could see anything, Marinette noticed the movement behind her and spun around.

"Hey, Adrien! I didn't know that you were coming in to visit today!"

"It was a bit spur-of-the-moment," Adrien admitted, setting the hot chocolates and pastry bag down on a clear spot on her desk. "I wanted to thank you for helping me last night- well, early this morning. And I figured that you might start to drag sometime soon, so I got some sugar to help."

"Sugar is always appreciated," Marinette said, peering into the bag and sniffing appreciatively. "This looks fabulous."

"I can just drop it and leave you to eat if you're busy," Adrien said, glancing at Marinette's computer screen again. It definitely looked like an in-progress sketch, which meant that if she was on a roll, he was just in the way. "I'll just snitch a croissant-"

"You can stay!" Marinette said hastily. "I'm not really in the middle of much anything. I've been trying to get into a groove with the dress, but I'm having a little trouble," she said when she caught Adrien's glance towards the computer. "I'm having a bit of a creative block right now. I might have to go do something else for a bit and come back to it later."

"The lack of sleep probably isn't helping much, huh?" Adrien asked, feeling a bit guilty. As much as he appreciated Marinette's help (a ton), he couldn't just ignore that her having to be up in the middle of the night and then getting up early to get breakfast for him cut into her sleep time, which probably was affecting her productivity. "I'm really sorry about that, honestly-"

Marinette snorted. "I didn't miss out on that much sleep. You're making it sound like I was running on three hours of sleep instead of, like, seven. This design has been giving me trouble for days."

"Really?" Adrien had always rather thought that designs gushed out of Marinette freely. She certainly had been drawing new things easily enough when he saw her at home, but maybe that was because she was drawing things that she wanted to wear, not things that were new and fresh enough to be carried by a fashion house. He supposed that there were probably a lot of designs that got scrapped or cast aside without ever making it to production. And when he took that level of pressure into account...yeah, it made a little more sense that Marinette might be struggling a bit from time to time. Besides, he vaguely remembered a few discussion about the creating process that they had had before, and yeah, Marinette had definitely mentioned occasionally having designer's block then. He just was too tired to remember those full conversations.

"I'm just not quite happy with it. I can't quite put my finger on what's wrong, but there's just something..." She glanced at the computer screen again. "It doesn't quite have the oomph factor to it, you know?"

"Maybe it could be made with a fabric with some sort of pattern?" Adrien suggested as Marinette pulled her pastry out of the bag and passed it back to him. "You could use some of those patterns that you thought up earlier in the year, they're all gorgeous."

Marinette froze, pain au chocolate caught between her lips, and then she lunged for her drawing tablet, sitting on her desk behind her computer. Still mid-bite, she pressed a button and frantically started searching through the drafted fabric patterns she had saved on it. Adrien watched, torn between amusement and concern as she flipped through one design after another, finally settling on
one with a happy noise. Seconds later, the pattern showed up on her computer screen. Marinette made a satisfied noise at that, then grabbed her sketchpad, flipping to the page with the dress design on it before flinging open a desk drawer and yanking out some colored pencils. It was only once she had started coloring the design that she froze, put the pencil down, and sheepishly turned to Adrien, pulling her pain au chocolate out of her mouth as she did.

"Sudden burst of inspiration?" Adrien suggested, amused. "I can go. Don't feel bad about kicking me out," he added when Marinette looked like she might protest. "I need a nap anyway. My plans for this afternoon were eat, sleep, shower, in that order, and I wasn't planning on bothering you for long anyway."

"I don't want to seem ungrateful," Marinette said, finally taking a bite of her pastry. Her eyes closed in momentary enjoyment before she focused on him again. "Really, I love the food, and the hot chocolate, and thanks so much for getting me back on track with the design, I really needed that suggestion-"

"But now you need to get that idea all sketched out before you forget it," Adrien finished, getting up and immediately bending down to press a quick kiss to Marinette's forehead before gathering up his pain au chocolate and hot chocolate. "I get it, I promise. I'll see you at home."

"See you later," Marinette responded absently, attention already back on her design as she picked up a colored pencil and started filling in the design with a rough representation of the fabric pattern, pastry forgotten on a napkin on her desk. Adrien smiled at her back for a moment, just watching her draw. It was admirable how focused she got when she was hit by a burst of inspiration for a design. She forgot about the rest of the world for however long it took for her to get her design sketched out. Strands of hair were falling out of her bun and into her face, but Marinette was so far into the zone that she didn't even bother to brush them aside.

When he heard a giggle, Adrien quickly turned and glanced around. Several of Marinette's coworkers were watching him watch her, and they looked rather amused. Trying not to blush, Adrien nodded a greeting to the giggling duo before making a hasty exit.

Yeah, he definitely needed a nap if he was openly staring at Marinette like that.
Because I've seen several people wondering: last chapter, when everything that could go wrong with Adrien's projects did go wrong- no, that wasn't Plagg's fault. Plagg might be an ass at times, but he wouldn't sabotage Adrien like that. It was just bad luck.

Also, because I forgot to mention it- Adrien's project with the "tagging" thing that he was staying up so late for was based off of a project I had to do in college, except in my case I had to identify over 50,000 bat call sonograms by species and it took a hell of a lot more than just one night to do (also I was the only one in the entire class to complete that assignment. Everyone else gave up at, like, 10,000 or less). I don't know how common projects like that are outside of the wildlife field (where we have not only bat call sonograms but also trail camera photos to tag and analyze as summarized data), but I needed a project that Marinette would be able to help with.

Adrien trudged up the stairs, completely worn out from his final day of exams. While the exams were meant to be spread over the course of two weeks, Adrien's exam schedule had meant that he had his final two exams back-to-back, with both of them taking two hours. To make things worse, it had been his two hardest classes left for last. The whole day had been absolutely exhausting and had left Adrien tired, hungry, and just a bit cranky.

He was just very, very glad that Marinette would already be in the middle of making dinner, because he was in the mood to just flop on the couch, inhale a meal, and maybe watch a movie before going to bed. A nice, quiet evening was in order.

Unfortunately, he wasn't about to get his wish. When Adrien got up the stairs, he was met with the sound of blaring music coming from down the hallway. Clearly their uni-aged neighbor was celebrating the end of exams. Adrien supposed he should at least be thankful that the neighbor hadn't finished before he did, since he wouldn't have been able to study with the racket.

(If their neighbor had been loud during exams, he would have seriously considered sending Plagg over to destroy their sound system. He still wasn't completely eliminating it as a possibility.)

"This is ridiculous," Adrien grumbled as he dug out his key. Even after months of complaints from pretty much everyone on their floor, their landlords still had yet to evict their inconsiderate neighbor. Everyone was hoping that he wouldn't be able to renew his lease once it came up, and maybe he would do something stupid soon that would mean he could be forced out earlier.

The only upside to the constant noise from down the hall was that Marinette would be staying over for the night and they would get to cuddle.

Adrien liked cuddling. It was really relaxing.

Adrien reached for his doorknob to unlock it- he did have to drop off his backpack at the very least before going over to join Marinette in her apartment- and found that it was already open. He
frowned, confused— he was *positive* that he had locked the door when he left for classes— but opened it anyway, and was greeted by the smell of cooking food. A moment later, Marinette's head popped out from the kitchen and her face lit up.

"Hey! I was wondering when you would be back!" She took in his confused expression and looked a bit sheepish as she started to explain. "I used my key to get in, I hope you don't mind. I just didn't want to cook with the idiot's music blaring right next door and I figured you wouldn't want to eat with the racket."

"That's fine," Adrien assured her. He shouldn't have been surprised, really. Marinette used the spare key he had given her on at least a weekly basis to let herself in after he had gone to bed and her other neighbor was being loud. It made sense that she would use it other times as well. "It just surprised me, that's all."

Marinette studied his face. "Are you sure?"

"*Pawsitive.*

Marinette laughed and ducked back into the kitchen to return to her cooking. Adrien kicked off his shoes, hung up his jacket (Plagg zipped off towards the kitchen in search of cheese), and dropped his backpack by the couch before heading into the kitchen to see what Marinette was cooking up. She was stirring something on the stovetop— some sort of soup, perhaps?— and the first whiffs of freshly baked bread were wafting out of the oven. It all smelled fantastic.

"Long day?" Marinette asked when Adrien wandered up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. She leaned backwards, relaxing into him as he dropped his chin against the side of her head. "But you're all done with exams now, right?"

"Right. Finally." Adrien let out a huff. "The semester is *finally* over. I thought it would never end."

"Please tell me you'll be able to get a better schedule next semester," Marinette said, craning her neck to look back up at him. "Because you want to get classes that aren't all one after the other like you had this semester, right?"

Adrien shrugged as much as he could without jostling her. "Hopefully I can. I'll have more seniority after this semester and hopefully won't have to scramble for whatever seats are still open. I *do* like having a day where I don't have to go in, though. I can just study all day without any interruptions."

Marinette laughed at him. "Is that what you're calling it? I thought you liked your day off only because you could come bug me at lunch because you got bored."

Adrien grinned. She had a point; he *hated* studying nonstop and lunch was a welcome break. Visiting Marinette over her lunch meant he got to enjoy her company even more (Plagg teased him since they spent their evenings together anyway and yet Adrien *still* wanted to practically be glued to Marinette's side; Adrien always argued that it was natural to want to spend time with his best friend/superhero partner, never mind the fact that he had done the exact same thing before he ever found out that his friend was also his lovely Lady). It was also a good way to make sure that Marinette didn't forget to eat because she got on a design kick. It had happened a few times before.

"Too much work and no play makes a kitty a dull boy." Adrien nuzzled Marinette's hair, smiling when she squirmed. They had gotten even more touchy-feely after the reveal, mostly because Ladybug and Chat Noir had gotten used to grabbing each other during akuma fights and had pretty much eliminated the personal space between them. They were crazy comfortable with each other,
and since Adrien really, really liked cuddles...

Thankfully, Marinette was more than willing to oblige.

Adrien let himself relax against Marinette as she continued to stir the soup, letting go of the stress of the day as the comfortable atmosphere surrounded him. The whole scene had an air of domestic bliss to it- all they needed was a cat patting down the hallway, or maybe even a kid, a few years down the road-

Adrien's eyes flew open as his heart skipped a beat. Whoa. Where had that thought come from?

He would be lying if he said that the thought of dating Marinette hadn't ever crossed his mind before. Adrien had definitely though about it (even more so since he found out Ladybug and Marinette were one and the same- his long-time superhero/partner love and the friend that he had always had at least a small crush on- there was no way to beat that combination), but he had never acted on it. Marinette hadn't given him any indication that she liked him as more than friends (despite what Plagg claimed; Plagg, after all, delighted in causing mischief and could not be trusted), and Adrien wasn't going to mess up their easy friendship by trying to make a move on her.

"Are you okay, Adrien?" Marinette asked, interrupting his thoughts. He had probably been quiet for too long, or perhaps she had felt him go stiff against her back. Marinette twisted in his arms, trying to catch a glimpse of his face. "Adrien?"

"I'm fine," Adrien claimed, forcing himself to relax again against her again. He pressed a kiss- a friendly kiss, a platonic kiss- against her forehead. He wasn't going to let himself overthink it. "Really."

Marinette didn't look convinced.

"I just had a long day. At least the semester is over now." It was a relief to be done, especially after the craziness that surrounded getting his projects in. Now he would have a few days to relax and get caught up on the housework he had fallen behind on before heading back to Paris for a week and a half. That period would be chock-full of fittings and photoshoots, and then he was going to start his first real, non-family-business-related job back in London. His father hadn't been pleased- Gabriel had wanted Adrien in Paris for the summer, even if Adrien would have had to spend most of his time lounging around bored out of his mind between photoshoots- but Adrien had insisted, and from the sound of it, Nathalie had helped persuade Mr. Agreste that a summer job outside of Gabriel Fashions would be more beneficial for Adrien in the long run.

He owed her big-time.

"Well, I have one more day of work and then we can celebrate properly this weekend," Marinette said. "We can make cookies or something and do absolutely nothing."

Adrien laughed, determined to get past the momentary weirdness that had overtaken him. "That sounds perfect."

After sleeping in Friday morning, Adrien spent the entire rest of the day catching up on chores he had slacked on leading up to his projects being due and finals. His entire apartment got vacuumed and scrubbed, his laundry finally washed, and his fridge got restocked.
Just a little, though. After all, Adrien was going to be gone for over a week, and he didn't want to come back to things rotting in the fridge.

"Why didn't you get more cheese?" Plagg wanted to know as Adrien put away the last of his purchases. "That's not very much. I'll starve."

"Because I didn't want it stinking up the fridge while we're gone, and I'll buy more when we get back to Paris. If you finish all of this up before we leave, then that just means you're a little glutton." Adrien straightened up and closed the fridge door before heading back to the living room. "And no, you aren't allowed to go whining to Marinette for cheese. I'll tell her to ignore you."

Plagg scoffed, floating along behind Adrien with a small scowl on his face. "Uh-huh. You say that like I can't blackmail you into giving me more cheese. All I need to do is talk about how much you luuurve Marinette when she's in the room and you'll do anything to get me to be quiet." He smirked. "And if you tell Marinette not to give me cheese once I've exhausted that pitiful supply, then I'll float along behind you talking about that the whole time."

"No, you won't," Adrien said immediately. "Because then I'll just transform and hang out like that for hours, because I can now."

"Then I'll alter your outfit to make you look ridiculous," Plagg countered.

"And I'll just wear something over it," Adrien shot back.

"I'll make it so ridiculous that nothing will fit."

"I'll rock ridiculous. Ridiculous is my middle name."

"Well, I'll-"

The sound of the apartment door opening shut both of them up. Adrien spun around to see Marinette stepping in looking somewhat puzzled, presumably having caught the tail end of the conversation. As soon as the door shut behind her, Tikki floated up out of Marinette's purse.

"Should I even ask?" Marinette asked. Next to her, Tikki leveled a narrowed-eyed gaze on Plagg. Adrien and Plagg exchanged a glance and immediately feigned innocence.

"Nope," Plagg said quickly.

"Definitely not," Adrien agreed.

Marinette didn't particularly look like she believed them. Adrien didn't blame her. So instead, he went for distraction.

"I'll get some pasta going," he offered. "I would have started earlier, but I just got back from shopping a few minutes ago."

Marinette grinned and followed him back to the kitchen. "Ah, so you did manage to actually get things done today, then? Nino and I were taking bets on how likely it was that you just flopped and slept all day."

Adrien couldn't hold back the snort as he turned on the water to fill his pasta pot. "Ah, such supportive friends I have, ones that believe in me no matter what." At Marinette's giggle, he hid his smile and continued on, working to make his voice sound as sorrowful as possible. "Even my Lady doesn't believe in me. Woe is me."
That only made Marinette laugh harder.

"Well, I was productive, even if no one believed in me," Adrien insisted, turning the water off and moving the pot to the stove. "I cleaned everything, and grocery shopped, and did my laundry! AAAH! My laundry!"

He was an idiot. He had forgotten his last load in the dryer. He scrambled for a second, caught between dinner and running downstairs to get his hopefully dry load of sheets. He didn't want to just leave the pot unattended, but he had tossed that load into the dryer before heading to the grocery store and that was over an hour ago. Other people would be getting home from work soon and want to do their laundry, and him just ditching his things there for who-knows-how-long would not earn him any Good Neighbor Points.

"You just put the water on, it isn't going to boil over right away," Marinette reminded him, grabbing his shoulder and shoving him towards the door. "I'll go grab the leftover bread from yesterday from my apartment so we can make garlic toast and then come back over to keep an eye on the pot. Go get your laundry before someone yanks it out and tosses it on the floor."

Adrien went.

Saturday dawned rainy and with just a hint of chill in the air. Adrien was a little disappointed since he had been hoping to go out on a walk around the city with Marinette before he had to go back to Paris for a week, but Marinette wasn't particularly bothered. According to her, it was perfect cookie-making weather.

And, since they were going to be inside all day, it was also perfect cookie-frosting weather.

"You're making a mess," Marinette complained as Adrien ever-so-carefully tried to pipe frosting on a cookie. More than a little of it was getting on his fingers and the cutting board instead of the cookie. "I can't even figure out what you're doing wrong- eep!"

Adrien had taken advantage of her momentary distraction to abandon his poorly-decorated cookie and bop her on the nose with his frosting-covered finger. As her eyes crossed to stare at it, he grinned mischievously and wiped his other fingers off on her cheeks, leaving long multicolored streaks across her face. It was a good look on her, Adrien decided as he stepped back to admire his work. Then again, everything was a good look on Marinette. She was too adorable to ever look bad, but maybe he was just biased.

After all, Chat Noir had always adored his Lady and Adrien had always thought Marinette was cute.

"Adrieeeen," Marinette complained, reaching up to wipe at the frosting. "Don't waste the frosting like that."

"It's not wasting it," Adrien shot back with a grin, batting her hands away from her face. "It looks quite nice on you, really. Have you ever considered wearing frosting out as a fashion statement?"

"You are impossible," Marinette informed him. "And it is wasting the frosting, we can't exactly eat it if it's on me- eep!"
Adrien cut Marinette off, leaning closer and ducking in to lick the frosting off of Marinette's cheek before he could think about it too much. When he pulled back, Marinette had turned red and seemed to be at a loss for words. Adrien's eyes dropped to her lips. There was a smudge of frosting at the very corner, and he wasn't sure if it was from when she was snitching a taste earlier or if he had somehow gotten it on her. Either way, that smudge was looking incredibly tempting. Adrien leaned forward just slightly, eyes locked on the frosting. Marinette had her eyes on him, and she didn't seem put off at all. Adrien's breath caught in his throat, entranced.

So naturally, Plagg had to spoil the moment by letting out an incredibly rude noise as loud as he could.

Adrien and Marinette both jumped, moving away from each other quickly. They both floundered for several seconds (above their heads, Plagg sniggered), and then Marinette cleared her throat and moved back to the counter, her eyes firmly focused on the cookies. "S- so! Cookies! Um, maybe you should be bracing your frosting hand with your other hand so the line isn't squiggling around so much. The designs should turn out better that way, I think."

"Right, of course," Adrien replied, forcing his tone to match Marinette's casualness. He swallowed and stepped forward, trying not to react when his arm brushed against Marinette's. "And here I thought just a minute ago you were trying to tell me that you didn't know how to fix my frosting abilities."

"It might not work," Marinette said, stepping back to give Adrien a little more elbow room. "Some things just can't be fixed, after all."

"Mhm." Adrien stuck out his tongue as he concentrated on piping a straight line along the edges of the cookie. Just like before, it turned out all squiggly, and Adrien straightened up with a sigh. "At least it'll still taste good."

Marinette didn't look particularly impressed.

"I'm just not that artistic, Marinette," Adrien insisted, finishing off the cookie with a few particularly un-artistic dollops of frosting before handing the piping bag back to her. "And that piping bag just gets the best of me every time. If both you and your parents have tried to teach me and failed, then that just means I'm not cut out for it." He grinned. "I'll just stick to eating the cookies. I'm good at that."

Marinette groaned.

The weekend flew by too quickly, and then on Monday Adrien found himself on the train back to Paris. He found himself fidgeting in his seat, wishing he had brought along a book or something, like Marinette had suggested, just so the ride wasn't so unbearable. It wasn't that he didn't have elbow room, because of course his father had asked Nathalie to get Adrien one of the best seats, but staring at the back of the seat in front of him got boring before they even left the station.

One would think that he would be an expert traveler by now, between the times he had traveled for modeling things and his trips between Paris and London, but those times he had always brought homework or a book for research along. Since he had finished the semester and hadn't yet bought
his books for the fall term yet, he had nothing to study.

Not that he wanted to study, of course. After finals week, it would be good to have some time to rest, recalibrate and think about things that weren't physics.

Thankfully, the ride wasn't long at all, and it didn't take Adrien long to get off and work his way through the train station. Nathalie and the Gorilla met him right outside the station, and soon he was being whisked back to his father's mansion. Unsurprisingly, his father wasn't actually home to greet him. Also unsurprisingly, Nathalie had printed off a color-coded schedule for Adrien to follow while he was in Paris.

"You'll be kept busy," Plagg observed as they reviewed the schedule in Adrien's room. "Look, your first fitting is in an hour. They didn't waste any time, did they?"

"And I have a haircut scheduled, too," Adrien pointed out with a sigh. "It's like Nathalie and my father don't think I would have gotten things like that taken care of in London."

Plagg sniggered. "Maybe it's Nathalie's way of telling you that you look like a mop."

"I do not." Still, Adrien couldn't resist glancing at his reflection in the computer screen in front of him. Maybe his hair was a little messy from the weather in London before he left, but it wasn't anything that a comb couldn't fix. Maybe he kept his hair a little longer than he used to, but it was hardly a mop. And besides, he had had a haircut only just-

Adrien had to pause to think about that. When had he last gotten his hair cut? He hadn't been able (or, rather, willing) to take the time when he was in study mode, and he had been planning on getting it cut during the week when all of his projects were due, but that idea had been abandoned the second Adrien had realized that not everything was running smoothly as planned. He probably should have then gotten a trim sometime during the three days between his final exams and leaving for Paris, but he hadn't. That meant that it had probably been two weeks before that when Adrien had last gotten a trim.

He took a closer look at his reflection in the computer, adjusting his bangs with his fingers. Okay, maybe his hair was a little on the shaggy side. That still didn't make it a mop. He kept his hair very nicely groomed, thank you very much.

...but maybe Nathalie was right to get him cleaned up before he saw his father.

One haircut and a three-hour fitting session later and Adrien was exhausted. It wasn't that any of those activities were particularly tiring, but standing around getting prodded by his father's army of assistants wasn't particularly invigorating and he had had to get up early that morning to catch his plane. The assistants in charge of his fittings hadn't been remotely interested in his attempts to strike up a conversation, so Adrien had had to resign himself to several hours of being a breathing mannequin.

So of course, Adrien was not particularly happy to get back to the house and find that Nathalie had altered his schedule to take out several previously free hours and replace them with business meetings, presumably at his father's request. Clearly Gabriel wasn't quite ready to give up on the
idea of Adrien working for Gabriel in the business department.

Oddly enough, Adrien objected. There was absolutely no reason for him to go to any business meetings for Gabriel. He had come home to do modeling, and modeling alone. Any extra time should have been time for Adrien to get together with Alya, Nino, and the assorted other former classmates he kept in touch with who were still in the city, or for just wandering around Paris and exploring a bit, visiting his favorite places.

Still, Adrien hesitated. Obviously he would have to break it to his father somehow because there was no way he was going to set a precedent of allowing his father to push him around like that every time he came home, but how? Adrien was sorely tempted to just not show up to the various meetings, but that was bound to not go over well. And because his father was the one paying for the apartment and Adrien's university, it was probably not a great idea to tick him off too much. It would be far safer to go through Nathalie and argue that there would be no benefit to Adrien from going to the meetings. She was more likely to listen, and knowing Nathalie, she would probably add in a few well-thought-out arguments of her own.

So now Adrien just had to drag himself off of his bed and go track down Nathalie before his father got home.

"It's stupid that I even need to do this," Adrien grumbled, brushing his newly-trimmed bangs aside. The hairdresser had cut off a little more than he would have liked, but it did look nice and neat, the ideal Gabriel image. "They should have mentioned this earlier, and then I could have argued about it earlier. Or they could have recognized that I'm a model for the business and only a model. That's all I'm being paid to do. Model."

Plagg just yawned and stuffed his face with more cheese from the cheese plate the Agreste chef had prepared for Adrien upon arriving back at the mansion.

Sighing, Adrien shoved himself off of the bed and headed out of the room. He should have known better than to expect sympathy from Plagg.

It didn't take long to track Nathalie down, or to express his complaints to her, but it did take a while for Nathalie to persuade Gabriel Agreste to back off on his request that Adrien sit in on business meetings. What finally persuaded him to back down was Nathalie pointing out that Adrien might decline to come back and visit if Gabriel made him go to business meetings that Adrien had no interest in.

"You're the best, Nathalie," Adrien said cheerfully when Nathalie finally ended the call, looking somewhat exhausted. Arguing with his father was never a fun thing to do. "Thanks so much!"

"Just make sure you're on time to all of the fittings and photoshoots," Nathalie reminded him, straight-faced even as Adrien practically lifted her off of the ground in a hug. "No running late, are we clear?"

"Perfectly," Adrien promised. "I'll be early to everything, even. I promise."

"Nathalie is gonna kill me," Adrien groaned as he sprinted down the block, three days into his visit to Paris. He had been hanging out with Max at a library, and they had lost track of time. Now he had to be at a photoshoot in three minutes, and it was a five-minute sprint yet. To make matters
worse, he had left Plagg at home and couldn't transform. And even if he had had Plagg, he and Marinette had agreed before he left London that it would be a bad idea for him to transform while he was in Paris, just because they didn't want people noticing any correlations between when Adrien was home and when Chat Noir showed up in Paris.

All of that meant that there were no shortcuts or cheats that Adrien could use to speed up his trip to the photoshoot location. He could only hope to be slightly late at best, and that was only if the lights were all green for him. Even then, he would be sweaty and gross, adding to the time that the makeup artists would have to spend on him.

He knew he should have set an alarm on his phone, but he hadn't expected his time with Max to stretch out so long. Adrien had figured that Max would be busy and could only spare an hour at most, since he had his Masters programs to keep him busy, but instead Max was eager for a bit of a break. Their one hour together had turned into two and a half before Adrien spotted the alert on his phone about the photoshoot and shot out of his seat with an embarrassing squeal. He had spared a few seconds to splutter an explanation to Max before bolting out of the building. Hopefully his friend had managed to understand him.

Seven minutes later (the lights had not been in his favor), Adrien skidded into the makeup tent. Several other models were already in the chairs, sitting patiently as the makeup artists worked. A couple others were waiting their turns off to the side, making Adrien breathe a sigh of relief. He wasn't too late. There had been times when he was younger and still fighting akuma when he would arrive late for a photoshoot and find out that either a) he was the only model and therefore it was very noticeable that he was missing or b) there were other models, but they were all ready and were just waiting for him. He did get a few curious looks this time as he burst in panting, but it was ages better than Nathalie's stern frown or his father's scowl.

The photoshoot of the day was ridiculously long. They had breaks, of course, just so the models didn't get too worn out or distracted, and most of the other models got to leave after the initial group and duo photos were over. That left Adrien, still the face of the brand despite himself. He had another hour of photos, followed by an hour break before sunset shots started.

Adrien couldn't wait for it to end.

Ten minutes into his break, Adrien's phone chimed. He checked it from where he was sprawled out over a park bench. Nathalie was giving him one of her famous Looks, probably because his posture was basically not there at all, but Adrien couldn't find it in himself to care. His posture had been nothing short of perfect for the entire photoshoot, and spending his off time sitting stick-straight would just result in him being completely sore and wiped out for the sunset shoot.

On his phone, there were a whole slew of messages. Some were from Nino, some from Alya, one from Max, and one from Marinette. He went for Marinette's message first, since she was the one who texted him last.

**Marinette: How's Paris, kitty cat? Are people taking lots of pictures of your pretty face yet?**

Adrien snorted and started typing back.

**Adrien: So many pictures. Too many pictures. Mariii, save me :(**

**Marinette: He lives!**

**Adrien: But I'm not done yet. I still have a sunset shoot tonight, and then more fittings photoshoots etc tomorrow. My dad's trying to get all of my summer shoots done now.**
Marinette: how many can there possibly be?

Adrien snorted a laugh. That had been his response, too. Even as big as Gabriel was, there were only so many ads to run. But then there was the catalogue photos, and then apparently a couple commercials to film.

Adrien: oh, you know, the usual: ads, catalogue shoots because apparently I'm the only male model in the company, commercials to film...

Adrien: Kill me now.

Marinette took a moment to respond, probably either in the middle of making dinner or reading a book. Adrien flipped through his other texts while he waited for a response. The texts from Alya and Nino were mostly nonsense, teasing comments about working all the time. He updated Nino about when his next break was meant to be so they could get together before Marinette responded next.

Marinette: Yikes!

Marinette: Don't die on me, kitty! I'm gonna make cookies on Sunday and Tikki and I can't eat them all by myself!

Adrien groaned out loud. Now he wanted cookies. Marinette's cookies, fresh out of the oven, were close to heaven. His family's chef made decent enough pastries and treats, but it was a bit of a weak point in his otherwise superb cooking skills. He just didn't have that Dupain-Cheng magic.

Adrien: Any chance of refrigerating some of that dough and baking them fresh when I get home? pretty please

He was not above begging. Marinette's just-out-of-the-oven cookies were just that good.

Marinette: Mmm...I don't know. It might be hard to remember to do that...

Adrien pouted at his phone. She was just teasing him, of that he was pretty sure, but he wanted the promise of nice warm, gooey cookies once he got back to London.

Adrien: Purr-ty please, my Lady?

"Adrien, you have to get back into hair and makeup!" Nathalie called to him before Marinette could respond. "Break is over, we've got to go before we lose the light!"

Groaning, Adrien pushed himself off of the bench and headed for the hair and makeup tent, pocketing his phone as he went. This was going to be a loooong week.

Adrien was pretty much sleepwalking by the time Sunday hit and he got to go hang out with Nino. Alya was busy covering a story across town, so the two men met up in the park and wandered together towards a café near their old lycée, tossing stories back and forth. Adrien fell quiet a few times, just too tired from his grueling schedule to keep up a conversation. Nino seemed not quite as chatty as usual as well, making Adrien wonder somewhat absently if his friend was feeling okay. He hadn't mentioned being overworked, despite working on both composing the score for the latest
indie film he had been tapped for and DJing several nights per week.

"All right, out with it. What's wrong?" Adrien asked, pushing his salad (he was so sick of salads at this point, honestly, and he wasn't going to eat them for a week at least once he got back to London) aside so he could focus on Nino. "You're quieter than usual."

Nino opened his mouth, clearly ready to deny that anything was wrong (Adrien knew how to read Nino like a book at this point) before the look on Adrien's stopped him. He let out a long sigh and his shoulders slumped. "I...fine. I..." He huffed. "Fine, no beating around the bush. You knew about Alya's plans to enter the newspaper contest, right?"

...aha.

"I did, yeah," Adrien confirmed. "Marinette and I have been trying to get Alya to tell you. I'm glad she finally did."

Nino made a face at that. "But it's been months. She's been planning this for absolutely ages and I would never stop her from following her dream, she knows that, but she didn't tell me for forever. I can understand why you guys didn't tell me- it wasn't your responsibility- but she should have told me earlier and she didn't. And that hurts."

"From what I've heard, she was nervous," Adrien offered. This was the exact reaction that he was worried would happen, and this was why he had hoped that Alya would tell Nino sooner rather than later. "Because you were talking about missing us because we were out of the country, and she didn't want you to then get the news that she might be traveling for six months. It's not an excuse to not tell you for that long, I know, but..."

Nino just shook his head. Adrien fell silent.

"I... yeah. I know there isn't any way to go back and change that now, so there's no point in holding grudges about it for ages, but..." Nino let out a huff. "We apparently need to work on communication. I hadn't ever thought that that would be a problem before."

Adrien stayed silent. Nino probably just needed to get things out of his system, and spewing Alya's (poor) excuses for not telling Nino sooner wasn't going to help.

"I get that she didn't want to throw the news at me right after you guys left and I was really down, but there's been plenty of time since then." Another sigh. "And I don't know- like, would she think that I would try to stop her or something? She didn't say that, but I wonder because the missing you guys things just doesn't seem like enough of a reason, you know? And, like... I would never do that. I wouldn't try to stop her or persuade her not to go or anything. I love seeing her happy, and she's been so happy and interested in the research she's been doing for that. And I know she's wanted to travel, and this is the perfect opportunity. Like, all expenses paid? That's great. And I've been thinking, and I could probably go visit her a few times over the six months. I have enough money saved up for that."

"That sounds like it would be fun," Adrien agreed. "Mari and I thought that you guys might do that."

"I like how you were apparently already planning what we were gonna do," Nino quipped. "Did you find hotels for us to use, too? Train schedules?"

Adrien snorted. "No. We didn't go quite that far. We don't know where Alya would be going yet, it would be impossible for us to somehow just divine it all just so we could plan out your lives."
Nino laughed.

From there, the conversation moved back to more cheerful waters. Nino told Adrien about some of the new movie projects that he had heard about that he was hoping to be a part of, and Adrien filled Nino in what he would be doing for the job that he had in London over the summer (paperwork. Lots of paperwork). They compared notes on apartment-renting (and Nino made fun of Adrien's lack of knowledge about what all was in his contract; apparently despite living in the apartment for the majority of a year now, Adrien still had a lot to learn about the whole process). As they finished their meal, their conversation turned back to Alya and the newspaper competition.

"I'll get over it soon," Nino promised as he and Adrien gathered their things. "I'll just talk to Alya about everything tonight so we understand each other and don't have any secrets. I don't want this to get between us."

"I'm glad to hear that," Adrien said, giving his friend a side hug. "Say hi to Alya for me, will you? Will she be able to get off while I'm here?"

"No idea," Nino said immediately, then frowned. "...aaaand another thing we need to get better at communicating about. Bugger, now that that problem's been brought up, I keep seeing it."

Adrien cringed slightly at that. "At least you're finding that out now, though, and not when you're, like, married or anything..." He trailed off at the look on Nino's face. "...uh, is there something that you maybe aren't telling me?"

"No!" Nino claimed immediately, and then he wilted just a bit. "Okay, that was something I was...considering thinking about. For the future. Not right away, because we're so young and what's the rush, right? And then with Alya doing this six-month thing..."

Adrien snickered quietly. "I like how we're all just assuming that she'll get the win," he said, grinning. "I'm sure she'll appreciate that."

"Probably," Nino agreed, grinning as well. "She's probably pretty confident herself. That's just how she is." His grin turned somewhat lovestruck for a moment before he refocused. "Anyway, I don't think it would be a good idea to ask her before her trip, because then we would be apart. Like, there was a shift in expectation between friends and dating, and then again when we moved in together. And I think that would happen again once we get engaged, and that would make it tougher to be apart for that long."

"No, no, I get it," Adrien assured him. At Nino's doubtful look, he grinned sheepishly. "I mean, yeah, okay, maybe I haven't experienced that-" yet, he added mentally "-but, uh, that just seemed like the right thing to say, I guess?"

"Right, right," Nino said, then paused. "...uh, unless you have experienced that. Do you have something to share about you and Marinette, by any chance?"

Adrien frowned, then realized what Nino was implying. "Oh! No, no, I did just say that because it seemed right. We're just friends, dude. Seriously."

For now, Adrien added mentally. If he said anything to Nino about liking Marinette, it was bound to get back to Alya, and if Alya knew then it was only a matter of time before Marinette knew as well.

Thankfully, Nino just sighed and shrugged. "Okay, if you say so. It was worth a try, at least. Do you think you'll be free again before you go back to London?"
"Honestly? Not a clue."

Adrien fidgeted in his seat as the train slowed down to pull into the London station. He couldn't wait to be back in London, even if it had only been a week and a half since he left. Marinette would be waiting for him with just-baked cookies in either her or his apartment once he took the bus back to their neighborhood, and he was more than a little eager to see her again. She was much better company than his father, and he had grown too used to cuddling up to her side during their after-dinner movies. To go back home to where he was ignored when he wasn't having photos taken...

Well, Adrien knew where he would rather be. It was no contest.

He jiggled anxiously as he worked his way through the thick crowd on the platform, powerwalked through the station, and dragged his suitcase (stuffed with new clothes, because of course his father was worried about him being out of style) up the stairs to the street. Adrien practically sprinted to the bus stop before remembering that the tabloids could be lurking anywhere and they would no doubt pounce like starving wolves if they suspected Adrien was in a hurry to, say, get back to a girlfriend.

He had to pretend that he had at least a little chill. Still, couldn't the bus go any faster?

Adrien hopped off the bus at his stop and pulled his suitcase down the sidewalk. He couldn't help the way his footsteps were picking up speed as he got closer to their building. He was just hungry, that was all, and Marinette would no doubt have something ready. He had had Plagg text her at the airport, though if she had responded Plagg hadn't told him.

Adrien fumbled the key as he unlocked the main door, then turned the knob the wrong way, and then tripped over the carpet once he got inside, all because he was in too much of a hurry to get in and see Marinette. Once he managed to get in (Plagg was snickering loudly at him), Adrien trotted up the stairs as fast as he could with the weight of the suitcase slowing him down. He tripped over the last step (more snickers from Plagg), caught himself, and made himself slow down as he opened the door to his hallway.

"Did she say which apartment she's in, Plagg?" Adrien asked as he reached for his keys again before thinking better of it and reaching for his door. If Marinette were there (which was fully possible, since she liked how much light his windows let in at this time of the day), the door would be unlocked.

It was.

Adrien pushed open the door fully, letting his grin spread across his face. Whatever Marinette was making smelled amazing- it always did, Marinette was an excellent cook- and she was waiting in the middle of the apartment.

"Bugaboo!" Adrien exclaimed, letting the door swing closed behind him as he bounded forward to scoop her up in a hug. "I missed you!"

"Yeah, I can tell," Marinette said with a giggle as he swung her around, only just refraining from peppering her face with kisses. She was just too cute. Instead, Adrien contented himself with pressing a single kiss to Marinette's cheek. He dipped his head and turned it, aiming to press a kiss to her lower cheek. He would have kissed right where he meant to, had Marinette not had the exact
same idea and turned her head at the same time.

Instead of kissing her cheek, his lips connected with Marinette's.

Adrien's eyes flew open in surprise, but he didn't pull away. This was his chance to find out if Marinette liked him like he liked- no, loved- her. If she pulled away, he could excuse the whole incident like the accident it was. If she didn't...

Marinette didn't pull away.

Adrien kissed her again, and Marinette melted into it, kissing him back as she tightened her arms around his shoulders. They shifted, finding a better angle, and kept on kissing. Adrien's suitcase tipped over with a loud thud, but neither of them paid it any attention. They were too wrapped up in each other to be concerned by anything else.

It was bliss.

When they finally pulled away from each other, it took Adrien a moment to refocus. He couldn't stop the goofy grin from spreading across his face as he leaned down to press his forehead against Marinette's. Her eyes blinked open and she gazed up at him, a small smile of her own spreading across her lips. It made him want to kiss her again, so he did.

And again, and again, and again.

Chapter End Notes

And now they've finally figured things out. :)

But wait! Hasn't Adrien's father forbidden dating? Aren't the paparazzi still being an occasional pain (or, at the very least, a concern?)? Is this the end of the story?

No, it's not the end of the story and yes, there is more. :D HOWEVER, I've caught up to the end of what I had completely written/edited when I started posting, and while I had been intending on continuing to focus on writing HTFAM while I posted it, I miiiight have gotten a little distracted with one-shots and Plagg and the Butterfly Costume (whoops). So I don't have as much of the next arc written as I had planned, and therefore there will be a bit of a break (hopefully not too long!) while I work on the next chunk of HTFAM and get the plot there a little more straightened out. Because the next part will be spanning 2 years (aka the remainder of Adrien's time in university), there might be more time jumps/skipping over inconsequential details, just so I'm not still working on this when I'm, like, 80 (okay, it probably wouldn't take that long). I want to have another 10 or so chapters written and ready before I start posting again (just because it's easier to work in subplots that way; also, I have maybe four or five of those chapters already largely written so it hopefully won't take THAT long. Also, I have PATBC plus the side stories for that done and edited so I can stop distracting myself with them).

Also, for those of you who weren't already aware, I do have a How to Fake a Marriage: Outtakes story with one-shots from other POVs. Currently there's just one story there (Chloe's reaction to the "marriage" news), but I might be inspired to write other scenes in the future.
As always, reviews are much appreciated and always make my day (and also my birthday is tomorrow, so reviews are doubly appreciated :D)
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

So! In the last 4 (!) months since I last updated, I

- did a bunch of writing and editing on this and some other stuff

- got a job in Northern Canada for a month and a half

- followed a bear for at least 10 minutes while singing the Harry Potter and Star Wars theme songs because I blanked on how else to let it know I was there

- (on a related note, I think my parents are strongly considering not letting me go to Canada again since last year I followed bear tracks and this year I followed an actual bear. I maintain that considering I'm still alive, I must be doing SOMETHING right.)

- got a fall job in Michigan (yay! I like knowing what I'm doing ahead of time!)

- had a bear walk right by me while doing dishes and didn't notice until my boss started yelling (whoops)

- Got to handle probably close to a thousand birds (yippe!)

- aaand returned home, with my last flight getting delayed by nearly 3 hours.

I'm not sure yet what I'm doing for the summer (if I can get a field job vs working around the neighborhood at home), but I'll let y'all know if anything changes that would affect me having at least a semblance of a posting schedule.

Currently I have the second chunk (13 chapters) done and edited, and I'm working on the last bit (final year, which SHOULD be shorter than the first two chunks and is largely planned out). I'm going to try to work on pt. 3 enough that there won't be another gap, but again- it depends on if I can get a job in my field/how busy I'll be with that/internet access/etc.

And now- back to the story of two dorks being ridiculous!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once Adrien and Marinette finally peeled themselves apart more than just a few minutes later, they had to have a bit of a talk about their relationship. Clearly they were both interested in dating each other, but Adrien's father hadn't budged on his position against Adrien dating while he was in London. Adrien was initially worried that Marinette might judge him for not wanting to blatantly defy his father's (ridiculous, completely stupid) wishes, but she understood that he wasn't exactly interested in losing his funding for his apartment and university. It would put a strain on Adrien and make their future finances less stable, since Adrien would have to dip into his savings from modeling.

Adrien had to hide his grin at that. Already they were talking pretty far out into the future, taking long-term effects of them dating publicly into consideration. If it were anyone but Marinette,
Adrien probably would have gone running for the hills. It was pretty heavy stuff, talking about their future several years out and assuming that they would still be together and maybe even married by that point even though they had literally just started dating minutes before, but Adrien was reasonably certain that it wasn't a crazy assumption. He had known Marinette (and Ladybug) for forever, and they just clicked. They were fabulous as friends and, if the kisses and cuddling thus far were any indication, they would be fabulous as boyfriend and girlfriend.

(Adrien knew full well that quality of kissing wasn't exactly a reliable indicator of long-term relationship quality, but their friendship had practically been a relationship already what with the cooking each other dinner, helping each other with other housework, hanging out together all the time, and sharing a bed at night. He might have denied it for all he was worth before they started dating, but looking back there was no way to deny the fact that they had pretty much been dating already for most of the year.)

"I think dating in secret would be best," Marinette said, passing Adrien another fresh cookie. "We just have to make sure that Nathalie and your father don't find out until you've finished school."

Adrien couldn't help but pout just a bit, even though it wasn't a bad idea. He had always dreamed of dates with Ladybug where they would go wandering around the city while holding hands and seeing all of the sights before going to a movie or a play and kissing in the back of the theater. He was a romantic at heart, and not being able to treat his Lady like the princess she was crushing. But Marinette had a point. Being obvious about their dating would just get them press attention, which in turn would catch Nathalie's attention, and then she would tell Mr. Agreste and Adrien would get in trouble.

Sometime Adrien just really hated being even somewhat famous. It made his life much more difficult. Most people would simply have to not tell anyone at home if they were "dating secretly" while living in another country, but no, not him. He had to keep it completely out of public view.

*Ugh.*

"How secret do you think we have to be?" Marinette asked, dragging Adrien out of his mental bemoaning of the loss of romantic candlelight dates out with his Lady. "Like, just out of the journalists' eyes? Or should we be even more careful?"

Adrien let out a long sigh as he thought about it. He wanted to be able to only do the bare minimum to keep it secret, but that probably (unfortunately) wouldn't be sufficient, not when they would have to keep the secret for two long years. "Well, I think we should probably be careful around my classmates and your coworkers, since we don't know all of them terribly well. And- oh, gosh. If we told Alya and Nino they would probably get excited and post it online before we even finished talking, wouldn't they?"

They totally would. Adrien couldn't even lie to himself about it no matter how much he wanted to. Based on how hell-bent Alya and Nino had been to push the two of them together the previous year, they would totally post the news online just to gloat and then it would spread from there. Even if they thought they were being careful, the news would be bound to get to someone who wasn't so careful about who they told and then his father would hear and get mad and then there went his funding.

Marinette groaned. "Yeah, they would. And so would my parents, because they, uh." She turned a lovely shade of pink. "They've been hoping that we would get together since we were fourteen. And they haven't exactly ever been subtle about it, either. I wouldn't put it past them to gossip with Nino and Alya."
"Sooo... tell no one for a bit?" Adrien suggested. He wasn't thrilled about that, honestly. He had always known that Marinette and her parents were fairly close, so he would have thought that she would tell them almost everything. Not telling them about their new relationship seemed like a bit of a bad sign, even if he knew the reasoning behind it. "...and what do you mean, they weren't subtle? I never thought they were pushing us together. They always seemed perfectly friendly to me whenever I came over."

Marinette groaned, shaking her head. "Of course you didn't notice, kitty." She reached over to ruffle his hair. It had gotten into quite a mess since he got home, mostly from her running her hands through it while they were kissing, but Adrien wasn't about to care. "I love you and all, Adrien, but you sure can be oblivious sometimes."

He just stuck his tongue out at her.

"I just want to start out being cautious," Marinette added quietly after a moment, catching sight of Adrien's slightly downcast expression despite his attempts to hide it. "Normally I would run and tell Alya and my parents right away, but I don't want to cause trouble between you and your father. I'll just squeal about it with Tikki for the time being."

Adrien couldn't help but smile at that. "Squeal about it, hmm? What would your past self think if she heard that you were squealing over Chat Noir?"

Smiling, Marinette tapped Adrien's chin lightly. "No teasing, minou. You know perfectly well that you'll probably squeal about it too."

Adrien couldn't really argue about that, not that he wanted to. He had mostly just wanted to get reassurance from Marinette that she was actually as eager to date him as he was to date her.

"I just wish I could take you out on proper dates," Adrien sighed in lieu of actually responding. "I mean, we're probably a little too old to really enjoy some of the ideas that I came up with in collège, but most of them would have been fun still."

Marinette narrowed her eyes at him playfully. "Too old? You say that like we're ancient, buddy."

"No, no, that's not what I meant!" Adrien protested, trying not to laugh at the look on Marinette's face. "I just mean that some of my ideas... well, it's obvious that a collège student came up with them. They're kind of cheesy, and not in a good way."

"Cheese? Where? I want cheese!"

"Oh no, we awoke the beast," Adrien muttered as Plagg, stirred by the mere mention of cheese, woke up and immediately came to investigate. He shared an exasperated look with Marinette, but even Plagg and his obsession with stinky cheese couldn't spoil his mood right now. "So...that's okay, then? If we keep the relationship secret for now?"

"Definitely," Marinette assured him, a smile of her own spreading over her face as she leaned forward to kiss him again. "That is definitely okay with me."

Being in a relationship with Adrien, Marinette soon found, really wasn't a whole lot different than just being friends- or, well, at least not a whole lot different than their version of being just friends.
with each other. There was a bit more cuddling, maybe, and a whole lot more kissing, obviously, and Marinette often slept over at Adrien's apartment now even when her next-door neighbor was completely quiet, but they had already been spending a ton of time together before and with the need for secrecy, they couldn't go out on proper dates.

And the other thing that didn't change was the teasing from Marinette's coworkers. They had teased her endlessly about her *just a friend* Adrien before the start of the summer, and of course they had no reason to stop now. Still, it never got to the point where she or Adrien were uncomfortable around them, which was nice.

Now in her second year at Rosalie Fashions, Marinette found herself settling into the work more. Most of the people who had been on her team the previous year were still there and they knew each other well, and she was good friends with most of them. It meant that they worked together more smoothly, and Marinette was more willing to just drop in on the others to collaborate on a piece or to ask for advice. She knew what Madam Rosalie would look for in a design, and what pitfalls she had to be sure to avoid. More and more of her designs were sent back with fewer changes suggested, and more went on to production and even runway.

"I'm glad you decided to stay for a second year," Abbey told Marinette as they ate lunch together several weeks into the summer. The older girl had been promoted from intern to junior designer after working for Madam Rosalie for two years, and Marinette agreed that it was a well-deserved promotion. She was just glad that her friend had stayed on her same design team even with her new title. "It's a good opportunity to learn more- but I gotta ask, did you decide to extend your time because you thought it would be a good opportunity to learn more and a good thing on your resume, or because a certain blond model is going to be here for two more years?"

Marinette did her best not to blush, but Abbey's smirk told her that she hadn't been *entirely* successful. "Well, I can't deny that having Adrien in the city made me consider the extension more seriously. I was sure that I was going to be too homesick with none of my friends in London to stay more than one year, but now Adrien is here and I have all of you guys as friends, too." Marinette shrugged, hoping that she wasn't *too* red. "So I don't have to worry about being homesick at all."

"Oh, are we bugging Marinette about her boyfriend again?" Emily asked as she entered the break room. "He's keeping her from being homesick, is that it?"

Abbey laughed while Marinette tried not to act any differently than she had in the face of the same teasing before the start of the summer. The other girls had teased her about Adrien pretty much since their wedding photoshoot and called him either her husband or her boyfriend ever since. She couldn't react any differently than she normally did or that would tip them off, so she just sighed and rolled her eyes.

The giggles trailed off soon enough as Emily sat down at the table with her lunch. Their discussion turned to different things, designs that they were working on and what they were doing over the weekend. Marinette relaxed (when the topic of conversation moved away from Adrien; just because it was *normal* didn't mean that she wasn't worried about messing up and saying something weird), joining in on the conversation without pause.

(That was another bonus to staying longer- now she knew more about her coworkers and could recognize names and places and stories, so she didn't have to just sit back and *listen*, completely lost on what was going on. Now, there was so much more of a sense of *inclusion*, and that feeling didn't just stop at the company doors.)

Abbey and Marinette finished up their lunches before Emily had gotten halfway through theirs. As they stood up to leave, Emily suddenly straightened. "Oh! Before you leave, I was meant to remind
you- Sarah's birthday is this Thursday, so we're doing lunch out. And Mrs. Kelley is collecting for a present, if you want to give anything."

"Okay!" Marinette agreed immediately. She was pretty sure that she had some bills in her bag that she could put in to the team pot for a birthday present. "That sounds great."

"Tell Adrien he's welcome to come join us, too!" Emily added. "I haven't seen him for more than a few minutes in passing for ages. We should all get together again for dinner sometime before he has to go back to school and gets swallowed up by homework again."

Marinette grinned. Adrien would definitely appreciate the invitation. Even with all the teasing that they always had to endure from her coworkers about their "relationship", he enjoyed their company and had become at least casual friends with several of the members on her team. "I'll pass the invitation along."

Even with the need to keep their relationship a complete secret, Adrien was happy. He was dating the girl- or, rather, the woman- who he had been in love with for years, and they were completely and utterly comfortable with each other. The transition from best of friends to lovers had been nearly seamless. After being partners for so long, they could read each other like a book. It was easy enough for them to tell when the other person needed space, or needed hugs, or was just generally upset about something. Being together just came naturally to them.

Adrien was in heaven. Plagg was in mushy-flirty-grossness hell, at least according to him.

"Old married couple," Plagg grumbled every time Adrien swung by the grocery store to pick something up for Marinette on his way home from work, or when she mended his favorite jacket, or when he planned to cook her favorite meal in his apartment. Adrien thought Plagg's muttering was embarrassing, but Marinette just found it hilarious. Tikki figured that Plagg was just sore about losing his teasing material now that Adrien and Marinette were dating and unabashedly open with each other about their feelings. Now that Adrien really didn't mind (much) when Plagg called him a lovesick kitten in front of Marinette, Plagg had no easy way to rile him up.

Well, besides loudly and rudely interrupting any kissing. Tikki usually tried to keep him out of their way, but sometimes she just wasn't fast enough to catch Plagg. Adrien had quickly found that the best way to shut Plagg up was to threaten to not buy any of his favorite cheeses for a month, and the threat did work most of the time.

Adrien had thought that it would be hard to keep their dating a secret. Not kissing in public was, of course, an easy thing to avoid (most of the time, at least), as was going out on obvious dates, but the nicknames and affectionate touches that had become so automatic could be harder to avoid. He had thought that there might be some sort of obvious shift that would tip off any lingering journalists, but apparently he and Marinette had been acting as though they were dating for so long beforehand that nothing really changed there at all. Their banter was old news at this point, and while Marinette's colleagues might roll their eyes and laugh or joke about Adrien and Marinette practically being an old married couple at this point, they had been doing that ever since Adrien came to London. It wasn't anything to get worried about.

(Adrien did wonder, though, if Madam Rosalie might have noticed their slight shift in behavior towards each other. He had seen her eying him and Marinette speculatively the time he had popped
in to join Marinette and the rest of her team for a birthday lunch. He had tried to keep his hands to himself, but, well. It was Marinette. He couldn't help it if his hands tended to migrate to either her shoulders or her waist when she was close by.)

Still, Adrien couldn't spend all of his time daydreaming about his relationship with Marinette. He had to respond from emails from Nathalie inquiring if he thought he could maybe make it back to Paris for one photoshoot or another for the fall line, track down the books for his fall semester courses, and stay on top of things at his job.

His job wasn't in Physics- as a first-year student, even one that was top in his class, it was a bit of a stretch to think that he might get one of the treasured internships available in the city- and it involved a lot of filing paperwork and doing spreadsheets, but the work environment tended to be nice enough, if perhaps rather boring most of the time. He didn't have the same kind of relationships with his coworkers as Marinette had with hers, but he hadn't exactly expected to, either.

At least it wasn't customer service. He had gotten all sorts of texts from Paul and a couple of his other university classmates complaining about awful customers that they had had to deal with at their jobs. With his job, the worst he had to deal with was the occasional coworker who hadn't filled out a form right who he then had to go track down to get the right information. It could be frustrating at times, sure, when the people he was trying to find didn't seem to understand what they were doing wrong on the form, but it was mostly smooth sailing.

Besides, it paid well enough, and Adrien kind of needed the money in his account so he could pay for Plagg's taste in cheeses in the future once his father was no longer supporting him. It would also be useful for gifts and dates (in the future, of course, once they actually got to have such things) with Marinette.

The main downside to the job was that Plagg never stayed put. He flew off every morning to zip around the office, leaving Adrien to do his best to ignore the sounds from the rest of the office, all the while praying that none of the crashes of papers or other things falling to the floor out in the main office were Plagg's fault.

(The scream of "Eeew! A mouse!" shortly after three one afternoon was definitely Plagg's fault, though. Adrien just buried his head in his paperwork and hoped that no one would see the "mouse" entering his office whenever it finally got hungry.)

"Are you ready to go yet?" Plagg whined later in that afternoon, popping up beside the computer monitor and startling Adrien. "I've been all through the building and it's boring."

"And you've been spotted," Adrien commented, not even sparing his kwami a glance. "And no, you know that I'm going to be here for another hour at least. I want to get this stack of papers done today."

Plagg scowled and sulked.

By the time Adrien was actually ready to go, Plagg was predictably nowhere to be found. He texted Marinette- maybe if she showed up, Tikki could drag Plagg out of whatever corner he had decided to hide in- and then dove into the next pile of papers. He could tell that the backlog was slowly getting smaller, and if Plagg was hiding and therefore also staying out of his way, then darn it Adrien was going to take advantage of the opportunity and get some more work done.

And then Marinette called.
"Hey," Adrien answered immediately, only barely swallowing back the 'love' he would normally attach to the greeting. There were still too many people in the office, and he didn't want to risk someone overhearing. Most of them didn't care about magazine gossip and wouldn't care, but it never hurt to be careful. "What's up, Mari?"

His only response was an excited shriek. Adrien tried not to laugh. "Marinette?"

The next set of squeaky excited noises contained a noise that sounded suspiciously like "Jagged Stone", and Adrien grinned. *Aha.* He had thought it was about time for Jagged to put out another album, and who else would he choose but Marinette? That was exciting news for her. It would be her fourth CD cover for him, and another bit of money to put away in her savings account on top of her wages.

"That's great news, Mari!" Adrien enthused, even though he still couldn't quite make out any proper words. "I can pick something up for dessert on my way home to celebrate. Just let me find Plagg and I'll be on my way."

"Great!"

Adrien let himself laugh after the line went dead. Marinette still got adorably excited sometimes, even though this was hardly her first CD cover for Jagged. He had to wonder if there was something besides the cover- had Jagged maybe asked her to design some outfits for him as well? *That* would be amazing- for her to get so excited.

Well, he was going to find out soon.

"If you don't show up in the next three minutes, I'm going home without you, Plagg," Adrien informed the room as he packed up. "And I won't bring any cheese tomorrow."

Unsurprisingly, there was a squeak from one corner of the room and a black blur dove into Adrien's bag moments later.

One stop at the local bakery later, and Adrien was headed back to their apartment building with a large, sweet-smelling bag in his hands. He trotted up the stairs and headed straight for Marinette's door. It opened right away, and Adrien stepped inside and immediately got an armful of excited girlfriend.

"Hello to you too, lovebug," Adrien teased, dipping his head to kiss her as he pushed the door closed behind himself. "A little excited about something, are you?"

"Just a little," Marinette said with a grin. Her eyes landed on the bag. "And- oh, did you get-?"

"I got those tarts we like so much," Adrien confirmed with a grin. "And some pain au chocolate, because they taste amazing and I figured I might as well pick some up while I was there."

Marinette grinned and took the bag from him to peer inside. "You're the best, Adrien."

"I'm impressed you could even figure out what she was saying," Tikki told him as they watched Marinette practically dance her way into the kitchen with the bag. "I was standing right next to her and I couldn't even tell, and I knew what she was excited about!"

"I heard her say something about Jagged and it was pretty easy figuring it out from there," Adrien admitted. "Was I right about it being another CD cover?"

"Yes, she got an e-mail about it." Tikki pointed to the laptop that had been left open on the table.
"Marinette still needs to respond, of course, but Jagged is asking her for both a CD cover and a few more sunglasses designs to add to the line he's had. And now that she's graduated and accredited and everything, he'll be paying her more than the last time. Like, **significantly** more."

Adrien grinned. Marinette deserved it. She worked super-hard on everything she did, and the things she produced were absolutely amazing.

"Jagged wants some holiday-themed glasses to add to his line this time around," Marinette said as she returned from the kitchen. She was grinning, still bouncing on her toes. "And I have so many ideas for that! He wants a few more regular sunglasses too, but-

Adrien snickered at that. "Regular?"

Marinette swatted his arm. "Non-holiday! And he and Penny had come up with some ideas there, so I do have a good starting point. I can't wait to get started!"

"She's already started," Tikki hissed in a stage whisper. "She has sketches finished already, because she started scribbling as soon as she finished reading the email."

Adrien laughed as Marinette turned pink. That sounded like Marinette, all right. Back when Marinette was in university, Adrien remembered times when their group had gotten together right after one of her classes got out, and she would be telling them about some assignment or other that she had just gotten that day, and she would already have sketches of ideas that she wanted to play with. Once she showed up with a fully sketched and colored design idea for an assignment she had only just gotten an hour earlier, complete with a list of fabric types and yardage in a neat list on the side of the paper.

"Jagged wants the holiday designs approved and in production by mid-November," Marinette told Adrien as he went over to peer at her sketches. In typical Marinette fashion, they were whimsical and fun. Next to a pair of snowmen sunglasses, Marinette had scribbled out *glitter?*.

Adrien was absolutely positive that Jagged would love every last one of Marinette's glasses designs.

"Once she sends confirmation, Penny will send her some of the demo tracks for Jagged's new album to inspire her for the cover," Tikki told Adrien. She sent Marinette a look. "Of course, she can't send anything if Marinette doesn't respond or forgets to tell Penny her new address!"

"I wanted to get my ideas for the sunglasses down while I was inspired!" Marinette protested. "I'll respond tonight, I promise!"

Adrien tried not to laugh as he made a metal note to make sure that Marinette actually sent her email. He wouldn't be surprised if she got so caught up in her designing that she completely forgot until it was too late at night for her to compose an email that made sense.

His laugh burst out of him when the kitchen timer went off loudly and Marinette let out a small curse as she dashed back towards the kitchen to pull a casserole out of the oven. It was a little darker than usual on top, and Adrien guessed that she might have intended to pull the dish out of the oven before the timer actually went off.

"No laughing," Marinette chided, depositing the dish on the stovetop and reaching over it to turn off the oven. "How was your day?"

"Less exciting than yours," Adrien shot back with a laugh. "I didn't have any famous rock stars contacting me. Plagg *did* decide to go exploring, though. And he got seen."
Tikki gasped and turned a glare on Plagg. Plagg, in turn, turned a glare on Adrien.

"You weren't even there! You can't prove anything!"

"We've never had any issues with rats or mice before," Adrien said pointedly. "Yet somehow, the minute you're out of my sight, someone just happens to spot one. Yeah, right."

Plagg pouted.

"Plagg," Marinette said reproachfully. "Really?"

"It's boring at his work!" Plagg complained as Adrien scooted around Marinette to wash his hands at the sink while Marinette dished up their dinner. "Nothing ever happens. All Adrien ever does is shuffle paper around and tap at the computer."

Adrien sighed. Marinette giggled at his displeased face.

"I don't see how school is any more interesting," Adrien pointed out. "Or me just hanging around at home, or photoshoots. It's not like what you can do actually changes that much."

"It does so! You go to more than one place at school, and I get to see what's going on and snoop in other people's bags. Your classmate Karen always had lovely cheese crackers in her bag last year. At the office, there's nothing interesting to see and no one brings any interesting snacks. You're all boring."

"He's impossible," Adrien grumbled as he and Marinette headed for the table. Marinette carefully set all of her papers to the side, shifting her laptop so she could sit down. "I just don't know what I can do to entertain him when I'm working. I know it would be more fun to be outside and whatnot, but that's impossible. My papers would blow away and I can't exactly bring the computer out. I wouldn't be able to see the screen."

"Marinette works outside sometimes," Tikki offered. "Sometimes Madam Rosalie has them go out and look at fashions on the street, or just try to get inspired by stuff outside. It's really nice!"

"It really helps us get new ideas," Marinette told Adrien. He didn't miss how a blank piece of paper and a pencil still rested by her right hand, ready in case she came up with any more ideas for Jagged Stone's glasses. "We see new stuff when we're out and about, and that can be inspiring. Not like sitting in an office is."

Dinner flew by, and then Adrien went out for a walk while Marinette sketched. He had asked if she wanted to join him—after all, it was a very nice day—but Marinette had insisted that she would be awful company until after she had gotten out all of her ideas for Jagged Stone's sunglasses line and that he should go out on his own.

"You aren't going to just sit there and watch her?" Plagg asked curiously as Adrien stepped outside. "I thought that was your guys' thing, just hanging all over each other all the time."

"We do not," Adrien protested. "We cuddle a lot, but we don't hang off each other. And Marinette needs her space to design so she can actually focus on having conversations later instead of spending the time trying to remember the designs she comes up with. I know how she works. We'll hang out later."

Adrien strolled for a little over an hour, then headed back to the apartment. Marinette had sketched out all of her sunglasses ideas, and now was cleaning up her favorites.
"Those are great, Mari," Adrien said as soon as he caught sight of the cleaned-up drawings. The sunglasses she had designed were completely outlandish, but Jagged Stone would love them, and so would his fans. "Definitely different than the last line you did, but it's obvious that you're the designer behind them."

"Thanks." Marinette sat back and surveyed her work, satisfied. "And I even emailed Penny back to say that I would love to do the sunglasses and CD cover, and I sent her my new address so she wouldn't mail the music demos to my parents by accident."

"I double-checked to make sure she actually sent the email and didn't just compose it and then forget to send," Tikki added with a giggle. "That's happened before."

Adrien laughed at that. "Really, Bug? You composed an email and never sent it?"

"I thought I had!" Marinette defended herself, pouting at him. "I just missed hitting the Send button and didn't realize it until later!"

"Are you cleaning all of your sketches up tonight?" Adrien asked. He really, really hoped not, but if Marinette wanted to blast through the designs, then he would understand. He would just pull out the book he was slowly working his way through and just lounge on the couch while Marinette worked.

Marinette shook her head. "No, I'm done designing for the night. Want to play some Mega Strike?"

"Sure!"

---

Even with Marinette's commission for Jagged Stone taking up a chunk of their evenings, Adrien thought that they were doing a good job of not letting it get between them. Marinette never let her designing take up the entire evening, and then once she finished for the night they would do something together.

"I'm glad we don't have downstairs neighbors," Adrien said with a laugh as he and Marinette tried to follow the directions on a dance video they had found one evening. "I think we would get complaints about thudding around all the time."

Marinette giggled. "You mean when you drop me?"

"That was once!"

Marinette was nearly done with the sunglasses designs by the time she received a thin manila envelope from Jagged Stone- or, more accurately, from Penny- in the mail. It contained a single CD with four demo tracks on it, and was completely unlabeled so that there would be less chance that someone would spot it, realize what it was, and run off with it to release it early to Jagged's rabid fans.

Even though the arrival of the CD meant that Marinette threw herself back into designing during their evenings, Adrien couldn't find it in himself to care. She let him flop across her lap and read while she sketched out her ideas, and then they could both listen to the demo songs from Jagged.

Yet another perk of dating Marinette, apparently. According to her, she had gotten either demo
tracks or sneak previews of Jagged's new songs for every CD cover she did, with the exception of the very first one. She just hadn't told anyone when they were younger because she didn't want the information getting out; now, even though Alya and Nino had both matured enough to not go posting anything about the demos online, it was just habit to not mention that she had gotten the new songs before they were released.

Besides, the fact that Alya and Nino now knew better than to spread the music didn't mean that they wouldn't beg for sneak peeks.

"I'm just not sure about this design," Marinette sighed after another few minutes. "I really liked it at first, but it just doesn't fit the music like I thought it would. It needs to have more, I don't know, edge? I guess?"

"You'll get it," Adrien assured her. A buzz at his hip made him frown. "Mari, your phone is going off."

Marinette wriggled, pulling her phone out of her pocket. "It's Alya! Adrien, turn off the music, fast!"

Adrien lunged for the music player from his position draped across Marinette's lap. She let out a little oof at the movement, but the music turned off.

"Pretend you aren't here," Marinette hissed, and then she answered. "Hi, Alya!"

Adrien quietly wriggled back into position across her lap, and Marinette's free hand automatically drifted down to run through his hair. Adrien settled down happily and made an effort to not purr as Marinette and Alya chatted.

"Really? You did?" Marinette asked, and Adrien rolled onto his side to raise an eyebrow at her. She patted his head in way of answer. "That's great, Alya! I can't believe you found so many experts on potential historical Miraculous holders already!"

Aha. So that was what Alya was calling about. Adrien briefly considered sitting up to try to listen in to their conversation, then decided that it might be a better idea to just wait. If Alya heard anything on their end that made her think that Adrien was hanging out with Marinette, they would never hear the end of it.

"Sure, I can go get Adrien," Marinette said, making him perk up. "What? No, he's not over here right now, what makes you think that?"

Adrien hastily muffled a snicker. Marinette pinched his side and stuck her tongue out at him.

"Just give me a minute," Marinette continued, pushing Adrien off her lap and onto the floor. He snickered and flipped up onto his feet, following her as she headed back to the bathroom and knocked on that door loud enough for Alya to hear over the phone before returning to the living room. "Here he is, just let me put the phone on speaker."

"Hi, Alya!" Adrien said cheerfully as soon as Marinette held her phone out between them. "What's up?"

"Hey! So why weren't you and my girl hanging out?" Alya demanded. "Seriously? You were in different apartments?"

Marinette gave a long-suffering sigh. Adrien grinned at her and answered. "Yeah, so? She had stuff to do, and I was reading."
"Alya was telling me that she's gotten some really good leads for her Miraculous research," Marinette told Adrien. "Several experts from around the world who know a lot about some of the historic figures that Alya suspects might be old Miraculous holders."

"And some of them even have artifacts for me to look at!" Alya told them excitedly. "And a couple have journal entries that they think might give something away. Like, obviously no Miraculous holder would write it down directly that that was what they were, but the details fit really well. So then if I win the contest, then I can go talk to them directly and get to look at the artifacts in person and get my own pictures of them!"

"That great, Alya!" Adrien told her, trying not to laugh. He was pretty certain that Marinette had mentioned several calls involving her diary (which did include clear mentions of her being Ladybug) and Alya or Chloe snooping. It was likely that past Miraculous holders simply edited their journals later on, once they were well known, to remove mentions of the Miraculous. "It sounds like your application is really coming along this year."

"Yeah, it's great! I've gotten a bunch of solid leads, and really good contacts, and, y'know, reasons to travel. I'm starting to get everything organized, so I know how much research I've done with each lead I have. There are some that I probably have enough on for now, and then there's leads that I haven't even looked at yet because I was spending so much time on the others. Like, there's other animal-themed superheroes that I've found signs of, and I want to look into that and see how many I can find mention of, and if they supposedly had any superhero-type powers. Mostly just myths of super-strength, or managing to survive things that they shouldn't have, because that's mostly what I've found with the old Ladybugs and Chat Noirs."

"They didn't use Lucky Charm or Cataclysm in the ancient days?" Adrien asked, feigning ignorance. Plagg and Tikki had mentioned to them that a lot of previous users had tried to keep use of their powers out of sight of others. There had been societies that weren't particularly accepting of magic- or magic users- and it was safer to stick with out-of-sight heroics. Things like Lucky Charm and Cataclysm were kept secret, and the Butterfly Miraculous was rendered practically useless since any heroes that could be made with the butterflies would then just be targeted for witchcraft or, apparently, devil possession or something similar.

"Some obviously did," Alya said, clearly eager to share her knowledge. "And more obvious use of powers correlates with cultures and time periods that were more accepting of magic. I can't believe how far-flung the Miraculous have been! They bounce back and forth between continents pretty fast, really. I'm trying to figure out how they traveled so fast, actually. Ladybug and Chat Noir were good at travelling pretty fast across the city, but Ladybug required buildings for her yo-yo-ing and Chat Noir's poling...well, it wouldn't get him across an ocean. So either they somehow had ships that didn't really make it into history, or they traveled somehow else. And I wanna figure that out."

Adrien made a mental note to ask Plagg later and, if Plagg didn't know, to ask Master Fu next time they were in Paris, because now that Alya mentioned the whole traveling issue, he was curious too.

"There's some movement that coincides with boat travel between those two countries, but not everything," Alya continued. "So they must have had some other form of transportation."

"Are you telling them about the Miraculous movement?" Nino's voice drifted faintly over the phone. "It's so weird!" he continued, voice much closer. "I've mapped out the time periods and locations that Ladybug and Chat Noir gave Alya, and some of them happen so close together time-wise and yet so far apart physically it's unbelievable. Alya hasn't confirmed all of them yet and that would be important for, like, scholars in the future, because right now she's just going off Ladybug
and Chat Noir's word, but it's just cool, that's all."

Adrien exchanged a smile with Marinette. Nino definitely sounded on board with the whole research thing again. That was good to hear, especially after how frustrated he had been after discovering the truth behind Alya's research.

"I'm hoping she can at least find some sort of confirmation for most of the historical superheroes," Nino added. "Just so there aren't those gaps, and so she has more of a confirmation than just 'oh a superhero told me this'."

"Two superheroes," Alya corrected.

"Maybe you'll find something with one of your sources," Marinette suggested. "Like, they'll have some idea about the travel, or maybe they've heard other stories that are hard to find online. I know you've talked before about having to have the perfect keywords to find what you wanted for this sort of research, and maybe they'll have some new ideas."

"Yeah, I'll ask! Maybe reach out to some historians in those areas and ask them about the time periods Ladybug and Chat Noir gave me and give them some hints of what to look for. That's a really good idea. They'll be more familiar with the history there!" Alya sounded even more excited than she had at the start of the conversation. "It doesn't hurt to check."

There was a snort from Nino. "Yeah, but maybe wait until you've caught up with your assignments at work again. You won't be able to enter the contest if you're on probation there."

"I'm not behind!" Alya protested. "...but okay, maybe I should stop doing research while I'm at work."

Adrien and Marinette just groaned in unison at her.

Chapter End Notes

aaah, what a lovely overreaction to having to keep a secret. I wonder how much of their paranoia regarding secret-keeping is influenced by how they had to keep their identities as Ladybug and Chat Noir secret from absolutely everyone?

(answer: all of it. They're being ridiculous and I love them for it. But they probably do have a point about Alya and Marinette's parents not being able to keep a secret.)

I'm just going to say now that personally, I'm not thrilled with my pacing (or lack thereof) for this second chunk, but hopefully that's just because I've been staring at it for so long. Either way, there's plenty of Marinette and Adrien being lovey-dovy dorks, which is what everyone came for, right?
Chapter 21

Jagged Stone absolutely loved all of the sunglasses designs Marinette sent him. Adrien listened to the star exclaim over every single one over the Skype design session Jagged, Penny, and Marinette had the second to last Saturday in August. Adrien sat in the couch, just out of sight of the computer's camera, and watched Marinette absolutely glow from the praise. Jagged only had a couple minor requests for changes, and Marinette nodded along and clarified everything, making notes on a pad of paper next to the computer so that she could remember everything.

"And how is the CD cover going?" Jagged wanted to know as soon as they were done discussing the last pair of glasses. "Have you had time to work on it?"

Adrien cringed. Just yesterday, Marinette had ditched her most recent attempt at the cover. He had thought that it looked fine- amazing, even- but Marinette wasn't satisfied. She had assured him that this had happened with every other cover as well- "well, except for the first one. I only made two then because Mr. Ross gave me bad instructions the first time around" - and it was nothing to worry about, really.

"I've made a couple drafts, but none of them feel right yet," Marinette explained. "They don't quite match the feel of the songs you sent me. I'm sure I'll get there, though. I work on it nearly every day."

"No worries, dear!" Penny assured her. "Jagged takes a while to put together his songs- there's always some little thing that's not quite right- so we understand. That's why we asked you with plenty of time this time around."

Adrien made a slight face. Being given plenty of time still wasn't going to keep Marinette from worrying about how much time she was taking to finish. She liked being on top of things (a trait that was apparently largely a side effect of being Ladybug for years on end and never knowing if she was going to have time to finish her schoolwork and projects later on), and having a project drag on like this wasn't her style.

"I've definitely found a few elements that I really want to use in the cover, so hopefully it won't take much longer," Marinette was telling Jagged Stone. "It's just a matter of incorporating them all together."

"I can't wait to see it!" Jagged Stone told her. "But take all the time you need to let your genius work!"

Marinette nodded.

It didn't take long for them to wrap up the call after that, and Adrien bounced up to go hug Marinette as she slumped into her chair with a sigh.

"That seemed like it went well," Adrien commented. "Jagged Stone sounded really happy!"

"I just wish that I had something ready for the CD cover," Marinette admitted. "I did like the last thing I made, but then I looked at it again and realized that I was reusing a lot of ideas from my last cover. It looked cool, but it was way too similar."

Adrien just shrugged. He had thought that the latest cover to be discarded was pretty cool and he hadn't noticed any similarities, but Marinette was definitely more familiar with her designs than he was. If she said that there were similarities, then he would believe her.
"Would it help to take a break from it for a couple days?" Adrien suggested. "Just step away, work on some other projects or watch a movie or take a walk, then come back refreshed. You've been working on this really hard."

"I think that sounds like a good idea, Marinette," Tikki piped up, popping out of the little nest of fabric scraps that she had built for herself on the windowsill. "You've been working really hard both at Madam Rosalie's and with the stuff for Jagged Stone, and you don't want to burn out!"

Marinette worried her lower lip for a second and Adrien waited, patient. If she wanted to keep working on her designs that was fine, but he really thought that she was running herself into a wall without taking a break. Sure, she was designing different stuff at work, and both of them took time off at the end of the evening to hang out together, but it wasn't a long break. If she stepped away, relaxed, and did something else, then maybe those creative juices would come flowing back in.

"Actually, I like that idea," Marinette decided, setting her notes aside. "Let's do literally anything else. I like your walk idea, and then maybe tonight we can go out for a run?"

Adrien grinned and held out his arm. "That sounds like a plan, my Lady."

Marinette had to admit that stepping away from her designing for a bit was relaxing. She and Adrien simply strolled around the neighborhood, enjoying the mild day and popping in and out of some of the shops around their area. They got distracted for a while in a pet store after Adrien spotted the kittens and immediately made a beeline for their pen.

"They're so cute," Adrien cooed as an orange kitten batted at his finger. "I want to get one, but I have no idea how you're meant to house-train them."

"And we aren't supposed to have pets in the apartment building," Marinette pointed out, amused at how Adrien continued to coo even as the kitten started claw its way up Adrien's sleeve. "And it might be a tad difficult to travel between here and Paris if we had a kitten to take care of."

"Aww, man." Adrien made a face, then had to try to pry the kitten off of his arm before she could make an escape over the edge of the cage. "Maybe once I finish school and we're back in Paris, then? They're just too cute to handle."

Marinette just smiled and tried not to laugh. The kittens were cute, sure, but watching her boyfriend cuddle with the kitten was even cuter. They would definitely have to get a cat once they were settled back in Paris. Maybe two.

"They definitely like you," Marinette commented as Adrien lifted the kitten up to perch on his shoulder. The other cats in the pen were crowding up along the edge near Adrien, mewing up at him for attention. "They would be crawling all over you if you could actually get in the pen."

"Now I wish I could get in," Adrien grumbled as he plucked the kitten off of his shoulder. "I'd love that, honestly. I've always wanted a pet but Father always forbade it. I mean, he is allergic," Adrien added. "He's allergic to cats and dogs and I'm allergic to birds. I'm honestly surprised that I haven't started sneezing yet, but maybe it's because the bird section is all the way across the store."

Well, if she and Adrien wanted to discourage Mr. Agreste from coming over too often and overstaying his welcome once they moved back to Paris, now Marinette knew how. Maybe getting
two cats would be a good idea.

Sighing, Adrien put the kitten down. The other kittens crowded around his arm, begging for attention. He gave a little pat to each one, ignoring the way some of them were snagging his shirt sleeves as they tried to climb up his arm just like the orange one had. Adrien looked absolutely enthralled, and Marinette was torn between enjoying the view and diving in to play with the kittens herself.

The decision only took a few moments. Marinette slid in next to Adrien, reaching in to pick up a black kitten with green eyes. It was absolutely adorable...but then again, she could say the same thing about any of the kittens.

Maybe Marinette just had a soft spot for cats.

"Are you looking to buy a kitten?" someone asked, and both Adrien and Marinette spun around. The black kitten dug its claws in to Marinette's shoulder in surprise. An employee stood behind them. "Have you owned one before?"

"Oh, we were just looking," Adrien admitted. "I love cats, but our apartment building doesn't allow them."

"Otherwise he'd probably be leaving with three," Marinette teased. Adrien had a black and white kitten in his arms now, and its tail kept whacking him in the face as it waved back and forth. He clearly didn't mind at all. It was really cute.

"Ah. Well, if you change your mind, or if you have any questions, I'll be around," the employee told them. She headed off, leaving Adrien and Marinette alone with the kittens.

"I think that's a hint that we can't just stay here all day," Adrien joked in a loud whisper. He cuddled the kitten close. "It's a pity. I'd love to be able to take one of these guys home, but I think I might have problems getting homework done once school starts again if there was a kitten running around."

"I don't want a kitten," Plagg piped up, popping out of Adrien's jacket to regard the kitten in his arms. "It would steal my cheese."

Adrien heaved a long sigh. "Plagg, kittens wouldn't want your cheese. They're lactose-intolerant after they grow a bit, anyway."

"It would tug my tail," Plagg complained. "Or try to eat me."

"Plagg, it's just sniffing you now," Marinette pointed out. "It's curious, not hungry."

Plagg grumbled and retreated back into Adrien's shirt with one last distrustful look at the kitten. From the safety of Marinette's bag, Tikki giggled.

They played with the kittens for a few more minutes and then, after noticing the employee floating closer to them again, they patted the kittens good-bye and left the pet store.

"They were so cute," Adrien said mournfully as they headed down the sidewalk. "I can't believe our apartments ban pets. Who could ban a kitten with eyes like that?"

"I couldn't have pets growing up because we lived above the bakery," Marinette pointed out. "We were worried about fur getting tracked downstairs. I wanted a hamster because that wouldn't get fur all over, but then there were concerns about if a hamster could get out of its cage."
Adrien patted her arm. "We'll have to get a pet once we're back in Paris, then."

Marinette was going to hold him to that. She wouldn't mind seeing Adrien covered by kittens every day.

The rest of their walk wasn't quite as exciting (though they did pop into the nearby bakery as they passed for a bit of an afternoon treat), and then they headed back to their building. As soon as they stepped into Adrien's apartment, Marinette had to refrain from picking up the design tablet that she had left on his couch. It was almost automatic, and it was probably not a great habit.

"Movie?" Adrien suggested. "Since we won't have to work on dinner for a bit?"

Marinette eagerly agreed. It didn't take long for them to settle down on the couch with a movie, and Marinette let herself burrow into Adrien's side. The one downside to walking around the city was that they had to keep some distance between them to try not to attract attention from any stray reporters that had yet to get a life. Now, in the privacy of Adrien's apartment, they could get as close as they wanted.

"Ew, I don't want to see that!"

...well, almost. Privacy could sometimes be a foreign concept when there were kwamis around, and especially when one of those kwamis was Plagg.

Adrien sighed as he and Marinette untangled themselves from their kiss. "Seriously, Plagg? Just go into the other room, then."

"But I would miss the movie!" Plagg protested. Marinette could see the devious little grin on his face. Clearly he didn't care about the movie that much.

"Plagg..." Adrien practically growled.

"We kiss all the time," Marinette pointed out before Adrien could start threatening Plagg with bodily harm. "This isn't that much different."

"There were hands in inappropriate places," Plagg informed her haughtily, as though he was some sort of prudish teacher. "It was burning my innocent eyes."

"So you're saying that none of your past Chosens ever dated?" Adrien asked pointedly. "Never married? Never had kids?"

"They weren't as gross as you about it!"

Somehow, Marinette sincerely doubted it. She had heard some stories about past holders, after all, and there were more than a few that had ended up getting married and having kids.

"Fine, we'll behave for the rest of the movie," Adrien sighed, shooting Plagg a glare. "Even if I'm tempted to dial up the gross just to spite you."

Plagg scoffed. Next to Adrien, Marinette turned pink.

Once the sun set and the city grew dark, Adrien and Marinette wasted no time in finishing up their
dishes from dinner and transforming, heading out for the second time that day. Only this time, they could run and jump and swing from rooftop to rooftop. If they really wanted, they could even cuddle and kiss.

"We really should go out like this more often," Ladybug sighed as they sprinted down a row of houses. They had had to wait until it was late and properly dark, but now they could go out without being easily spotted as they ran across the rooftops. The streetlights down below provided just enough light for Ladybug to see where she was going. "It seems like we're not even going out once a week anymore. I miss getting to stretch my legs."

"To be fair, we do have to wait until it's pretty late to go out now that it's summer," Chat Noir pointed out as they slowed down a bit to a stroll. He sounded a little out of breath, but he was grinning as he stretched. "And since we know that we don't have to transform to hang out anymore, the only real reason to transform here is to run around."

"We could also just stroll like we want to," Ladybug said, linking her arm with Chat Noir's so she could snuggle up to his side. "I wanted to do this earlier, but..."

"Same here." Chat Noir twined his fingers around hers. "Of course, it might have been a little warm to snuggle-walk, but still. By the time it gets cold, I don't know how I'll be able to keep my hands off of you outside."

Ladybug laughed. "You're going to be Mr. Handsy again, hmm?"

"That makes it sound bad," Chat Noir complained, but he was laughing as well. "I just meant that I would want to cuddle with you all the time. But you know that, you dork."

They sped up again, leaping over a gap in the buildings easily. They had just started to circle around to head back to their building for the night when a shout from the streets below caught their attention.

"Momma, there's people up there!"

Ladybug and Chat Noir both whipped around to locate the sound of the shout. Ladybug was still squinting around when Chat Noir hissed and suddenly grabbed her hand, pulling her up and over the ridge of the roof and onto the other side and then yanking her flat to the roof.

"It was just a little kid," Chat Noir whispered. "Hopefully the mom didn't see us." His ears twitched and then his expression dropped. "Oh, crud. She spotted movement and now they're sticking around and looking up."

Ladybug groaned and dropped her face to the shingles. This was exactly what they were always afraid of when they transformed and went for a run around London. If they were spotted and word got out that Paris's superheroes were in London, that could endanger their secret identities. People would look to see what Parisians were now in London and which of those people went back to Paris around the holidays, and that would narrow down the field of candidates quite a bit.

And considering that people would also be comparing moving dates with when Ladybug and Chat Noir vanished from Paris, that would really not be good. Maybe there weren't any active supervillains at the moment, but secrecy was always key. They didn't want any would-be supervillains knowing who they were and attacking them while they were off-guard to steal the Miraculous.

Five minutes later, the superheroes were still lying flat on the roof as Chat Noir listened. The girl
and her mother were staying around, peering up at the roof. At one point Chat Noir peeked over the ridge of the roof and spotted them aiming a flashlight up towards the roof, and he beat a hasty retreat back down to the safe side of the roof.

"Some people are just too persistent," Ladybug grumbled as they waited for the civilians to leave. "Ugh. If we hadn't changed into pajamas before transforming, I would just suggest jumping down and detransforming in an alley and just walking home."

"I think that might make tabloid front-page news if a reporter spotted us doing that," Chat Noir agreed. "Darn it I hate not being anonymous. No one would care if we were just random people. But nooo, the press has to practically work as a free pair of extra eyes for my father while I'm here."

"It is annoying," Ladybug agreed. "So, do you think that you'll stop modeling once you get a job in Physics? Surely the press attention would go away after a bit."

"Maybe, maybe not," Chat Noir told her. He shrugged. "My father is still famous, after all. That's why I'm even getting attention as a model in the first place. And I haven't decided on the modeling. It's a nice bit of extra income, but if my father won't let me scale it back when I'm in Paris, I might just flat-out quit." He grinned at her. "Well, quit Gabriel, at least. I wouldn't mind modeling your designs."

"You'll be the prettiest physicist in Paris," Ladybug teased. She reached over to rearrange his bangs in front of his face. "And the prettiest kitty, too."

Chat Noir grinned and opened his mouth, clearly about to respond, when his expression froze. His eyes darted towards the street below, and then he was tugging Ladybug's arm again, yanking her back up and over the roof ridge before flattening them both down again.

"Wha- Chat Noir?" Ladybug asked as Chat Noir listened intently. She glanced down at the street, but no one there was looking upwards. "What is it?"

"The kid and her mom decided to circle around to look at the other side," Chat Noir reported with a hiss. "I heard them right before they got all the way around. They aren't going to drop it easily."

His ears flicked. "And- oh, shoot. They think they saw movement near the ridge, when we flipped over. They don't think it's superheroes, though. They think that there's robbers or something, and now they're going to the door to ask the people there if they know that there's people on the roof."

"We need to move, then," Ladybug decided. "Just keep low and get off this set of houses, and be super-careful for at least a couple blocks. I wish there were more clouds so the moon wasn't so bright, but we'll just have to work with it."

Chat Noir nodded. His ears flicked again as he listened to the conversation down below. "The people from the house are watching the other side now and the kid and her mom are coming back around again. Let's go."

Ladybug nodded, pushed herself up, and, keeping herself bent practically double, she sped over the rooftop. Chat Noir followed close behind, hissing instructions as he listened to the conversations behind them.

"Over the ridge," he instructed, and Ladybug kept herself close to the roof as she rolled to the other side and continued speedwalking. She glanced down at the street, and didn't see anyone looking up. She could still feel Chat Noir's tension as he followed her closely, so she had to guess that they weren't in the clear yet.
"Back over!"

Ladybug followed the instructions immediately. Chat Noir guided her to a section of the roof that was hidden from the rest of the street by a dormer jutting out so they could keep moving.

"If someone looks out of any of these things, we're done for," Chat Noir panted. There was a pause, and then he spoke up again, a grin in his voice. "That might be a little bit of an exaggeration. But Alya would be over here every weekend if she knew we were here, and there would be way too many people prying into our lives for my comfort."

Ladybug just nodded.

"They've called the neighbors," Chat Noir reported as they vaulted over another dormer. "So there might be more eyes. But they haven't spotted us again."

Even once they cleared a couple streets, they were still tense. They waited until there weren't any people on the sidewalk below before making the final jump onto Adrien's balcony and rushing inside.

"Well, that was unnecessarily stressful," Adrien said with a laugh as they detransformed. "We might want to not go to that area for a bit, though. And maybe we should stick to nights that are either overcast or don't have much in the way of a moon. We would have been fine if the moon hadn't been so bright."

"You would have been fine if you hadn't gone out at all," Plagg grouched, flopping on a pillow on the couch. "Unnecessary transformation. Ridiculous. I could have been eating cheese during that time."

"I think it's fun going out!" Tikki protested. "Maybe tonight didn't go as smoothly as usual, but it's nice to transform every once in a while even if we don't have a supervillain to fight."

"Maybe we should just stay in tomorrow," Marinette suggested. She had really been hoping to do another superhero stroll over the rooftops, but after tonight it would be a good idea to sit back and take a break. "We can bake something- maybe croissants or pain au chocolate, those both take a while- and watch movies while the dough chills. That would be relaxing, but we wouldn't have to worry about anything except burning the dough."

"That sounds like a plan," Adrien agreed. He smiled at her. "But right now- bedtime?"

"Hey!" Plagg protested, even as Marinette nodded. "What do you mean you're going to bed already? What about my midnight snack?"

The rest of the weekend sped by in a flurry of design-avoiding activities, and then Adrien and Marinette both had to head back to work. Adrien slogged through the day, trying not to get distracted by a commotion happening in the rest of the office, and then took off almost as soon as he could at the end of the day. He arrived home from work to find Marinette hunched over her tablet at his kitchen table, frowning as she sketched out ideas for Jagged's CD cover. Several of her previous design attempts were printed out and spread out on the table around her, and she kept glancing over at one as she worked.
Adrien thought they all looked awesome, but Marinette was positive that there was something that just wasn't quite right.

"How's it going, love?" Adrien asked, setting his bag down and crossing the apartment to bend over and press a kiss to Marinette's head. He glanced down at the tablet and grinned. "That looks amazing, Marinette!"

"Thanks! I'm really liking this one," Marinette said, twisting around so she could properly press her lips to his. "I think this is it. It just fits the music so well!"

"I'm glad you're happy with it," Adrien replied with a smile. Then he frowned slightly. "How long have you been working on that? It looks almost complete."

"Oh, I salvaged chunks from some of these designs," Marinette assured him. "Most of this was just a matter of copy-paste and then some color changes so they would all tie in together. I've only been working on it for maybe half an hour at most, and I did some of the moving stuff from previous designs at lunch. I really only just got home."

That was a relief. For a moment there, Adrien had been worried that Marinette was pulling an Alya and neglecting her actual work for the commission.

"Having the break really helped, I think," Marinette continued as she went back to designing. "I felt like I could really just look at everything with new eyes. So thank you for that suggestion."

"No problem," Adrien assured her. "I'm just glad that you've gotten out of the designer's block. It didn't look like fun."

"Not at all," Marinette agreed. "And I wasn't helping things along at all by over-thinking it. So, how was your day?"

Adrien told her about the drama that had broken out in the office as Marinette drew and asked questions whenever he paused for breath. By the end of the story, she had to put her pen down as she laughed.

"I just guess that's the danger in hiring two brothers to work in the same office," Adrien finished. "I'd be surprised that they haven't been fired yet, because they apparently bring their family problems into the office a few times a year, but they're really good at what they do. I think people just learn to ignore it."

"I can't believe that a grown man would threaten to tell their mom on his brother," Marinette chortled. "And while they were at work, too. It's funny, but that's just so unprofessional."

"It makes things awkward, too," Adrien admitted. "I had a few forms I had to run by one of them, but he was still stewing about the fight and about the boss telling them off. And then it turned out that it was a form that his brother was partially responsible for, too, and that practically set him off again."

"Did they get things figured out, though?" Marinette asked, picking her pen back up again. "Like, they aren't going to be all ticked at each other all week, are they?"

Adrien just shrugged. He honestly had no idea. His colleagues hadn't told him that much. He was just a temporary worker, and was treated as such. "I really don't know. I don't think they'll explode like that again because the boss really did tell them off, but unless they resolve things out of the office it could still be awkward."
"Pity," Plagg piped up. "I thought the fight was funny. All I needed was some popcorn, and I'd have a proper show to watch."

Adrien just rolled his eyes at the kwami. Plagg had just liked the fight because it had meant that the brothers were too ticked at each other to notice that their sandwiches had both been strangely devoid of cheese at lunch, and the distraction of the fight itself had meant that only Adrien had noticed him slipping into the break room.

"I hope that they won't explode again while I'm there, though," Adrien said. He stood up and wandered towards the kitchen to see what was there to eat. They had made a large pot of stir-fry the previous day, but he didn't really feel like eating it again right away. "I didn't get as much done as I wanted because the fight was really distracting and then I was a bit rattled. I lost probably an hour of work."

"I'm sure your boss won't blame you for that," Marinette assured him. "You've been working super-hard all summer, and of course unprofessional working conditions are going to affect you. You can't churn out the same amount of work every day, that's just unrealistic."

"I suppose."

"I suppose." Adrien ducked his head into the fridge. There were a lot of assorted leftovers, so maybe he should make shepherd's pie. That would be tasty. He started to gather up some of the things that he wanted to use. "I just don't like getting everything I wanted to get done finished."

"We don't do the same amount every day at Madam Rosalie's," Marinette continued. "I mean, if we have designer's block, then we might just spend the entire day whacking our heads against the desk until we get an idea. Or we can spend three days trying to re-draw the same skirt. I know office work isn't the same, but, like, not all forms are alike. Or something."

Adrien muffled a snicker at that.

"D'you want me to help?" Marinette asked as Adrien started to wash up potatoes. She craned her neck to see what he was doing. "What are you making?"

"Shepherd's pie, and don't worry, I've got this," Adrien assured her. "If you're on a roll with the design, then keep at it. This isn't that difficult to make."

"Does it have cheese?" Plagg wanted to know as Adrien got to work chopping. He floated over Adrien's shoulder, peering at the potatoes and at the leftovers Adrien had pulled out. "I don't see any cheese."

Adrien sighed, headed back to the fridge, and pulled out a round of Camembert so he could cut off a chunk for Plagg. Once his kwami was taken care of and no longer hovering over his shoulders trying to steal from their dinner, Adrien went back to work.

In the living room, Tikki turned on Marinette's music player, and the sound of Jagged's demos filled the apartment. Adrien bobbed his head along to the beat as he worked, and it felt like practically no time at all before he was sliding the pie into the oven and setting the timer.

"Dinner in forty-five minutes," Adrien announced as he flopped back onto the couch. "...ah, bugger. I suppose I should have made a salad or something to go with that."

"Just toss some strawberries on a plate and call it a day," Marinette suggested. Adrien laughed.

"I was trying to be a responsible adult, Mari!" Adrien protested, but he couldn't help but grin. "I was trying to make sure that we got our vitamins and whatnot, but noo, someone is trying to persuade me to just throw that out the window."
"Fruit is healthy!"

Adrien just shook his head, grinning. Marinette was right, of course, and it would be easier to just wash a few berries and toss them on a plate, but that didn't mean that he wasn't going to tease her about her lax approach to it.

Picking up his book, Adrien settled in on the couch. He opened it, but instead of reading he watched Marinette drawing at the table. Tikki danced around behind Marinette, prancing and twirling to the beat, and Marinette focused on her drawing. She looked gorgeous like this, relaxed and clearly enjoying herself as she designed. The summer dress she had picked out fit her perfectly, and it exposed her lovely freckled shoulders.

How Adrien had gotten so lucky to get such an amazing girlfriend, he didn't know. He could be himself around her without fear of rejection, the banter was amazing, and she was his best friend twice over. Marinette was brave and spirited and smart and creative, and she always ranged between cute and absolutely drop-dead gorgeous.

"Done!" Marinette announced. She turned around and grinned, holding up her tablet. "I love this! I'm saving it and then sending it to Jagged Stone right away for feedback."

"Congratulations!" Adrien exclaimed. He set his book aside (he hadn't read a word of it anyway) and crossed the room to examine the cover more closely. Like he had suspected from his earlier glimpse of the piece, it was absolutely stunning and had a play of colors that just made it pop. In his opinion, Jagged Stone would have to work super-hard to make the songs live up to the gorgeous cover's promise. "I'm sure Jagged will love it."

Marinette grinned. "He always does," she admitted. "He's never once had requests for changes of CD covers apart from that very first time, and that one hardly counts. I'm always glad when he likes what I did, especially since he never really gives me much direction."

"Right," Adrien agreed. He ducked down for a kiss. It lasted perhaps a little longer than strictly necessary, but then again there were absolutely no rules about limits on kissing time when the kissee was his girlfriend. Marinette leaned up to meet him, and Adrien deepened the kiss with a grin. It was an awkward angle, sure, but he wasn't about to let a little problem like a slightly sore neck (and a slight twinge in his back from being hunched in front of a computer all day) get in the way of his kissing.

"I'm looking forward to having my evenings free again," Marinette admitted once they separated. "I mean, I know I tended to kind of low-key design before when ideas came to me, but it was stuff for myself and I didn't feel like there was any sort of rush. And I like having commissions, but this one just took longer than I expected. Having done several covers for Jagged before hurt rather than helped, I think, because it's harder to come up with something different than what I've done for him before."

Adrien opened his mouth to respond, but was cut off by the timer in the kitchen going off and he glanced over at it with a frown. Was it time to take the pie out of the oven already? He must have spent more time staring at Marinette than he had thought.

Ah, well, it was time well spent.

Adrien headed off to the kitchen to pull the shepherd's pie out of the oven to cool slightly as Marinette quadruple-saved her design and then saved a copy in a file that she could send to Jagged Stone for approval. By the time their dinner had cooled enough to dig in without burning their mouths, Jagged had sent an email back singing her praises.
"Well, he's definitely happy," Adrien laughed, passing Marinette her plate. "Congrats, Bug. That's a job well done for sure."
Adrien was looking forward to a quiet evening of leftovers, cuddling with his girlfriend, and maybe a movie as he came home from work on Tuesday. It had been a long day- the brothers that had fought the previous day were still being frosty towards each other, and it made the entire workplace not quite as welcoming as usual- and Adrien was just glad it was over.

He stepped into his apartment and was greeted by the sight of his table draped in a gorgeous scarlet tablecloth and set for two, a vase of roses in the middle and candles set on either side of the flowers. A lovely smell came from the kitchen.

Adrien stepped inside, eyes wide. The light in the living room was dimmed slightly, and it gave the entire setting a romantic feel. A movement caught his eye, and Adrien turned in time to see Tikki flitting around, lighting small candles set around the tidied room.

Okay, a really romantic feel. Smiling, Adrien shut the door fully behind him. Tikki finally noticed him and abandoned her candle-lighting job to fly over. "Adrien! Marinette is next door, getting changed. She'll be back over soon."

"This is- wow," Adrien said, glancing around the room. He stepped towards the kitchen, curious. There were some delicious scents floating out, and he wanted to know what Marinette had made. There was definitely something sweet and chocolate-y, but he couldn't place exactly what it was or what else Marinette might have made for dinner- for their date, because there was no denying that that was what this was. "Marinette is amazing. I can't wait to see what she made-"

"But you will wait!" Tikki insisted, flying in front of Adrien and pushing at his chest. "Marinette said that you aren't allowed to look yet. Go clean up and then wait until she comes back!"

Adrien went.

"Ugh, now I'm going to have to put up with your soppiness all evening," Plagg complained as Adrien stripped out of his work clothes and started digging through his closet in search of clothes that would be suitable for a date, since that was apparently what Marinette was planning. "All that kissing and cuddling and ew."

"Can I just send you over to Mari's apartment with some cheese?" Adrien asked as he picked out a green button-up that complimented his eyes. "You could just stay over there overnight."

"And then get forgotten in the morning and have to starve all day? No thanks!"

Adrien could only sigh.

It didn't take long to put on a clean pair of black slacks and a fresh button-up and to slip on a pair of dressy shoes, and then Adrien spent several minutes in front of the mirror in the bathroom making sure that his hair looked good. As he finished, he could hear the front door open and close again, followed by the sound of Marinette's voice as she talked to Tikki.

Grinning, Adrien headed out to meet his girlfriend. He didn't get far before he caught sight of her and promptly stopped dead in his tracks, jaw dropping to the floor.
Marinette giggled.

"You can't just spring a dress like that on me with no warning, my Lady," Adrien managed once he picked his jaw off of the floor. "Wow."

"I've been saving it," Marinette admitted. "I found it in my closet over Christmas last year and just had to bring it back, even if I didn't know where I would wear it." She shrugged sheepishly, smiling at him. "Now just seemed the perfect time."

Adrien wasn't entirely certain that his heart had restarted. He was still a bit stuck on the way that Marinette's scarlet dress clung to her like a glove. And the skin... oh, the skin...

He was 97% percent positive that Marinette was trying to kill him. That certainty inched up to 100%- no, 130%- when Marinette turned around to lead the way into the living room.

How she had achieved that body-hugging fit with a back that low, Adrien had no clue. But he wasn't about to complain.

Adrien eagerly followed Marinette into the living room. All of the candles were lit now, bathing the room in a soft glow. As he glanced around, Adrien noticed that there were rose petals scattered around as well.

"I wanted to go really romantic," Marinette explained, twining her arm through his. "So I thought of the time you set up all of those candles and rose petals on the balcony, and I tried to do the same. Are you ready for dinner?"

Adrien nodded, and eagerly followed her directions to sit. Marinette scooted into the kitchen, and soon emerged with two bowls of her great-uncle's famous soup. A second trip to the kitchen, and she came back with a basket of bread.

"This must have taken all afternoon to make!" Adrien exclaimed as she set a plate down in front of him for the bread and then settled into the seat next to him. "You're amazing, Marinette."

Marinette shrugged, pleased smile playing at the corners of her lips. "I thought we could use a proper date- well, as proper as we can get while we're still in London! I used some of my time off to take the afternoon off to prepare everything."

"I love you," Adrien blurted out. Seriously, how had he ended up with someone so amazing? She had gone absolutely above and beyond to make the evening special. Somehow, she had managed to transform his plain old apartment into something practically magical.

Maybe they had only been together-together for a few months, but Adrien was positive that he was going to marry this woman.

"I love you too, chaton," Marinette told him. The soft smile she sent his way made Adrien melt. "Ready to eat?"

Adrien could only nod eagerly as he dug into the meal. Wang Cheng had clearly taught Marinette well, because the soup was every part as delicious as he remembered.

They were halfway through the meal before Tikki and Plagg showed up again. Plagg made a beeline for a buttered chunk of bread on Adrien's plate, while Tikki settled by some candles nearby. She didn't look happy, and Adrien had to wonder if she maybe had been meant to keep Plagg out of the way throughout the entire thing. He wasn't too bothered about it- not having Plagg nearby felt weird at this point, anyway, and he probably would have started wondering what his
kwami was up to and if he was getting into any mischief without supervision soon if the two of them hadn't shown up.

"If we hadn't gotten spotted last time, I would have suggested going out on a run after dessert," Marinette said as she passed Adrien a lovely slice of chocolate cake. Tikki wriggled excitedly as she got her own thin, kwami-sized slice of the cake. "But the moon is practically full and the sky is clear, so it wouldn't be safe to go out. I guess that staying in is good, too."

"Any time I spend with you is time well spent," Adrien promised, catching Marinette's hand and pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "Purr-haps we can do a date like this next time we're back in Paris... whenever that is."

"It might not be until Christmas," Marinette admitted. "I might go back some weekend for a visit, but I have enough going on here that I'm not going back to visit as often as I thought I would." She let out a frustrated sigh. "I miss my parents, but they're always busy with the bakery when I go home for a weekend and we only end up getting an evening to be properly together."

"I might end up going back some weekend to do a fall photoshoot for my father, but even if you came back at the same time there's no promises that I wouldn't be too busy to do anything," Adrien said with a sigh. So much for his idea. Realistically, he knew that it would be impossible to plan anything with Marinette without Nathalie knowing about it first, and if he had a chunk of time free then he would also want to see Nino and Alya. "Since now I've been cramming my photoshoots in to a couple days, it means I'd either be getting fitted or in a shoot all day. And I suppose that just some weekend would be a kind of random time for the two of us to show back up in Paris again- as superheroes, I mean."

Marinette made a face but nodded. "Yeah. Ugh, that's annoying. And here I was thinking that it would be easier for us to date in public as superheroes. I can't believe I forgot the whole identity thing."

"Speaking of which..." Adrien started, suddenly reminded of something, and the kwamis both turned to look at him. "I was just thinking about it today, and I can't believe it took us so long to figure each other out after we ran into each other as Ladybug and Chat Noir! One would think that we would put the pieces together, but of course not. I was even considering asking if you wanted to do a reveal so that we could coordinate nights out better, but then we just always went out at the same time."

"I asked about doing a reveal after you mentioned that you had seen me going past your window," Marinette admitted, and Adrien's eyes went wide in surprise. "But Tikki said no."

"What? Why?"

Marinette blinked and then turned to her kwami with one eyebrow raised. "You know, I don't actually know why. Tikki, care to explain why you discouraged me from telling Chat Noir anything?"

Tikki looked positively sheepish as she stuffed a large chunk of cake in her mouth so that she wouldn't have to speak. Neither Adrien nor Marinette were going to back down, though, so finally Tikki swallowed and sighed. "Okay, okay! I just wanted to see how the reveal would go down without you two revealing to each other on purpose. Besides, it was funny! You two were making excuses to each other to run off and see- well, each other!"

"I think Plagg's rubbed off on her too much," Adrien whispered to Marinette as she stared at her kwami. "'Because it was funny' is such a Plagg reason for doing things."
"Besides, it all turned out fine!" Tikki added. A smear of frosting decorated her cheek. "You two found each other even without any help from the kwamis!"

"We figured it out because Plagg forgot to check and see if I had company before barging in demanding cheese," Adrien corrected her dryly. "We didn't just, y'know, spontaneously piece things together."

Tikki just pouted.

"Well, I'm glad we're good entertainment for the kwamis, at least," Marinette said. She set her empty plate to the side and smiled up at him. "So, what else do you want to do? A movie?"

Adrien grinned, reaching over and pulling Marinette into his lap. His hands itched to explore the bare back presented to him by Marinette's marvelous dress. "Oh, I'm sure we can find something to do for the rest of the evening..."

Plagg gagged loudly.

Lazy weekends with Marinette were the best, Adrien decided the last Saturday afternoon in August as he munched on the cookie he had gotten from the kitchen. Maybe they weren't doing a whole lot while they were together, but they could just near close by and enjoy each other's company and maybe nap in the sun. Adrien was just on his way back to the couch with his prize to do just that when a familiar logo on one of Marinette's letters caught his eye and he wandered over to check it out.

"Is that from apartment management?" Adrien asked curiously, bending over to look at the piece of mail on top of Marinette's table. "Are you having maintenance done or something? I haven't gotten any letters from them."

"It's a reminder that I have to renew my lease for next year," Marinette said, glancing over at him from the couch. "I'll do that tomorrow, I just haven't had time recently. My schedule hasn't lined up at all with the landlady's."

"Shouldn't you have already resigned the lease?" Adrien asked, frowning. "You came over here early summer last year. I've already done mine, since Nathalie had my place on hold for a couple months before I came over here."

Marinette laughed at that. It was a reasonable assumption, but she had just gotten a strange arrangement for her apartment in the first place. "I was actually subleasing my apartment for several months before I signed my lease. Some university student had had it and of course their lease ran through the end of the summer, but they had already gotten a job in another city and didn't need this place. So I rented from them over the summer, and then had things set up with the landlady so I would keep the apartment after the previous person's lease ran out."

Adrien looked pensive. "Huh."

"I got lucky, really," Marinette continued. "Abbey- you remember Abbey, right?- she wanted to get into this building, but apartments don't open often. And she's had terrible luck with when openings do come up, because they never line up with when her lease at her current place expires at all and her contract doesn't let her sublease, even if she could find someone to sublease to."
"That stinks," Adrien sympathized, making a face. "And of course she wouldn't want to be paying for an apartment that she wasn't using. Couldn't she coordinate with an outgoing intern? I thought Madam Rosalie said that a lot of her workers live here."

"She's tried," Marinette told him. "But the people leaving most recently that she knew didn't live here." She shrugged. "I'm sure she'll get in soon enough."

Adrien looked pensive, even as he nodded and turned back to his book. Marinette thought that the conversation was over, but that wasn't quite the case.

"We've been spending pretty much all of our time off work together," Adrien started a bit hesitantly as they finished dinner that evening and cleared their plates off the table and into the kitchen. He was looking nervous for some reason, fiddling with his Miraculous as he spoke. "And you've spent pretty much every night since we started dating over here."

"Right," Marinette agreed, brow furrowing in confusion. She really wasn't sure where Adrien was going with this, or why he was so fidgety. Normally it meant that he was uncomfortable or uncertain, but nowadays Adrien was rarely uncomfortable around her. "...what about it?"

Adrien swallowed, looking even more nervous as he reached up to rub the back of his head. "I, um- I was wondering if, instead of renewing your lease, if you wanted to move in with me."

Marinette froze. Part of her- the teenaged, very excitable part- was screaming yes, yes yes! The other part of her wasn't quite so sure.

"I mean, I don't want to pressure you!" Adrien assured her quickly when Marinette didn't respond right away. She could see his expression drop a little bit, his expression closing off marginally. She had known him for long enough- and well enough- to read him well, even when he went into model-mode and controlled his expressions. "I mean, it was just an idea, I don't want to make you feel like you need to say yes or anything, just-"

"You aren't pressing me," Marinette assured Adrien, reaching out to take his hands as she cut across his sudden stream of babbling. "And it's not like I don't appreciate the offer, Adrien. It's just..." Marinette trailed off, biting her lip.

Adrien's expression dropped and his gaze fell to the floor. "You don't want to, it's fine."

"No, I-" Marinette cut herself off, frustrated. "As much as I would like to, I don't think it's a good idea, at least not right now."

Adrien's gaze flashed back to her.

"We just started officially dating, Adrien," Marinette reminded him. "Only a couple months ago. I think it's a little early to be moving in with each other."

Adrien's expression shifted to puzzled, which was much better than the downtrodden expression he had been trying to hide before. "But we basically live together anyway- we cook together and eat together, and you sleep over here more often than you sleep in your own flat."

That...was true. "But we still have our own spaces if we need them," Marinette said, remembering the advice her mother had given her when she moved to London. Marinette hadn't been planning on getting a boyfriend while she was out of the country (nor had she been planning on staying for more than a year; she was going to get her work experience and move back to Paris, that was the plan and she was going to stick to it), but Sabine wanted to prepare her for anything she might
encounter. One of the things she said—well, besides warning against rushing into a serious relationship or letting a boy get in the way of her internship experience—was that even if she was sure that she loved someone and thought that they would get along well, sharing an apartment with only one bedroom was only asking for trouble when the relationship was young.

Adrien looked slightly taken aback, though he was clearly trying to hide it. "In case we break up, you mean?"

"No, nothing that serious!" Or, rather, possibly. Neither of them had ever dated before, after all—while they had seen other couples and how they acted, that was hardly a substitute for actual experience, which both of them were completely and utterly lacking. It was completely possibly (but not probable, in Marinette's opinion) that they would fight and fall apart for some stupid reason. They would probably make up again, if that happened—they were best friends, after all, and they definitely got along well—but in the hours or days that it took for them to cool down, having to share a one-bedroom apartment would only make things worse, not better. "Just, like, if we get in an argument, or if you need to study and I'm having to brainstorm out loud, it would really be nice to have the separate spaces."

Adrien's kicked kitten look didn't go away completely, and Marinette sighed. "It's advice my mother gave me," she admitted, sliding her chair closer to Adrien as she spoke. "Even if we hung out together all of last year, she told me that people tend to have slightly different expectations for relationships than they did for friendships, even if they don't realize it. I think it would be better if we got used to being, y'know, dating, before we make any permanent moves."

Adrien's face finally cleared. "So it would be to, like, ease the transition?"

"Exactly." Marinette scooted even closer so she could snuggle up to Adrien's side and much to her relief, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Next year at this time, I'm sure I would say yes. But not right now."

"Is that what your parents did?" Adrien asked after a moment. "The living apart for a bit, I mean."

Marinette nodded, remembering what her mother had said. Even if Marinette hadn't thought that she would need to use her mother's advice while she was in London, that didn't mean that she hadn't listened. "They waited two and a half years, actually. And then they got a two-bedroom apartment, and they each had their own designated bedroom. They shared a room most of the time, of course, but if they needed to they had somewhere they could go to be alone for a little while. It was more expensive, of course, but they said that there were a few times when it probably saved their relationship."

"Okay, I can see where that's smart," Adrien admitted. "I know Nino has said before that he's glad his and Alya's families are nearby, because one of them can go back home for some distance if they have a fight or something."

"And we don't exactly have that here," Marinette reminded him. "I mean, maybe I could go to Sarah's apartment or something and sleep on her couch if we had a fight, but that would require actually telling her that we were dating and sharing an apartment. And that wouldn't work for more than a couple nights."

"Right, of course. I just hadn't considered that before I asked you." He gave a small wince, feeling a bit bad about how pouty he had been about the perceived rejection. "Sorry about that."

"It's fine. I'm glad we had a conversation about it, at any rate." Marinette grinned. "My parents always said that communication is the most important thing in a relationship."
"I'm glad that we're doing well with that so far, then." Adrien dropped a kiss onto Marinette's crown. "Any other relationship advice from your parents? They certainly know what they're talking about. They've been married for almost thirty years now, right?"

Marinette nodded. "Yeah, they have." She paused, thinking back to the advice that her parents had given her. "I mean, most of the advice they gave me was, like, how not to get into a bad relationship and the signs of a toxic relationship. Which, I mean, it's important to know and all, but..." She trailed off with a gesture. "Somehow, I don't think we'll have that issue."

Adrien nodded and beamed down at her, and Marinette felt her heart skip a beat. He was still too cute for his own good.

"My parents also said that it's important for people to have a lot in common," Marinette added, remembering that particular conversation. "That it's important to have some different interests, of course, but it's easier to find things to do together if people have common interests."

Adrien grinned. "Let's see...we both love video games and Jagged Stone's music. I'm at least somewhat interested in fashion, especially when it's you doing the designing-"

"Flirt," Marinette grumbled, though she couldn't hide the grin on her face.

Adrien pressed a kiss to her forehead, just because he could. "Always. We're both superheroes. We're both decent cooks, although the finer points of baking still elude me, though that's fine because I adore your baking."

Marinette giggled. "You'll learn eventually. You pick up on stuff fast."

"We have similar cleaning habits, we have the same friends... Mari," Adrien said, suddenly serious as he turned to her. "We're actual clones of each other."

Marinette snorted and almost choked on the water she had been drinking. She emerged dripping and still snickering. "Adrien!"

"What? It's the truth!"

"We are not clones," Marinette insisted with a laugh. "For one, I don't have a ridiculous sense of humor like you do."

"Try again," Adrien teased, tickling her sides until she squealed. "You laugh at my jokes, I know you do. You're not as good at hiding your smiles as you seem to think."

"I don't understand Physics at all," Marinette said instead of continuing to argue the point. Adrien grinned at the small victory but didn't gloat. Instead, he nodded solemnly.

"Ah, yes, I know. Otherwise, you would be able to understand the true gravity of your beauty."

Predictably, Marinette could only groan loudly.

Despite Marinette's talk about keeping her own apartment so they could each have their own space, they rarely used it. She still slept over every night, and it seemed like more and more of her clothes were migrating over to live in Adrien's drawers and closet.

He didn't mind at all. In fact, he tidied up his dresser even more so Marinette could have a few
drawers all to herself and he moved all of his things over to one side of the closet so she would have space there, too.

"I would have thought that you would have more clothes," Marinette admitted when she saw what he had done. "You only take up half a closet? Really? Even though your father is a designer?"

"I'm starting to be worried about how much space your clothes take up." Adrien joked. "But yeah, only half a closet. I mean, I didn't bring everything, of course. I've got loads more clothes at home. But I figured that I didn't need everything. I wouldn't get around to wearing it all." He chanced a glance at her. "...so, uh, how much space does your wardrobe take up?"

Marinette looked a little sheepish. "Now, after the trips I've done home to Paris? We might need to look into finding a wardrobe at a thrift store or something and using that, too once I move fully over here. Either that or I'll have to put out-of-season things in storage."

Adrien did his best not to laugh.

The two of them had also long since given up the idea of trying to keep their shopping and cooking separate. It was too hard to keep track of who had what ingredients and then where the leftovers were when they tried to keep things separate. Besides, combining their pantries meant that mid-week grocery runs could be kept to a minimum, and their weekend trips to the store were a whole lot more enjoyable when they both went.

"I swear, by the time I memorize where everything is in this store it'll be time to go back to Paris," Marinette said with a laugh as they turned around and headed back up the aisle they had just come out of. "You would think that between the two of us we would be able to remember where everything is, but no such luck."

"I think we just distract each other and that's why we always miss stuff," Adrien teased. "I swear I don't have to go back as often when I do the shopping on my own."

Marinette gasped, pressing a mock-scandalized hand to her chest. "Why Adrien, are you insinuating that I'm distracting?"

"You know you are," Adrien said without missing a beat. "Such a distracting Bug."

From inside of Adrien's jacket, Plagg let out a soft gagging sound. Adrien was about to ignore him and ramp up the flirting instead- even if they were out in public, people were shopping, not paying them any attention- when an unfortunately familiar face caught his eye. Promptly, Adrien froze.

"We gotta split up," Adrien hissed frantically, steering Marinette further up the aisle where the tabloid reporter Adrien had just spotted (and how did they run into them so often? Was London just overrun with tabloid reporters like rats?) wouldn't notice them. "I can take the second half of the list, if you want."

"Wait, are you serious?" Marinette asked in confusion. She twisted and frowned back at Adrien as he hurried her up the aisle. "I thought you were kidding about the whole being a distraction thing!"

"I was- well, mostly," Adrien corrected himself. "But I just spotted one of the tabloid reporters from one of the more pesky magazines. She's just out shopping, but if she sees us..."

"She would probably make a giant deal out of us grocery shopping together," Marinette finished. She made a face. "Ugh. That sounds so lame and paranoid but some of those magazines totally
Welcome to the life of a very minor celebrity," Adrien joked through gritted teeth. "The life of a very minor celebrity on a slow news day, that it. Imagine what it would be like if anyone ever found out about our, ah, extra-curricular activities back in Paris!"

Marinette shuddered. "I'd rather not imagine that, thanks. That would be awful! We would never get any rest." She glanced down at the list. "Here, you take everything after the cereal. Maybe we'll be able to check out together still, but if not then I'll see you back at the apartment.'

Adrien nodded, took the offered part of the list, and hurried off to get a basket. At least he would be the one paying for all of Plagg's cheese with the list divided like this.

"You're not shopping with your wife anymore?" Plagg asked, popping his head out of Adrien's jacket as he snagged a basket and quickly headed towards the dairy section of the store. "Oh, goodie. No more flirting! You were making me sick."

"We were not," Adrien countered, keeping his voice low so no one would give him any funny looks. "And she's not my wife yet, Plagg. You know that."

Plagg muttered something indistinguishable and vanished back into Adrien's jacket.

As he whizzed through the rest of the shopping trip, Adrien kept an eye out for the reporter he had seen earlier. He spotted her a few times, and each time he quickly headed up whatever aisle was closest. It made what should have been a very normal shopping trip incredibly stressful, and by the time Adrien checked out and started heading back to the apartment building, Adrien was starting to wonder if it was really worth it to keep their relationship a secret.

Sure, maybe their relationship would get plastered all over the tabloids and they might get hounded for a couple weeks until everyone figured out that they were cute but boring, and his father would be upset, but Adrien just wanted to be able to go on a shopping trip like normal.

"I know what you're thinking kid, and I wouldn't do it," Plagg warned as Adrien headed into the apartment building. "You and Marinette already discussed it, remember? You're trying to not tick off your father right now."

Adrien let out a huff and didn't answer. It sometimes seemed that most everything he did ticked off his father in some way, so what was one more thing? Still, Plagg was probably right.

Marinette was already in his apartment, busy unloading bags and putting things away. Tikki was trying to help and failing miserably, since most of the things they had bought were far too heavy for her to lift. Adrien laughed and caught the orange Tikki was trying to carry before she could topple off the counter and then dove into the nearest bag to help with the unpacking.

It looked like Marinette had gotten the lion's share of things to carry. Clearly it hadn't bothered her-if she had thought that she had too much to carry, she would have just waited for him outside the grocery store or somewhere on the route back to their building- but Adrien wasn't going to make her put everything away, too.

"Say, I don't remember chocolate being on our list," Adrien said after a few minutes. He held up the bag and raised an eyebrow at Marinette. "Last-minute addition?"

She reached out to take the bag from him. "Yup. I thought we could make cookies."

Adrien couldn't stop the grin from spreading across his face. "I love you."
"I love you, too." Marinette rolled up onto her toes to press a kiss to his lips. "But first, we have to finish unpacking the groceries. Pass the milk, please."

By the time the cookies made it into the oven, Adrien was in dire need of some sugar. His father had called him up—well, Nathalie had called him up, and then put his father on once she had gotten Adrien on the line—and spent a large chunk of time nagging on about Adrien doing menial office work in London instead of coming back to Paris for the summer instead to be at Mr. Agreste's back and call for fittings, photoshoots, and commercial shootings. He had then complained about Adrien's chosen major for another chunk of time, and then ended the call with reminders on how Adrien was expected to behave in London, because apparently Mr. Agreste hadn't learned anything at all from the prank.

"There must have been some article again," Marinette said once Adrien hung up, looking utterly exhausted. "Or maybe he's getting nervous with the start of the fall semester getting closer, if he thought that you would quit sooner."

"It's enough to make me not want to move back to Paris once I've finished here," Adrien grumbled, flopping onto the couch. "I mean, I don't want to let him control me that way, by driving me away from Paris, but... I just worry that he'll think he can control me more when I'm closer."

"Eh, he's bound to accept that you're your own person eventually," Plagg piped up helpfully from where he was. "Maybe it won't be until you've finished your degree and have a permanent job and your own apartment in Paris, but I bet you can out-stubborn him."

Adrien groaned. He would be in school for two years more, and right now that felt like forever to have to deal with his father's temper tantrums. At least he hadn't decided to go to a university in Paris. The distance between Paris and London at least provided a little bit of a buffer.

"Don't let him get you down," Marinette said, patting his arm as she curled up next to him on the couch. She nuzzled into his side. "Remember, now that you're an adult, all he is is hot air. He can complain and bluster, but you're in control, kitty cat."

"Right." Adrien let out a long breath, trying to let the negativity out. He was far from his father, following his own chosen major, Hawkmoth was defeated, and he had his girlfriend—his long-time love—at his side. And there were lovely chocolate-chip cookies in the oven. Even if his father insisted on being awful and inconsiderate, life was still good.

From there, the day just got better. Adrien ate far more cookies than was strictly a good idea (both he and Tikki got a scolding from Marinette after they burned their mouths on too-hot cookies just out of the oven), he and Marinette tried to learn how to dance around his living room under Tikki's instruction, and then they cooked dinner together.

It didn't miss Adrien's attention that Marinette had picked out his favorite meal from the week's menu to prepare that night. She really was the best.

Several hours and more than a few rounds of Mega Strike 3 later, the two of them went to bed. As they drifted off together peacefully, Adrien's arms draped over the woman he loved, he knew that together, they could do anything.

Adrien was rudely awakened at six twenty-three by a loud shriek less than a meter away. He jolted upright, years of fighting setting his nerves ablaze, and he positive flew out of bed, eyes scanning the room for the source of the sound.
He found Marinette clutching her phone, staring at the screen and looking incredibly excited. Tikki was floating by her shoulder, rubbing tired eyes with her little paws.

"What's going on?" Adrien asked, puzzled. He rounded the bed to join her, yawning as he went. "Marinette?"

"Jagged Stone's assistant emailed me!" Marinette exclaimed. "She says that some people he knows- other musicians- they want me to make their album art, too!"

Adrien grinned at her. "Really? Congratulations, Marinette! That's so cool!" It was great that Marinette could keep making connections with people that could really get her well-known and a great asset to whatever label she ended up joining. It meant that she would have a wider range of fashion companies wanting her, so she could pick and choose the job that she wanted to be associated with in the long run instead of having to settle with whatever she could get.

Adrien was of the opinion that Marinette was far too talented to settle.

"Yeah! I hope I can get them all what they want." Marinette was grinning widely now. "Oh, wow, I wasn't expecting another Jagged Stone cover, let alone having other musicians wanting me to design covers as well. I'm not- I'm not even a proper artist or anything, I'm a fashion designer-

"You're an artist," Adrien corrected, smiling and wrapping his arms around Marinette's waist. He pressed a quick kiss to the top of her head. "Just because you chose to focus more on the fashion design aspect doesn't mean you aren't an incredibly talented artist. And you understand the music and you understand color and just... you're amazing, Marinette. Of course people would want you to design things for them."

"It's just hard to believe," Marinette admitted, putting her phone back down on her nightstand and wriggling around in Adrien's arms so she could cuddle into his chest. "Like, I'm only just starting out in fashion and design, yet I got an internship right out of university and now I'm designing album covers for famous musicians and designing fabrics from scratch and- it's just a lot, you know? I always hoped I was good enough to make it, but most people don't. I got an email from one of my old classmates a couple weeks ago and it seems like a lot of people are working other jobs during the day, like at a grocery store or pizza place or in an office, and then they're trying to design stuff to sell online during the time they aren't working. It makes me feel a bit guilty sometimes, you know? Like, how did I get so lucky?"

"Well, you're talented," Adrien pointed out, hugging her close. "Your design aesthetic seems to be one that sells easily. You work hard. It's not like opportunities just fall into your lap."

Marinette made a bit of a face at that. "They kind of do, though? Like, not everyone has the chance to design sunglasses or album covers for rock stars. And that was kind of what set me apart when I was applying to design school, and then again when I was applying for internships."

"So you've had some unique opportunities and took advantage of them," Adrien pointed out. He wasn't going to let Marinette get down on herself like that, not when she was amazing and talented and deserved all of the opportunities she got. And she had done amazing work even when she was protecting the city as Ladybug, which meant it was even more amazing. "Some people could have had the same opportunity and had it go nowhere. They could have just found something in a shop and called it a day."

Marinette cringed and ducked her head at that. "That was what I did at first, actually. I, uh, was a little jealous about Chloe getting to hang out with you while I was out running around, so I bought the first pair of Eiffel Tower-adorned sunglasses I spotted. Jagged hated them. It was only after that
when I thought about designing them myself."

"And some people would have quit after that," Adrien said firmly. "I know I would have, probably. We weren't being paid to do the work in the hotel. Or I would have found the person who normally did those sorts of runs for celebrities and just accompanied them. I don't know why they didn't have you do that, actually. Literally everyone else except Chloe and I were just shadowing a normal worker."

"Maybe that person was off," Marinette suggested. "Or Mr. Bourgeois was still really flustered from Jagged showing up and forgot to call up the normal runner for me to work with."

Adrien grinned as he remembered just how shaken Chloe's father had been after he finally got Jagged Stone settled in. He had quickly retired to a private room after ensuring that Chloe had entered everything into the computer correctly, and Adrien and Chloe had spotted a cook bringing a tray with wine on it into the room just a short while later. Chloe had been worried, but Adrien rather thought that Mr. Bourgeois deserved the stress. After all, he had been very rude to Jagged Stone before Chloe told him who Jagged was. There was no need to be so mean to anyone just because they weren't famous or rich, and it was honestly surprising that Mr. Bourgeois' attitude hadn't lost business for the hotel.

"Oh, this is going to take up my evenings again and I won't get to spend that time with you!" Marinette suddenly said. She was pouting again, and Adrien did his best to refrain from commenting about how adorable she looked with the pout and her messy hair. "That was the only thing I didn't like about doing Jagged Stone's commission. It felt like I was just ignoring you."

"You weren't," Adrien assured her. "I had my own things to do while you were designing. And we can't be doing stuff together 100% of the time anyway, that's just not realistic. I'll be starting up classes again soon enough and I'll probably be studying or working on projects during the evening a lot."

"Maybe we just need to decide on a time when we'll be done for the night, unless there's exams or last-minute project deadlines or something," Marinette suggested. "Then we can make sure we have some time to spend together every night. It'll keep my work from encroaching on our us time too much."

"I think that's a good idea," Adrien agreed, squeezing Marinette tight again and pressing another kiss to her forehead. There was a pause, then Adrien yawned and glanced over at the clock. It was still ridiculously early, not even seven o'clock on a Sunday.

"So..." Adrien started, a little hesitantly. "I know you're probably super-excited right now and everything- and congratulations, by the way, if I forgot to say it before- but can we go back to bed for a bit first before we have a celebratory breakfast?"

Chapter End Notes

......plot what plot. More domestic fluff though, so.....there's that?
As the summer and Adrien's job finally drew to a close, Adrien made one last push to try to get all of his filing done. That meant a week of early mornings, and a lot of whiny, sleepy girlfriend when he first got up.

"Nooooo," Marinette complained as Adrien rolled over to try to get out of bed. Sleepy arms latched around his waist. "Air's too cold. Stay in bed."

Adrien smothered a laugh and scooted back under the covers to try to pry Marinette's arms open. She refused to budge. "I have to go in, Mari. C'mon, let go of me."

"Noooooo."

"Marinette."

Marinette's arms tightened, pulling him back several centimeters. Adrien suspected that she was anchoring herself somehow, because otherwise she would be the one moving. "Bed's too cold without you."

Adrien snorted, letting himself slide up next to Marinette for a few moments more. He couldn't deny that the thought of staying with Marinette for a bit longer was a tempting idea. "Right, right. And then what do I tell my boss when I'm late and can't finish up my filing, hmm?"

Marinette didn't answer, only snuggled into his side more.

"I don't think my boss would be impressed if I told her that my neighbor wasn't letting me out of bed."

Marinette snorted, wriggling to get comfortable on top of him. "That makes it sound like some random person you barely know broke in and sat on top of you to trap you in bed."

Adrien gave the top of her head an amused pat. "Well, you are sitting on top of me."

"Not random though." Marinette yawned widely. "And I didn't break in."

"True enough."

"And I do know you pretty well."

"But you are trapping me." Adrien gave her arm another tug. "C'mon, Mari. Let me up. We can snuggle later."

Marinette groaned, slowly letting her grip loosen until Adrien could work his way free. There was a small pout on her face and Adrien couldn't help but grin and duck down to press a small kiss to her lips.

"You have to get up soon anyway," Adrien cajoled as he dug in his dresser for his clothes. Marinette had already buried herself again under the cover. "You won't get to sleep for that much longer."

"It's a whole hour," Marinette's voice said from under the cover. "Nope. Sleeping."

Adrien laughed and started to get dressed. It was amazing how fast he had gotten comfortable with
dressing and undressing with Marinette still in the room. He knew that Marinette wouldn't look if she knew he was in any state of undress, so there was no point in getting all shy about it.

Besides, it wasn't as if Marinette wasn't ever going to see him undressed at some point, considering how things were going. He really wasn't all that concerned about it. In fact, if she did decide to ever watch, he might put on a little show just to tease her. He would probably get a pillow to the rear for his efforts, but it would be fun.

"Didn't you use to get up earlier to go over to work?" Adrien asked as he straightened his shirt. "I remember going over to your apartment sometimes last fall and you would already be gone."

Marinette groaned and peered out from under the blanket at him grumpily. "Yeah, well, first year, first few months- I had to make a good impression. I'm, like, a senior intern now and I don't have to be so overeager. I can do a great job without coming in before most of the normal designers. Now shush and let me sleep."

Adrien just laughed and patted the sleepy girlfriend-lump in his bed before heading out to keep getting ready.

The day went by fast. Adrien spent most of the day plowing through paperwork, determined to get the pile down to nothing before he left so that the normal secretary wouldn't have to try to catch up on much once she returned from maternity leave. It helped that a lot of people had been on vacation and so not as many forms had been coming in for him to file as normal. He had nearly finished for the day when Nathalie called him.

Sighing, Adrien picked up his phone and answered, hoping that it was only Nathalie and not his father who wanted to speak with him. "Yes?"

"Adrien," Nathalie greeted. "I know this is last-minute, but do you think that you could come back to Paris for a photoshoot before your next semester starts?"

Adrien frowned. "I thought I already modeled fall stuff!" he protested. He was almost certain that the photoshoot that he had done at the very start of the summer had included a fair amount of fall outfits. After all, he had spent several hours baking in the summer sun while modeling long-sleeved looks.

He had heard of suffering for fashion before, of course, but he would rather it didn't involve his suffering.

"Yes, well, your father made some new things that he wants in the fall spread, and there's some early winter ads that he wants to get done." Nathalie sounded completely unconcerned by the dismay in his voice. "So do you finish up with your job early enough this week to come back to Paris? I can get the train tickets-

Adrien sighed, turning to his calendar. As much as he wanted to just refuse and tell Nathalie (and, by extension, his father) to just find a different model to use, it would be easier in the long run if he just agreed to the shoot. "I'm working through the end of this week, and then I'll need the weekend to get ready for the new semester and make sure that all of my books and everything are in order. But I suppose I can go back to Paris the first weekend after school starts again."

He didn't want to. He really didn't want to. Going back to Paris for a weekend meant a weekend where his father could complain about his life choices in person, should he actually choose to show up at any of the shoots or for dinner. But he wouldn't mind seeing Nino and Alya again, even if it was only for a short while, and Marinette had mentioned that she wanted to get her sewing
machine from Paris sometime to work on some of her own projects. He could fetch that while he was in Paris, so Marinette wouldn't have to make her own trip.

Unless she wanted to, of course, which was entirely possible. After all, she actually enjoyed seeing her own parents.

"Any chance of you coming back over your fall break this year?" Nathalie inquired. "Do you know yet? Does it line up with your friend's Fashion Week?"

"No, this year it's two weeks before my break," Adrien said automatically. He and Marinette had checked early this year so that they could be prepared. While the timing still wasn't the best, it seemed like it should be better than the previous year. "But we were thinking of going somewhere during my break. We hadn't decided on where yet, but she has vacation days saved up that she wants to use, and we want to explore the country."

"I don't suppose you would be interested in coming back to Paris?" Nathalie tried hopefully.

"Not a chance."

Thankfully, Nathalie didn't try to argue. "Very well. We wouldn't be able to put the full photoshoot off until then anyway." She paused. "...actually, do you think you could do two weekends in a row? One for fittings, one for the photoshoots? Otherwise, it's a whole lot to fit into one weekend."

Adrien made a face. He didn't really want to go back to Paris twice in one month. Even if he didn't have any specific plans in London, he, well...

He wanted to spend time with his girlfriend. So sue him.

"Of course, I understand if you'll be too busy at that point in the semester," Nathalie continued when Adrien didn't respond. "But it would be difficult to fit both fittings and photoshoots into the same weekend unless you could come over before mid-day on Friday."

"That sounds better," Adrien said immediately. He pulled out his phone to double-check on his schedule for Fridays to make sure that he was remembering it correctly. "I have two classes on Fridays, both lectures, and the second one ends at ten. I could probably make a noon or eleven thirty train."

"I'll book you for the eleven-thirty train," Nathalie decided. There was the sound of her clicking something on the computer. "And then back on Sunday night on the nine p.m. train, so you can have time to catch dinner with your friends before you leave Paris."

Adrien grinned. That was really nice of Nathalie to think of that. Hopefully his father wouldn't try to stick in an evening photoshoot on Sunday.

After ironing out a few more details (Adrien had to promise to have Marinette do his measurements so the seamstresses would have the absolute most up-to-date accurate measurements for his outfits), Nathalie hung up and Adrien dove back into his filing, hoping to finish the pile he was on before he took off for the day.

"Why didn't you just say no?" Plagg wanted to know, popping out of Adrien's bag. "Surely your father has other models. They're not exactly in short supply."

Adrien let out a huff. "Yeah, but sometimes it's better to choose my battles. It's one weekend, and I'll get to see Nino and Alya again for dinner, hopefully. It won't be any fun to have to do a ton of back-to-back fittings and photoshoots, but I'll manage."
"I better get cheese if I'll have to spend forever cooped up in your bag on the train for ages," Plagg grumbled. "Your bag smells."

"It does not, I just washed it," Adrien said automatically. He reached over the desk to grab a paper and squinted to read the writing on it. "It smells just fine. If anything, it just smells a lot like Camembert. And it wouldn't do that if you didn't leave crumbs all over."

Plagg just sulked.

The end of the summer came too fast and too slowly all at once. Adrien was glad to be done with office paperwork and glad to see Paul and his other uni friends on a more regular basis again, but now he had homework and readings and projects to take up his time. As expected, his coursework had picked up for his second year, and the concepts took a little more work and focus to understand. The professors also warned them that there would be more papers this year, something that worried Adrien. He had to write the papers in English, and it could sometimes take him quite a while to work out the grammar and to edit correctly. Writing research papers when he had to read published papers first was even harder, since it could take quite a lot of time to wade through the technical jargon in English.

In fact, Adrien already found himself hard at work all week to make sure that he would be on top of things and wouldn't have to do any homework over the weekend. In fact, he was spending more time in the evenings working on his assignments than Marinette was spending on her commissions.

At least he had a fantastic soundtrack to do his homework to in the evenings. Marinette had been sent several more demo tracks from the bands that had commissioned her, and they were pretty good.

"I don't understand why your wife decided not to come with you this weekend," Plagg said as he and Adrien rode the Eurostar back to Paris. "Doesn't she want to see her parents and Nino and Alya again?"

"She thinks that there would probably be a lot of speculation if we both went back to Paris the same weekend if there wasn't a holiday or something," Adrien said. He marked his place in his book so he wouldn't have to re-read the passage he had just waded through. "It makes sense that we would travel together when we go exploring and whatnot, but if we're just going back to Paris, then it starts to look like we don't want to be apart at all."

When Plagg didn't respond, Adrien went back to his book. He hadn't quite grasped the concept that his professor had introduced that morning, and he wanted to have a solid understanding before their next lecture on Monday. He only had a couple hours before he would be in Paris, and he was determined to make the most of them.

By the time the train pulled into Paris and Adrien hopped into the Gorilla's waiting car, he had read the section over twice and had done a few practice problems for good measure to make sure he was understanding and applying things correctly. He had his Physics section down, just in time to switch over to modeling instead.

The rest of Friday passed in a flurry of fittings. Things were nearly perfect- clearly the measurements Marinette had taken helped speed things along- and then Adrien got a slight haircut
before being shuffled off to an evening winter-themed photoshoot. By the time that was over, it was late and Adrien hadn't had a chance to eat more than a few bites in between shots.

"At least early-morning shots aren't a staple of fall and winter shoots," Adrien said with a sigh as he scarfed down his late dinner. Next to him, Plagg was loudly inhaling a round of Camembert. "I'll actually get to sleep. Not as much as I would at home, but I won't be woken up before the crack of dawn, at least."

Saturday was a mix of outdoor and indoor green-screen and set shoots. Adrien ate whenever he could, snitching bites during set restagings and whenever he had to wait for another model to finish getting ready. There was a proper break scheduled in for dinner- Adrien figured that he probably had Nathalie to thank, as his father usually didn't take things like food and breaks and rest into consideration when making schedules- but she was busy coordinating the photographers and makeup artists and hair team for the next round of sunset and evening shoots and wouldn't appreciate an interruption, even if it was to thank her.

By the time Sunday rolled around, Adrien was fairly certain that it would take a full week, if not longer, to get all of the product out of his hair. It had been brushed and styled and sprayed and re-brushed and re-styled and re-sprayed more times than he could count. A piece would start to slip marginally out of place and an army of stylists would immediately descend and spray it back into submission. His hair didn't even feel natural anymore.

Once he got back to London, he was going to have to hop straight in the shower.

Thankfully, everything was running on schedule under Nathalie's watchful eye. Everything seemed to be going right, and Adrien hoped that it would hold out for the entire day. He had made plans to join Alya and Nino for dinner at their apartment at six, so they would have a couple hours together before he had to swing past the Dupain-Cheng bakery to pick up Marinette's sewing machine and her sewing kit and then head straight to the train station.

He hadn't spotted his father at all weekend. Adrien wasn't certain if he was happy about that or not.

With the last photo snapped, Adrien only gave himself a few seconds to relax before he was dashing off to the changing room. He had to exchange a few pleasantries with the other models before they let him go and he dashed off to get in the car. His small suitcase for the weekend was already stashed in the trunk.

"Remember, you should be at the station by eight fifty at the very latest," Nathalie reminded him as the Gorilla pulled the car out into traffic. "If you want to stop by the bakery after your dinner, I would say you would have to leave your friends' apartment by eight or eight fifteen."

Adrien nodded. He would probably leave closer to eight, simply because a short visit with the Dupain-Chengs was a thing that really did not exist. He would probably leave with not only the sewing stuff, but a large bag of bakery leftovers as well.

Once he arrived at Nino and Alya's apartment, Adrien had only just stepped inside the outer door when he was nearly bowled over by Nino. His friend was grinning as he slapped Adrien's shoulder.

"Hey, model boy," Nino said with a grin. He squinted at Adrien. "Dude, is that eyeliner?"

"Hey, I had to look pretty for the pictures," Adrien said with a shrug. "Blond doesn't showcase the eyes that well, so I have eyeliner. And I came here directly from the shoot, so no judging."

"Aw, but where's the fun in that?" Nino asked as he lead Adrien up the stairs towards his
apartment. He grinned. "Seriously, it looks like your hair might just crunch if I touch it. Like, it looks fine from a couple paces back, but up close..."

"Yeah, it's lucky we don't do shots that focus on my hair," Adrien agreed. "It feels fake right now. They could have added in all sorts of hair extensions and I honestly wouldn't be able to tell anymore."

Nino laughed.

Alya already had dinner on the table when they got upstairs. She greeted Adrien cheerfully, wasting no time in joining Nino in teasing Adrien about his makeup and hair.

"Hey, we don't have that much time together," Adrien protested as Alya ruffled his very, very stiff hair. "So I didn't want to waste half of that time showering."

Alya snickered. "Really? You'd spend an entire hour showering? Your water bills must be horrendous. I suppose it's a good thing you and Marinette don't live together, or she would never get any time to shower herself."

"I have more stuff in my hair than I normally do," Adrien protested, deciding to ignore the jab about Marinette. "So therefore it would take longer to get out. I don't spend that much time in the shower."

Neither Nino nor Alya looked convinced.

"It's too bad Marinette didn't come back with you this weekend," Alya said as they dished up. "She hasn't been back to Paris for forever, it seems. But I heard that she has more commissions that she's working on!"

"That she does," Adrien confirmed with a grin. "Several sets of album art, and then one of the singers found out that Marinette sews, too, so she has a couple rocker outfits to make. She has this faux leather stuff all over now."

"Is she going to use the sewing machines at Madam Rosalie's for those outfits, then?" Alya wanted to know. "I thought she left her sewing machine in Paris because she thought it would be too bulky and heavy to bring to London."

"She did leave her machine originally, and I'm getting it before I go to the train station," Adrien told her, impressed that Alya would remember that. "Marinette let her parents know so they could gather everything up, since I'll be in a hurry. I brought a big suitcase back to Paris so I can pack her sewing machine into it so it'll be easier to carry." He grinned, remembering his bodyguard's expression when he saw Adrien with his largest suitcase packed for one weekend at the train station. "The sewing machine is packed in a box for travel, so I had to pick a really big suitcase so it would fit. The Gorilla was really confused when he first saw it, because he thought I packed a ton for just one weekend."

His friends laughed.

"So what are you up to now?" Nino asked him. "You're done with your job now, right? The filing one?"

Adrien nodded. "Yeah, thank goodness. It was all right for a job, but it just wasn't what I wanted to be doing. I'm just focusing on school right now and honestly, I don't know if I could do more at the same time. It's only the first week, but it's already obvious that it's gonna be a whole lot harder this year."
"So that means he's gonna be boring," Nino mock-translated, grinning when Adrien kicked him under the table. "What? You know that's true. You'll be all study, study, study."

"It'll only get worse my third year, or so I've heard," Adrien said. He shrugged. "I think this week was as hard as it was mostly because I had to get all of my homework done before the weekend, and because I had to get used to new professors. They have a different teaching style, most of them, and I need to figure out how to get the most out of their lectures and then it'll be easy. Easier, at least."

"You could ask older students about those professors," Nino suggested, then checked himself. "I mean, students who have been in the program for longer. Third year students."

That was a good idea, actually, and not something Adrien would have thought of himself. He wasn't used to having to ask for help in catching on to a professor's teaching style. Normally he was the one that other people came to for help. "It would just be a matter of finding those students. I'm not super-familiar with people outside of my classes and I can't exactly, like, just go up to other students at random and ask them if they've had a certain professor."

"Then go to the tutoring center or something," Alya told him. "They should have students that did really well in those classes there that could give you study tips or readings and stuff so you can stay top of your class- because I know you're a crazy student like that."

Adrien just shrugged. There was nothing wrong with him wanting to put his best foot forward in his classes. The better he understood the concepts the better he would do in his classes, sure, but it would also make it easier for him to understand stuff in the higher-level courses later on.

From there, Adrien got to hear about how Nino's DJing was going (apparently he was largely in between doing indie movie soundtracks at the moment), and about the articles Alya had been writing for the paper. She was finally getting to do articles with more substance instead of just fluff pieces, though as one of the youngest on staff she still had to do jobs like sorting through letters to the editor and small local interest pieces.

"It's busywork, really, "Alya told them with a huff. "And at least I don't have to go through all of the letters to the editor. The interns whittle it down some to get rid of the junk, and then when it's my turn, then I just narrow further so that the editor can just look through a few things before making the final selection."

"It's not as exciting as covering superheroes," Nino told Adrien in a stage whisper. "Most things aren't, though."

Adrien had to laugh at that. "I can see where stuff would be a little less exciting than what you did with the Ladyblog. But at least your dates and interviews don't get interrupted all the time by attacks. Paris is doing better with Hawkmoth gone."

"Yeah, but it's less exciting," Alya complained. "At least I have my research to do when it's a slow day. It's a lot of sifting through dead ends, but when I find something, then it can be really fun."

"Or really frustrating, if you can't find anything else about them," Nino added. He grinned at Adrien. "She forgets that I hear all her grumbling in the evenings when she'd found a potential historical user but can't find more than, like, two really vague sources."

"It's frustrating!" Alya defended herself. "I just get a feeling about someone, that they were probably a user, but there's no proof. And without proof, all I have is a folder of random normal heroes and people throughout history from all over the world."
"Do you contact historians then?" Adrien asked. "From those areas? I know for that the big ones you could find experts on that person, but maybe you could just find people who were just experts on that period of time. They might have access to other materials that you couldn't find online, stuff that wasn't translated. You might need to find a translator to contact some of them, though."

Nino looked a little nervous. "Uh, maybe we could hold off on hiring a translator," he suggested. "Just have a list of historians you want to contact and the language you would want to contact them in for your application packet. Otherwise I can see it getting really expensive really fast, and we don't exactly have a ton of extra money sitting around."

Alya pouted.

"I mean, if you can find someone who speaks one of those languages who's willing to do it for free- like, one of our friends- then go ahead," Nino said quickly. "But if you'll probably be able to have the newspaper pay for it, then we won't have to spend a ton on translator fees."

"I suppose," Alya grumbled. "I just hate dropping a lead like that. Or not dropping, but at least putting it aside for a bit. I just worry about forgetting about some of the things I've found," she told Adrien. "My research is a bit messy right now. There's a lot of information and a lot of research, but it's a mess. I really have to sit down and properly sort it some time."

"She's getting a filing cabinet for her birthday," Nino whispered in Adrien's year when Alya hopped up to go refill her glass. "And oodles of folders and other organizing stuff. Maybe it's a boring gift, but she needs it right now."

Adrien just grinned.

The rest of their time flew by far too fast, and then Adrien was hugging his friends good-bye and heading out to the waiting car. The Gorilla drove him straight to the Dupain-Cheng bakery and Adrien hopped out, grabbing his ridiculously large suitcase from the back.

His clothes were going to be a wrinkled mess by the time he got back to London, with the amount of flopping around they were doing in his suitcase, but that hardly mattered. He'd have to wash them once he got back home either way.

"Remember, you only have thirty minutes with them before we have to go to the station," Nathalie reminded Adrien as he made to go up to the front door. "So don't linger too long."

"Of course."

It didn't take long for Tom to answer the door after Adrien pressed the doorbell. The large man grinned when he spotted Adrien, and as soon as the door was open, Tom enveloped Adrien in a hug.

"Adrien, son! It's good to see you," Tom said. He gave Adrien one last friendly squeeze before releasing him. "It's too bad Marinette couldn't come back for the weekend with you. Is she busy with work?"

"Adrien, son! It's good to see you," Tom said. He gave Adrien one last friendly squeeze before releasing him. "It's too bad Marinette couldn't come back for the weekend with you. Is she busy with work?"

"Work and commissions," Adrien agreed. He stepped inside the door so Tom could wave to Nathalie and the Gorilla before closing the door and leading the way upstairs. "She's working hard, making connections and whatnot. If she's ever between design jobs, she'll be able to get enough commission work to support herself, I think. And it'll look amazing on her resume, of course."

"She's done very well for herself," Tom said proudly. "Sabine and I had initially been concerned when Marinette wanted to become a fashion designer, since it's such a competitive industry and so
Adrien nodded in agreement as Tom led the way into the living room. He could see where Tom might be concerned, since the fashion industry was very competitive and plenty of talented designers went undiscovered. The designers who ended up struggling the most were the ones who decided to strike out on their own instead of joining an existing company, and it seemed that Marinette had already decided against doing that. It was probably a smart move—while being an independent designer probably sounded glamorous, it was a lot of work and a lot of struggling to get things on the market and popular while not earning a particularly steady income.

"Adrien, dear!" Sabine called eagerly as she caught sight of him. "It's so good to see you! We got Marinette's machine all packaged up, and then we found everything else she wanted and got it in her sewing bag there." She pointed to the bag and box sitting on the table. "But won't you visit with us first before you run off again?"

"I can stay for a bit," Adrien agreed. "Just let me get the sewing machine into my suitcase right away, so we're not rushing at the end."

"Be really careful with it," Sabine warned, fluttering around him as Adrien unzipped his suitcase. "It's a sturdy machine and all, but too many knocks around will throw parts out of line and it can be pretty expensive to fix."

"I'll take care of it," Adrien promised. He glanced into his suitcase and quickly scrambled to cover a couple, ah, purchases he had made with a t-shirt and a pair of jeans. Over the weekend, he had managed to squeeze in a trip to the store to pick up a few things, stuff that he couldn't exactly risk buying in London in case the paparazzi happened to spot him— and no, he wasn't being paranoid. The reporter that he and Marinette had spotted in the store had been there around the same time as they were several more times, and on top of that, several of the cashiers were young uni students that recognized him from the tabloids and he didn't want any of them taking note of any, ah, mature purchases.

Not that he was necessarily going to need any of said mature purchases anytime soon, but Adrien preferred to be prepared. He also preferred that his secret girlfriend's parents not notice the aforementioned purchases.

"So you just started classes this past week, I heard?" Tom asked as Adrien carefully moved the box with the sewing machine in it from the table to his suitcase. It was heavier than he had expected. "Is your second year getting off to a good start?"

"It is," Adrien confirmed with a grin. He arranged the box in his suitcase— it only just fit, which meant no rattling around when he carried it from place to place— and then tucked everything else in the suitcase into the space over the sewing machine box. He quickly zipped up the suitcase before the Dupain-Chengs could see anything incriminating, and then the suitcase went next to the table so he wouldn't forget either it or Marinette's stuffed sewing bag. "My classes are going to be more interesting this year, I think. We've moved on from the more basic stuff, and I think I get to pick the first of my elective classes second semester."

"Exciting," Tom said. He grinned at Adrien. "And you get to keep my daughter over there with you for another year, so I'm sure that's a bonus."

Adrien nodded a bit cautiously. He could recognize fishing for information when he saw it, especially after spending so much time with Alya and Nino. "Yeah, it's great to have her there! I love having a friend from Paris in London, and right next door, too. And then I get to hang out with Marinette and her friends from work, too, which is always fun. And I hate just sitting in my
apartment alone, so..." He trailed off and smiled, trying to not let the smile get too sappy. "We hang out a lot. It's nice to have the company."

"Would you invite your friends from university over otherwise?" Sabine asked. She plopped down a large paper bag that, from the smell of it, was filled with delicious pastries, then headed over to perch on the couch. "Are most of them younger than you are?"

"I have invited my uni friends over before, just not anywhere near as often," Adrien told her. "None of them live in the building or next door like some of the other Rosalie workers do, though, so they have to come further. And yeah, my friends from uni are all younger than I am. There's a few other nontraditional students in my classes, but they're all, like, a lot older, with families and whatnot."

"I don't know if you're old enough to count as a nontraditional student," Tom said with a laugh. "And come over here and sit down, son. You don't have to just stand over there. We want to know how things are going in London."

Adrien grinned, crossing the room and settling down on the cushion Sabine was patting. Marinette's parents were always so welcoming and eager to hear what he was up to. In only twenty minutes, they learned more about what Adrien had been up to over the summer and his first week of the semester than his own father had learned over the entire weekend. There were more than a few pointed questions about him and Marinette that Adrien had to dodge, but Adrien had had so much experience with reporters that it was child's play to evade all of the questions.

"Oh, is that your ride?" Tom asked when Adrien's phone chimed. He looked disappointed. "Is it time for you to leave already?"

"Yeah, I have to get to the train station soon," Adrien admitted, checking his phone and shooting a quick message back to Nathalie to assure her that yes, he was on his way. "Nathalie got me on the latest train back to London, so I can't miss it. It was great getting to talk to you guys again."

"It was great getting to see you again too, dear," Sabine told him fondly. "Now Tom, do you want to help him carry everything downstairs? Maybe you can take the suitcase."

Tom ended up taking both the suitcase and Marinette's sewing bag while Adrien trotted down the stairs after him with the bag of pastries. How he was going to carry everything once he was getting on the train he had no clue, but he would make it work somehow.

"Take care of our girl for us," Tom told him as Adrien stepped out the door. "Make sure she doesn't overwork herself, between her job and her commissions. And see if she'll come back with you next time you come to Paris, all right? Facetiming her just isn't the same as seeing her in person. And give her a hug for us."

"I'll do that, sir," Adrien told him. "I promise."
Chapter 24

Adrien paused in front of the university's tutoring center, glancing in somewhat anxiously. There weren't a ton of people inside, but the sign above the door told him that he was in the right place. He stepped forward, then paused.

Logically, he knew that asking about getting some help at the tutoring center would be a good idea. It wasn't something to be ashamed of at all, especially considering that he was learning in his second language. But Adrien had never really needed any help at school before, and so he was a little reluctant to start. It didn't help that he would no doubt be matched with a tutor several years younger than him.

Still, if he could maybe make his time at school any easier, and if he could learn the material better, then it would be worth it. And the tutoring center was paid for in his tuition already, so it wasn't as though he would be wasting his money at all if it didn't work out. Straightening his shoulders, Adrien headed in.

"How can we help you?" the woman at the desk asked as Adrien approached.

"I was wondering about tutoring and also maybe proofreading essays," Adrien told her, still somewhat unreasonably nervous. "English isn't my first language, and I'm starting to have a little trouble with keeping up."

"What field of study and what year?"

"Physics, second year."

"Out of the three-year program?"

Adrien nodded. "Yeah."

She tapped at some keys on her keyboard and then glanced at the computer screen. "Okay, so we have several third-year and fourth-year students with our tutoring center program. If I could have your student ID, then I can pull up your classes and see which tutors your schedule lines up with best."

Adrien slid his student ID across the desk, and the lady took it to type in his ID number. "Is it a specific class you're having trouble with, or just in general?"

"Um, in general, I guess?" Some of the classes were still easy at this point in the semester, but Adrien didn't know if that would hold true forever. After all, the year had just started. "And I think I just miss details in class, and then it's hard to catch back up again."

The woman flashed him a warm smile. "Yeah, that's understandable. We actually have quite a few students from other countries come through here just needing a little boost. And that's quite smart to have a student from here proofread your essays. I'll keep that in mind when picking out a tutor, too. We have some tutors from other countries that are quite good at teaching others, but they might miss some grammatical errors in essays."

"Right, right."

There were a few more taps, and then the woman consulted her screen again, sliding his ID card back to him as he did. "Okay, Adrien. I have a short list of our tutors that I think would work well
for you. I'll contact them to see which of them still have spots open for ongoing, regular tutoring and who is interested in also proofreading essays and get back to you in the next day or two to let you know that I've found a tutor, and then they'll reach out to you to get the first tutoring session set up. Okay?"

Adrien nodded, thanked the woman, and then headed back out.

"That wasn't so bad," Adrien told Plagg as they headed out of the building and into the chilly, damp air outside. He shivered, adjusting his too-thin-for-the-weather sweater as he headed down the steps. "Hopefully she finds someone that I'll really get along with. It would stink if I got stuck with a fan somehow."

Plagg sniggered, then looked somewhat more serious. "You could always ask for a change if the person doesn't work out. I mean, you might get a reputation in the tutoring center as a spoiled brat, but-"

"Oh, cut it out."

"Hey, Adrien!"

Adrien automatically turned towards the call, and almost immediately spotted Paul headed his way. He waited for his friend to catch up, stepping out of the way of a few other students headed for class.

"I thought you normally had headed back to your apartment by now," Paul said as soon as he had drawn near. "Did you have a meeting with a professor or something?"

"I dropped in at the tutoring center to see if they had anyone who could help me stay on top of classes this year," Adrien said, trying not to wince at the way Paul's eyebrows shot up in clear surprise. "Some of the technical terms aren't sticking right, and with the way some of the profs talk so quickly, I'm missing words because I can't translate that fast. So I thought it might help to have someone to explain things to me a little more slowly so I don't have to try to teach myself."

Paul's surprise had died away quickly. "Oh, that makes sense. Work smarter, not harder. I was just surprised for a minute, because you've never seemed like the kind of person to need tutoring, but yeah, trying to listen and understand and translate all at once? Oof."

"Yeah, it's not been a whole lot of fun. I don't think I'll need a ton of help, though." Adrien was pretty certain that he just needed things slowed down, and the sentences or concepts that he didn't fully understand explained again but more slowly. It wasn't that he was having trouble grasping the concepts, just that he wasn't getting all of the information he needed to understand them right away. "And the tutor I get paired with will read over my essays, too, so I don't have to do so many rounds of edits to try to catch any mistakes with my grammar. That was my biggest weak point last year, I think. There was always just one thing that I passed over and didn't fix."

"Oh, that's smart," Paul said immediately. "Yeah, I can't even imagine trying to take our classes in a language that wasn't my first one. And I would offer to proofread, but I didn't ever get the best marks ever in writing and grammar. You're probably better at it than I am."

Adrien just shrugged at that.

"So, are you off to your apartment now?" Paul asked as they headed down the sidewalk. Then he grinned and elbowed Adrien. "Or perhaps off to a certain fashion studio to visit a certain designer?"

Adrien just shook his head. "No, I'll be hanging around campus. I have a meeting with a professor
later to discuss my paper topic for the semester, so I have to wait until her office hours start.” He shivered again as a breeze blew across the campus. ”I just have to find somewhere warm to settle down and study. I definitely didn't expect this kind of weather when I got dressed this morning.”

Paul just cackled at him, completely unsympathetic. ”Y'know, there's this thing called a weather report. I find them quite helpful for when I get dressed so I don't end up freezing all day.”

”Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Adrien made a face at him. ”I just thought that since yesterday was so warm, today might be more of the same, and I thought the fog would burn off early on. And since I knew I would be on campus all day, I didn't want to have to carry around a heavy sweater all day.”

”Dude.”

”I know, I know. That backfired on me big time.” Adrien picked up his pace, heading for the library before he froze. ”It was a bad plan and I won't do it again.”

”If you do it again, can you at least do it on a day when we have classes together so I can laugh at you?” Paul asked, grinning at Adrien's eye-roll. ”It's not as fun a day later when you're all bundled up.”

Adrien sighed, shivering again as another wind gusted past. What he wouldn't give to have the lovely wooly scarf that Marinette had made for his most recent birthday with him. If nothing else, his neck would be warm. ”Very funny. I think I'll be bringing sweaters with me from now on. And proper sweaters, not this kind.”

They walked in silent for a few paces, then Paul spoke up again. ”Hopefully we'll be in more of the same sections next semester. I swear I don't know most of the people in most of my classes, and that's no fun when there's group projects.”

”We could try to coordinate class sections when we register for next semester,” Adrien offered. ”Other than that... I don't know how likely it'll be that we'll be in the same sections. I glanced at the courses for next semester, and it's a whole lot of smaller class sizes but a lot of sections.”

Paul made a face. ”Ugh, that's no fun. Yeah, maybe we can see if that'll work.” He grinned. ”How does all eight o'clock classes sound to you?”

Adrien just groaned.

Adrien shivered as he headed up the street towards his apartment building at the end of the day, after he had finished up his meeting with his professor. The chill that had hung in the air earlier in the day had only grown, and the fog wisping through the street had gotten thicker. His sweater had been woefully inadequate earlier, and it was practically useless now.

”Would you hurry it up already?” Plagg whined, sticking his head out of the little nest he had made in Adrien's sweater pocket. ”I'm cold and wet and miserable. Paris was never this foggy!”

...he had also been stuck with a very whiny kwami all day. And between an early class and the late meeting with his professor, it had been a very long day indeed.

”We're almost home, Plagg,” Adrien pointed out, tugging his sweater tighter against a gust of wind.
It really didn't help much. "I can bake some Camembert for you to eat so you can warm up if you want, but only if you stay quiet until I get back to the apartment."

Oddly enough, his pocket fell utterly silent.

Grinning, Adrien's steps picked up again and he rounded the last corner to their apartment building. He was looking forward to a warm apartment and a warm meal to end the day, and then getting into a nice, warm bed with his girlfriend- assuming, of course, that Marinette wanted to stay the night. She tended to sleep over most nights now, but sometimes she would get a burst of inspiration and stay up late hammering out a design or doing a bit of sewing on a commission because she couldn't fall asleep, and then she slept in her own bed so that she wouldn't wake Adrien up.

Adrien's phone buzzed right before he reached his building, and he pulled it out. Marinette had texted him. Apparently her apartment had been chilly, so she was hanging out in his instead.

Even more reason to be cheerful. If her apartment was chilly, then she would definitely be staying over for the night. Marinette hated the cold and she loved snuggling up to him to warm up.

Trotting into the building and up the stairs didn't take long, and then Adrien was entering his apartment. The smell of stew simmering filled the room, and there on the couch sat Marinette, looking very cozy indeed dressed in one of his sweaters as she read a book.

Adrien couldn't help the way his heart skipped and something in his stomach grew warmer. Marinette hadn't ever snitched his things to wear before, and he definitely wasn't opposed to her doing it more often. She looked absolutely adorable in the overlarge sweater, and Adrien couldn't deny that he felt a bit possessive.

She had marked herself in his things. The cat in him purred.

"Looking good, Princess," Adrien greeted her, dropping his bag on the other end of the couch and immediately snuggling up to her side. She grinned up at him and leaned up to kiss him. They only broke apart when Plagg gagged loudly right behind Adrien's head. "I especially like the sweater."

Marinette laughed. "I thought you might."

"Is it nice and cozy?"

Grinning, Marinette nodded. "It is." She pulled the collar up to her nose and took a deep, dramatic breath in, letting her eyes flutter shut as she did. "And it smells amazing."

"Oh, you don't play fair." Laughing, Adrien tugged her into his lap. "And what makes it smell so good, hmm? I can't possibly think of what would make it smell good."

Marinette elbowed him lightly before laughing, resting her head against his shoulder. "Dork. You're just fishing for compliments. Don't think that I don't notice what you're doing."

Adrien just grinned and pressed another kiss to her head. What could he say; he liked compliments, especially when they were coming from his Lady.

Their snuggling hadn't gone on for long before Plagg interrupted them, complaining about wanting his promised baked Camembert. Adrien groaned and grudgingly got up to go stick a wheel of Camembert in the oven.

Sometimes he wondered what it would take to get Plagg to stay out of the way for long enough to actually have some proper time alone with Marinette. They had had a few more stay-in "dates"
since their first one and normally Plagg was willing to stay out of the way for an hour or hour and a half at most. Then he would get bored and crash the date, and make rude noises if he deemed that the kissing had gotten too gross.

That really messed up the romantic vibe and kept them from going too far with each other. It was incredibly frustrating.

Tikki had tried to keep Plagg under control, but the little imp refused to stay out of the way. Adrien was kind of running out of ideas to keep him busy and elsewhere in the apartment. Food seemed to be the only surefire way to control Plagg, but the glutton could just absolutely inhale even a large plate of cheese.

"I hate the damp," Marinette said once Adrien got the cheese into the oven and headed back over to curl up with her again. "It just makes everything feel so much colder. It's fine if it's a decent temperature, I guess, but ugh."

"If it's cold, it means we can cuddle more," Adrien said, settling back down next to her. "Remember when it was too hot to during the summer?"

"Mmm-hmm. But I can't take my kitty heater with me to work," Marinette said. She cuddled into his side. "There were a lot of people going in and out today with deliveries and the building was cold. I should have brought more sweaters back from Paris. Most of the ones I have are more fashionable than functional. And I accidentally brought back and left the other sweaters I had last year when I went home in the spring."

Adrien grinned and tugged at the fabric at her elbow. "So that's why you're stealing my sweaters now?"

"It's cozy."

He could only laugh.

Soon enough, Adrien had to get off of the couch to go sit at the table and work on his homework instead. There had been more homework and more readings to do this year, and he wanted to stay on top of everything so that he would actually be able to go out and do stuff over the weekends. Sitting at the table wasn't as comfortable as curling up with Marinette on the couch, but he really wanted to get this particular problem set done before dinner.

Ten minutes in, Marinette set aside her book and headed into the kitchen to warm up some leftovers for them to eat. As she passed him, she pressed a light kiss to the top of his head.

Adrien couldn't help but smile.

Their dinner didn't take long to heat up and eat at all, and then Adrien settled back in with his homework while Marinette worked on sewing one of the commission pieces, with her sewing machine set up on the desk they had found at a rummage sale. The hum of the machine and the rustle of fabric or the snip of a scissors was (despite Marinette's concerns about it distracting him) a comfortable background noise as he worked. Sometimes Marinette would hum quietly as she sewed or cut, or mutter to herself when a seam didn't come out just right. It was comforting noise, enough to remind Adrien that he wasn't all alone but not so much that it was going to distract him.

(Unfortunately, he couldn't say the same thing about when she was pounding rivets into fabric. Even though it wasn't particularly loud and it didn't usually take more than one or two hard taps per rivet, it was distracting, in the same way that an endlessly tapping pencil was distracting and oh-so-
annoying. She ended up going over to her own apartments to do those.)

"It's supposed to not be quite as damp this weekend," Marinette reported. Adrien glanced over and saw that she had abandoned the corset top she had been working on in favor of reading something on her phone. "Still cool, but sunny, at least. We should go for a walk or something."

"That sounds good," Adrien agreed. He punched a button on his calculator and scribbled down the answer under the neatly copied problem. "Where to? Just around the neighborhood again?"

Marinette shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe we can just take a bus somewhere and wander over there. We can always decide Saturday."

Adrien nodded and went back to his homework. A minute later, the sewing machine whirred back to life.

Saturday morning, Adrien discovered that he was short a book that he really, really needed for a paper that he really, really needed to get started on soon. He could check it out from the library on campus, but that meant that he would have to go over there first before he and Marinette could go on their walk.

"Or we could just walk over there," Marinette pointed out. "There's a couple wooded areas over on your campus, aren't there? And you've seen where I work, so can I see where you study? I've never gotten a proper tour of your campus."

"Oh, sure," Adrien said, surprised. He had never considered his uni campus to be an interesting enough place to go just for a walk, but he supposes that it makes sense that Marinette might be curious. "I've never really explored that neighborhood, either. I've only really been on campus. It could be interesting to go over there." He glanced at Marinette's overlarge t-shirt and shorts that she had been sleeping in. "Are you planning on going out like that?"

Marinette rolled her eyes at him and rolled up on her toes to kiss him. "Of course not, you dork. Give me fifteen minutes to get ready, okay?"

Adrien nodded, and Marinette had vanished back into his bedroom. It wasn't long before she emerged, dressed in warm leggings and Adrien's sweater. Her hair was up in a messy bun, and she looked absolutely adorable.

Adrien was going to have the absolute hardest time not hugging her when they were on their walk. More than anything, he wanted to curl up with her on the couch with a blanket and a movie. But he had to be responsible and get that book, and then they would have to act like just friends for an hour or two while they toured the campus and strolled around the neighborhood.

Well, when they got back, then Adrien was going to insist on a good old-fashioned cuddle session. Marinette was just too cute dressed like that.

Unaware of what kind of effect she was having on him, Marinette beamed up at him. "Ready to go? Do you have whatever you'll need to check out the book?"

"I'm ready," Adrien told her. He held up his bag with his school ID in it. "After you, My Lady."

Partway to campus, Adrien was starting to wonder if it maybe wasn't a great idea for Marinette to be out and about while wearing his sweater. No matter how adorable she looked in it and no matter how pleased he was about her wearing things out around town (the cat in him purred at the little sign to the world that she was his), it was obvious that the sweater was too large to be hers. It was clearly a man's sweater, and pictures of her wearing it could easily turn into tabloid fodder, and-
Adrien decided that today, he wasn't going to care. He didn't want to live his life in complete fear, worrying about every little action that could be picked apart by the press. His father would probably have an aneurysm if he saw any tabloid photos of the two of them, but Nathalie could deal with that.

It only took Adrien fifteen minutes to track down the book he wanted, and then he trotted downstairs to check it out at the front desk. Minutes later, he and Marinette were wandering across campus. He itched to reach out and link his arm through hers, or maybe drape his arm around her shoulder, but he couldn't.

*Boo hiss.*

As they wandered, Adrien pointed out which buildings he had classes in and which ones had food places in them or had good study areas. Marinette listened and nodded along, asking questions about the campus as they went. Adrien couldn't help but smile as he answered one of her questions about how he managed to get from one lecture to another when the classrooms were across campus from each other. After so many years of being in a home with people who didn't even bother to ask how his day had gone (or who asked but then didn't listen), it was absolutely *amazing* to be in a relationship with someone who cared so *much* about how him.

"I'm glad we came out," Marinette said as they slowly wandered off campus and into the surrounding neighborhood. "It's nice out, really. And it's not *that* chilly."

"Yeah, because you stole my sweater," Adrien teased. "Otherwise I suspect that a certain little bug would be complaining about the cold."

Marinette stuck her tongue out at him. Adrien smirked and leaned in.

"You know," he started with a purr. "If we were at home and you did that, a cat would have caught your tongue with his own."

"And since we're out in public?" Marinette teased. "Kitty can't catch my tongue now."

"I'll have to make up for it when we get home," Adrien promised, grinning. He wriggled his eyebrows at her, and Marinette giggled. He opened his mouth to say something else- after all, they were in public and Plagg couldn't interrupt his flirting- but then someone else entirely interrupted him.

"Hey, Adrien!"

Adrien turned around to see Paul hurrying towards them, a grin on his face and a younger girl following along behind him. The girl's eyes were wide as she stared at Adrien, and it didn't take a genius to realize that it was Paul's younger sister, the one who had once asked Paul if he could introduce the two of them and if Adrien was available to date.

*Great.*

"I wasn't expecting to run into you today," Paul told Adrien, grinning and clapping a hand on his shoulder. "And it's nice to see you too, Marinette. I thought that you two lived in a different neighborhood."

"We were going over to campus because I needed to pick up a book for the Thermodynamics paper," Adrien told him. "And then Marinette and I wanted to go on a walk, and we figured that over here was as good of a place as any other to do that."
Paul groaned. "Oh, don't remind me about the Thermodynamics paper," he grumbled. "I've been putting it off because I was focusing on the Professional Skills paper. Have you worked on that one yet?"

"I've gotten a bit of the research out of the way," Adrien told him. "I still have to get more research done and organize it and get stuff all typed up, but it's not too bad. And it's not due for ages anyway."

"Oh, you're a show-off," Paul grumbled. "He did this all of last year," he told his sister, who did not appear to be listening as she continued gaping at Adrien. "Started work on stuff the second it was assigned, and then when the rest of us were panicking and scrambling to try to get everything done, he was just sitting there, cool as a cucumber."

"Says the morning person who gloats at me whenever we have early classes."

"He just drapes himself in his chair like the model he is and watches as everyone else freaks out," Paul continued, ignoring Adrien's comment. "And mentions that 'oh, yeah, I just have the seventh round of editing left to do', like that's normal or something."

"I'm writing the papers in my second language," Adrien reminded him. "My second language out of three, by the way. There's a lot of mistakes the first couple times through. We literally just talked about this a couple days ago."

Paul sighed. "Oh, I suppose."

"I can't believe I finally get to meet you!" Paul's sister squealed, finally snapping out of her daze and pushing past her brother to stand in front of Adrien. He got the sudden urge to hide behind Marinette and hastily batted it back down as impolite. "I've heard about you from Paul and I've read all about you in the magazines and you're even more handsome in person."

Adrien took a cautious step back when she stepped closer, still prattling on. He sent an uncomfortable look at Marinette and then at Paul, hoping that Paul would pull his sister away.

Instead, Paul was smirking as he glanced back and forth between Adrien and Marinette. Adrien puzzled over that for a moment- it was hardly uncommon for Paul to see the two of them together, so why was he so smug?- and then it clicked.

Right. Marinette was dressed in his sweater- and Adrien had just worn that sweater to class on Thursday. It had been too warm in the building and he had taken it off partway through class, but apparently Paul recognized it and was amused about it.

Adrien suspected that he would be hearing about this in class on Monday.

"-and hold on, let me quick take a selfie with you, all of my friends will be so jealous, and- oh! I need an autograph- or two! Paul, do you have a pen? And let me take my sweater off so he can autograph my-"

Adrien pushed the phone the girl was wielding away from his face as gently as possible, stepping back a few more paces to put more space between himself and Paul's sister. Marinette stepped ever-so-slightly in front of him, and Paul pulled his sister back, tugging her sweater back down as he did so.

"Bella, cut that out," Paul hissed, now looking thoroughly embarrassed by his sister's behavior. "I'm telling Mom, I swear."
"Oh, come on!" Bella protested, twisting away from him. "Fine, so no autographs on my body, then! But at least let me-"

"No." Paul pulled her back again. "Stop harassing my friend and grow up. Sorry about her," he told Adrien and Marinette. "Run while you can. I'll see you on Monday?"

"Sounds good," Adrien told him, already backing up. "See you then! Bye, Paul!"

With that, Adrien and Marinette fled back down the sidewalk. They didn't stop until they were almost back to campus.

"I didn't expect Paul's sister to be such a complete fangirl," Adrien panted as they slowed down. A few stray students wandering across campus gave them a strange look, but they just ignored it. "I mean, from what he told me about her it seemed like maybe she wasn't the most level-headed person ever, but I didn't- I didn't expect her to-"

"To try to strip so she could get an autograph somewhere inappropriate?" Marinette suggested. Adrien nodded frantically.

"Yeah. That."

"Want to go home now before we accidentally run into them again?" Marinette suggested.

"Yes. Please."

"I am so sorry," was the first thing Paul said Monday morning as he slid onto the bench next to Adrien. "So sorry. If I had known Bella was going to act like that, I would have gone a different direction instead of going down that street to say hi. I told our mom about that, and Bella's been grounded for an entire month."

"I know you had said that she was a fan, but I wasn't expecting that," Adrien said with a small laugh. Now that he was no longer being lunged at by an overzealous fan, the whole thing seemed a bit funny. He paused, then added. "Uh, she has other celebrity crushes too, right? Please tell me that she isn't just hyperfixated on me."

Paul shrugged slightly as he pulled out his books. "I mean, kind of? She and her friends crush on a lot of celebs, but in her mind you're actually within reach. Ignoring the giant age difference and complete lack of interest on your part, of course."

"Of course."

"Speaking of interest..." Paul leaned forward, and his smirk was back. "I happened to notice that Marinette was wearing a sweater on Saturday that definitely wasn't hers. In fact, I seem to remember you wearing that particular sweater last week, after you finally figured out what the weather was like."

Paul shrugged slightly as he pulled out his books. "I mean, kind of? She and her friends crush on a lot of celebs, but in her mind you're actually within reach. Ignoring the giant age difference and complete lack of interest on your part, of course."

"Of course."

"Speaking of interest..." Paul leaned forward, and his smirk was back. "I happened to notice that Marinette was wearing a sweater on Saturday that definitely wasn't hers. In fact, I seem to remember you wearing that particular sweater last week, after you finally figured out what the weather was like."

Adrien couldn't help but laugh. "Yeah, she stole it from me because all of her sweaters are more for fashion than function and not particularly warm because she brought the heavy ones back to Paris last year. We've asked our friends in Paris if they could bring a few more of her sweaters with them when they come to visit next weekend."
"And she managed to steal it how?" Paul probed, still grinning. "Was she sleeping over or something?"

Marinette *had* been sleeping over, but that hadn't been when she snatched his sweater for the first time. Besides, Paul didn't need to know the exact details.

"Nah, she has a key to my apartment and hangs out there whenever her neighbor down the hall is playing music too loud," Adrien told him. It was true, mostly. The neighbor hadn't been blaring music on that particular occasion, but it was the reason why Marinette had gotten the key in the first place. "And she was cold, so she found my sweater and claimed it for her own use."

"And kept it."

"And kept it," Adrien agreed. He hadn't argued with Marinette about it, mostly because she looked adorable when drowning in the overly large sweater. "Well, actually I took it back for a day, and then she stole it again. I don't mind. I have other sweaters that I can wear."

Paul just let out an exasperated breath, shaking his head. "You two, really. No wonder the tabloids are tearing their hair out over you guys."

Adrien played stupid. "What do you mean?"

Paul just let out a long-suffering groan and didn't answer.

Friday afternoon found Adrien and Marinette standing in Adrien's apartment, staring around in horrified realization. After a full week of knowing that Alya and Nino were going to be visiting, it had only *now*, two hours before their friends were meant to come in and they were going to meet them at the train station, occurred to them that it looked like they were living together. Marinette's sewing station (complete with desk, sewing machine, basket of fabric, *two* borrowed mannequins, and scraps all over) sat in the living room, and several of her fashion magazines were scattered around the room. Adrien's room was a mix of her clothes and his, and if either of their prying friends happened to glance in the laundry hamper (or in the closet, or the dresser drawers), they would *definitely* notice that Marinette's clothes were in there, too.

"If it weren't for the fact that they would *definitely* let it leak on accident, I'd just say to screw it and tell them that we're dating," Adrien said, running a hand through his hair as he surveyed the room. "But I know that Alya can't keep a secret like that."

"Not when she's been trying to get us together for forever," Marinette agreed. She huffed out a breath and rested her head on Adrien's shoulder. "Well, I suppose one of us could stay back to keep cleaning while the other person gets Alya and Nino. We could say the other person was studying or sewing, depending on who stays back. And I suppose we should start moving stuff *right now*.

She had a point. Adrien grabbed the closest fashion magazine, gathering them up and sticking them in Marinette's sewing bag. Marinette unplugged her sewing machine and gathered it and all of the cords up. Tikki flew alongside her, popping doors open so Marinette could get the machine across the hall. After having Plagg check to make sure the coast was clear (after all, it wouldn't do to have the neighbors see and then ask why they had been moving things from Adrien's apartment to Marinette's while Alya and Nino were present), Adrien followed her with one of the mannequins that Madam Rosalie had loaned her. By the time he had gotten that set up across the hall, Marinette
was busy folding and packing up all of the fabric that she had had sitting in a heap in the corner. Adrien picked up the second mannequin and moved it, and then they both worked together to pick up the desk and haul it across the hall.

Adrien was already sweaty and they hadn't even gotten the entire living room cleaned up yet.

"I can't believe we didn't remember this earlier," Marinette grumbled as she tried and failed to pick the entire stack of fabric plus several finished pieces up at once. "God, imagine what Alya and Nino would have said if they came in and things looked like this."

"It would have been cat out of the bag for sure," Adrien agreed, grinning and ducking when a pillow flew at his head. "Or maybe we could have said that we just hang out together over here a lot and that was why all of your sewing stuff was over here. After all, we did that before we started dating." Adrien grinned and wriggled his eyebrows at Marinette. "Or, rather, before we realized that we were basically dating already."

He ducked another pillow.

"It might have been hard to explain the stuff in the bedroom, though," Marinette said. Pile of fabric finally gathered up, she straightened. "And if my stuff is entirely over in my apartment, then it'll look like we don't spend all of our time together and Alya and Nino are less likely to be suspicious."

"Good point."

Fifteen minutes later, the living room looked like a hurricane had gone through it, but all of Marinette's things there had been moved. Adrien rushed around with their vacuum cleaner, trying to get up all of the fuzz that had come off of the fabric when Marinette cut out her patterns. Marinette carried her clothes from his room back across the hall to her own room, then dove into their laundry baskets to fish out her own things.

"Do you have any food in your kitchen?" Adrien asked, sticking his head around the corner. "They might be suspicious if you don't have anything over there."

Marinette groaned. Adrien hastily headed back to the kitchen to gather up the bare minimum of food Marinette would be expected to have. Nino and Alya already knew that they had dinner together most nights, so Marinette wouldn't need to have a ton of food over in her apartment, but she should have stuff for breakfast and lunch at the very least.

"It's time to go pick them up," Marinette said, startling Adrien as he tucked a loaf of bread away on her counter. "Do you want to do that, or should I?"

"I can," Adrien told her. He glanced around her apartment. "Your sewing area looks kind of rushed right now. Why don't you make sure everything over here looks natural while I get Alya and Nino?"

Marinette nodded and pressed a kiss to his cheek as he headed out. Adrien stopped to kiss her properly for a minute (after all, they wouldn't be able to get away with it once their friends arrived), then headed out to the bus stop. He couldn't help but worry about what they might have forgotten.

Marinette had gotten so integrated in his apartment. Even with the living room and bedroom sorted back out, what had they forgotten? What if there were things that were clearly Marinette's that had gotten under the couch or something? Really, they should have realized that they would have to separate their things out as soon as Nino texted Adrien asking about visiting that weekend.
"No Marinette?" Alya asked as soon as she spotted Adrien outside the station. "She's not sick, is she?"

"She was midway through a commission when I left," Adrien told her, accepting the bag she shoved into his arms. A glance down told Adrien that it was full of Marinette's sweaters, just as requested. "She wanted to get it finished and her space cleaned up before you guys arrived so there wouldn't be a giant mess."

Thankfully, his friends seemed to accept his excuse, and they dove into conversation about what they had been up to since seeing each other last. Nino had signed on to a new film, Alya had written a very popular article, and they had been considering moving to a different apartment, though they had agreed that it wouldn't make sense to move to a larger (and therefore more expensive) apartment right away.

"If there's a chance that Alya is going to be away for half a year, then I would be paying for that apartment by myself," Nino told Adrien. "And I wouldn't really need more space if I'd be the only one there. So we're waiting until February- or March, maybe, depending on how far Alya gets in the competition- to see if we should move."

"It would be nice to have an extra room or two for Nino to do his mixing and for me to do my research and editing," Alya told Adrien. "Right now, we just have my desk in the living room and Nino's set-up in our bedroom, which just makes everything really cramped."

Adrien couldn't disagree. It was hard to move around Alya and Nino's apartment sometimes. It was cozy and homey, but he could see where it would be difficult to live that way all the time.

"So we've been doing a little poking around, looking at apartments in the area we want and trying to get an idea of what the cost would be for different numbers of rooms," Alya continued. "Right now it looks like only a two-bedroom apartment would be in our price range, but I'm kind of hoping that we could maybe find one with, like, a walk-in closet big enough for a bit of an office. Either that, or a large enough living room/dining room area that it could have my office there without taking up all of the floor."

"So are you planning on continuing to do independent research once the contest is over, even if you get the trip?" Adrien asked. "I mean, I could understand it if you didn't get the trip, but if you do?"

"Then I gotta have space to write a book." Alya looked excited by the idea. "The newspaper articles the winner is supposed to write- there's a lot of travel articles, then little updates about the main project, and then there's a big article on the project at the end, but it's never long enough to present all of the stuff people learned. Most people write a more comprehensive book at the end. I wanna start out my book with a focus on the most recent Ladybug and Chat Noir, then go to the earliest ones and then work my way back up, I think."

Adrien nodded. That sounded interesting. It also sounded like a lot of work, but he was pretty certain that a lot of people in Paris, at least, would be interested in Alya's research once she finished it.

"And what about you?" Nino asked. "Anything new, or just the ol' study, study, study?"

"Actually, there is something new," Adrien told them, grinning as he remembered. "Remember when you guys told me I should try going to the tutoring center at school? Well, I did that, and I got paired up with someone a week ago. His name is Ben, and he's a year ahead of me." Ben was also only a year younger, since he had taken a gap year before starting university. That made Adrien a whole lot more comfortable with the whole tutoring thing, since his tutor wasn't ages
younger and yet ahead of him in school.

(Did Adrien know that logically, that shouldn't be an issue? Yes. Did that particularly proud, stubborn part of his brain care? No.)

"Is he good?"

"He's *fabulous*, and we get along really well." Ben had a gift for teaching, at least in Adrien's eyes. "He just gets what points I'm getting hung up on and really slows down for them, and then adjusts if I'm catching on faster than the speed he's teaching at. We've only had a few hours together, but I swear he's shaved a good ten hours of on-my-own study time off already. And he's going to help with editing my essays, so I don't have to do as many read-throughs on them."

"Oh, that's great!" Alya exclaimed. "And he can give you study tips too, right? And tell you what to look out for in different classes?"

Adrien grinned and nodded. "Yeah, he- well, he *said* that he would, it's just that we haven't met *that* many times yet, and we've been focusing on making sure I'm on top of my current classes before we start talking about future classes at all. But it's on the agenda."

By the time they got back to the apartment, Marinette looked much less flustered than she had before. They all piled into Adrien's apartment to cook dinner, and Adrien was just starting to relax. Neither Nino nor Alya had spotted anything out of place yet, so maybe they were in the clear.

And then halfway through the meal, Marinette suddenly looked panicked for a second before her expression smoothed out into something almost perfectly expressionless. Nino and Alya didn't appear to have noticed, but Adrien had looked up at just the right time. He frowned, wondering if he should say something, when Marinette excused herself to go to the bathroom.

Maybe she wasn't feeling well? He hoped that wasn't the case. He would want to be able to be with her if she was sick, but right now she was going to be sleeping across the hall. If she was sick and miserable, he wouldn't be able to take care of her.

Adrien was just telling Alya and Nino about their run-in with Paul's sister when he heard the click as Marinette left the bathroom. Oddly, though, it was a full minute more before she came back out, looking a bit frazzled, and then sat down to keep eating like normal. Adrien frowned briefly, utterly puzzled.

*Okaaaay...so that was a little weird.*

After dinner, Adrien passed around the tray of cookies he and Marinette (well, mostly Marinette) had made. Alya and Nino didn't seem to be in any hurry to get up, so Adrien was stuck across the table from his girlfriend, unable to ask her what had happened to freak her out earlier. He was doing his best not to fidget- after all, Marinette seemed fine now- but Adrien was curious. Not even Alya's latest leads with her research could fully pull his mind away from the curious incident, which was honestly a pity. Adrien had rather been looking forward to hearing about any Miraculous history Alya had been able to dig up.

It was a full two hours later before Adrien finally got his chance to check up on Marinette.

"What was up with you earlier?" Adrien asked quietly as he and Marinette got the inflatable bed filled. In the kitchen, Alya and Nino were doing the dishes. "You looked all panicked for a second and then ran away to the bathroom."

Marinette nudged him in the side. "I didn't *run away.*"
"You made a rather hasty exit, at least."

She glanced towards the kitchen, making sure that Nino and Alya were still occupied, then turned back to Adrien. "I realized that I had forgotten to get my stuff out of your bathroom. So my toothbrush and toothpaste and towel and makeup and everything were still sitting out. We're lucky that they washed their hands in the kitchen before dinner and hadn't needed to use the bathroom at all. Somehow I don't think that claiming that my water had been out earlier today would have worked."

Adrien's eyes were wide. That would have given them away. How could they have forgotten about the bathroom? "So what did you do with everything?"

"My toothbrush, comb, and makeup all went in my purse," Marinette told him, pointing at the bag sitting in the hallway. "Everything else was too large. I wrapped up my shampoo and conditioner and everything in the towel and buried it in the hamper."

...well, that was one way to deal with it, Adrien supposed. Hopefully now they had everything of Marinette's out of the apartment or at least well hidden.

"I'll just have to not shower until they leave," Marinette continued. Her nose crinkled in annoyance. "Either that or open new bottles, if I have any. And I think I have an extra towel over in my apartment, though who knows who it belonged to originally. I might have accidentally stole it from you."

Adrien had to bite back his immediate purred response to that. It was far too flirty to risk their friends hearing.

"I wanna see the pieces Marinette's been working on," Alya announced once the dishes were done and put away. "I keep getting progress pics, but I wanna see the real things."

"Some of it already got sent off," Adrien told her, and Alya groaned in disappointment. "Marinette finished one person's order a week ago and we had a ton of fun trying to wrestle everything into a box for shipping. The people at the post office were side-eyeing the box a bit because it was bulging so much, but they let it pass."

"Please don't tell me you already shipped the studded jacket," Alya pleaded. Marinette made a face and shrugged apologetically.

"I already shipped the studded jacket. Sorry."

Alya groaned.

"She made a studded corset bodice recently," Adrien told Alya. "It took her something like two evenings to decorate, but it was definitely worth it. It looks amazing."

"Everything Marinette makes looks amazing," Alya said loyally. She tugged on her friend's arm. "Show me what you still have? I wanna see."

"Okay!"

"You're not going?" Adrien asked Nino when he didn't follow his girlfriend. Nino shook his head.

"Nah. I've seen the pictures. That was good enough." Nino shrugged. "It's cool, but I'm not really into the fashion stuff. Has she worked on any more album art?"
Adrien nodded, grinning. "Yeah. She's done three others besides Jagged's, and they all went really well. It helped that they were distinctly different sounds and Marinette hadn't ever made anything for them before, I think. She didn't have to worry about having reused ideas from previous albums, so she only needed one draft instead of a bunch. And they gave her more information about what they wanted, too, which Jagged Stone never does. That helped a lot." His phone let out a quiet **ding**, and Adrien checked it only to find that the battery was almost dead. Still talking, he headed back towards his bedroom to fetch his charger and Nino followed. "She's only had to do a small round of edits on that, and on the glasses and Jagged's cover. And she's almost done with this round of stage outfit commissions."

"She's gonna be famous before long," Nino said as he followed Adrien almost absentmindedly. "CD cover designer, the mind behind Jagged Stone's sunglasses line, the dresser for up-and-coming rock and metal bands... like, never mind joining some design company when she gets back to Paris. She could probably make it freelancing."

"I think she likes knowing that she'll have a steady paycheck," Adrien said as he stepped into his room. He started scanning the floor for his charger, fairly certain that it had gotten unplugged somehow yesterday, and then it had probably been knocked around a bit in the rush to get Marinette's things out of his room. "And she likes working with other designers. They're a creative bunch, and they're always tossing ideas back and forth. It keeps them from getting designer's block, I think."

A flash of color caught Adrien's eye, and he took a second look. A second later, he froze. On the floor, mostly hidden by the blankets hanging off of his bed, was a bright pink bra.

**Crud.** How had they managed to miss that?

"I can understand wanting a steady paycheck," Nino admitted as Adrien tried to subtly shove the bra under his bed with his foot. "That's why I keep the DJ job, even though it can be exhausting to do both that and movie soundtracks sometimes. Like, there's gonna be times when I'm between movies, and I don't want to have to pick up just any random job to get us through."

"Do you think you'll keep DJing for a while, then?" Adrien asked. He could still see a sliver of pink sticking out from behind the blankets, so he tugged the blanket slightly further over so it would drape all the way to the floor before continuing his search for his charger. "Or do you think you might eventually do something else?"

Nino shrugged. "No clue. It depends on what jobs I get. If I'm ever lucky enough to get hired on to a bigger movie set, then maybe. Right now, I'm still working on building my resume up so I can get even slightly on the radar when I apply for the big projects."

Adrien nodded as he spotted his charger and dove partway under the bed to snag it. He tried to reach for the bra, too- maybe he could pull it further under the bed, or even pull it to his side and- what? Hide it under the covers on his side, maybe? - but it was too far away. Before Nino could ask what he was doing, Adrien straightened up and waved the charger at him as explanation before plugging it and his phone in and then leading the way back out to the living room.

"Isn't it hard to get away for the weekend with your DJing?" Adrien wanted to know as they stepped back into the main room. "Or do you not usually work weekends?"

Nino shook his head. "Nah, I'm usually during the week. The more experienced dude gets the weekends, unless he's traveling or sick or something. He's got seniority, so he gets first dibs on the schedule. I don't mind, though. It's nice to have the weekend off." He made a slight face. "Except
then I have a ridiculously long day on Mondays, if I'm working on a film project. And especially if one of the crew members is sick or something and I get drafted to do their job instead of being able to work on my own thing."

Somehow, Adrien suspected that Nino was speaking from experience. The somewhat sour look on his face also made Adrien suspect that the crew member he had had to fill in for probably hadn't had the most exciting job in the world.

The girls came back a few minutes later, still talking about Marinette's designs animatedly. Still, Adrien could tell that Marinette was exhausted. Her blinks were taking longer and longer, eyes staying closed a fraction of a second longer than they would normally before opening again. As Alya turned to tell Nino about the outfits, Adrien caught Marinette trying to hide a yawn.

"Someone looks like she's about to tip over," Adrien teased quietly, stepping over next to Marinette. He rested a hand on her lower back, careful to try not to look too overly familiar with her. "Bedtime?"

Marinette yawned properly this time. "It's been a long day. But now my bed is gonna be cold and I don't have my kitty to snuggle with." She gave him a kitten-eyed look, and now Adrien could really tell that she was tired. "The bed is gonna be so empty."

"If you wanted your stuffed cat from Paris, all you had to do was ask," Adrien teased, guiding Marinette towards the door before she could flirt too much and say something that Alya and Nino would overhear. She stuck out her tongue at him and he snickered at her. "But I think it might be bedtime for you. See you tomorrow morning!"

Marinette nodded, yawning, and waved goodbye to them all before heading back across the hall. Adrien briefly wondered if she had remembered to take back her extra blanket- somehow, it had migrated across the hall with her at some point- but it was too late to do anything about it if she hadn't. Marinette might have been able to smuggle out some of her toiletries in her bag without attracting any attention, but their friends would definitely notice if Adrien headed across the hall with a blanket.

After making sure that Nino and Alya had everything they needed, Adrien headed back to his bedroom. As soon as the door was closed, he dashed over to his bed and retrieved the bra he had hidden earlier. He panicked for a moment- where to stick it?- before he hastily shoved it between the mattress and the box spring. No one would think to look there.

Adrien had just finished relaxing (that had to be the extent of Marinette's things around his apartment, surely) when he happened to glance down into the trash can tucked neatly under his bedside table and promptly blanched.

Crud. Oh, he had definitely been lucky that it had been Nino and not Alya who had been in his room earlier, because Nino didn't notice things like Alya did. And if Alya had noticed the contents of his trash, she would have been able to figure out in a heartbeat that he and Marinette were in a relationship.

Suddenly re-energized, Adrien yanked out the trash can, ready to tie it up and take it out now, when he suddenly remembered that there was a trash can in the bathroom, too. It was in the cabinet under the sink, but he had absolutely no clue what was in there. He tore out of his room in a flash, startling his friends (he could make out Nino's distinctive "What the hell, dude?" from the living room), and dashed into the bathroom to grab the trash.

Sure enough, there was an empty and very feminine deodorant stick sitting among the used tissues
and makeup wipes, and there were a couple more clumps of long black hair and a broken ponytail holder. Adrien cringed and brought the trash can back to his room, emptying it into his own partially-full can before returning it to its rightful position. Then he was tying up the bag and dashing out the door past a puzzled Alya and Nino to throw the incriminating evidence away. It wasn't until the bag had slid down the chute and out of sight that Adrien let himself finally relax.

Surely that was the last of the things that could give him away. As long as Alya didn't go snooping in his drawers- and she probably wouldn't, they had just been overreacting earlier with moving Marinette's clothes back to her apartment- they should be in the clear.

And then Adrien turned around and saw two very puzzled faces peering out of his apartment.

"Uh, Adrien? What are you doing?"

Whoops.
"I never thought having our friends over would be so stressful," Adrien told Marinette as they waved good-bye to Nino and Alya at the train station Sunday evening. Even though there had been no further close calls with Marinette's stuff in Adrien's apartment, there had been a few instances when they had found themselves being a little too friendly with each other, particularly when they were tired. "But after those first few times when we found stuff we had forgotten to take care of, then I was just on high alert all the time looking for stuff that was out of place."

Marinette blinked up at him. "What other stuff? I thought it was just my things in the bathroom that we had forgotten about."

"Oh, I wish." Adrien slid his hand around her arm as he led them back towards the bus stop. "Not even close."

"He's being dramatic," Plagg grumbled from where he was hidden in Adrien's scarf. "There were two other times when he found stuff that maybe could have given you away."

"It would have straight-up given us away," Adrien said. He squeezed Marinette's arm lightly. "I'll tell you when we get home."

She nodded.

"So what else did we forget?" Marinette asked the second they had stepped into their building. "Whatever it was, both Nino and Alya must have missed it, or we would have heard about it."

"Yeah, but only because I just managed to catch it in time." Adrien let out a huff as he remembered. "You left some, ah, clothing in my room."

She just looked puzzled.

"It was pink and lacy," he told her, and was pleased to see the blush spread across her face as she caught on. "And tangled up in my sheets. Nino had followed me back to the bedroom so we could keep talking while I looked for my phone charger, and I spotted it then."

"Oh, that would have been hard to explain."

"Try impossible. I'm lucky that Nino was busy talking about his job and wasn't paying attention." Adrien unlocked his apartment and let Marinette in in front of him. "And then I was about to start getting ready for bed when I saw what was in the trash."

Marinette just looked confused.

"And then the trash in the bathroom had stuff in it that clearly wasn't mine, so I had to empty that into my trash can and take the bag out, and I think Nino and Alya thought I was crazy," Adrien continued, flopping down on the couch and pulling Marinette down to sit in his lap. He had missed all of the casual touches while their friends were there. "I had to make up something about how I had just remembered that there was an apple core in my trash from earlier in the day and I had to take it out before it stunk out the room, and that I had decided that I should empty the bathroom trash at the same time so I wouldn't have a half-empty bag." He rolled his eyes. "And of course, all
of that required me to be dashing around like a madman, because taking out the trash couldn't wait two more minutes."

Marinette laughed at that.

"It made me wonder if it's really worth it, keeping our relationship a secret from them," Adrien said. "We could have just both slept over in my bed like normal and then had Nino and Alya across the hall in your apartment."

"Yeah, I wondered that, too," Marinette admitted. "I was thinking that if we told them while they were here and could explain why it needs to stay a secret in person then maybe it would be fine. Like, one of the things that I was worrying about when telling them long-distance is if Alya would just read half of a text and then go spread the news before reading the rest of it, or if they would zone our reasoning out if we just told them over the phone. And in person, surely we could explain everything first."

"But...?" Adrien prompted. "I'm getting the feeling that there's a hang-up there."

"But then Alya was telling me about how she has a bet going with one of our other friends back home- I don't remember who, exactly- about when the two of us would get together. And just the way she said it- and the fact that her phone is always in her hand- I don't know." Marinette let out a frustrated sigh. "It just made me think that maybe she wouldn't see the problem with just telling one other person."

"And we don't want to risk that," Adrien filled in. "Yeah, okay. We can wait until it's closer to the end of our time here to tell people. That's probably the smartest thing to do anyway."

Marinette nodded, relaxing into his chest. Her eyes fluttered shut as she curled up, resting after their hectic day.

"You know, it's odd that your neighbors always somehow manage to be quiet on the weekends that Alya and Nino are visiting," Adrien commented after a few more minutes of comfortable silence. "It only seems to be those weekends that they're quiet, actually. Do you go and talk to them or something?"

Marinette snorted. "Of course not. They would never listen to me, considering that they're inconveniencing the people on their other side all the time."

"Then it must just be good luck, then?" Adrien suggested. Marinette laughed, sitting back up on his lap.

"Oh, sure. You could call it that, I suppose." Marinette's eyes lit up with her grin. From her purse, there was a small giggle. "Or you could call it Tikki. She phases through the wall and messes something up in their speaker system, and then they have to take it in to be repaired. It works really well to shut them up."

"Are you feeling ready for midterms?"

"I think so," Adrien said as he handed one of his printed-out paper drafts to Ben. "I don't have many, really. It's mostly papers and rough drafts and project write-ups, and I have most of those
close to done. It's just this one I have left to get cleaned up."

Ben nodded as he read through Adrien's paper, red pen in one hand as he went. He made a few marks in the margins, a quick suggestion for wording here and a small correction there. Adrien pulled out his notebooks and textbooks while Ben worked his way carefully through the paper, keeping an eye out for any spelling or grammar mistakes.

"It's a really solid paper," Ben said after a few minutes more. "A couple small mistakes and one sentence that was a bit awkward and then your bibliography is a little out of order so I would check that again, but it's really good. You've done some really great research."

Adrien nodded, glancing over. He had tried his hardest on that assignment, working to get a solid paper done and all of the research that he might need finished, and it was good to heard that his efforts had paid off. "Thanks for proofreading that, by the way. I know I heard someone in the tutoring center say that that isn't usually a normal part of tutoring."

"Oh, it's no trouble." Ben handed the paper back to Adrien. "With you, I'm not trying to improve the content at all, really, because it's already fabulous. It's just catching a couple English errors, and that's easy."

"And the bibliography this time, apparently." Adrien scanned the section and- yep, Ben was right. Three of his sources were out of alphabetical order. "Oh, that's a ridiculous mistake. I'll fix everything tonight and get it turned in early, I think. Just to get it out of the way."

"Good plan. Have you gotten the other things in?"

"Some. Others can't be turned in early, so I'm still polishing them up." Adrien glanced at the other corrections Ben had made. They weren't large- the things he found never were- but it would make his paper sound that much more professional, and all without Adrien having to spend an hour agonizing over it in an attempt to find all of the mistakes before handing it in. "It's mostly making sure that I have all of the information I need in them and that I'm not forgetting to mention part of an experiment or something."

Ben grinned and nodded. "Yeah, that wouldn't be good! You would think that the professors would miss something like that after reading so many lab reports, but they catch everything. One of my classmates last year forgot to write down one of the main steps in a lab report for one of the classes you're in now, and they got marked down an entire letter grade for it."

Adrien winced at the thought. It would stink to have so many points taken off from what would otherwise be a perfect paper. He had been careful in his double-checking of his work, though, and he was positive that all of his lab reports contained all of the steps in just the right amount of detail.

With the paper editing taken care of, Adrien and Ben moved on to working on the concepts that Adrien hadn't quite fully grasped during class. Their dynamic wasn't quite that of teacher and student, which was something that Adrien hadn't quite anticipated when he first signed up for tutoring. He and Ben had become fast friends even if they were only seeing each other for the tutoring sessions two to three times a week.

With only a year's difference between them and similar interests in Physics topics, they had enough in common to chat about when they weren't focusing on Physics. Adrien was glad that the two of them got along so well; after all, they were meeting up several times per week for nearly an hour. It was easier for him to be comfortable interrupting and asking questions when Ben wasn't just a tutor, aloof and detached. They had managed to develop a nice balance between a focus on teaching while still being friendly, which Adrien thoroughly enjoyed.
"Words cannot express how easy you are to teach," Ben said with a laugh when Adrien let out a loud "OH!" and quickly started scribbling down some notes to help him remember a rather important point about a concept. "I've tutored people where you have to walk them through a concept and several problems super-slowly and multiple times, but you? I just break a concept down a little bit and suddenly you catch on. It's very rewarding, as a tutor. I feel like I'm doing so much more than I actually am."

Adrien just grinned.

The rest of the tutoring session flew by, and then Ben had to leave for class. Adrien waved good-bye, then turned back to his work to try to finish the problem set he was on before packing up. He did his best not to rush, even though all he wanted to do was head back to his apartment, where there was leftover chocolate cake calling his name. It was made even more enticing by the fact that Adrien hadn't had any cake since he and Marinette polished off the last of his birthday cake earlier in the fall, and this time Marinette had tried a new and ridiculously delicious flavor to distract herself from the (admittedly less crazy than last year) Fashion Week.

...aaand now he was thoroughly distracted. Great.

Adrien gave himself a good shake to refocus and looked back down at his work. Right. Two more problems to go, and then he could head back home and eat his cake. He could do it.

Adrien's midterm exams went by in a flash, and then it was time for his fall break. His father had only bothered him a little bit about returning to Paris for his break this time around, giving up after only a couple nagging texts and phone calls with Nathalie. That, combined with the fact that Marinette had plenty of saved up time off that she had to use before the end of the year, meant that they could take a week to themselves to travel around the country. After some consideration, they had decided to head north to investigate an area that, according to their kwamis, had once had a couple active Miraculous holders there (though not a Ladybug-Chat Noir pair). Since neither of them knew much about the other Miraculous and they were rather curious to learn more, they decided to head up and see if they could find anything.

So once again, they dragged themselves out of bed early to catch a train for their several-hour journey northwards.

"I hate everything," Marinette grumbled, burying her face in Adrien's shoulder. "Ugh. I hate being efficient with our time when it requires getting up early."

Adrien tried not to laugh as he yawned and ended up making a strangled sort of sound instead.

They headed steadily north, and eventually both Marinette and Adrien were awake enough to enjoy the trip. Adrien alternated between staring out the window at the scenery flying by and reading one of the several papers he had brought along for his classes, while Marinette sketched in her sketchbook, working on possible designs for Madam Rosalie's winter collection. Once their stomachs started to growl, she pulled out the sandwiches that they had prepared the previous night. They had been sure to pack enough for the train ride up and for their first dinner, but after that they would either have to buy things from the grocery store as needed to make sandwiches or eat out at restaurants.
Honestly, that wasn't a bad thing, even if it could get a bit expensive. He and Marinette never ate out in London unless they had been invited out to lunch with Marinette's coworkers, so now they could. They would just have to be careful to not let it appear too date-like, in case anyone recognized them.

Partway through eating his sandwich, Adrien happened to notice that there were a lot of people heading through their train car. They passed through to the car in front, and then came back several minutes later with food in their hands.

"Uh, Mari, do they sell food on this train or something?" Adrien asked after seeing about a dozen people come back through with food. "I keep seeing people coming through with sandwiches."

Marinette glanced up as a whole family came through, clutching paper-wrapped sandwiches, and she made a slight face. "Oh. Yeah. They sell food on most trains, apparently. One of my coworkers- Emily, I think? Yeah, it would have been Emily- almost died laughing last year when I told her that we were starving on the way back from Bath and didn't get to eat until we got home. She told me about the dining compartment then, and then brought me part of a sandwich that she had gotten on the train during her weekend trip." Marinette's face screwed up in disgust. "It was...not good. I don't think their sandwich bread could even be considered bread. It was dry, and dense, and ugh."

Adrien hid a smile at that. "Someone is a bit of a bread snob, huh?"

"I am not! I just have standards!"

"You're totally a bread snob."

Marinette gave him a sour look. Adrien tried his best not to laugh. After all, even if he hadn't grown up with completely fresh, amazingly tasty bread like Marinette had, he wasn't in any hurry to sample the train food. He much preferred their homemade sandwiches. Still, he was curious about it and they still had a while to travel, so he re-wrapped the rest of his sandwich and followed the next group of people forward through several carriages until they got to the dining car. There, he saw a team of workers handing pre-packaged sandwiches to riders. A menu- if it could be called that, considering how limited it seemed to be and how much of the list seemed to be snacks rather than anything that would be considered a meal- hung on the wall. The sandwiches seemed fairly simple, and didn't sound appealing at all.

Okay, so maybe Marinette wasn't actually a bread snob. Maybe she just appreciated decent food, and the train wasn't the best place to find that. In the few minutes that he had been hanging about, he had already heard a few muttered complaints about the food. The bread was dry, there wasn't enough meat, there wasn't enough of the other fillings, there were no condiments and the whole thing tasted like cardboard...

Yeah, Adrien was glad that he and Marinette had brought their own food. They would have to try to make something for their return trip, too, so they could avoid having to resort to the train sandwiches.

"What did you find?" Marinette asked when Adrien flopped back into the seat next to her. "Was it as bad as I thought it was?"

"Worse," Adrien told her. "Well, worse than I thought it would be, at least. It looked like they put in the bare minimum effort required to call that stuff 'sandwiches'. I saw someone picking through their sandwich and it just looked sad." He bent down to dig the rest of his sandwich out of his backpack. "I've never seen something so awful-looking sold before, but then again I'm pretty sure
that my mom always brought a lunch with us whenever we went on day trips. We probably never bought food while actually on the train.

"No, probably not," Marinette agreed. "I think the people who do buy stuff on the train are either unprepared or maybe they just like the taste of sawdust. Who knows."

Adrien tried not to laugh. He didn't entirely succeed.

After that, it wasn't long before they were pulling to a halt at their stop. Adrien and Marinette hopped off, along with only a couple other people on the train, and then headed into town. This time, their hotel room was under Marinette's name, and Adrien stayed outside with their luggage while Marinette got checked in.

"It has two beds, because that's all they have here," Marinette told him after she had checked in and they were heading down the hallway with their bags. "But both are big enough for two people."

Somehow Adrien suspected that they would only be using one bed. Still, it would be good to have two so they could spread out a bit more, considering that they would be in town for several days.

"We're looking for room 108," Marinette said over her shoulder as she led the way down the hall, checking the doors as she went. "Aaand 104, 106, 108! Right here!" She dropped her bag into Adrien's hands so she could pull out the room keep. A swipe, a beep, and a click later, and they were in the room. It was a fairly standard hotel room, from what Adrien could tell. Nothing to write home about, but not bad at all. There were two beds, a tiny bathroom, a desk, a couple lamps, and best of all, a mini-fridge.

A mini-fridge that meant that they could keep food there.

"We could get stuff for sandwiches for lunches," Marinette suggested when he pointed it out. She crouched down to check it out. "I don't think we'd be able to do our own dinners, though. We don't have any cooking stuff."

Adrien didn't mind. He would rather have meals out then eat in their hotel room, but it was nice to know that they could make their own lunches, at least. They wouldn't have to rely on deli sandwiches from the grocery store.

"It's not super cold, so I don't know if we could keep meat in here- oh, wait, there's a dial we can turn," Marinette said. She twisted it all the way up. "Hopefully that will work."

"We could also take it out of that cupboard," Adrien suggested, peering over her shoulder to inspect the poorly-designed cupboard. "It's not ventilated at all, so the fridge is essentially fighting the laws of thermodynamics to try to cool down. If we take it out, then it might do a bit better. I'd say just open the door on that cupboard, but it would just be in the way."

"Somehow I don't think the hotel would appreciate it if we unplugged the fridge," Marinette said, peering at the cord leading behind the very large piece of furniture. "Maybe we should just keep the cupboard door open during the day while we're gone and then use the bed closer to the bathroom so we can leave it open at night, too."

Adrien grumbled but had to agree. Unless he transformed, it would be difficult to move the furniture to get the fridge unplugged so they would be able to remove it from that ridiculous cabinet.

Why had they made that awful choice to close the cupboard, anyway? Just for aesthetics? Had the room designer never taken a thermodynamics course in their life? Ugh.
"So what do you want to do with the rest of the day?" Marinette asked, flopping back on one of the beds. "It's late enough that there wouldn't be any point in going out to the castle Tikki and Plagg told us about."

Adrien gave it a few seconds' thought. "Maybe grocery shop for lunch and scout out restaurants nearby for when we want to have dinner?" he suggested. "Then maybe we can just explore the town."

So that was exactly what they did. It didn't take long for them to figure out how to navigate through the town so they could pick up some sandwich fixings and get them back to the hotel before wandering around to explore the town. Once dusk had properly fallen, the two of them made a beeline to a restaurant and settled in at a table.

Neither of them noticed the man in a corner booth pulling out a camera.

"So were the Miraculous holders people who lived in this castle?" Marinette asked Tikki after they had hopped off of the shuttle at the old castle the next morning. A couple other people had gotten off with them, but she and Adrien had been sure to not walk up to the castle too close to the others so they could try to get more information out of their kwamis without anyone else noticing. "Or did they just live nearby?"

Tikki giggled. "What fun would it be if I told you now? See if you can figure it out first."

Both Adrien and Marinette groaned. "Really? We have to do this just like Alya, with just a place and time period to work with?" Marinette complained. "Why?"

"Because I want to know what two humans with knowledge of the Miraculous could pick up. These users were fairly typical of the time, and I want to know if people noticed anything out of the ordinary."

"Or at least if they noticed enough out of the ordinary to make it through a couple centuries' worth of time," Adrien corrected. They started climbing the stairs to the castle. "I'm curious to see if we can pick the users out, actually. We don't even know what they were fighting, if they were fighting anything at all."

Tikki just giggled and vanished back into Marinette's purse.

In the entrance hall, the small group gathered around the designated tour guide. There were only a few people working in the castle at the moment, their guide explained as they waited a few minutes more for anyone who might be coming by car. It wasn't their peak season for visitors, so they were down to a skeleton staff, the year-rounders.

"That's good," Adrien murmured to Marinette. "They'll be the ones that know the most about everything."

Marinette nodded.

Ten minutes later, the tour started. Their guide showed them around the old castle, pointing out rooms and what they had been used for. Most had been set up in the same way that they would have been back when the castle was in use, though there were a couple rooms that had been
converted into an office and gift shop. The guide talked to them about what life had been throughout the castle's use, and about the major events during the different time periods. Adrien and Marinette listened attentively, but nothing sounded particularly strange. Nothing stood out, even though they knew during what time period the Miraculous had been active and had even asked several questions about the few things that happened then.

It was weird.

"So, do some Miraculous holders just, like, not really do much with it?" Adrien asked after their tour had finished, leaving them to wander and explore the grounds, and they still hadn't picked out anything strange or Miraculous. The people who had lived in the castle in the past sounded absolutely normal, and it hadn't sounded like the people who lived in the town and countryside nearby had been anything but ordinary, either. "They just happened across a Miraculous, maybe, and didn't want to venture out and join the army or anything?"

Plagg sniggered. "Nah, they definitely were fighting something. We got called to come in and help but they had things under control by the time we got here, so our holders just turned around and headed home."

"But there were no records of any fights during that time period you told us," Marinette argued. "In fact, that time period was so settled that they covered everything about it in about two minutes. Some people were born, some people got married, some people got old and died. That was it."

"Well, there was also a short famine," Adrien pointed out. "All of the crops just failed. But that happens sometimes, and it didn't last that long. Does that even count as a famine, then, if it barely lasts any time at all?"

"It was three years," Marinette corrected before their kwamis could say anything. "And it would have been a big problem if had lasted much longer, since the stores of food were dwindling down to nothing. But that was it."

Tikki and Plagg just exchanged a look.

"Wait, was the famine hiding something?" Adrien suddenly asked after a minute of silence. "Did the superheroes do something to end it?"

"Warmer."

Marinette frowned. "...was the famine not natural?"

"Right!" Tikki chirped. She zipped in a happy circle around Marinette's head. "It was supernatural. There was a dark spirit attacking the area, after a witch nearby summoned it and then lost control. Most of us were busy elsewhere in the world, so all we could spare was the Bee and the Goat. They were retired superheroes from two different areas and not fighting any immediate threat, so they gave up their Miraculous to send over here so new holders could be found."

"It was an odd partnership," Plagg piped up. "Two different levels of Miraculous, and not particularly complimentary powers. But odd superheroes are better than no superheroes when there's a dark spirit involved."

Marinette and Adrien exchanged a wide-eyed look. Fighting a very human supervillain had been hard enough, and they had had relatively normal lives outside of the mask. They hadn't had to worry about lack of food or destruction to the city (magic reset ladybugs were lovely, really). Fighting a dark spirit while simultaneously worrying about a lack of food and trying to keep the
destruction to a minimum and keeping normal civilians from finding out about the superheroes in
the area just sounded really, really tough. They would have had a clear limit to how long the fight
could get dragged out, too, since there was no food coming in from elsewhere.

"It took a bit for the Bee and the Goat to find the spirit once they got the Miraculous, and then they
spent two long years fighting it," Tikki continued. "There was a lot of damage done to the land,
actually. A section of forest was completely leveled, as were some hills. When we arrived, there
were gouges in the ground and entire sections of earth that were barren and I could tell that they
wouldn't be able to grow anything in those areas for probably years. I'm sure the people in the area
suspected that something was going on, but it was probably put down to the weird weather they
were having. Everyone knew to stay indoors when the winds picked up and started howling."

"Now, you would get people driving out into the middle of the storm- or rather, the battle- in those
ridiculous storm-chaser cars," Plagg said with a huff. "And then they would get footage of the fight
and it would be all over the internet. It would be huge news. But in those days, it was different."

"It was a far better idea to stay inside and pray that their houses would stand the storm," Tikki
continued. "From what we understood when we arrived, not all houses could tolerate the spirit's
storms. Some families left the area when the famine and storms continued, but not everyone could
afford to relocate. And the family in the castle didn't leave, because two of them were the
superheroes. Besides, they had to stay so they wouldn't lose the castle to other people or be called
deserters."

Marinette frowned at that, utterly confused. "Wait, did their family know that they were
Miraculous holders, then? Did they know about each other?"

"They knew about each other, but their family didn't know," Plagg told them. "They were a
brother-sister pair, or maybe cousins? I don't remember. We only met them the once."

"They were cousins," Tikki scolded him. "You should have remembered that, considering that they
were both men. And their kwamis told us that when the whole family discussed leaving, the two of
them were clearly against it, though they just claimed that they didn't want to go and leave the
villagers and farmers around here stranded. With people in the castle, those who lost their homes
but not their lives could have somewhere to stay while things got rebuilt. Besides, if they left and
the castle got damaged during a 'storm', then it would just get worse and worse instead of being
fixed right away."

"Well, they had their excuses lined up," Adrien said with a laugh. "Those actually sound like good
reasons. I don't know how many of our excuses were actually decent when we were trying to
justify being missing."

Tikki giggled. "Well, you're comparing long-term excuses that they had time to think of with
immediate knee-jerk excuses. I'm sure the Bee and Goat had some sketchy excuses as well."

"So why have us come up here to look for clues if you knew there wouldn't be anything to find?"
Marinette wanted to know as they finally turned and headed back up over the bumpy ground
towards the castle. "I mean, it's gorgeous up here, but..."

"We were curious."

Adrien sent their kwamis an incredulous look. "Really? That's it? You just wanted to see if there
were any tales?"

Neither Tikki nor Plagg looked at all guilty about it. "Well, it's good to know what people noticed.
There was a dark spirit loose, after all. Legends pop up around those sorts of things all the time.

"Personally, I'd be interested asking more questions about the famine," Adrien said. He reached out and linked Marinette's arm with his as they headed up the steeper part of the hill towards the castle. "Just to hear if there's any stories about that. I'm sure the guides here will think that we're crazy or weird or something, but it could be interesting."

"What I'm interested in is knowing why there were so many kwamis out at once," Marinette said. She leveled a look at the two kwamis. "You said that everyone was busy, but now there's only three Miraculous out and Master Fu has the rest. Why were there so many needed back then?"

Plagg's shrug was utterly disinterested. "Lots of sorcerers accidentally summoning spirits that they couldn't control. Some wars and rebellions. Lots of little stuff."

Wars and rebellions and dark spirits were little stuff? Adrien and Marinette exchanged a worried look.

Hopefully they would never have to learn what the kwamis considered big stuff.

"So I'm pretty sure that we can never return to that castle," Adrien said with a laugh as they waited for their dinner that night. Once they knew what they were looking for, they had spent a chunk of time quizzing their guide about the dark spirit-caused famine after returning to the castle. "They probably think that we're complete weirdos for asking so many questions about one three-year famine several hundred years ago."

Marinette laughed. "Yeah, they were giving us some strange looks," she agreed. "And all we learned was that people just though there were some strange weather patterns and that fae or something got blamed for the random patches of land that wouldn't grow anything for the next dozen years. Presumably they got blamed for the hills that got flattened and the river suddenly changing course, too."

"People probably just persuaded themselves that they had remembered things wrong," Adrien suggested. Their waiter arrived with their meals, and they both dug in. "Either that, or they decided that lightning or a flood flattened the hills."

Marinette just shrugged. There could have been a lot of fuss and confusion about the topographical changes at the time, but that had just been lost over the years.

"So what do we do with the rest of the week, then?" Adrien wanted to know. "Just go on hikes or something? We're scheduled to be here for the next three days."

"Mhmm. Hikes and maybe do tours of some of the lakes and other castles around here, or explore some of the places that the Miraculous battles took place." Marinette beamed over at him and Adrien swore that he would follow her everywhere she wanted to go, just to see that look on his face. "It's gorgeous up here. Maybe we can't go on crazy hikes or anything, because I just have my sneakers along, but I'm sure there's plenty we can find."

Adrien just grinned back at her. "That sounds great, Marinette."
Yes, the thermodynamics thing is 100% a reference to a Katie Mack tweet. I saw it and couldn't resist :D

If anyone is wondering about who Ben is- he was mentioned (briefly) last chapter, so I figured I would properly introduce him this chapter so people remember him better. He's Adrien's tutor, if that wasn't clear.

Also for anyone going "holy crud this is dragging out foreeeeever"- yeah, that it is. I'm very aware of that (mostly because of how much time it took to write and edit everything). No fear, though- I've learned how to use time skips for year 3, so there's still plenty of fluff but not QUITE so much filler (that being said, of course, there's still 8 more chapters between this and Year 3).
Chapter 26

Their relaxing week up north ended with a much less relaxing few days once they got back to London. They found out within a day that someone had taken pictures of them having dinner together and had posted the pictures online. A reporter had apparently come up to investigate, and they had discovered that the two of them were sharing a hotel room.

Naturally, the articles and rumors flared right back up again. Adrien got a very displeased call from his father- or, rather, from Nathalie on behalf of his father.

"It was cheaper," Adrien explained, completely exasperated. "And of course we were going to have dinner together, it didn't make sense not to."

"Your father wants you to speak to the tabloids again to dispel the rumors," Nathalie told him. "Again."

Adrien scowled. It wasn't his fault that reporters insisted on harassing him and Marinette, or that someone at the hotel had decided to completely disregard confidentiality rules and share their reservation information. He didn't particularly want to have to carve a chunk of time out of his day to talk to some nosy reporter. If he could chose, he would rather just ignore them until they found some new target to pester, but his father did pay for his tuition and rent.

Grudgingly, Adrien agreed to at least talk to a reporter. It probably wouldn't do much, but maybe he could manage to get the majority of the reporters off of their backs again.

"And one more thing- what is that noise on your end?" Nathalie wanted to know. Adrien cringed.

"Marinette's neighbor down the hall is moving out soon," Adrien explained, flinching and shuffling as far away as he could manage from the source of the noise as the bass dropped and raising his voice a little so Nathalie would be able to hear him. "They've been such a nuisance all year that they haven't been allowed to renew their lease, and they're moving out this weekend. And they're being as big of a pain as they can before they leave."

"I see."

"They'll be gone by Monday," Adrien told her. "No clue who is gonna be moving in in their place, but they can't possibly be worse. But I think they're being so obnoxious because they're sore about having to move in the middle of the semester."

"Report them," Nathalie suggested. "They might get a mark on their police record. That would teach them not to behave so poorly."

"Of course." Adrien didn't plan on doing that, not really. It was only going to be a couple more days. If it got too bad, Tikki would probably go over and break something in the speaker system to give them a bit of a break. "Bye, Nathalie."

The phone clicked in his ear.

"Well, that could have gone better," Adrien sighed. He glanced over at Plagg, twisting and stretching as he did to try to shake some of the stiffness that had settled in the small of his back from being bent over his schoolwork earlier. "I suppose I just have to happen to find and talk to one of the better reporters before the trashy ones find me and not let myself get cornered anywhere."
Plagg yawned and burped, letting out Camembert-scented air. "Do you really gotta do a proper interview? Just answer the hotel room thing by telling them about the cost and how there were two beds and then if they ask you about your relationship, ask them why they're so thick that they need to keep asking the same question over and over and over. And then leave. They're trash and they don't deserve your time." Another burp, louder this time. "Also, their voices are annoying."

Adrien laughed.

Down the hall, one song wound down and another started up. Adrien groaned, shooting a nasty look towards the source of the "music". Clearly he wasn't going to be able to study right now. Maybe he should just go out and get some grocery shopping done, and hopefully their neighbor would have quit their little hissy fit by then.

Grumbling, Adrien gathered up his grocery bags and snagged the shopping list he and Marinette had written up and his wallet. He would have preferred to get a chunk of writing for several of his project papers out of the way, but now he was too distracted to do that. Maybe the shopping would give him some time to clear his head.

...or maybe he would run into a reporter ten steps outside of his building. At least Marinette hadn't had that problem when she left for work earlier that morning.

Adrien did his best to not let his exasperation and apprehension show. Instead, he did his best impression of his father, smoothing out his expression into something absolutely disdainful and icy as he made to stride right past the reporter.

Of course, it wasn't going to be that easy to shake the absolute pest of a reporter. He trotted after Adrien, microphone at the ready.

"Mr. Agreste! You were recently spotted traveling with your 'friend' Ms. Dupain-Cheng, and reports say that you two shared a hotel room-"

"I'm a university student and Marinette is an intern," Adrien snapped before the man could even get to his question., not even slowing his pace. "We like saving our money, and it was cheaper to share one hotel room with two beds than to pay for two rooms for five nights, as anyone with half a brain would know."

"And your 'friend' was comfortable with not having separate rooms?"

Adrien scoffed at the frankly insulting question. "Of course. I'm a gentleman, and Marinette knows that. I'd be more worried if she wasn't comfortable with me after us knowing each other for so long."

"Ah. And, uh..." The reporter glanced down at their notepad, then shoved the microphone in Adrien's face again. "You two had dinners together, and looked very close-"

"What, should we have sat alone at two separate tables?" Adrien snapped, ice dripping off every word. He had never so much like his father before. "Should we have sat with straight faces and not talking at all? You people are ridiculous."

He was pleased to see the reporter falter.

"And, uh, what do you have to say about the state of your relationship with Ms. Dupain-Cheng-"

"I have already answered that question endless times," Adrien said, his voice going a few degrees chillier yet. "How many times do I have to repeat myself? Do you people have memory problems
or something?" He screeched to a halt, and turned a truly Gabriel Agreste-esque look on the reporter still tailing him. Unsurprisingly, the man faltered. "You people have been harassing us for a year now. Enough is enough. I'm not going to entertain any more of your ridiculous questions. Good bye."

Turning, he stalked off. The reporter didn't follow.

"Oh, that worked well," Plagg cackled. Adrien could feel him wriggling into his collar so he could see the reporter. Plagg sniggered. "He looks like someone slapped him across his face. Good job, kid. All those years of mocking your father behind his back really paid off, it seems."

"Hopefully that gets out soon enough," Adrien muttered. He had absolutely no desire to repeat that several more times. "Otherwise I'm tempted to get a restraining order. Or ten, maybe."

At the grocery store, Adrien could tell that he was attracting a few more stares than normal. Even if people hadn't read the articles written about him, the fact that they had just seen his face at the end of the check-out lanes was enough to make them curious. He shopped faster, speedwalking down the aisles, and he specifically chose a checkout lane run by a bored-looking middle-aged guy who didn't even give him a second glance. He could see a uni-aged cashier from two lanes over glancing over at him excitedly, but thankfully she was busy with a customer and Adrien was able to escape with his groceries unbothered.

"Hey, there's a new article about you," Plagg reported from Adrien's pocket, where he was fiddling with Adrien's phone. "From that reporter you told off. He's claiming that he got an 'exclusive interview', but at least he got the details right." A pause. "Also, he says that you seem to just be in denial about your feelings for Marinette, or maybe you got turned down at some point because you were super-defensive about the whole thing."

"Well, Ladybug did rebuff my flirting a bunch," Adrien pointed out. "That was rejection." He smirked, just because he knew it would bug Plagg. "But she's much more receptive now, hmm?"

Plagg gagged, Adrien snickered, and they continued on their way.

The music was still pumping when Adrien and Plagg got back to the apartment. Adrien sighed, grumbled, and started putting food away. Once he finished, he pulled on his headphones, turned up his own music to a comfortable volume, and tried to buckle down to work on his papers while Plagg curled up on the kitchen counter to try to take a nap, snarling impolite words in the neighbor's direction as he tried to settle down.

The faint thud-thud-thud that he could still hear through the headphones was utterly distracting. Adrien grumbled, adjusting the headphones and wishing that he could just head over to campus and study in the library or something there. But he was pretty certain that buildings were closed for the break, and he also didn't want to get cornered by any reporters while there.

Maybe he should just go over to Madam Rosalie's and ask if he could study in a corner there. Surely Marinette had enough space in the corner of her workspace for him to sit and write. There might always be a hum of activity there, but at least it would be disruptive than the so-called music he neighbor had been playing.

Shaking his head, Adrien forced himself to re-focus on the lab report he was trying to complete. It was most of the way done, and he just really needed a really solid conclusion to cap it off before he could do a first edit and then hand the paper over to Ben to look over. However, trying to write in a language that wasn't his first language could be difficult, and the nonstop thudding wasn't helping matters.
Maybe he should take Nathalie's advice and call the police. The immature idiot would deserve the mark on their record.

Still, Adrien instead just adjusted his headphones, turned his own music up a little, and tried to refocus on his paper. Maybe he should try moving outside to his balcony. It might be quieter there, though he would have to bundle up.

He had just gotten up to get his coat when there was an earsplitting screech followed by deafening silence.

Adrien yanked off his headphones, frowning towards the door. It sounded like something had gone suddenly and seriously wrong with their soon-to-be-ex-neighbor's speaker system. Adrien wasn't about to complain- the idiots shouldn't have been playing their music so loudly- but he couldn't help but wonder what exactly had happened. Had they accidentally knocked things over, breaking something in the speakers? Had playing music loudly for so long finally affected the speakers somehow? Had a ticked-off neighbor broken in and taken a sledgehammer to the sound system?

There was no yelling, though, at least none that Adrien could hear. Still frowning in confusion, he sat back down at the table. Well, whatever had happened meant that for the time being at least, he could get some work done. The ringing silence was a little disorienting, but at least now he could actually hear himself think. Adrien started typing and had only gotten a couple sentences written when Plagg phased straight through the door, whining loudly and clutching at his ears as though in pain.

In a split second, it became completely obvious what had happened to the soon-to-be-ex-neighbor's sound system. Adrien tried not to laugh.

"Oh, my ears," Plagg whined, collapsing onto the couch. "Oh, they ring. They hurt. Oh, I think they're bleeding. I'm deaf for life."

"What did you break?" Adrien wanted to know. He grinned over at his kwami. "It must have been something important."

Plagg gave him a green-eyed glare. "Me? Break something? I would never. I was just innocently exploring when that machine started screeching and nearly made me deaf."

...Adrien did suppose that it probably wouldn't have been pleasant to be inside the sound system when it made such a loud noise. He wasn't sure why Plagg was trying to play innocent, but he couldn't deny that it was pretty funny.

"I see. So, uh..." Adrien regarded his kwami, biting his lip to try to hold back the laughter. "In your expert, God of Destruction opinion, how long will it take for the neighbors to fix their sound system?"

"Oh, they won't be able to fix it, I don't think," Plagg reported, yawning widely and showing off his little fangs. "Every last wire in that thing got fried- all spontaneously, of course. Not my fault at all, obviously. I certainly had nothing to do with it. So, do you have any Camembert that I can enjoy while I get my hearing back?"

Adrien showed up to the last of his tutoring sessions before finals with a bag of cookies for Ben
and a grin, and with Paul trailing somewhat anxiously behind him. Since Adrien felt pretty ready for finals and Paul had been increasingly curious about the tutoring after Adrien sailed through several exams with ease, Adrien had asked Ben if he could bring along a friend to their final tutoring session of the semester. Ben had agreed, of course, and so for a day his normal one-on-one tutoring was instead one-on-two.

"Oh, thank you," Ben said in surprise, taking the offered bag. "These look amazing."

"Marinette made them," Adrien told him, grinning. "So you know they'll be good. And I helped in between study sessions, but not too much. It's never a good idea to get in between a Dupain-Cheng and their baking."

Ben looked a little puzzled. Paul noticed and grinned.

"Marinette is his wife," Paul said helpfully, snickering when Ben blinked and turned his startled gaze on Adrien. "He talks about her all the time."

Adrien groaned and leveled an annoyed look at Paul. "Marinette is not my wife, she's my friend from Paris who lives across the hall from me."

"Who you got married to once."

"It was a prank! I'm not actually married!" Adrien was pretty certain that he had mentioned Marinette to Ben before, but of course he hadn't actually mentioned the wedding prank at all, because that was ages ago and not that important, even if he had kept the fake marriage certificate. "And anyway, I didn't invite you over so you could tease me the entire time. We have exams to review for."

Ben was grinning. "Maybe, but I'll have to remember to ask about that in the future. So Adrien apparently forgot his manners and forgot to introduce us," he added to Paul, reaching out a hand to shake. "I'm Ben, and you must be Paul."

"Right," Paul confirmed, shaking Ben's hand. "Thanks for letting me come. I've been curious about the tutoring for a bit now, since Adrien has been acing everything this semester."

Ben laughed. "Well, I can't take credit for everything. Adrien usually just needs a nudge to understand what was taught in class. But I can certainly try to help." He glanced over at Adrien. "Do you have any more papers for me to look over, Adrien?"

Adrien shook his head as he sat down at the table. "No, the ones that you edited on Tuesday were the last of the batch for this semester. Thanks for that, as always."

"And as I always tell you- seriously, it was no problem."

Adrien just grinned and shrugged as he opened his bag and pulled out his books like normal. The politeness was ingrained at this point, and that was the way he preferred it. It was better than automatically expecting other people to do things for him.

Their tutoring session continued as normal, with the exception of Paul sometimes chiming in with a question about something. As Ben explained a concept that he and Adrien had already gone over, Adrien let himself sit back a little and think about the upcoming break.

He was looking forward to the break, even if it would be filled with fittings and photoshoots and filming for commercials (seriously, Adrien wanted to know which one of the staff members was responsible for writing commercials. More often than not, they were cringy and terrible, no matter
how hard Adrien worked to deliver the requested emotions believably). Seeing Nino and Alya again would be fun, and of course being able to transform and run around freely on the rooftops without having to worry about staying hidden would be amazing.

Adrien wasn't looking forward to Christmas Eve dinner with his father (it would surely be painful as always, since Mr. Agreste still didn't approve of Adrien's field of study; to say that Adrien was fully done with listening to his father's opinion would be an understatement), but that would be a couple hours at most. He would be spending more time with his friends (upon his request, Nathalie had agreed to be sure to schedule his photoshoots and other activities while Alya and Nino would be at work and therefore busy as often as possible, so he could have evenings and even parts of the weekend off to spend with them (and of course with Marinette as well, when she wasn't busy helping her parents).

The thought of Marinette spending part of her vacation working made Adrien frown slightly. She had been working on commissions for most of the fall- never that many, though Adrien suspected that there would be quite a few more requests after Jagged Stone's album came out right after the holidays, and she kept the number of hours worked each night (or each day, during the weekend) reasonable- but more recently, she had thrown herself into making presents for her family and friends (and had put off finishing a few commissions to fully focus on that). He knew that it was an act of love when she made presents for those people she knew, not a burden, but it also meant that she threw herself into working on the pieces without regard to how long it took. It meant that Adrien never felt guilty when spending the entire evening studying for finals and polishing up the last of his lab reports and papers, but he was concerned that she was going to end up overworking herself- especially because she apparently had been working on his present during her breaks at work.

Mr. Dupain had warned him about Marinette's tendency to overwork herself. Maybe he should check in with her to see how much she had left to do on her gifts, and if there was any way he could help between the end of his exams and when he had to head back to Paris.

"Ah, I get it now," Paul said suddenly, snapping Adrien out of his thoughts. "Hopefully I'll remember it, too. That's always the worst, learning something and then forgetting it completely when it's actually important."

"Even if you've already done the problem set for the chapter that theorem is in, I'd recommend you do it over while you still have that understanding fresh in your head," Ben told him. "Then you get more practice with it, and it's more likely that you'll remember things."

Paul nodded. "Right, of course. I'll do that tonight. Man, I should do this tutoring thing more often," he added to Adrien. "I've been spending ages trying to figure that theorem out."

Ben was grinning. "Great! And you don't have to have regular meetings with a tutor throughout the semester if that's not what you need. We do once-off meetings too, though you might get bumped from one tutor to another with those based on who's available."

"I might look into that, then," Paul decided. "I never needed tutoring at all when I was younger, but there's no sense in making things more difficult for myself. Now, what about-"

And they were off again, covering a few different topics. They switched between Paul's questions and Adrien's until time was up and they had to finish up for the day.

"Good luck on exams, both of you," Ben told them as they packed up. "Be sure to read the questions carefully, and several times over before you start trying to answer. I've known several people who lost a lot of time on their exams because they realized partway through answering
something that they had interpreted the question wrong."

Adrien nodded, nervous. He suspected that he would probably be more likely than Paul to misunderstand a question— or maybe he would be less likely to misread a question; after all, he tended to read through the exams more slowly than the native English speakers, since he couldn’t just skim through.

It was impossible to tell now. He would just have to be careful on his finals, just like he had been with all of his exams earlier in the semester.

The three of them trotted down the stairs together to return their study room key, then they exited the building. Adrien waved good-bye to the other two boys before turning and heading for the bus stop, yawning a little as he did.

Exam week couldn’t be over soon enough. He was pretty certain that he was ready, and much more time spent studying would just straight-up drive him crazy.

"Can't wait for next semester, eh?" Plagg asked, finally popping out of Adrien's bag. He had managed to behave throughout the entirety of the tutoring session—he had probably been sleeping—but now Plagg was very much awake and ready to be a pain in the neck. "I heard you guys talking about hating this part of the semester."

"I like the learning part better than the testing part," Adrien said by way of answer. "As for next semester... well, I guess? Paul will be in more of my sections, so I'll see him more often than I have this semester. But I'm a bit worried about it, too."

Back when Adrien registered for the classes his advisor had told him to take, Ben had looked the list over and commented on the number of research papers and lab report write-ups and writing in general for those classes. The thought of so much writing was intimidating, even with Ben’s help with proofreading. Adrien had already decided that he would have to really push to get ahead on those projects early in the semester—so much reading thick, technical papers in English (though Ben had suggested that he also look through papers in French; while perhaps not quite as numerous, it was not against the rules) would probably take quite a long time. The thought of all the hours he would have to spend hunched over digging through the papers made set off an increasingly familiar twinge in the small of his back.

Ugh. He was getting old if his body was starting to have random aches and pains already. If this kept up, before he knew it he wouldn’t be able to run and flip over the rooftops of Paris anymore and his bones would be brittle and shatter into a million pieces when he fell on the ice, just like an old man.

(So maybe he was exaggerating, just a tiny bit. But Adrien didn't exactly like pain, and it was stupid that his back—which he hadn't even injured, ever—was acting up like this.)

Once he reached the bus station, Adrien opted to stand instead of sit, since it seemed that all that he had been doing lately had been sitting. He stretched, turning his face turned to the sky as he waited for the bus to come.

Above him, the first snowflakes of the season floated down.
Marinette couldn't help but have a little skip in her step as she headed down the sidewalk. There was only another week until Christmas, and it was really feeling like the holidays. A light dusting of snow was sifting down on London, and Marinette let herself spin around on the sidewalk, arms open to enjoy the snowflakes fluttering past.

It was going to be a good holiday, even if she and Adrien would have to pretend to be just friends for the entire time. Adrien was already planning on coming over and joining the Dupain-Chengs after Christmas dinner with his father, and he had also put a limit on the number of shoots that he was willing to do over break so that he could have more time with her and with Nino and Alya. They had both given up on hoping that Mr. Agreste might ease his stance on Adrien dating, considering his reaction whenever she and Adrien were once again pronounced a couple by the tabloids, but Marinette wasn't going to let that spoil her mood.

"It looks like a snow globe," Tikki chirped, poking her head out of Marinette's scarf. "I can't believe it's so pretty out! How long do you think the snow will last?"

"No clue." Marinette pulled out her keys and unlocked the door to her apartment building before stepping inside. "Hopefully it sticks around for a bit. It doesn't feel like Christmas without snow."

Tikki giggled. "You know, there are some parts of the world that would be worried if they got snow for Christmas. I've been places where it never snows!"

"Oh, that's no fun!"

They both giggled as Marinette made her way up the stairs She only made a brief stop in her apartment- really, it was more of just a storage space at this point; maybe she should have considered asking about doing a half-year lease instead of a full-year- before heading over to Adrien's apartment.

She opened the door and stepped into holiday heaven.

Christmas music played from Adrien's computer speakers. A wreath hung (crookedly and somewhat precariously, but the effort was there) across from the door. A small tree- really small, and sprayed with glitter to boot- sat in the middle of the table, several tiny green and blue ornaments hung from its branches. A slight movement caught Marinette's eye and she glanced up to see mistletoe hanging at regular intervals from the ceiling.

Clearly Adrien was planning on a whole lot of kissing in their not-so-distant future. Her kitty was ridiculous.

"Hey, Kitty!" Marinette called, closing the door fully behind her and pausing to kick off her boots on the rug by the door. "I like the decorations! But how did you manage to buy so much mistletoe? Am I going to start seeing tabloid headlines again? You only just got them off of our backs from the last time."

"There's even more in the back," Plagg told Marinette morosely as he floated out to greet her. "So much. I'm not sleeping back there again until it's all gone."

"Ignore him," Adrien called around the corner. A second later, he came striding around the corner, dressed in a dorky Christmas sweater. He pressed a gentle kiss to her lips, then drew back slightly. "And no, no tabloid headlines. I wore a disguise and paid cash instead of using my card so not even the store clerk would recognize me."

Marinette giggled at him. "So you mean that instead of seeing headlines about 'Adrien Agreste buys
"You have far too much fun coming up with those headlines," Adrien informed her, grinning. "Were you a tabloid journalist in a past life or something? And it was a good disguise. Plagg, tell her."

Plagg made a rude noise and flew off.

"I didn't go over the top," Adrien told her after sending a glare after his kwami. "I just dressed for the cold, so I had a hat that covered my hair. And then it was sunny, so I had sunglasses. Maybe some people would think that it was odd that I didn't take stuff off in the store, but plenty of people were still in winter gear inside because they were just dashing in quickly."

Marinette made a mental note to keep an eye on the tabloids for the next few days. Even if Adrien thought that he had been subtle, Marinette sometimes wondered if her boyfriend even knew the definition of subtle. He seemed to go all-out quite a lot of the time.

"Anyway, I thought we could have a holiday date before I have to go home now that my finals are over," Adrien continued. "And I thought some decorations were called for."

Marinette couldn't help but laugh as she poked at his holiday sweater. "Lovely date attire. I don't think I have one of those, though."

"Good thing I came prepared, then!" Adrien bounded over to the coat closet and reached up to snag a lumpy package. "Merry Christmas, Bug!"

Marinette couldn't help but laugh as she took the package and tore it open. She pulled out a lovely green sweater with Mewry Cat-mas and a picture of a tree with cat faces sticking out from between the branches. It was utterly ridiculous, but Marinette couldn't love it more.

"He's been giggling over that ever since he found it," Plagg reported, floating back around the corner to tease Adrien some more. "And he was pouting that there weren't any sweaters with that pattern in his size."

...okay, so now Marinette needed to figure out the sweater pattern and replicate it for Adrien. She wondered if she could pull it off before Christmas and if not, then by next Christmas. She had already finished all of her other presents, so she had a bit of free time yet.

"I was not pouting," Adrien complained. "I just thought that it wasn't fair that the best cute pun sweaters were all small. Guys like puns, too."

Marinette laughed and shed her coat and the sweater she had already been wearing (one of Adrien's, naturally) so she could pull the holiday sweater on. The second her head cleared the collar, Adrien pulled her into a kiss.

"You were under the mistletoe," Adrien explained after he pulled away. He was grinning. "And so was I."

"They were different pieces of mistletoe, Adrien! That's not how it's supposed to work!"

Adrien didn't look at all repentant. "Maybe I made up my own rules about mistletoe, then."

Marinette couldn't help but grab hold of her ridiculous boyfriend's face and kiss him again. He was
a giant dork and she loved him so, so much. Of course he would cover his entire apartment in mistletoe, just so he could have more excuses to kiss her. Of course he would buy her a cat-pun Christmas sweater so they could match and have an absolutely cheesy Christmas date together.

"So does dinner and a movie sound good, my lady?" Adrien asked as he led the way back across the room, peppering her cheek with kisses as they went. "I picked out some holiday movies we can watch, and I got a selection of treats from the bakery we like, and I made a holiday meal. I've never made cranberry sauce before, and I was surprised how easy it was! I just hope I got enough sugar in. I swear every recipe said something different."

Marinette laughed and kissed his cheek. "That's the nice thing about putting in not a ton of sugar to start. You can add in more later."

"Aaand now I'm worried that I put in too much sugar."

Marinette couldn't keep the grin off of her face as she helped Adrien finish up the cooking (well, "helped"; she gave her opinion that the cranberry sauce could, in fact, use a little more sugar, and that was pretty much it) and as they served up. Even though they always ate together and more often than not cooked together and spent their evenings together as well, she always enjoyed their stay-in dates. It was time for them, to spend the entire time focused on spending time with each other.

Besides, it was always fun to see what Adrien had thought up.

"Oh, this looks good," Marinette praised him as they dug in. She slipped the first bite in her mouth and hummed happily. "Oh, it's really good."

Adrien preened and leaned over to kiss her again. When he pulled away, he wriggled his eyebrows and flicked his eyes upwards.

Sure enough, a spring of mistletoe dangled right above her chair. An identical bundle hung above Adrien's seat, because of course he would cover all of his bases like that. Marinette glanced over to the couch and- okay, wow, Adrien had definitely gotten that area well-covered.

"How did you even have the time to do the shopping and the cooking and all of the decorating?" Marinette asked partway through the meal. The meal by itself was an incredible amount of work, and the decorating (well, the separating out and hanging up all of the mistletoe) would have also taken a lot of time. He would have had to keep moving a chair around to get everything hung up... unless he had help.

Adrien was grinning "I managed to persuade Plagg to help," he admitted. "With lots and lots of cheesy popcorn as a bribe. He hung up most of the mistletoe. I got the ones above the chairs and the couch." His grin grew wider and he wriggled his eyebrows at her. "And the bed."

Marinette threw a pea at his head.

Once dinner was done, they had to clean everything up before they could retire to the couch with their bakery-bought treats and a movie. Marinette couldn't deny that it sort of threw her off to transition from date to chores and then back, even though she and Adrien kept teasing and talking as they worked to clean things up. It ruined the mood just a bit, even though she tried not to let it. At least Adrien had taken care of most of the cooking dishes before she had gotten home.

It would be really nice to be able to go on proper dates once they were back in Paris for good, but they still had over a year to go before that happened.
"At least we have a dishwasher we can use," Adrien said, taking the dish Marinette had just rinsed and sticking it in the dishwasher. "That speeds things up a lot, I think."

"This one is gonna have to soak," Marinette said, making a face at the last pan. She rinsed off her hands and reached around Adrien to dry them off on the towel hung over the oven handle. "Movie time?"

"Mmm, almost." Adrien spun around and caught Marinette's face in his hands again, pressing a kiss to her lips. "There. Now it can be movie time."

Marinette spluttered out a laugh. "Why are you kissing me now? The nearest mistletoe is all the way over there, Adrien." She pointed out towards their dining area. For some reason, the kitchen was completely free of mistletoe. Either Adrien and Plagg had run out of mistletoe to hang or they had decided that maybe it wasn't the best idea to have it in the same area as the food prep. Marinette had some vague recollection of someone- probably Max- telling her that mistletoe was actually poisonous.

Yeah, definitely a good idea to not have any mistletoe in here, then.

Adrien grinned. "There's no rule that I have to wait until we're under mistletoe to kiss you. Why don't you go ahead and pick a movie while I get the treats I bought earlier out?"

It didn't take long for Marinette to get settled down on the couch and pick out a movie. Adrien wasn't far behind her with a couple plates and forks and a bag from their favorite London bakery.

"I knew I couldn't bake up to your standards, so I didn't even try," Adrien said with a laugh, pulling over a side table to set everything down on. He dipped down for a couple kisses, because the mistletoe above the couch demanded it. "And I know that a Yule log cake is traditional for Christmas meals, but they were out when I went. Or they hadn't started making them yet, I'm not sure which."

"It's probably all for the better, honestly," Marinette admitted. "Papa makes the best bûche de Noël, and I've never found another bakery that can make it as well." Maybe she was biased, but she doubted it. Her dad put in just the right amount of chocolate- lots without it becoming overwhelming- and the right amount of frosting. Other cakes always had too much chocolate or not enough, or the cake was too dry, or too sweet with too much frosting, or overbaked, or-

Well, there was a lot that could go wrong with a bûche de Noël.

Adrien grinned. "Well, it's a good thing I stuck with your favorite treats instead, then. I got several flavors of eclairs, and some cookies, and...oh, I don't know what else. I got a lot of different things."

Marinette hummed happily and reached over to kiss him again.

The kwamis kept themselves scarce until the movie was nearly over. Tikki ventured over to snag a half-eaten eclair off of Adrien's plate, and Adrien had to extract himself from Marinette to go get some cheese for Plagg.

"I wish I didn't have to leave tomorrow," Adrien grumbled as he burrowed his way back under the quilt wrapped around Marinette. "I'd rather spend the time with you, but instead I have boring photoshoots."

Marinette poked his nose. "You know we have to avoid suspicion. Your father would start asking questions if you just quit the modeling altogether. And you'll have Nino and Alya to hang out with..."
for the *three days* that you're in Paris without me." When Adrien still pouted, she giggled at him and leaned over to kiss him again. "But we have each other for tonight. Let's make the most of it, yeah?"

---

Even with as busy as Nathalie and his father kept him and with the time he spent with his friends, Adrien still found himself missing Marinette. He texted her a bunch, but punning at her wasn't nearly as much fun when he couldn't hear her groan and feel her banging her head against his shoulder in exasperation. Their banter was slower, and worst of all, he couldn't kiss her via text.

Also, Adrien was pretty sure that whoever he was with—whether it was Nino and Alya or Nathalie or his photographers—would notice if he spent all of his time smiling like a sap at his phone. That meant that the texting Marinette had to be limited to times when people wouldn't try to read his messages over his shoulder.

And then once Marinette arrived in the city, he had to remember to keep his hands off her.

"I smell like sugar," was the first thing Marinette said when she saw him again on their way to visit Alya and Nino, which *really* didn't help Adrien's self-control at all. "I swear I've done so much piping of frosting and fillings in the last couple days that I never want to taste either again, but I know that's a lie."

"I'd ask if you taste like sugar, too, but I probably shouldn't," Adrien said with a laugh, linking his arm with Marinette's as they headed towards Nino and Alya's apartment. "I don't know if I'd be able to keep myself from kissing you."

Marinette laughed at that. "I haven't been doing that much sampling, actually," she admitted. "I've been smelling the cookies and everything too much to want to eat them. I'm glad that we're just doing orders on Christmas rather than opening the store, because then we can be done early and have some time to *not* be around all of the treats before we eat them."

Adrien couldn't even imagine *not* wanting to eat all of the lovely things baked in the Dupain-Cheng bakery, but he also had never spent nearly as much time as Marinette did in their back room, and had never visited their kitchens at all during the holidays. That was the time that, according to Marinette, had the most cookie and cakes and other sweets being made.

"It isn't bad at all during the rest of the year," Marinette had told him once. "Actually, it's not bad at all. It's just during the holidays when there's all the cookies and everything when it gets overwhelming."

He supposed that he would get to see for himself soon, though, since he had volunteered his morning to help out in the bakery and get them finished up for the holiday.

"Do you want to go out as Ladybug and Chat Noir sometime today or tomorrow?" Adrien asked as they headed down the street. "It would be nice to run around again. We haven't been doing it nearly as frequently this year."

Plagg scoffed from inside Adrien's jacket. "And why should we be transforming you? You were just doing it to hang out with Ladybug, and now you and Ladybug spend every evening with your lips glued together."
"We don't spend the entire evening kissing," Adrien argued, flushing. "And it's fun to transform and run and leap and everything. It just wasn't safe to go out in London really often after being spotted."

"Let's go out tonight," Marinette proposed before Plagg could say anything else about the frequency or duration of their kissing. "We can do a loop of the city and then end up on the Eiffel Tower for some cookies before going home."

Adrien couldn't keep the grin off of his face.

"Hey, you took your sweet time!" Nino greeted them once they got to Nino and Alya's apartment building. Nino had been hovering in the doorway looking for them and had grinned upon spotting the two of them approaching. "And you came together, mmm?"

"Might as well. There's no point in walking separately when we were going to the same place."

Adrien unwound his scarf as they followed Nino into the building. "So how are things going?"

"Since I saw you yesterday after your shoot?" Nino asked with a laugh. "Not much different. But I'm willing to bet that Alya is ready to talk your ear off about her research. She's really been focusing lately on getting everything lined up and ready for her contest entry."

Marinette laughed. "Oh, we know. I've gotten tons of texts lately complaining about stupid forms and poorly worded questions."

"And of course Marinette shared all of those texts with me," Adrien added. "Just to make sure that I suffered along with her."

That got a splutter out of Marinette. "I-what- suffer? I was sharing because I figured that you wanted to know what news I was getting from Paris!"

Adrien grinned and jostled her lightly. "I know. I was just teasing you."

"You flirt like an old married couple," Nino grumbled. He pushed open his apartment door and led them in. "So, who's ready for some movies and popcorn? I remembered to get the snacks ready ahead of time this year!"

"They're here? Hey, guys!"

Adrien laughed as he and Marinette were nearly bowled over by Alya. He stumbled backwards into the couch and barely managed to catch all three of them before they tumbled onto the floor. "Hey to you too, Alya. You're squishing me."

"I'm just glad to see you guys." Alya got off of them, pulling Marinette off of Adrien as she did. Adrien pushed himself back up. "I'm glad you could make it today. My family wanted us to hang out with them all of tomorrow, so we couldn't do our movie night then."

"I know that means that Adrien is gonna be bored out of his mind with nothing to do tomorrow, but we couldn't do much about it." Nino shrugged at Adrien. "Girlfriend's family, dude. I gotta stay on their good side."

Adrien just shrugged, grinning. "That's fine, really. I'll be helping out at the bakery tomorrow morning, getting the last of the orders packaged up and sent out so that they have as much of the day free as possible. And then I'm getting together with Ivan and Mylène to get a late lunch and then hang out for a couple hours. I'll manage."
"As if you don't see enough of Marinette normally," Nino laughed. "Okay, now everyone sit down and I'll get the popcorn and drinks."

"So I've heard that you've been focusing on getting a bunch of forms done for the contest," Adrien started as he sat and Nino maneuvered around a pile of wrapped presents sitting on the floor to get to the kitchen. Marinette sat next to him, and Adrien had to keep his arm from snaking around her waist. "So you've gotten enough leads fleshed out to enter this year, then?"

As usual whenever superheroes or her research were brought up, Alya lit up. "Yeah! I've gotten a bunch of leads with solid evidence and historians lined up, and then a few more than look like they're gonna be good with a little more work. It's actually really nice to have to step back and organize now- I think I texted Mari about this- because I can see how much progress I've made."

"It's also a good chance for her to look back and find patterns that she hadn't noticed before," Nino added as he set a giant bowl of popcorn down in front of them. He headed back into the kitchen for drinks but kept talking as he did. "Like, when she was sorting stuff out, then she can see some themes to the information that she's finding."

Adrien and Marinette looked back over at Alya in near-unison. "Themes?"

"What kind of themes do you mean?" Marinette asked curiously. "Like how the superheroes were dressed or something?"

"No, no, not at all!" Alya exclaimed. She was grinning. "So you know that I haven't been able to find information for all of the superheroes leads that Ladybug and Chat Noir gave me, right? There's some where there's just not that information online, or it's in another language and it's hard to search through. So I've been working on finding historians specializing in that era in that location for each of those superheroes."

"Of course, the problem then is that a lot of the historians speak different languages, so she can't contact all of them," Nino added. He handed each of them a glass before sitting down next to Alya on the couch. "Or she can try, at least, but not all of them respond when they can't understand the email. Or they think that it's a weird request and ignore it."

"Wait, so what does that have to do with themes?" Marinette wanted to know. She leaned forward and snagged a handful of popcorn from the bowl. "Is there a theme of people ignoring your emails?"

Alya snorted. "No- I mean, yes, that's a theme too, but that's not what I meant. I emailed some historians in Italy about one of the Miraculous users several centuries back- one of my colleagues speaks Italian and was willing to translate- and the historians all responded, but they said nothing happened then in that part of the country. No wars, no conflicts. Like, the most exciting thing was a poor harvest for, like, two years."

Adrien and Marinette exchanged a look. That sounded a whole lot like what they had heard when they visited the site of the historical Bee and Goat. Alya had probably found the conflict after all, but the evidence of anything weird was completely obscured.

"I wouldn't even remember the bit about the harvest if it weren't for the fact that I got essentially the same answer when I asked about an American Ladybug and Chat Noir, and a Russian duo," Alya continued. "So I think there's something there- some connection- but there's absolutely no evidence, no sightings of oddly dressed people, no nothing. I'll have to keep those in a folder, as, like, a footnote or something for my book." She let out a frustrated breath. "I just don't get it. What could superheroes do against a bad harvest?
"I thought that maybe the aftereffects of whatever they were fighting caused the bad harvest somehow," Nino chimed in. "Or maybe they were fighting the whatever-it-was so often that people couldn't go out and do as much planting and harvesting as usual or something. But you would think that there would be something that, y'know, stuck out a bit as unusual. Oddly dressed people or something. I don't know."

"There might have been, but people were too worried about the harvest to record that well enough for it to have survived for- what, centuries? It's been ages," Marinette pointed out. She swatted Adrien's hand away when he tried to steal some of her popcorn. "Or maybe it was recorded but historians just write it off as a little detail that isn't worth the time to remember."

Alya made a face and shrugged. "Yeah, maybe. But no historian is gonna be willing to spend the time looking for something like that unless they were getting paid specially to do it, and I don't have those funds. Yet."

"And when you do have the funds, you're already going to have enough places for that money to go with more solid leads," Nino reminded her. "I'd say that you would need even more instances like that before any historian would agree to look into things more, and you would need a couple with more concrete ties to the Miraculous."

Alya made a face. "Ugh. Trying to find concrete ties to superheroes that were trying to blend in is hard. Like, I was thinking that it was going to be some fairly hidden superheroes but a lot of them like Ladybug and Chat Noir, where it's obvious that they're, y'know, not just normal people. But it seems like Ladybug and Chat Noir were the exception. But the challenge is fun, too. Except when it's not."

They all laughed at that.

"But enough about that," Alya said, reaching out to grab her own handful of popcorn. "I'm taking the day off from everything Miraculous-related. It's Christmas! Let's watch some movies and forget about work for a couple hours."

Adrien grinned. "Now that sounds perfect."

Adrien grinned when he spotted his partner's familiar silhouette on top of the house just across the street. He waved, then pried Plagg away from his cheese to transform, dash out the window, and join her on a run around the city.

"It's nice to be in Paris again," Ladybug said as they paused near the Arc de Triomphe. They waved to the civilians passing down below. "I'm not going to skip out on your third year, of course, but I like just having an itch to run and then just... going."

"Yeah," Chat Noir agreed. He grinned at her. "And it's going to be even better when we can just, like, spontaneously decide to go out together."

Ladybug giggled. "I don't think Plagg is looking forward to that. I think he likes lazing around without having to transform you."

"Oh, so true." Chat Noir rolled his eyes. "You know how much he complains. It's enough to make me want to transform more often, just to spite him."
Ladybug *really* laughed at that, even as she cast her yo-yo out and they started moving again.

"I almost want to go tell Alya about what we found at that castle after what she was telling us earlier," Ladybug said after several minutes of running and swinging around, waving to the crowds down below whenever they were spotted. "About the whole famine thing. But there was no way to tell her as *us*, because why would we remember a detail like that, and I also don't want to give her any hints of where Ladybug and Chat Noir have been."

Chat Noir frowned in thought. "Huh. Yeah, that's true. Um, maybe we can wait a bit and tell her, like, right before she goes on her trip if she wins the contest, or maybe... I don't know. We didn't tell her about the kwamis and those are meant to stay a secret, so how are we supposed to know for sure about other users?"

They both puzzled over that.

"I mean, I guess it's not the most important thing ever," Ladybug said after a couple minutes. "I mean, it's a side pairing from ages ago, and they were fighting what *sounds* like a fairly normal enemy at the time. I just wonder what it would add to her research."

"It's just one more data point," Chat Noir agreed. He waved to some people down below as they passed City Hall. It seemed that the news that they were back in the city had spread fast, and people were already scanning the skyline for them. The city was gorgeous and festive from above, with lights and displays everywhere. Some snow was starting to fall on the city, muffling the sound and coating the streets and buildings in white.

"I can't believe that there's still so many pigeons out and about," Ladybug said with a laugh as they jumped over a banister and disturbed a roosting group of birds, making Chat Noir sneeze. She sent him a teasing look over her shoulder. "You know, when we first became superheroes, part of me was worried that you were going to get me rats or pigeons as a joke gift because you seemed so into the whole cat theme."

Chat Noir made a face, but internally an idea was starting to form. "My Lady! Did you really think so little of me? I wouldn't have brought dead animals to a lady."

"I wouldn't have put it past you to catch a live pigeon in a shoebox to present to me. At least, I wouldn't have until I found out that you were allergic." Ladybug laughed and cast out her yo-yo to swing again, headed for the Eiffel Tower. "I can see where you maybe wouldn't want to risk your nose just in order to pull off a joke."

"Yeah, I'm not *nearly* as pretty with a puffy red nose," Chat Noir teased. "Setting off my allergies just makes it run a lot, and then I have to blow my nose a lot, and then it gets all scaly and dry and gross and I have to moisturize."

"You moisturize your nose?"

The crowds around the Eiffel Tower were thicker than normal with the holiday bustle. There were cheers as the superheroes landed on the lowest section and waved before leaping always upwards, delighting the crowds on the tower. They only stopped when they reached the top deck. The crowds weren't as thick as normal- it was late and cold, and people were slowly filtering out of the tower and going home or to their hotel- so the superheroes hopped down to mingle a bit. Some people just waved, used to seeing the superheroes around, while others- mostly tourists and kids- surged forward to shake hands and take pictures with the superheroes. The two of them worked their way around the deck, making sure that they visited with everyone who wanted to see them. Right before they were about to leave, a call stopped them.
"Ladybug! Chat Noir!"

Both of them glanced over to see a young girl waving at them. When she saw that she had their attention, she grinned and pointed at something above them. "Look!"

They looked. Above them dangled a single bunch of mistletoe, perfectly positioned to catch two unsuspecting tourists, or perhaps two unsuspecting superheroes.

"You gotta kiss now!" the girl exclaimed, grinning. "It's the rules!"

"Shall we, my Lady?" Chat Noir asked, ducking his head down with a grin. Ladybug returned his grin with one of her own and reached out to pull his face closer.

"Oh, I suppose. It is the rules, after all."
Chapter 27

Christmas Eve, Adrien found himself leaving the mansion bright and early and staying out as long as he could. His father was clearly intending to work for almost the entire day, and Adrien was too used to being around people now to just hang around in his room alone for the whole day until his father or Nathalie summoned him down. He popped into the bakery to help Tom and Sabine (and Marinette, of course) with getting the last of the bakery orders packed up and delivered, then wandered around doing window shopping (and some proper shopping) until it was time for him to meet up with Ivan and Mylène. It was nice catching up with the two of them again, especially since neither of them felt the need to prod and ask about Adrien's relationship with Marinette.

It was a letdown to go back home, even with the elaborately decorated hall and professionally prepared food. His father was as disinterested and cold as ever, and Adrien fidgeted his way through the dinner until he was excused and he could head over to the Dupain-Cheng bakery again. Once he was free of his house and on his way, Adrien's footsteps sped up. He wanted to spend his Christmas Eve somewhere warm and friendly, and with people whose company he could actually enjoy.

"You could just go to bed early," Plagg grumbled from his bag as Adrien knocked on the Dupain-Cheng's door. "But nooo, you gotta go see your wife instead."

"She's my girlfriend," Adrien corrected absently, the response automatic by now. He peered in the small window by the door, looking for signs of movement. He had texted Marinette when he left his house so she would know that he was on his way, but she might be too busy to check her phone. There was suddenly a sound of feet thundering down the stairs and then the door flew open to reveal Marinette standing there, pink and out of breath.

Adrien grinned when he spotted her Mew-ry Cat-mas sweater. Marinette looked adorable, and the sweater reminded him of their holiday date, maybe too much. He was going to have to remember to not kiss and cuddle her like he normally would.

"Oh, stop smirking, kitten," Marinette sighed, pulling him in by his collar and closing the door behind him. "It's warm and it's festive, okay?"

Laughing, Adrien followed her inside and up the stairs. He knew that Marinette liked the sweater. It was just so Ladybug to tease and evade and pretend that she didn't like puns.

"We've been waiting for you," Marinette told him over her shoulder. "Papa didn't want you to miss out on the bûche de Noël."

"I didn't want to miss out on it either, but my father was taking an annoying long time to eat dinner," Adrien told her. He rolled her eyes. "Because he was going over some sales reports while he was eating, of course. I don't know why it couldn't have waited twenty minutes for us to finish eating. And he still doesn't think that I'm going to stick with the physics degree. I happened to mention that classes were more intense this year and he asked if I was done messing around with that degree yet."

Marinette let out an annoyed huff and slowed so Adrien could catch up with her and she could wrap her arm around him. "Ugh. I wish he could see how much you enjoy Physics, but he would probably see you frowning at a difficult problem and immediately get worried about wrinkles or something ridiculous about that."
Tom and Sabine both jumped up and came over to greet Adrien as soon as he came in, even though he had just seen them that morning. He set his bag down so he could return their hugs, and then only just managed to pick it up again as Marinette's parents ushered him towards the table.

"You've had our Yule log cakes before, right?" Tom asked as he handed a generous slice on a plate to Adrien. "I know we always tried to get one to each of Marinette's classmates when she was younger."

"A few times, yeah," Adrien agreed. "It's fantastic. Marinette was waxing poetic about it a few days ago."

Marinette spluttered. "I was not waxing poetic, I was just saying that nowhere else makes it right!"

Adrien grinned down at her. "Like I said- waxing poetic. I bet if I asked about why the Yule log cakes here were so great I would have gotten a five- no, a ten minute speech about everything that you guys do better."

"Just shush and eat your cake," Marinette grumbled, accepting her own plate. Adrien laughed, took a bite, and immediately hummed in appreciation. He had remembered that the cake was amazing, but his memory hadn't fully remembered and appreciated just how good it was. The cake was amazing, rich and chocolatey and moist and-

Well, Adrien wasn't a baker, so he didn't think that he had the vocabulary to describe everything amazing about the cake. No wonder Marinette didn't think that the Yule log cakes from anywhere else would be as good as her parents' cakes.

"Well, we have taught Marinette how to make the logs," Tom told Adrien. He grinned at his daughter. "They're maybe a little messy yet, but they're still tasty."

Adrien's eyebrows shot up. "Marinette, make something messy? Never."

Marinette was pouting. "The cake always cracks when I roll it," she complained. "It's just a little too stiff, or I try rolling it too tight, or something. I can't put my finger on it. And then the log is lumpy."

"I think you have to roll it sooner once you get it out of the oven, love," Tom told her affectionately. "Or it's too thick to roll properly. And I've told you that you can just cover the cracks with a thicker layer of frosting or just stick on a branch there to cover the lump."

Marinette muttered something about too much frosting and too sweet. Adrien grinned.

Anyone else probably wouldn't notice a little extra frosting throwing off the ratio of cake to frosting, but of course Marinette had ridiculously high standards.

Once they were done with the cake, they moved to the couches to unwrap presents. Adrien didn't mind just sitting back and watching- he enjoyed seeing the little gifts that Marinette's parents got each other and besides, he and his father had exchanged their (boring) presents earlier and he and his friends would be giving each other their gifts after Christmas. Adrien was perfectly content to bask in the presence of his secret girlfriend and watch as she squealed over a new set of rotary cutters and fabric scissors and a length of a gorgeous blue silky fabric.

Also, Tom and Sabine both kept asking Adrien about his classes and the projects he had had to do, and Adrien was all too happy to tell them all about it. He was in the middle of telling Tom about
one of his papers when Marinette got up and came back to the couch with a slightly lumpy package.

"I know we're exchanging gifts with Nino and Alya soon, but there was one that just couldn't wait," Marinette told him as she shoved the package into his lap. There was a grin dancing on her lips, an impish look that screamed Ladybug and trouble. Adrien took the package and answered her grin with a smirk of his own.

"What a coincidence! I actually picked up something for you earlier today," Adrien told her, delighting in Marinette's suddenly puzzled expression. He reached over and pulled a wrapped box out of his bag before depositing it in her arms. "Merry Christmas. And no, don't shake it," Adrien added when Marinette held the box up curiously. "I don't want it to break."

"I'll open it after you open yours," Marinette told him, and Adrien grinned and tugged on the wrapping paper. Marinette groaned when he opened the packaging as slowly as possible. Laughing, Adrien pulled harder and a bundle of knitted green fabric tumbled out of the packaging and into his lap. He lifted it up and it unfolded, revealing an exact copy of the sweater he had gotten Marinette, only in his size. He let out a slightly embarrassing squeal of delight.

"Mari! Oh, I love it!" Adrien yanked his plain sweater off and immediately pulled the new sweater on. It fit like a dream. "How did you find- oh! Did you make it yourself?"

Marinette nodded, and Adrien pounced on her in a hug. He had to reach out and snag the box he had given her before it tumbled off her lap and onto the floor.

"It's only been a week, though!" Adrien exclaimed as he pulled back and inspected the pattern decorating the front of the sweater. "You must have worked on it practically nonstop!"

"I had some concentrated time to work on it while I was on the train, and then evenings, and whenever I was working the counter and there was a slight break," Marinette explained. "And I had a basic sweater pattern that would fit you perfectly, so it was just a matter of making a pattern chart with the tree and the words. It didn't take long to do that bit, honestly. I've had practice copying patterns before."

Adrien was pretty certain that his cheeks were going to start hurting with how wide his grin was. Even with how fast he knew Marinette could knit, she must have spent all of her free time working on it to have it ready. His girlfriend was amazing, and he couldn't even kiss her because her parents were watching.

*Why was it that they hadn't told the elder Dupain-Chengs that they were dating yet?*

"And now you match," Tom commented with a laugh. "I take it you really wanted that sweater, son?"

"I loved the puns and I loved the design and I hated that there wasn't one in my size," Adrien admitted. "So I got one for Marinette, because then at least I'd be able to see it."

Sabine whispered something in Tom's ear, and Adrien did his best not to flush when he caught the words "couple outfits" being passed back and forth as they eyed him and Marinette. They weren't wrong, necessarily, but somehow it was still a little embarrassing.

But he was going to own it, darn it.

"Now it's your turn," Adrien said before either of Marinette's parents could say anything else. He tapped the box sitting in Marinette's lap. "I think you'll like it."
Marinette tore into the packaging eagerly. She looked slightly confused when she spotted the box, from a well-known sweets shop in Paris, and glanced over at Adrien.

"Open it," Adrien urged. His cheeks were starting to hurt from holding back his smile. He was looking forward to seeing Marinette's reaction to his gift, and he was going to explode with anticipation if she didn't get it fully opened soon.

Shaking her head at his excitement, Marinette peeled off the sticker holding the box closed and opened it, moving the tissue paper aside. When she saw the chocolate dove sitting inside, she threw back her head and let out a long groan. Adrien exploded with laughter.

"Oh, I didn't mean to give you ideas," Marinette complained, but she was completely failing to hold back her laughter. "Adrien!"

"But it was a fantastic idea," Adrien proclaimed through his laughter. "I couldn't just ignore it."

"What did he get you, Marinette?" Sabine asked. She leaned forward, trying to peer into the box. "It sounds amusing."

Still giggling, Marinette reached into the box and pulled out the chocolate dove. "It's cute."

"It is," Adrien confirmed as Tom and Sabine exchanged a puzzled look. He was willing to bet that they were trying to understand why Marinette had found the gift so funny. "And I'm not allergic to this kind of bird. Always a plus when picking out presents."

"It must be some sort of inside joke," Tom told Sabine. He sent a look towards Adrien and Marinette. "I don't suppose you could explain?"

Adrien and Marinette exchanged a look. They didn't exactly want to tell Marinette's parents about them being Ladybug and Chat Noir, especially not when they had just confirmed that Ladybug and Chat Noir were dating the previous night (their kiss under the mistletoe had gotten a little too involved to deny it, and now the internet was blowing up about it). Eventually Marinette just shrugged at her parents. "It wouldn't be half as funny out of context."

Thankfully, neither Tom nor Sabine seemed bothered. Sabine just laughed.

"Oh, that's understandable. There's some things that have happened in the bakery that if we tried to tell anyone about it later, they would think that we were crazy."

"Is this going to become a theme?" Marinette asked warily, replacing the little bird in its box. "Just because I was being funny yesterday?"

Adrien grinned. He hadn't been planning on continuing the bird gift theme, really, but now...

Well, he wasn't going to repeat the chocolate bird thing right away, but he was pretty certain that he could find some bird-shaped soap or a rat gummy or something. He'd have to do some shopping around at Easter and Halloween since that was when they would be most likely to have interestingly themed small gifts, but Adrien was sure that he would be able to remember.

Marinette let out a groan. "You hadn't even thought of that before, had you?" she demanded. When she only got a grin as a response, her head dropped into her hands. "Great. Great. I just keep giving you ridiculous ideas, don't I?"
Predictably, all Alya could talk about when they got together after Christmas was the Ladynoir kiss. Some people who had been there when the superheroes kissed had submitted photos to the Ladyblog, but there were maybe three photos.

Alya wanted more.

"I can't believe that they're finally dating after all these years" Alya exclaimed. "And I can't believe that they basically waited until no one was there to witness it before confirming it. Like, there were no crowds up at that part of the Eiffel Tower at that time of the night! I was lucky to get the pictures I did. And no one there thought to ask them any questions beyond just confirming if they were dating!"

"What else was there to ask?" Adrien asked curiously. Alya looked at him like she couldn't believe that he would ask that question.

"All sorts of things! How long they've been dating, what made them realize that they were perfect for each other, how long they've each like each other, where they've been for the past year and a half..." Alya threw up her hands. "So many things! But at least we've got a confirmation that they're together. Paris has been waiting for this for years. I've heard that Madam Chamack is going to be out every night looking for the superheroes so she can get the first exclusive interview."

Adrien was 99% positive that Marinette would want the first exclusive interview to go to Alya. Besides the fact that Alya was her best friend, he was also pretty sure that Marinette hadn't completely forgiven Madam Chamack for the disastrous interview back when they were in collège. The Ladyblog had never been that invasive, probably because Alya already got enough views without harassing superheroes.

"So now I have to keep my ear to the ground to try to find out when the superheroes are out and about so I can get to them first," Alya said, expression determined. "This is the biggest superhero news since Hawkmoth's defeat, and I'm not coming in second."

"There seems to be a theme of Alya desperately needing to track down the superheroes around the holidays," Nino said. He looked slightly exasperated. "Of course, I doubt that would be the case if they still lived in the city. She could track them down literally whenever then."

"Not this time it couldn't wait!" Alya objected. "The news is fresh, and I gotta get to it before any of the big news outlets do. But I suppose that last year it could have waited. Or I could have tracked them down before Christmas if they were still in the city." She checked her phone. "But no one has seen them out since that night, so I haven't been able to try to track them down."

"Do you think that they've gone back to wherever they've been?" Adrien asked, pasting a look of interest on his face. Alya looked horrified at the idea.

"Oh, that wouldn't be fair," Alya complained. "They can't just drop news like that and then leave."

Nino was trying not to laugh. "Well, it's probably not huge news to them. They might have decided to do just that."

Alya groaned even louder.

After several more minutes of grumbling, Nino finally managed to steer the conversation back to the holidays. Apparently he and Alya had spent Christmas Eve with her family being terrorized by the twins, and then spent a relatively relaxed Christmas Day with his family.
"You would think that the twins would have grown out of causing trouble, but no such luck," Alya grumbled. She glanced at her phone again and then set it aside. "My parents get letters home every week about pranks that they've pulled at school, and they love staying up late and giggling over stuff on the Internet. They stay up so late and then they're sleepwalking the next day."

Marinette snickered. "Funny, I remember someone staying up crazy late sometimes so she could work on her blog. Maybe they're trying to imitate their big sister."

Alya spluttered indignantly. "I- what? I was being productive when I stayed up late. They're just screwing around and giggling over boys in their class!"

"Uh-huh. And did your parents care exactly what you were up to when you ended up staying up practically the entire night?"

Alya didn't answer, choosing to scowl and mutter instead.

"Okay, so, presents!" Nino interrupted before Alya could try to argue about the educational and career benefits of staying up all night to work on the Ladyblog. "Are we gonna open them or what?"

"Of course, of course," Alya said, properly distracted. "Come on, let's sit down. I've got some treats from my mom to share, too."

Adrien perked up. "Ooh, treats!"

"I like the matching sweaters, by the way," Alya said as they settled into their chairs so they could pass around the presents. "Did you buy those at the same time, or do you both just have the same awful sense of humor?"

"Neither," Adrien told her with a sniff. "My sense of humor is fabulous, thank you very much. And I saw the sweater and really wanted one, but they didn't make them in my size so I bought one for Marinette. And then she made one in my size."

Alya rolled her eyes at them in utter exasperation. "Of course she would."

Nino and Alya had already exchanged presents at their family gatherings, of course, but they each had gotten presents for Adrien and Marinette. They passed things around, then eagerly tore into the packages.

Like always, Marinette had picked out or made the perfect gifts for everyone. Alya got a lovely winter dress, something that would be warm but still fun and professional all at once. Nino's gift was an early, signed copy of Jagged Stone's newest album that he exclaimed over. Adrien got a Physics pun sweater.

"I love it!" Adrien exclaimed, examining the sweater. "Why can't you trust an atom?" was written on the top half, and "Because they make up everything" ran along the bottom, under a knitted picture of an atom. "I'm gonna wear it every day."

"I'm starting to think that your wardrobe is becoming half puns," Nino said with a laugh. "Like, we get it, dude. You think you're funny."

"I am punny," Adrien corrected, grinning when Nino and Alya both groaned. Marinette, more used to his puns, just rolled her eyes. "And it's, like, a requirement for physics nerds to have at least a couple physics jokes shirts. Same with the math people."
"Did you come up with that design?" Nino wanted to know. "Or did you get some sort of color chart or something?"

Marinette was grinning. "I came up with the design, back near the start of the semester. I found a website where I could put in my color chart and it would, like, convert it to look more like a knitted pattern. Then I could tell which parts were too chunky or too thin. It was really nice, because then I didn't have to tear stuff out partway through knitting because it doesn't look right."

"Oh, that's super-cool!" Adrien exclaimed. "I know that can be difficult to envision- well, I've heard," he corrected with Marinette shot his a slightly dubious look. He grinned, remembering the last time he had gotten into her knitting basket. Between him and Plagg, they had managed to tangle up a skein of yarn and had spent over an hour trying to untangle it so Marinette could get it rewound.

Unsurprisingly, Marinette had not been impressed.

Nino and Alya had gone in together to get presents for Adrien and Marinette. Nino had made music mixes for them, and then they had gotten a book of Physics and math-related jokes for Adrien and a case of fancy sewing threads for Marinette.

Adrien grinned as he passed out his presents for his friends. More than anything, he wanted to see the look on Marinette's face when she opened her gift. She would probably protest, knowing her, but it wasn't as though Adrien had bought something he couldn't afford.

Besides, she had made two sweaters for him. Adrien knew full well how expensive the yarn could get, and then the countless hours spent coming up with the design and then actually knitting. The time and supplies were why homemade sweaters cost so much, so with that in mind technically he hadn't spent more on his gift to her than she had on her gift for him.

"Sweet! Dude, I was hoping to get one of these!" Nino exclaimed after he had ripped open his present. He held up the headphones. "My last pair has been on the fritz lately. These are gonna be great!"

Alya was grinning as she pulled her box out of its wrapping. "How do you learn exactly what we need every time? I think I mentioned that this camera lens broke once, like, three months ago."

"I write stuff down. It's not that hard. And then I have to hope that no one else got around to replacing it first." Adrien wasn't looking forward to the day when Alya and Nino would be able to just buy whatever they needed straight up, because then he would actually have to come up with his own ideas for presents.

Not that he didn't want Alya and Nino to be earning enough money to buy what they wanted. But it would make present-giving more difficult. Maybe he could brainstorm with Marinette.

"Adrien!" Marinette squealed, and Adrien grinned as he turned to look at her. She looked thrilled as she inspected the box for her new drawing tablet, even as she protested. "This is too much, really-"

"I write stuff down. It's not that hard. And then I have to hope that no one else got around to replacing it first." Adrien wasn't looking forward to the day when Alya and Nino would be able to just buy whatever they needed straight up, because then he would actually have to come up with his own ideas for presents.

Not that he didn't want Alya and Nino to be earning enough money to buy what they wanted. But it would make present-giving more difficult. Maybe he could brainstorm with Marinette.

"Adrien!" Marinette squealed, and Adrien grinned as he turned to look at her. She looked thrilled as she inspected the box for her new drawing tablet, even as she protested. "This is too much, really-"

"It's not," Adrien assured her. He let his fingers brush over the back of her hand, not lingering long enough to make either Alya or Nino suspicious. "I haven't gotten you a present like this in ages." He didn't count the stay-dates as presents, and they didn't cost that much anyway. "Besides, you made me two sweaters this year, both ones that you designed. I know how long it takes to knit those. This is hardly too much."

"Is that a new tablet?" Alya wanted to know. She craned her neck. "Nice one, Agreste."
"Marinette is getting so many commissions these days, I thought she might want to have her own tablet to work on," Adrien explained. "She's been borrowing Madam Rosalie's tablet for both fabric designing and commissions."

"It'll be nice to have my own for non-work stuff," Marinette said. She was grinning as she pounced on Adrien in a hug. "Thank you!"

"You're very welcome," Adrien told her. He gave her a light squeeze, enjoying the way she snuggled into his side. "And, uh, I did find a site with tablet cases, to protect them a bit more when you're carrying them around. There's a post-it with the site on it stuck to the side of the box there. Just tell me what one you like best, and I'll order it."

Marinette gave him a are-you-kidding-me look. Clearly she still thought that the tablet was too big of a present, but the tablet covers didn't cost that much, even if they were good-quality ones. He had gotten the tablet itself on sale, too, so it hadn't been that expensive.

"Didn't Marinette already have a tablet?" Nino wanted to know. "I thought that was what she used back in collège and lycée for Jagged's album covers."

"It's ancient, though, that's the problem!" Adrien exclaimed. "If electronics could need a cane, hers would need two. It was time for an upgrade."

"Oh."

It only took a few minutes for them to clean up all of the wrapping paper and get their new things safely stowed away in their bags (or, in Nino and Alya's case, in their bedroom). Then Alya came out of their back room with a large flat box in her arms and a grin on her face.

"So, I know that if we play video games together, Adrien and Marinette will completely flatten the rest of us," she announced. "So, does anyone want to play Monopoly instead?"
Ben had been right about the number of research papers and other writing assignments that Adrien had for his second semester of classes. The two of them had spent one tutoring session inspecting all of the rubrics that Adrien had been handed in his first few days of the semester and putting together a rough schedule of where he should be for all of his papers and projects at certain points in the semester. It wasn't nearly as overwhelming broken down like that, but Adrien still pushed himself to get ahead of the schedule, spending all of his days finding research papers that he could reference whenever he wasn't in class.

The twinge in his back that had popped up during his first semester got worse. Adrien spent several minutes every hour trying to twist and stretch it out before returning to his readings, but it only alleviated the ache for a little while.

The extra work early on in the semester was going to be worth it, in the end. Adrien wasn't sure that Ben had taken into account the fact that it took him a bit longer than most of his classmates to read the research papers and articles that he was using, since they were largely in English instead of French, so really, he was just putting the extra work now to make sure that he would be on schedule later on.

Adrien wasn't the only one who was intensely busy. Marinette had gotten a fair number of inquiries about commissions after Jagged Stone's album dropped and it got out that she had designed covers and dressed several other singers and bands, and she had spent several hours responding to those emails once the holidays were over. A surprising number of the inquiries had been dropped after Marinette informed people about her prices (and Adrien had to grin remembering Marinette's infuriated spluttering whenever someone complained and tried to counter with a much lower price offer; she had blocked several people instead of replying, since her reply probably would have included a bit of rather unprofessional swearing), but there were a couple more bands that had reached out with legitimate requests and they were completely willing to pay Marinette's prices. Adrien had spotted his girlfriend creating some sort of spreadsheet to keep track of the requests before diving in to her first round of preliminary sketches.

(The sketches that he had seen so far were really cool.)

"Are you still reading that stupid paper?"

Adrien sighed as Plagg's voice jolted him out of his thoughts. He turned around to see his kwami lurking behind him, looking utterly bored. "It's not stupid, it's a highly researched and peer-reviewed paper. And no, I was, uh..."

"Daydreaming about your wife?" Plagg jeered, grinning and spinning around Adrien's head. "She'll be home soon enough and then you'll get to see her face then."

Plagg gagged loudly and Adrien aimed a swat at him. "Did you need something, or did you just come over to annoy me?"

"Cheese!"

Adrien groaned- he should have known- and hopped up to go fetch Plagg’s snack. He had to roll his neck to get the crimps out of it, and something cracked loudly. Adrien cringed- that didn't sound good- but at least it seemed that he hadn't injured anything. Plagg wasn't paying him any attention, too busy zipping impatiently around the fridge and rambling on about what kind of cheese he was most in the mood for.

_Naturally._

Once Plagg was settled down with a variety plate, Adrien headed back to the table and woke his computer back up so he could resume reading his way through the paper's summary to see if it was something he could use. He was just working his way through the introduction and taking notes on some of the things they mentioned when hands slid over his shoulders and started massaging.

Adrien sat back with a purr, letting his head loll back far enough to see Marinette and Tikki behind him.

"Working hard, kitten?" Marinette asked. Her hand slid over his shoulder and under his jaw, tilting his head back so she could kiss him. "How was class?"

"It was interesting," Adrien told her. "I had my class about space today, and that's my favorite. And the lab class was pretty good, too. And then I got together with Ben for an hour and a half to talk about my Electromagnetics class. That one is a _doozy_ to try to keep up with."

Marinette could only smile and nod at that. Adrien grinned. He knew that she _tried_ to keep up with what he was talking about in his classes, she really did, but she hadn't had any math or science classes since back in lycée and he had gotten to some _seriously_ higher-level stuff. The fact that she was willing to sit and listen to him rambling on about some theorem or another when he got excited about something was amazing, it really was. She could be completely lost but she wouldn't interrupt him or try to change the topic. She even tried to ask questions about whatever it was that he was talking about, which proved that she actually _listened_, even if she couldn't follow what he was saying at all.

It was more than Adrien could have ever said about his father. Even with the topic was one of his photoshoots, Mr. Agreste only ever listened with one ear at most.

Adrien let himself relax as Marinette's hands worked magic on his shoulders and neck. She wasn't a professional or anything at it- her hands had a tendency to wander a little aimlessly, and sometimes they wandered into his hair and petted him for a few minutes instead before going back to massaging his shoulders- but it still felt fantastic.

"What about you?" Adrien asked after a further few minutes of massaging. "How was your day?"

Marinette grinned. "Oh, it was good. We did a few collab designs, and they turned out pretty well. There were a few silk-and-leather combinations, and I think one of them might make the runway."

"Oh, _cool._"

"And I heard from Alya, too," Marinette added. "She's still gloating that she got her Ladynoir interview before Mrs. Chamack. Apparently the traffic on the Ladyblog has been higher than it has been in years."
Adrien tried his best not to laugh at the smug look on Marinette's face. Mrs. Chamack hadn't gotten any interview from the superheroes about their newly-confirmed relationship at all, while the duo had specifically orchestrated their 'patrol' to run into Alya and talk to her. Adrien suspected that Marinette was perhaps still a little bit sore about the woman interrogating Ladybug and Chat Noir about their relationship status so often and putting them on the spot in her studio the few times they came in.

(Also, he wasn't going to argue with her about that. Alya, overeager as she could be at times, could apparently recognize when to back off with her questions. Madam Chamack, driven by gossip-focused ratings, would push and push until the superheroes snapped and took their leave abruptly, and that never reflected terribly well on them.)

"And she's obsessing over the contest forms again," Marinette added. She looked much less smug about that, and Adrien had to try not to laugh at her exasperated expression. "And getting all of her research summarized and organized. There's some things that she has to leave out for space, and she keeps wondering if she should try to shorten her other sections so she can fit little details back in."

"Doesn't she get to submit a more lengthy summary of her research if she gets to the later stages of the contest?" Adrien wanted to know. "I thought that was what she said at Christmas. And she knows that it'll be a better idea to focus on the users that she does know a lot about and has gotten a lot of research done for right away. If she just does little odds and ends on everyone, the committee might think that that's all she can find and it isn't worth the money to send her places."

Marinette gasped. "Oh! Yeah, that's exactly what she needs to hear. Hold on a second, I have to text her that." Her hands left his shoulders, and Adrien mourned. "I don't mind hearing about her progress, of course, and I don't mind offering my opinion to help her, but all the back and forth and second-guessing herself is starting to drive me a little crazy."

Adrien couldn't blame her. Now that she mentioned it, he remembered a series of texts from Nino groaning about how Alya kept pestering him with questions about things that they had already discussed. She kept second-guessing and running herself in circles with worry.

Hopefully Alya would calm down soon. It wouldn't do her any good to be stressing out and potentially ruining a perfectly good application.

"Did anything else interesting happen today?" Adrien asked after Marinette's phone had returned to her pocket and her hands had returned to kneading his shoulders. He was startled when she suddenly groaned.

"I got another idiot trying to get a commission," Marinette said, sounding suddenly grouchy. "Someone who wanted something ridiculously fancy for a ridiculously low price. I told them how much it would actually cost, not that I would actually accept them when I have so many other things to do, and then they sent back a message accusing me of highway robbery. There were some curse words, so I blocked them." She groaned. "I just have to hope that none of these idiots start complaining to Madam Rosalie about me, but I suppose she wouldn't take them seriously."

"How are these people getting your email in the first place?" Adrien asked, completely baffled. "Do you have, like, a website for commissions that I don't know about or something?"

Marinette shook her head. "No, I don't. If I did, I bet I'd never get any rest from answering emails. Most of the legit inquiries I get are from bands and singers that probably just asked Jagged Stone how to get in contact with me. Everyone else got my work email from the company website. A couple of those inquiries were legit, but most are just idiots who expect an original designer piece
to only cost as much as something from a department store. And a cheap department store, at that."

"Could you ask to have your email removed from the company page?" Adrien suggested. "It sounds like it might be a problem to have it up."

Marinette shook her head. "I have to have it up. And there's fewer people bugging me every week. It really wouldn't do much at this point."

Adrien hoped that she was right. He didn't like the idea of people calling Marinette names or trying to cause problems for her just because she dared demand that she be paid fairly for her work.

(He wasn't going to lie- if someone actually did cause trouble for her, he wouldn't hesitate to transform and show up on the idiot's doorstep with a few choice words for them. No one messed with his Lady and got away with it.)

"And I suppose I really shouldn't worry at all about people emailing Madam Rosalie," Marinette continued, oblivious to Adrien's mental plans of destruction. "If they mention pricing at all, she would just laugh at them. She's been there before, back when she was just starting out. And she helped me set my prices too, her and Mrs. Kelly. Otherwise I probably would have set stuff too low, and that's no good when establishing a customer base."

"Are all of your customers bands, then? Or are there some individuals, too?"

"It's all bands or singers. Any private individuals who wanted me to design something ended up being idiots about the price, or at least they just dropped the idea when I gave them base price estimations."Apparently done for now with her massaging, Marinette finally sat down at the table next to Adrien and pulled her tablet out of her bag. The protective cover for it had come in the mail just over a week after Christmas, and Marinette had picked out a leafy pattern. It was really pretty, and more importantly, Marinette loved it. Adrien glanced over her shoulder as she powered it up and caught sight of an in-progress album cover. It was darker and had more black and grey than she ever did with Jagged Stone's albums, but it still screamed rock, or maybe metal. It looked really cool. "And I'm busy enough that I think I would just accept bands at this point anyway. They kind of provide free advertisement."

"Hopefully that's the last of that kind of requester, then." With one last glance at the paper he had been perusing and his notes, Adrien stood up and stretched. His back let out a loud crack, making Marinette jump. He gave her a sheepish grin as he headed into the kitchen, shrugging when she looked concerned.

His back cracking had actually felt kind of good. It relieved some of the painful pressure that had built up over the afternoon. Adrien twisted and stretched again, and this time was rewarded with a series of pops.

Much better.

Adrien started work on dinner as Marinette worked on her commission. He paused often to glance over at his girlfriend as she worked, her brow gently furrowed as she added details to the piece. Tikki alternately perched on Marinette's shoulder and flew around the room, occasionally popping into the kitchen to check on Adrien and snag a cookie from the jar that Marinette had sitting on the counter. Plagg napped on the window ledge, curled up in the last dying ray of sun.

Adrien spooned the casserole mixture he had been working on into a pan and slid it into the oven before sticking his head back out into the living room area. Marinette had left the table and was kneeling on the floor, cutting out some pattern pieces from her special patterning paper.
"Done with the cover art?" Adrien asked. That was fast. Marinette had gotten a lot of the piece done, sure, but he hadn't thought that she would be able to finish it so fast.

Much to his surprise, Marinette shook her head. "No, not yet. There's still a bit of work to be done with sharpening up some of the shadows and contrast, but I can do that whenever. I just figured that I should get some of the outfit work done while I'm at home."

Adrien nodded and headed back into the kitchen to chop up some fruit for a salad. Tikki swooped down to steal a few pieces before Adrien tipped everything into a bowl and stuck it in the fridge.

"Your dietician would be proud of you for eating healthy," she told him as she settled down on the counter. "It's hard to when you first move out, I know. I've heard people complaining about not wanting to make more dishes just so they could have a fruit salad, and that they would rather just stick to the main dish."

Adrien grinned and raised his voice slightly so he could be sure that Marinette would hear. "I see. And would I be correct in assuming that by people you mean Marinette?"

The "Hey!" from the other room came in loud and clear. Adrien's grin widened and Tikki giggled.

"That's exactly what I meant," Tikki whispered loudly. "Whenever she was on a designing kick, she wouldn't take the time to eat right if she wasn't eating at the same time as her parents! And then she was starting to do the same thing when she came here, before you moved to London."

"What is she telling you, Adrien?" Marinette demanded from the next room over. "Don't believe any of it!"

Adrien just laughed.

It wasn't long before dinner was done and he was pulling it out of the oven. Plagg had finally moved, his ray of sunlight long gone and the windowsill now a bit chilly. Now he was situated on top on the back of the stove, munching on a slice of Gruyere and relishing in the heat floating up.

Adrien set the table as the dish cooled a little so it would set, then waited until Marinette had sat up from her work before interrupting. She had moved on from the patterning paper to cutting actual fabric, and he didn't want to startle her and make her cut something wrong. "Bugaboo, dinner is ready."

Marinette set her rotary cutter aside and popped up. "Really? Great!"

It didn't take long at all to eat, and then Adrien shooed Marinette off to keep working while he cleaned up. It was a fairly transparent attempt to avoid his papers for just a bit longer, but Marinette didn't tease him about it at all. It wasn't that long of a delay- having done some of the washing-up while waiting for the casserole to bake had that effect- and then Adrien was settling back down in front of his computer to finish reading and taking notes on the paper he had been partway through when Marinette arrived home. He had just finished with that and was about to open the next paper (this time the paper was thankfully in French, which would make reading it just a bit quicker) when he remembered something that he wanted to ask Marinette.

Adrien turned around in his chair, once again waiting until Marinette's scissors and her fabric were no longer in contact before saying anything. "Hey, Marinette?"

Marinette sat back on her heels, glancing over. "Yeah?"

"What would you think about having Ben over for dinner some night?" Adrien asked. "I'd cook, of
course. But I just realized earlier today that I've been talking about him for months but you two haven't ever met."

"Oh, sure!"

"He's got a lot of interesting stories to tell," Adrien said, spinning around in his chair to straddle it backwards and watch Marinette instead of going back to reading his paper. Marinette had gone back to cutting out pieces of fabric, but she was clearly still listening. "Since he took a gap year and all. And his family always traveled when he was a kid." He grinned. "They apparently went to France one year, so he was trying to tell me about it in French. And, uh, I appreciated the enthusiasm and all, but he hasn't taken French classes or practiced at all for, like, five or six years." He grinned at the memory. Ben had tried, he really had, but the story had finally ended up being told in a strange mix of French and English. "Maybe he can try again when he comes over. Will any time in the next, say, two-ish weeks work?"

"Any day except next Thursday," Marinette said, and Adrien frowned. Had he missed something going on at Marinette's work? He had thought that he knew everything that was going on at Madam Rosalie's.

"Wait, what's next Thursday?"

Plagg snickered. Tikki looked appalled. Marinette just gave him a Look.

"Adrien?"

"Yeah?"

"Next Thursday is Valentine's Day."

Adrien and Marinette's Valentine's Day stay-in date ended up being planned half by Marinette and half by Adrien. Once he realized that the holiday was approaching (and how he had forgotten, he really had no idea) Adrien had wanted to be the one to plan it. After all, he did technically tend to have more free time than Marinette, since he was only at school for a couple hours a day and could easily move his study sessions and homework to other days, and he had romantic ideas practically bubbling out of his head. But Marinette hadn't been content to let him do all of the work, so they finally agreed that he would cook dinner and she would make dessert and they would both contribute to the decorations in their (well, technically still just his) apartment.

Adrien called dibs on the music soundtrack, though. He knew what songs he wanted to play, and he knew Marinette's favorite songs, and he had spent several hours brainstorming with Tikki while Marinette worked on her latest commissions. It had turned out well, he thought, mixing soft romantic music with music that was a little more their style but that still had a definite love theme.

And once they got everything set out and prepared, their Valentine's date was definitely romantic. Marinette had somehow managed to get a large vase of roses and baby's breath flowers smuggled into the building (she swore up and down that there was no chance that any reporters could have found out, but she refused to tell him how she had managed that), and Adrien set out cookiescented candles around the room and set up a lovely red tablecloth and fancy place settings. They both dressed up, and then sat down to a steak dinner.
(The kwamis agreed to stay out of the way in Marinette's apartment, accompanied by a large wheel of cheese and a stack of cookies.)

Thankfully, it had turned out perfectly. Adrien had been really worried about accidentally under- or over-cooking it. His cooked vegetable medley- a recipe that he had gotten from his family's chef over the break- turned out just as well.

"You know, if someone told fifteen-year-old me that you would be able to cook so well, I wouldn't have believed them," Marinette told Adrien as she polished off her last few bites. "Remember that time that you and Nino tried to make snacks for one of our study sessions back in our first year of lycée?"

Adrien groaned. "Don't remind me. Oh, those were awful. We definitely screwed something up when we were mixing up that dip, and who even knows where we went wrong with the mini pizzas. I'm so glad that we had prepackaged stuff that we could still snack on, or that would have been a long study session." He polished off the last of his vegetables, dragging one of the potatoes along the plate to wipe up the last of the sauce. "I'm glad that Alya was willing to teach me how to cook. I hated not knowing what I was doing when we were cooking. And I like being able to actually eat what I make."

"You learned well," Marinette told him. "I know some people who got taught and still can only make the basics. This?" She gestured at her now-empty plate. "This is far, far more than the basics."

Adrien preened.

"Do we want dessert right away?" Marinette asked several minutes later as Adrien brought their dishes out to the kitchen. "Or do we want to have a break first and let dinner settle?"

"Let things settle, I think. Then I can fit in more of your amazing chocolate cake." Adrien made sure that all of the dishes were out and what needed to be soaking was filled with water and soap, and then he headed back towards the table. On the way, he snagged the heart-shaped box of chocolate that he had picked up on his way home from school and the smaller box that he had wrapped earlier in the day. "Besides, I wanted to give you something before we have our dessert."

Marinette twisted in her seat to watch him and her eyes went wide when she saw the box. "Adrien..."

"I couldn't go and buy anything fancy," Adrien assured her as he pushed the box of chocolates and the small box on top of it across the table. "I'm pretty sure people would notice if I went to a jewelry store or something. But I couldn't go completely without any gifts."

"I don't need anything fancy," Marinette assured him. "Or any gifts, really. The drawing tablet you got me for Christmas was already more than enough. And spending time with you is a gift, too."

Adrien grinned over at her. "I know. But I wanted to get you something. What kind of cat would I be if I didn't get you a present?"

Marinette paused, hand hovering over the small wrapped box, and gave Adrien a deeply suspicious look. "Why do I get the sudden feeling that I know what this is?"

He just pasted on his most innocent look. "I'm sure I don't know what you might be talking about."

Sighing, Marinette pulled the wrapping off and opened the box. Inside, a dove-shaped bar of soap sat among pale pink tissue paper. She lifted it up and sniffed, then looked pleased. "It smells like
baking spices! Cinnamon and nutmeg and-" another deep breath- "and allspice. I love it! Thanks, kitty."

"I spent a couple days hunting that down," Adrien told her, delighting in Marinette's loud groan. "But I couldn't show up empty-pawed."

"Adrien."

He just grinned at her, unrepentant. The soap had been a great find and he was totally going to stock up on more of them before they left London, just to be sure that he would have them for presents for years to come, because watching Marinette groan and roll her eyes while trying not to laugh was never going to get old.

"I do love it, even if you're ridiculous," Marinette said again, setting the box back down and leaning over to kiss him. "And I have something for you, too. I managed to find the time to make it at work during one of my breaks, and I think you'll like it." She handed over a shoebox-sized box wrapped in what looked like homemade paper, with hearts and cats stamped all over light pink paper. It was adorable, and Adrien did his best to not rip it as he opened the box. Something made with cat-patterned fabric sat inside, and Adrien picked it up curiously. It was stuffed with something small and grainy, and Adrien looked to Marinette for an explanation.

"It's a heating pad," Marinette explained. "Filled with rice, because that seemed to be the best thing to use. You stick it in the microwave for a minute and then put it on your back, or your neck, or your lap, or whatever you want. I know you like heat, and I thought it might be nice to use on cold days or just to curl up with. And they're really good for back aches, too."

"I love it!" Adrien was already planning ways to use it. Maybe he could stick it in his bed to warm the sheets up before he slid in when he went to bed before Marinette, or just hang out with it on the couch, or use it when he had sat at the table for too long doing homework and his back started to hurt. The cat pattern was adorable, and- Adrien unrolled it- yeah, he hadn't been seeing things. The fabric on the back side of the heating pad was green with little red ladybugs scattered all over.

It was Ladybug and Chat Noir themed, and he loved it even more.

"I know I've loved heated blankets when I've had them on tour, and this is gonna be like a miniature heated blanket," Adrien continued happily. "Thank you! And it's so cute, too."

Marinette was grinning. "I knew I had to use those patterns as soon as I saw them," she said. "They're just perfect for us. And I got more fabric of both just to make sure that I would have some for whatever other projects I might want to do in the future. These kinds of patterns have an annoying habit of being discontinued right after I discover them."

Adrien tried not to laugh at the grumpy expression she made at her words. He had to wonder how many times she found the perfect fabric for something, only to have it vanish before she could buy it. At least at Madam Rosalie's, she could just make the perfect fabric on demand.

...well, it was probably a little more complicated than that, but from what Adrien could tell, Marinette could have free rein with fabric design if she so desired, and she had regularly been designing patterns for her team's pieces.

The evening continued with them spending some time snuggled together on the couch, talking about everything and nothing all at once. It was comfortable and warm, even if it wasn't too terribly different than what they did normally. After twenty minutes of that, Marinette pulled Adrien up so they could dance to the music still playing from the speakers Adrien had set up. They waltzed
around the cramped space in the living room, sometimes turning a little sharper than normal to avoid hitting the chairs or the couch.

"The carpet is messing me up," Adrien said with a laugh as his shoe snagged a bit on the carpet and sent him tripping into Marinette for the third time that night. A second later, he was catching Marinette as she tripped over her heels. "We really need a proper hardwood floor to dance like this really well."

"I also need to know how to dance for us to be dancing really well, but details," Marinette teased him as she righted herself. The song ended and she led the way back to the table, "I haven't had the fancy-pants training that you've had. My hold is probably all wrong or something."

She was right, but Adrien wasn't about to go full nerd on her and admit it. "Have you been watching too much of that dancing show on TV again? Because that sounds like a comment that one of their judges would make."

Marinette stuck her tongue out at him instead of responding, effectively distracting Adrien for several minutes. When they finally separated several minutes later, he had more or less forgotten what they had been talking about. His distraction was fully completed when Marinette promptly headed into the kitchen to fetch the cake she had made and served it up with a generous scoop of ice cream.

It was a lava-style cake, rich and fudgy and fluffy all at the same time. Adrien hummed happily as he let the first bite melt in his mouth. Clearly it had been a good idea to agree to let Marinette make the dessert. As always, she did not disappoint.

"I was going to put heart-shaped sprinkles on top, but the store had sold out," Marinette told him as they ate. She made a slight face. "I thought that I had looked plenty early, but apparently everyone in London really wanted heart sprinkles for Valentine's Day."

Adrien laughed. He couldn't help it, she just looked so disgruntled. "It's plenty tasty without sprinkles, bugaboo."

"It just would have been good for color," Marinette grumbled. She stabbed her fork into her cake and took a bite. Her expression immediately smoothed out and her eyes closed as she enjoyed the cake. Adrien grinned.

Marinette would probably never comment like he often did about how good the cake was because that was all she was used to, but he knew that she always enjoyed her own baking.

The candles flickered lower as they finished up their desserts. Adrien scraped the bottom of his bowl, trying to get up every last delicious crumb before they brought their dishes into the kitchen.

(He would have licked his bowl, but he had been raised better than that. Besides, there were plenty of leftovers for them to have other days.)

"I haven't heard anything from Alya today," Marinette commented as they washed up their dishes. She giggled. "I'm guessing that Nino managed to distract her from the contest at long last."

"I'm just glad that the entries were due yesterday," Adrien said. He took the newly-washed plate from her and started drying it. "It's too bad the deadline was so close to Valentine's Day. You would think that they might put it a bit sooner since, y'know, Valentine's and all. People can't plan as well if they're stressing over entering."

"I think it has something to do with the contest people not wanting to have to deal with having to
"wade through the entries before Valentine's Day," Marinette joked. "If they have the contest closing date on the 13th, then they don't have to read anything before the 14th, and they won't be distracted on Valentine's Day thinking about the entries."

Adrien let out a hum of thought. Part of him wanted to laugh at Marinette's joking theory, but upon second thought... well, she might be right. He had seen how obsessed Alya could get when she found a topic that she found intriguing, and from what he could tell, it was a common trait among reporters. He could see where the contest council members might get distracted by some of the more original ideas being presented, and that might keep them from being able to fully focus on whoever they were spending Valentine's Day with.

Well, if they were spending the day with someone. He knew that not everyone paid attention to Valentine's Day (he certainly hadn't before this year), so maybe the unfortunate timing was just due to the organizers not really paying attention to the significance of the date.

"Either way, I'm glad that the contest is closed now and I won't wake up to fifteen messages from Alya asking about wording for a specific section or whether or not she should include some specific detail," Marinette said. She put the pot she had just washed in the drying rack and reached for the last plate. "I mean, I understood, because this is such a big opportunity, but I've never seen her so anxious. Also, I'm not the one with a degree in writing! How was I supposed to know which wording was better?"

"I had thought that she had been planning on having everything ready and entering as soon as the contest opened this year," Adrien said. Maybe he had misunderstood, but he was almost positive that Alya hadn't wanted to wait until last minute to enter. And then instead of entering, she spent the two-week entry period fiddling around with her submission, changing word order and fiddling with the details. "But so much for that. Hopefully she wins this year so she doesn't have to go through that again."

Marinette giggled. "Hopefully she wins this year so that she doesn't find all there is to discover before she can even leave Paris. Because she's going to, at the rate she's going."

"She really has been discovering a lot." Even if Alya had been focusing mainly on getting things organized and formatted correctly to enter the contest ever since the Christmas holidays, that hadn't meant that she hadn't found anything new. A few more historians had responded to her inquiries (apparently having the Ladyblog on her resume had been a large help in spurring them to respond), and they had each had found something of interest. The biggest discovery, according to Alya, had been what had to be an ancient Ladybug and her partner. The Chat Noir at the time had been elsewhere, and the Ladybug had been paired with what Alya said had to be another user. It sounded like it had been a Bee, just based on the color scheme.

It was the first time in months that Alya had found a new type of Miraculous holder. Adrien would not be surprised if the next few months were filled with a careful combing-through of everything she had found over the last year and a half to try to find any signs of other Bees throughout history.

"So what do you want to do after we finish this?" Adrien asked after drying a few more dishes. "A game before bed, maybe? A movie?" He flashed an impish grin at Marinette and wriggled his eyebrows, letting his voice drop into Chat Noir's suave purr. "Or purrhaps the Lady is feline more like going straight to the bedroom?"

Marinette's jaw dropped and she gave him an absolutely incredulous look. "Are you seriously trying to pick me up with cat puns?"

Adrien grinned. He could practically feel the indignation rolling off of her, and it was hilarious.
"Mewby."

"I have half a mind to splash you," Marinette threatened, waving soapy fingers in his direction. "If it weren't for the fact that I don't want to get your suit wet, I would."

"And I would splash you back, but I really don't want to accidentally get that gorgeous dress stained." Adrien ducked down and pressed a kiss to Marinette's cheek. "We should have a date sometime where we just, like, don't get dressed up at all. We could wear pajamas and order takeout and play board games and splash each other all we want."

Marinette lit up. "Oh, that sounds amazing."

(Adrien absently wondered if he could get away with ordering onesies for both of them for the date. Marinette might not be happy with him if he did, but she would be so. cute. in a red-spotted or cat-themed adult onesie and it would be so worth it.)

"I know we don't really have much in the way of games over here except for video games and cards, but I bet I could borrow a couple things from my coworkers," Marinette said, clearly excited. The last bowl dangled from one hand, clearly forgotten. "I could just say that we want to have a game night, so they don't think date. And we could make popcorn, and- okay, now I'm just planning our next date when we're still in the middle of our Valentine's Day date."

Adrien laughed. "Oh, I'm glad that you like the idea." He tapped her hand, reminding her about the dish she still held. Marinette eeped and hurried to rinse it off and hand it over to Adrien. "So what do you say? Game? Movie? None of the above?"

"I'd be up to a short rom-com before finishing our date," Marinette decided after a moment. "If you want, of course."

"I suppose it would be a good idea to let our lovely meal digest a bit before we lie down," Adrien agreed. He put the last bowl away and dried his hands before holding a hand out to Marinette. "Let's go find a movie to watch, my Lady."
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

So I've had a few people wondering about the, ah, fate of the purchases that Adrien made back in ch. 23 so I figured that I might as well respond to all of those at once. I set the rating on this story as Teen on FF.net and General Audiences on AO3, which means that I have to abide by those standards and keep the content appropriate for younger fans.

That being said, I have been slipping in hints of stuff happening behind the scenes, just because they ARE adults. Some hints may be more obvious than others.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marinette was in the middle of puzzling over a kid's summer romper at work when she noticed her phone flashing with a new message next to her elbow. She set the design to the side for a moment to check it, and found a new email waiting in her inbox. Marinette clicked on it and found another commission request, this time from what was apparently a symphonic metal band.

Nibbling on her lip, Marinette considered the email for a few minutes before opening a new tab on her computer and googling the band name to find out a little more about them. It didn't take long for Marinette to skim the first page and find out that they were a relatively well-known band in their genre, as far as she could tell. If she took the commission and did a good job with the outfits that they were asking her to create- a few stage outfits and some screen-printed t-shirts, and wow were those ever some interesting concepts, her imagination was already sparking- then maybe they could become a long-time client, or at the very least another strong point on her resume for when she was applying to things back in Paris again.

Maybe she could do it. If she set a long deadline, pointing out her normal job and vague other obligations (read: the commissions she had already committed to), then she could push to finish her other projects while getting the initial sketches done during her breaks at work and then approved. The cape they had asked for- well, there would be some screen printing on it, and bedazzling, but overall it wouldn't take long. The rest of the pieces would take a little more time, but nothing too bad.

Marinette really wanted to say yes. Sure, it would be a busy few weeks to catch up, but requests had been slowing down after that initial burst right after Jagged Stone's album dropped (and half of the requests had been dropped after people who wanted custom designer outfits but didn't want to pay custom designer price learned that yes, she did actually expect to be paid fairly, oddly enough). They would no doubt slow all the way to a stop soon, and then Marinette would be left with nothing to do in the evenings while Adrien studied.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. She could do her own for-fun designs, and she did have some mending that she could do as well- her pajamas had a rip at the moment so she had stolen an old t-shirt of Adrien's to wear instead (and Adrien had looked a bit surprised when she told him that she was too busy to do the mending, but he definitely hadn't protested her wearing his clothes). But neither of those things would result in her getting paid extra money, which she needed right now if
she wanted to build up any real savings by the time she and Adrien left London. Sure, next year they wouldn't have the expense of her apartment to pay, but that was still *months* away.

Giving herself a good shake to refocus, Marinette read over the email again and reminded herself to not get ahead of herself. She hadn't even given these people a quote yet and she didn't know if they would be willing to pay the right price. They might drop off when she emailed them back, just like so many others had.

Marinette made a mental note to get back to the band over her lunch break- she could use the general response email that she sent out to everyone requesting a commission and just tweak it a little bit to fit their request- and then set her phone aside to refocus on her design.

With that spark of inspiration still lingering from the band's aesthetic, it didn't take long for Marinette to make a few tweaks on the romper to make it unique. She cleaned up the drawing, and then got it uploaded into her team's shared folder so everyone else on her team could see it and give her some feedback. With that assignment done, Marinette turned her attention back to the pile of runway designs that she had to alter into streetwear looks.

"Nice design, Marinette!" Emily called from her cubicle thirty minutes later. Marinette glanced up from her work and grinned in Emily's direction, even though the junior designer wouldn't be able to see her.

"Thanks!"

"Dibs on making a dress for that line!" Sarah called. "I already have an idea for one to go along with the romper!"

"I'm making overalls!" Abbey chimed in. "And a sun hat. Whatever your inspiration was for that romper, Marinette, I approve."

Marinette ducked her head, grinning shyly as she did. She hadn't expected her piece to be the focal point for their summer kid's line, but it was a good feeling to be so appreciated.

By the time lunchtime had rolled around, Marinette had drafted up three potential runway-to-streetwear outfits. She headed to the break room and powered up her laptop while the leftovers she had brought heated up in the microwave. It didn't take long to alter her basic letter to fit the band's requests, and then it was ready to send.

Before she hit *Send*, Marinette paused one more time, wondering if she should *really* even be *considering* taking the commission. After all, she *was* already pretty busy, so much so that Tikki had even argued with her about Marinette insisting that she plan at least *part* of her and Adrien's Valentine's Day date. Tikki thought that she should leave all of it to Adrien, since he was clearly eager to do it, but Marinette hadn't been about to just sit back and not put in some effort for Adrien on their first Valentine's Day as a couple.

Besides, it had been nice to have an excuse to take a break from the designing and the commissions to bake a cake. It was *really* nice to have the near-instant gratification that came with starting a project and finishing it in only a little over an hour and a half.

"I can handle it," Marinette assured herself, hitting *send*. Most of the commission would be the screen-printing, and that wasn't hard at all. In fact, she rather enjoyed those kinds of commissions, because just like the cake, they were relatively quick to do and check off the list. Besides, she had already seen how the band's aesthetic inspired her. She *wanted* to work with them.
Right after her email sent, her phone lit up with another message. Marinette set her laptop aside and grabbed her phone, just as a second and third text came through in quick succession. They were from Alya, and Marinette grinned as she read the messages.

"What is it, Marinette?" Tikki whispered so that the sewing room workers who were taking a break wouldn't hear the voice coming from Marinette's pocket. "What did she say?"

"Alya was just told that she got past the first round of the competition," Marinette whispered back, grinning.

Tikki perked up. "Oh, that's amazing!"

Marinette shook her head, checking her phone again. "Not really. About half to three-quarters of the entrants make it past the first round. The first cut is just to make sure that there's enough research that they've done and recorded to justify needing a trip. Alya knew that she would make that first cut, but it's good to have that confirmation, at least." She texted Adrien with the news, just on the off chance that Alya hadn't let him know as well. "It'll be the next two cuts that we're more interested in."

"Working over lunch again?" Sarah asked, appearing at Marinette's side with a sandwich and Marinette's food from the microwave. She slid the hot dish over to Marinette before sitting down to eat her own lunch. "You gotta take a break sometime."

"I was just responding to some email," Marinette defended herself, though she knew Sarah was right. Every other day of the week, she had had sketches to work on over their lunch break. "And I was responding to a text from my friend Alya back home- she's made it past the first cut in this research competition."

"Oh, cool!" Sarah said immediately. "What is she researching?"

By the time Marinette finished telling Sarah about the kinds of things Alya was researching, the rest of her team had arrived and most were listening.

"Oh, I remember hearing about the superheroes in Paris," Abbey said. "Only vaguely, though. Some of my classmates were super excited that there were real-life superheroes. But I bet you know all about them, since you were there and all."

Oh, the irony. "Yeah, they were at my school all the time," Marinette said, only years of practice allowing her to keep a straight face. "There were a lot of akuma fights in my neighborhood."

"Oh, I would hate that," Emily said, shivering. "That would be so scary, to have superhero fights nearby all the time!"

The rest of her team nodded. Marinette managed to just smile and nod, trying not to laugh at what her coworkers' reactions might be if they ever found out that she had been right in the middle of every single one of those fights.

The rest of the afternoon flew by as the entire team came together to toss ideas around for the summer lines and to discuss the upcoming spring/summer Runway week. They ended the day with a strong plan going forward, a good start on their summer kid's line, and a bunch of sketches for the runway-to-streetwear pieces.

(Marinette also ended the workday with a response from the band- they had already heard about her prices from one for the other bands Marinette was already working with and were fine with it, so now she had a whole slew of new outfits and screen-printing screens to design.)
"How's the husband?" Sarah asked, appearing at Marinette's side as she walked towards her apartment building. "I've seen him in passing, but we haven't been able to talk for long. Either he's trying to get somewhere or I am. Or both. Often both."

"One of these days, one of those annoying reporters is gonna overhear you calling Adrien that and they're going to take you seriously," Marinette said, rolling her eyes fondly. Plagg would get along well with Sarah, what with his insistence on calling Marinette Adrien's wife and Sarah's insistence on calling Adrien Marinette's husband. She had even gotten the rest of the team in on it from time to time.

Sarah shrugged. "Eh, who cares about them. I'm not going to say anything to them to get you in trouble, though," she added quickly. "And if they do overhear me, I can just explain that duh, I'm referring to the prank because I was there, don't they recognize me from the bridesmaids photo? I won't say anything about how ridiculously married you two are."

Marinette thought about protesting that and then decided against it, because Tikki had said that in the past, too. If it weren't for the fact that they apparently couldn't hide their "married-ness" from everyone else, acting married would be quite a good thing, really. To her, acting married meant that she and Adrien were comfortable with each other and worked well together, and that was a good thing.

"Have a good evening with your husband," Sarah told Marinette as they separated once they were in the building. She grinned at Marinette's groan. "Don't be too cute."

"Right, right, of course," Marinette grumbled, waving her friend off and trying not to grin as she did. She headed through the door to her floor's hallway and made an immediate beeline to Adrien's door. Her boyfriend would surely be working on homework- he had a lot of projects and papers to do this semester on top of his usual studying- but that didn't mean that he wouldn't welcome the interruption.

And just like she suspected, Adrien was hunched over in front of his computer at the dining room table, headphones plugged in as he worked. Marinette grinned, dumping her bag on the couch and heading over to greet him.

"Hey, kitty," Marinette sing-songed, sliding up behind Adrien and sliding the headphones off. She dipped down to press a kiss to his cheek, and he twisted in his chair to return the kiss. She didn't miss his wince of pain when he twisted and she frowned. Clearly he had been sitting and studying for too long. Again. "Where's your heat pad? You should be using that if you're going to be sitting for so long."

Adrien jabbed a finger over his shoulder. "I was sleeping!" Plagg complained, floating after her. "And there was some lovely residual heat

Tiny god or not, she was not letting him steal Adrien's heat pack, especially not when Adrien clearly needed it. And even worse, it sounded like the stealing the rice pack was a common occurrence.

"I was sleeping!" Plagg complained, floating after her. "And there was some lovely residual heat
still, and-

"This is Adrien's," Marinette scolded as she brought it back to the microwave. "And he needs it. Go sit in the sun or something."

"But I like the heat!"

"It's not yours!"

"But I'm-

Tikki zipped up after Plagg and twisted his tail, making his squeak. "You can't steal from your Chosen, Plagg!" she snapped at him as Marinette set the timer on the microwave. "You can maybe perch on the pad if Adrien allows, but you can't claim it and not let Adrien use it. And your poor Chosen is in pain right now because he couldn't use his heated pad!"

Plagg scoffed. "No, he's in pain because he was hunched over like an old man all afternoon. If he ever got up and stretched for a bit then he wouldn't have this problem."

Tikki let out a wordless shriek in Plagg’s direction.

"As much as I hate to admit it, Plagg is at least partly right," Marinette said as she removed the newly-heated bag out of the microwave. She swatted Plagg away when he started drifting closer, drawn by the heat. "Adrien has to stop sitting in place for so long without getting up and stretching and taking breaks. But having this available to him would have helped." She tugged her (ridiculous) boyfriend off of his chair and face first onto the couch. Once he was settled, she draped the heating pad over the small of Adrien's back and he let out a happy sigh, relaxing into the couch.

"You gotta take better care of yourself, Adrien," Marinette sighed, rubbing his shoulders. A quiet purr floated up into the air between them. "I know your classes have really stepped up this year, but you need to take breaks and stretch. You're all tense."

"I have an exam on Friday," Adrien explained, voice muffled by the couch. "I was studying for that, and then trying to work on my paper. I swear that once I get both of those done I'll be able to relax a bit more."

Marinette dug the heels of her hands into the knotted muscle in Adrien's shoulders, making him yelp. "You'll be able to study better if you aren't stiff as a board, you dweeb."

"Rude."

They fell into silence, broken only by Adrien's quiet purr as Marinette worked on his tense muscles. Plagg floated over and settled on top of the hot pad, burrowing around to make a little divot in the heated rice. After a few more minutes, Tikki joined him.

"Feeling better?" Marinette asked after several minutes. She ran her hand up Adrien's back and into his hair, mussing it further. She adjusted the heating pad so it wasn't in danger of slowly sliding off. "I'm starting to think that I should have made two of these things. Then you could have one on your upper back, too."

Adrien made a happy little noise and wriggled slightly.

"I want one, too!" Plagg announced, rolling over and staring up at Marinette with pleading green eyes. "One that I can carry around wherever I want!"
Marinette gave Plagg a Look. "Will you stop stealing Adrien's if I make you a heat pack of your own?"

"Yes!"

Marinette made a face and gave Adrien a few light scratches behind his ears. She didn't want to reward Plagg by giving him a gift when he was stealing from Adrien (and she didn't exactly have a ton of spare time to spend making a kwami-sized rice pack, especially with the newest addition to her list of commissions to do), but Adrien was apparently unwilling to cross Plagg and risk being bitten. If she gave Plagg a miniature heat pack of his own, then Adrien wouldn't have to deal with his spoiled kwami stealing his when he needed it.

Fine. She would make a mini heat pack for Plagg, then. Maybe Adrien could occasionally steal it for his neck or something, just because turnabout was fair.

"D'you wanna order takeout tonight?" Marinette asked after a few more minutes. "I don't think there's much in the fridge right now and I don't really feel like cooking." She really wanted to get a good chunk of work done on her commissions tonight, and cooking and cleaning up just took up time that she didn't really have at the moment. She reached for her phone, scrolling with one hand as the other rubbed up and down Adrien's back. "Sarah recommended this Greek place. I've actually been there before with the people from work. It's not too expensive and they deliver."

"Sure." Adrien reached his arms forward and stretched, arching and twisting back and forth. "Mmm. I think I'm gonna bring this thing to bed tonight. If I stay here much longer, I'm going to fall asleep."

Marinette giggled and ran a hand up Adrien's spine as he stretched again. "You can take a little cat-nap while our food comes. It might help you focus better once you wake up again."

Adrien laughed and started to wriggle his way upright. Marinette hopped off of his legs so he could sit back up. "It's a little too late in the day for a cat-nap, I think. I'd just end up tired."

"If you say so."

Marinette went to order their dinner while Adrien moved his study materials to the floor so he could lay down and finish some assigned problems for one of his classes while keeping the hot pad on his back. Once their order was in (maybe Marinette had ordered a little more than they would eat, but she liked leftovers for lunch and so did Adrien), Marinette grabbed her tablet and settled down on the floor next to Adrien so she could draw with one hand and rub his shoulders with the other hand.

It was comfortable. Adrien leaned his head to the side, resting it against Marinette's knees as he worked. Partway through their wait, Marinette got up to reheat the rice bag and then resettle it on Adrien's back.

"Thanks, bug." Adrien said as she settled the bag across his shoulders. He smiled over at her as she settled back down at his side and picked up her new tablet again. "My back is feeling a whole lot better now."

"Promise me you'll take better care of it this weekend, when you have your test and the paper out of the way?"

Adrien grinned. "Well, then I'll have another two papers to focus on and another test to start studying for... but I suppose I could manage to screw up my back less than normal once my test on
Friday is done."

Marinette sighed. She supposed that that was as good as she was going to get. "It seems like you have a lot more tests than normal this semester." Normally he just had a cluster of exams around the middle of the semester and again at the end, but now he had exams and paper due dates sprinkled through the semester. Adrien always seemed to be studying, but that wasn't a huge problem.

After all, she certainly had enough commission work to keep her busy. *More* than enough, even.

So much for their *be-done-with-classwork-and-projects-by-a-certain-time* pact from the fall. It seemed that these days, they worked up to it or over regularly, but it really couldn't be avoided. At least they *did* try to spend a chunk of time together without commissions or studying distracting them several times a week, even if those times had been shortened somewhat. And of course they tended to try to go to bed around the same time, too, and early enough that they didn't *have* to go to sleep right away.

"Yeah, I seem to be having tests at the end of every large unit for one of my classes," Adrien agreed. "I think it's because the units are so different, it wouldn't make sense to stick them together. And there's some other classes with a strange exam schedule, or that just have papers instead of exams."

Marinette hummed in acknowledgement, and kept sketching. She was currently working on finishing up a set of preliminary drawings for an earlier commission, and she wanted to get them down and approved soon so she could go and get the fabric and other things she needed at the same time she was picking up the stuff she needed for yet another order over the weekend. Not getting feedback and approval in time would mean that she would have to waste time going on a separate trip to the fabric store, unless she wanted to put to put off getting supplies for *that* commissions off until she was getting the things for her *latest* commission.

Needless to say, she would rather *not* have to do more trips than strictly necessary. And sure, maybe she should be focusing on finishing up her in-progress commissions first, but it was nice to have options for when she got to the fiddly work on a piece and she was too tired to do anything but sew long straight seams for one evening.

She had just finished the basic sketch when the take-out arrived. Marinette grabbed her wallet and trotted downstairs, meeting the delivery guy at the front door. One exchange of food and money later, and Marinette was trotting upstairs with her prize.

"That's a *lot* of food, Marinette," Adrien said with a laugh after Marinette set everything out on their table. He rolled to his feet with a quiet grunt, snagging his rice bag before it could fall to the ground. "Are we expecting guests?"

"It's not *that* much." In her defense, she had kind of thought that the serving sizes would be a little smaller. She must have misremembered how large they were. *Whoops.* "I mean, we'll have enough for two meals, but that's not a bad thing."

They dug in eagerly. Adrien still wasn't looking completely comfortable in the chair- clearly his back was still bothering him at least a little bit- but the discomfort hadn't affected his appetite at all.

Maybe they wouldn't have enough for two full meals after all.

"I might go to bed early tonight," Adrien told her as he scraped his plate clean. "I think that with all of the work I've done this afternoon, I should be in good shape."
"Lots of homework?"

To her surprise, Adrien shook his head. "Well, some. It was mostly cleaning up a rough draft for one of my papers this semester and writing up a lab paper for another class. That stuff always takes forever."

Marinette could understand that. Writing in English tended to take an annoyingly long time as she puzzled over the right words (and the right tenses, and the right form of the word to use, in some cases), and while Adrien had Ben to help get things polished up, he didn't like to give his papers to his tutor in too rough of a shape. "When are your papers due?"

"Most of the rough drafts are due close to midterms, but the lab paper is due next Thursday," Adrien said, making her start in surprise. That was ages out-right? Or had more of the semester passed her by than she realized? "I just want to get the bulk of the work out of the way now, because I never know what will come up closer to the due date. Ben has said that sometimes things can get intense around midterms and that people who tend to put stuff off until closer to the due date end up pulling all sorts of all-nighters. I've been trying to avoid that."

Marinette was of the opinion that Adrien was going a little over the top with trying to be prepared, but maybe Ben was right. Since it took Adrien longer to research and write in his second language, maybe it was a good idea for him to get that as much out of the way as he could now.

"I'm going to stay up a little longer, I think," Marinette said, glancing over at where her sketchbook and tablet sat side-by-side on the small side table. "I have some stuff I want to finish up tonight for commissions."

Adrien pouted at her for a moment, then sighed. "Okay. Honestly, I'll probably just take that rice pack with me and end up falling asleep straight off anyway. And I'll take better care of myself tomorrow, I promise. Really. I don't like my back hurting, either. It makes it harder to focus. And it makes me feel old besides."

Only half an hour after they finished dinner, Adrien started getting ready for bed. He wandered into the kitchen to get Plagg his evening cheese chunk and to heat up the rice bag, then paused to kiss Marinette good night before heading back to the bedroom. Marinette watched him go, then turned back to her tablet.

One last cleaned-up sketch, and then she could send the files to her client. It still wouldn't be that late by that time, as long as she didn't spectacularly mess up and, like, delete the file once she was most of the way through it. Saving her work periodically would keep her safe from that, and then she should have time to start on the album cover art that she had just gotten the details ironed out for earlier in the week.

Hopefully.

"I thought you were just telling Adrien about how he shouldn't be overworking himself," Tikki said disapprovingly once Marinette had sent her email with the six attachments and immediately started some quick outlines for the cover art, general sketches and lines to get an idea of where she wanted different elements to go. "And now you're working later than you two agreed on your commissions."

"I'm not overworking myself," Marinette protested. "I just have some things that I need to get done to even come close to staying on track with the number of commission requests that I've been getting. And this particular art needs to get done sooner rather than later, since the shirt designs depend on it."
Tikki did not look impressed.

"I just want to get my general ideas for this drawn out while I still have them in my head," Marinette added. "I'm not going to complete the whole thing tonight. It'll be two hours at most, and you know Adrien went to bed really early."

Tikki's expression didn't change. "One hour more, tops."

"One forty-five."

"One fifteen."

"An hour and a half, and that's all I'm willing to budge."

Marinette went back to her work, drawing and re-drawing lines as she tried to get a rough sketch done. Fifty-seven minutes in and Marinette's rough outline started taking on more detail—though not too much, because then it would get too difficult to replicate as a print on a shirt. Since the band had also commissioned her to do the screen-printing of their shirts for them, Marinette had to make sure that she delivered an interesting, unique cover while still keeping it clean enough that it wouldn't be a pain to print.

Needless to say, Marinette was very happy that the band had wanted the cover in only black and silver, because having to print multiple colors on one shirt was just a pain. It would be simple enough to print in silver-grey on a black shirt or black on a grey shirt, as long as she didn't give in to the temptation to add too much detail.

"I thought you said that you weren't going to design the whole thing tonight!" Tikki complained as Marinette cleaned up more of the sketch. Slowly but surely, it was starting to look less like a quick sketch and more like a proper album cover, though it wasn't anywhere close to completion yet.

"I still have five minutes to work on it!" Marinette protested. She carefully erased a section and redrew a line. "And I'm not going to finish it tonight, you don't have to keep mother-henning me about that. I've still probably got two hours of work left on this for another night, and more than that if the band requests any changes."

Tikki let out a little hmph and zipped off. Marinette checked the clock one more time—now she only had four minutes left to work—and then worked on evening out a line. She had just finished cleaning the upper corner up when her watch chimed, letting Marinette know that her time was up and she had to go to bed.

Trying not to grumble (if she didn't have work the next day, then she definitely would have tried to power through another hour or two of work), Marinette saved her work one last time and powered down the tablet. It got carefully tucked away in her bag, in the carefully padded pocket that she had made just for it, and then she headed back to the bedroom to wash up. It didn't take long, and then Marinette was slipping into bed next to a sleeping Adrien. He was sleeping on his stomach, which puzzled her for a moment until she remembered that he had mentioned going to sleep with his rice bag.

Sliding her hand over, Marinette felt for the bag. It was cold under the blankets, so Marinette carefully tugged it off of Adrien. After a moment's consideration, she headed back out to the kitchen to warm it back up again. Adrien didn't stir when she replaced the pack on his back, but he did let out a happy sigh that trailed off into a purr.

He was such a cat. Marinette couldn't deny that it was really, really cute.
It only took a few minutes more to set up her alarm for the next morning and get it arranged on the bedside table, and then she was sliding back between the sheets. Marinette could feel the heat from both Adrien and the heat pad as she curled up next to his side. His face was relaxed and angelic in sleep, finally free of stress and tension.

"Sleep well, chaton," Marinette murmured, leaning over to press a kiss to the part of his forehead that wasn't obscured by hair. "You need it."

Chapter End Notes

I just remembered that I also just wanted to quick mention that my next update might be a bit on the late side (hopefully no more than a day late) because I'll be traveling to Michigan for my fall job and I'm supposed to be arriving and getting settled on my normal update day (and also meeting all of my coworkers for the season!). It'll be a crazy busy week for me, but I'm REALLY looking forward to it and to getting to do more bird work!
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Adrien was concerned.

As winter turned to spring, Marinette had been contacted by more bands (as well as the occasional individual singer) as different rock and alt metal groups discovered that Jagged Stone's album art designer was a talented fashion designer as well. It was good for Marinette, of course- she was going to have one really impressive resume after this- but spring runway was also coming up, and it resulted in one very stressed Marinette as she worked to stay on top of the requests while still keeping up with her work at Madam Rosalie's.

And because Adrien had been wrapped up in his own concerns about finishing the projects, papers, and tests he had for his classes plus getting his applications in and interviewing for summer internships, he had taken far too long to catch on to just how much work Marinette was taking on. It hadn't helped that she had moved her sewing setup back to her apartment after Ben came over for dinner back in February. Since he had been working hard on papers and she hadn't wanted to distract him, she had just kept it over there and spent her evenings after dinner and before bed working in her apartment, unless she was working on album art or doing concept sketches.

He had thought that she maybe was pushing herself so hard because she had a long wait list formed and she didn't want any of the bands dropping her because they had to wait too long for their turn to come up, but that wasn't it.

There weren't any bands that had been wait listed. Marinette had accepted them all (well, all of the ones that agreed to her pricing), and so she had an insanely long list of in-progress commissions that nearly all had deadlines coming up in the coming weeks.

"Bug, you don't have a full time job and a couple commissions on the side," Adrien said in utter disbelief late Sunday evening- or, rather, Sunday night, when Marinette should have already been getting ready for bed, considering how early she was going to have to wake up the next morning to get ready for the Fashion Week runway- as he looked at Marinette's spreadsheet of commissions and the progress and due dates for each one. "This is two full-time jobs plus some, what with the spring runway this week. And you still have spring photoshoots at work after that. How on earth did you even find the time to make the heat pack for Plagg?"

"It got out of hand," Marinette admitted. She looked utterly stressed as she looked at the list of commissions on her computer screen. "I just... they're famous people, you know? Or on their way to getting famous. They're visible. And the styles are something I haven't had the chance to do at Madam Rosalie's place, really, and they have so many fun ideas... I just didn't want to turn anyone down and miss out on that exposure."

"And Plagg?"

Marinette finally smiled, just for a moment. It wasn't even a quarter as bright as her usual smiles. "I did his bag right before bed one night, when I was too tired to do a good enough job on the commissions. It was just a matter of sewing a few straight seams and pinning the fabric right so that the rice wouldn't get under the needle." A pause. "Also, his whining was annoying."

"Most of these people would have been willing to wait a bit for their commissions, I think," Adrien
said, trying not to laugh at that last comment. His eyes scanned down the list. It was very organized, he had to admit, with notes on sizes and measurements and themes and links to other sheets with more information. Thankfully there were quite a few that were close to being done, but they also had due dates that were coming up really soon. "How often are you getting contacted? With real requests, I mean. Not individual weirdos that have no idea what it would cost."

Marinette worried her lips as she thought about it. "Every couple weeks, maybe? It's just that there was a whole slew of them after Jagged Stone's album release that I had to put off working on until after Christmas, and there was that article about the outfits I designed for those other groups that got me more attention again, and I'm still working on finishing up everything for those ones. If I just had a break in the requests I would be able to catch up and then be working on commissions at a decent pace and be able to actually enjoy them again, but that's just not happening!"

"Bugnette." Adrien rested his hands on Marinette's shoulders and tugged her into a hug. Part of him wanted to get frustrated with her- she should have known better than to take on so much work- but getting frustrated wouldn't help anything. Or anyone. Besides, there were better ways of expressing the same sentiment without being an arse about it, and the last thing Marinette needed right now was any sort of fight. "Love, that's when you tell new people that you're busy. Or if someone you're working with is requesting more pieces, you tell them it's going to have to wait. You put them down on your lovely spreadsheet as on the waiting list, and then contact them once you've caught up and had a little break. You'll do your best work for them then."

Marinette was still not entirely convinced, Adrien could tell. She was scanning her spreadsheet with a worried look on her face.

"You're right," she admitted after several more seconds of silence. She let out a huffy breath. "I just- we always heard in school about how it's hard to break into the fashion industry and that even to get hired by a company can be hard because designers are a dime a dozen, it seems, and I didn't want my chance to slip past me."

Adrien could understand that fear, honestly. He had seen the pile of applications on his father's desk before- and those were the ones that had already made it past several rounds of eliminations. There were a lot of strong candidates, and even people who graduated in the top of their class in university weren't guaranteed to get a position.

Still, Adrien didn't think that Marinette had to worry about that- and no, he wasn't just being biased. Marinette was crazy talented, and she had an impressive resume to back her up, even as young as she was.

Stepping to the side and crouching so that he was looking Marinette in the eye, Adrien put his hands on her shoulders so he could get her full attention. "Bug. Listen to me. You've already broken into the fashion industry. You'll have three years of interning at Rosalie on your resume, plus all of the stuff for Jagged, plus all of this stuff that you have right now. If people are asking after you to the point that you're getting overworked, you are solid in the fashion industry."

He gave her shoulders a little shake for emphasis before sliding one hand up to cup her cheek. "But if you overwork yourself like this, you know the quality is going to suffer. It's better to put people on a wait list and work at your own speed than it is to churn out things that aren't original and aren't you and end up falling out of favor because of that. If people want a Marinette Original, they can wait. That's how the fashion industry works."

"I guess." Still, Marinette looked overwhelmed as she looked from Adrien to her spreadsheet. "And I can start putting people on a wait list now, but what about the commissions I already have lined up? I don't know any of the people on here well enough to ask if I could push their due dates back.
And it's just so much work, I don't know how I'll get them all done by the deadlines."

Adrien had to think about it for several moments. It didn't take long before a plan started forming in his head.

"How about this- instead of having to cut off by our normal time, I can finish with my homework then or during the day and then come over and help you however I can?" Adrien suggested. "You said you had rivets to put in on some things, right? If you just mark with, like, chalk where you want them pounded in, I could do that. And I can sort out finished pieces into which commissions they belong to, and get shipping labels printed, and stuff like that. I can't sew, obviously, but if you think of anything I can do to help..."

Marinette looked slightly distressed at that. "But Adrien! You have your own stuff to do, with your papers and your midterms and-"

"My papers are largely done, they just need some editing. I'm going to have Ben look at them tomorrow for grammar and spelling and word choice, so I won't have to do that, and then I'll have a few days to go back and make sure that I have everything just the way I want it." Adrien rubbed Marinette's back, working at the tense muscles in her shoulders. "And one of my tests was yesterday, and then I only have two more for midterms. Most of my classes don't really do midterms at this point. They have tests when they want to have tests. I can handle it."

"That would help," Marinette admitted. She sent a slightly rueful look at the pile of finished clothes on her couch. "There's stuff from four or five commissions there and I know they're there- I check off each outfit once I finish it- but I just don't have the time to sort it out."

"Do you have a sheet with descriptions of which outfits are meant to be in each order?"

Marinette pointed to a folder sitting on the low table next to the couch. "Yeah, in there. There should be copies of the designs attached to each one, too."

Adrien headed over to pick up the folder. It was thick, and when he opened it he found a packet for each of Marinette's commissions. There were a dozen of them, all with multiple pieces. That surprised Adrien a bit, considering that none of them had ever worked with Marinette before and she didn't exactly have a site or anything online with photos of her past work. A couple had cover art commissions as well, and from what he could tell, only one of them had that part of their order completely finished- though once again, there were a quite a few that were nearly done, only needing a round of requested revisions.

It was a lot.

Adrien sorted through the pile as the sewing machine whirred furiously in the background. Marinette was right when she had said that there was stuff from several different commissions all mixed together- only instead of four or five commissions, there were eight. Tikki found sticky notes for him to stick to each pile of outfits, and Adrien wrote down the customer's name, what pieces were in each order, and checked off each piece that he had found and put in the pile. What was still needed was written on a different colored sticky note and put on top of the pile.

Slowly but surely, the couch was becoming much more organized.

"This one says that it just needs one more piece before it's complete," Adrien reported after everything was sorted out into neat stacks, flipping through one packet of commission information to double-check. "It looks like a fairly basic tank top, except with some screen printing."
"Really?"

"It looks like it, yeah," Adrien handed over the packet. "I've found the two skirts and one completed top. It just needs this one shirt and then it'll be ready to go."

"I think I was waiting to do the screen printing all at once, since I have a bunch to do among all of my commissions and it's more efficient to do it all in one go," Marinette said, scanning the page. "But yeah, I should maybe do that this weekend and I can get a bunch of stuff checked off. Is it supposed to be sunny then?"

Adrien blinked, puzzled- what did the weather have to do with anything?- but checked his phone anyway. Maybe she just needed the sun for the shirts to dry or something. "Yeah, it'll be sunny, for once. At least that's what they think right now. Why?"

"I gotta set the screens in the sun," Marinette explained, which... yeah, honestly, that really didn't explain anything at all. Adrien was still very much confused. "I should have most of the materials for screen printing, but I just have to make the screens themselves. And- oh, if I'm gonna make all of the screens at once, I'll actually need to make more frames. Shoot, and I don't have the time to pick up more materials, and the copy shop is never open when I'm off and it's always packed during lunch and-"

"If you tell me what you need, I can pick up the stuff for the frames and the other materials, and whatever you need from the copy shop, I can run all of those errands," Adrien told her immediately, before she could get too far into one of her panic spirals. "I can go whenever, I just need a list and where to buy stuff. And for the screen printing- do you sew your own shirts for that?"

Marinette shook her head, looking marginally less frantic. "No, I just ordered some pre-sewn ones that I'll print on. Even if it only takes an hour to sew a shirt like that, I have so many orders for them that it would just take forever." Marinette pointed at an unopened box wedged in the corner of the room with a pile of papers sitting on top. A closer look told Adrien that it was the name of each commission, the color and size of the base shirt, and what design was meant to be printed on it. Once again, Marinette had absolutely impeccable organization. "I should check and make sure they're all there, probably, and get them sorted out with their commission sheets, but I don't have the time."

"I can check on that, too," Adrien piped up. He slipped up behind her and hugged her, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Are you feeling better about everything now?"

"Better," Marinette agreed. She twisted around to kiss him. "Not perfect, because there's still a lot to do and I feel really stupid for letting it get to this point... but I think I might focus on the little stuff this week, all of the easy commissions and finishing up the orders that just have one piece left and finishing the pieces I have mostly completed and then doing album cover revisions. Once I have all of that done, then I think I'll have a better view of what I really have left to do." She glanced over at her laptop and the spreadsheet on it and let out a sigh. "I might end up having to email some of my customers and asking to push back the completion date a little bit. I've been scrambling so much lately that I just keep hopping from one piece to another because I see the due date and just freak out, and start working on one of their pieces, then see the due date for another and switch again."

"That sounds like a plan," Adrien agreed. He straightened up and glanced around the room. There were four in-progress pieces on the mannequins, and what looked like a couple others sitting around on the floor and on Marinette's kitchen counter. Just by standing here he was starting to feel overwhelmed. "Then you can finish orders and get those pieces cleared out of here so you aren't
being buried under an avalanche of clothes. It won't feel quite so overwhelming then."

Marinette nodded in agreement, biting her lip as she glanced back at her computer. "Yeah. And I suppose I can bring my tablet along to Fashion Week and work on the cover art stuff between runways, too. I've got some requested changes to finish up and then a couple complete ones to design. Or maybe it's just one complete one left to design, I don't remember." She reached over, scrolling through her list of commissions. Red, yellow and green boxes told her what was finished, what was in-progress, and what was still woefully untouched. There were way too many yellow and red-coded boxes for Adrien's liking, and he was sure that she felt the same. "I still have to go in every day and go to other presentations and runways for inspiration, but there's enough downtime between stuff that I can probably get some work done. And I could bring my sketchbook and work on some of the preliminary sketches that I still have to do once the covers are finished up. And then I could take a day or two off to catch up, too, maybe, after Fashion Week is over. Or maybe not. It depends on what we have to do at work."

Adrien nodded. He couldn't say that he entirely liked the plan- Marinette was going to be working herself to the bone with barely a moment to catch her breath, and that wasn't healthy- but if she overworked herself now, then hopefully she would get enough done that she wouldn't be keeping herself awake stressing over the unfinished commissions with their ever-looming due dates. And with his tests and paper due dates more spread out this semester than ever before and Ben's help in keeping him on top of his coursework, he should be able to help Marinette without falling behind in his own studies.

Besides, even if he hadn't admitted it to himself fully, Adrien was far ahead of schedule on the essays. His early push meant that his 'rough drafts' were more like fully completed papers at this point, and he probably wasn't going to need to do much editing between when he got the graded draft back and when the final copy was due.

Hopefully, at least. Barring some complete disaster.

"Are you almost done with that piece?" Adrien asked as Marinette turned back to the jacket she was working on. "Because I can understand wanting to finish it, but it's late and you have to get up early for Fashion Week. And you actually have to be awake for that."

"I want to get one more seam done, and then it'll be at a good stopping point," Marinette decided after a pause. "And then I'll be over- unless you want me to sleep over here so I don't wake you up when I get up?"

Adrien shook his head. If Marinette slept over in her apartment, then there would be no way of knowing if she had actually slept. He would rather deal with being woken up briefly when Marinette's alarm went off early in the morning than have her make the last-minute decision to stay up even later to finish a piece and not know. "I'd rather sleep next to you like normal. How long do you think you'll be?"

"Five minutes, tops."

"Sounds good." As he turned to leave, Adrien paused. "Oh, and one thing... Marinette?"

Marinette looked over at him, eyes wide. "Yeah?"

"Everything will work out, I promise. We're Ladybug and Chat Noir, after all." He grinned at her, and was pleased to see her smile back. It was a little muted, but it was a start. "Together, we can do anything."
For the first time in nearly two weeks, Marinette found that she could actually focus entirely on what she was doing at work. She didn't find her mind floating back to the piles of unfinished commissions sitting in her apartment, or fretting over everything she had to do.

Even if she hadn't made nearly as much progress as she wanted to over the weekend- well, she had had ridiculous expectations in the first place. She had done a good bit of work, and now that Adrien had caught on to her problem, he was solidly on her side. He had managed to get the messy pile of commissions sorted out and organized so that she had a better idea of what she had left to do, and together they had come up with a plan for her going forward.

Well, maybe she had come up with most of the plan, but Adrien's presence and willingness to help had settled the jittery nerves in her stomach and cleared her mind so that she could actually focus. The mountain of commissions to finish didn't seem so insurmountable now that she had Chat Noir at her side and a plan in her mind.

And that focus was needed as Marinette helped models change clothes quickly and got them back out onto the runway. The work was fast-paced and needed all of her attention to make sure the right collars were popped and everything was tucked in in the right places and no wrinkles were visible. Once the last model went through and headed out to the runway, a sigh ran through the changing area and there was a distinct drop in tension. Seconds later, though, everyone pulled themselves back together to start steering models back to their area so they could get changed back into their street clothes and all of the outfits could be packed up and sent back to the office.

Once the last of the things from Madam Rosalie's show were packed up, Marinette snagged her bag and followed her coworkers out of backstage and towards the first of the shows that she had wanted to see. As she walked, she pulled out the wrap that Adrien had made for her- *best boyfriend ever, honestly*- and dug in hungrily.

"Oh, I'm jealous," Sarah said, eying the wrap. "I have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and that's it. I can't cook all that well."

"When did you find the time to put that together, even?" Emily wanted to know, partway through her own turkey sandwich. "I thought you said that you were super-busy with commissions to do, too."

Marinette swallowed her bite and then grinned. "Yeah, I've been swamped," she agreed. "So Adrien has been doing most of the cooking, and he made this for me. He's an absolute godsend."

"D'you think I could bribe him to pack a lunch for me for the rest of the week?" Sarah joked. "I kid, I kid," she added before Marinette had time to think about it. "I should have time to make a proper meal to pack tonight. But that really *does* look good."

They worked their way through the crowd and into the largest of the runway areas. Once they got into their seats, Marinette wasted no time in polishing off her wrap and pulling out her commissions sketchbook. She wanted to get at least three of her designs cleaned up today, preferably more. Then she could submit all of her sketches to that particular client for approval, and then they would get back to her in probably two to three days, and then she would have to carve out the time to go to the fabric shop and get the materials that she needed, and then-
Her thoughts had started to race again as she tried to feel out a timeline for the commission. Only a sharp jabbing at her side pulled Marinette out of her thoughts, and she looked down to see one of Tikki's eyes peering out of her bag, clearly frowning at her. Marinette let out a breath and tried to calm her racing thoughts.

She was going to try to clean up several sketches today and get them ready to submit for approval. Once she got home, she was going to send the sketches off for approval and finish up the jacket she had been working on and then turn her attention to the mostly-finished pieces. Only once she had her mannequins cleared would she start anything new. If Adrien had any time free, she would have him start to put together the frames for the screen printing.

All she had to do was keep a level head and not start panicking.

As the day wore on, the side of Marinette's hand slowly darkened with smudged graphite. She cleaned up rough sketches while waiting for shows to start, scribbled out ideas to use at Madam Rosalie's during runways, and even got a few new commissions sketches very roughly sketched out. Her hand was starting to ache from being clenched around her pencil for so long by the time she left the Fashion Week grounds and headed home.

"You look productive," Adrien said with a laugh after they pulled apart from their welcome-home kiss and he spotted her grey-smudged hand. "How's your hand doing?"

Marinette wriggled her fingers, trying to loosen them up. "It hurts, but I should still be able to sew with no problem. I might use my quilting gloves, though, just so my hands don't cramp up."

She didn't miss Adrien's concerned glance at her hands, nor the way he immediately reached out to gently massage them. She stepped closer, letting him continue to work at her hands until they were back to feeling relatively normal.

How Marinette had somehow gotten the Absolute Best Boyfriend In The World she didn't know, but she wasn't complaining.

"Let's have dinner first before you do any sewing again," Adrien suggested, steering Marinette towards the table. "I made soup and sandwiches. How was your day?"

Dinner went by all too fast, and then Adrien took care of the dishes while Marinette headed over to her apartment to get pictures of all of her cleaned-up sketches taken and sent before she sat down to finish up the jacket. It would need some snaps and other bling on it later, but she was practically finished with the sewing.

"Is that pile done and ready to sort?"

Marinette glanced up from where she was sewing the pockets in the jacket. Adrien was pointing to a more-or-less neatly stacked pile of jackets and pants and tops on the kitchen counter. She had to think for a moment- why were those pieces over there?- before it clicked.

"Those all need hardware," Marinette explained. "Studs and rivets and snaps and eyelets. It's easiest to do them all at once, I've found, instead of getting all of my tools out and doing one piece at a time." She had marked them all with a marker (dark for the few light pieces, white for the dark ones) with where the studs were meant to go, so she wouldn't have to refer back to the drawings for each one. Like with the screen printing shirts, each one had the commission name on it and the kind of studs (number and size) written on a slip of paper and pinned to the piece.

Technically, it had been Tikki that had been the one to come up with the idea of labeling the pieces
like that and it had also been Tikki who wrote up each slip of paper so Marinette didn't have to take the time to do it herself, but Marinette couldn't deny that it was a fantastic idea.

"Aha." Adrien regarded the pile as Marinette turned back to her jacket. "So is that stuff I could potentially do?"

Marinette bit her lip and thought about it. Part of her wanted to say no, because she would have to take the time to teach Adrien how to put things in correctly so that they wouldn't mess up the pieces, but the more reasonable side said yes, please. Adrien was smart and could pick things up quickly, and once he learned how to do the hardware, that would probably be several hours of work off of her shoulders in return for what in all honesty would probably just be a ten-minute demo.

"I'll teach you tomorrow how to do some of the studs," Marinette promised. Those had the fewest tools involved and were the easiest of the hardware pieces to put in. "But for tonight... do you think you could put together some screen printing frames? The wood and the tools are in the hall closet, and there should be an instruction packet there, too."

Adrien nodded and bounded towards the closet. Minutes later, the first frame was halfway assembled on the kitchen floor. Half an hour after that, and several completed frames were lined up next to the fridge as Adrien worked on making several smaller and one larger frame from the remaining wood. Marinette had finished what she could on the jacket and added it to the pile in the kitchen before starting work on a pair of pants.

"Okay, I think it's bedtime," Adrien announced two hours later. Marinette looked over to see him stretching, his t-shirt rising up to expose a thin line of stomach. "Unless you had something else you wanted to get done tonight?"

Marinette blinked and glanced over at the time on her phone. It was definitely later than she had thought. Clearly she had kind of zoned out while sewing. "Oh! Yeah, that's probably a good idea. But, uh..."

She wanted to keep going, in all honesty. She could feel like she was making progress, and she couldn't do that if she went to bed. But Tikki was staring at her from across the room, clearly disapproving of Marinette's desire to just ignore reasonable bedtimes in favor of working.

(Plagg was also there, only he was napping, happily curled up on the heat pad Marinette had made for him. She never got disapproving looks from him.)

"I just wish I had made more visible progress," Marinette admitted. "These pants are almost done, since I had them already started before, and I got the jacket ready for studding but it was already mostly there. And I still have so much to do."

"One day at a time, Bug," Adrien reminded her. He waited until she switched off her sewing machine and then pulled her up off of her chair. "And if you want, I can pick up whatever other materials you need for the screen printing stuff tomorrow. That'll be another thing checked off your list."

Marinette lit up at the reminder. "Yeah! I just need- wait a moment, I need to check something." She hurried to her computer and pulled up the spreadsheet that she had made for all of her screen-printed shirt orders. "I should need six more of the average-sized frames, and the inks, and-" She scrambled for a blank piece of paper and started scribbling down a list, trying to remember what she had and hadn't already bought. Since she had gotten the materials for the first set of commissions, it was just a matter of remembering which ones she hadn't bought stuff for.
Well. It was probably better to overestimate rather than underestimate. Presumably she would get enough orders going forward that she would use everything up long before she had to go back to Paris and if not... well, she had coworkers who could probably use the supplies.

"I think that's all the information you'll need for the fabric ink," Marinette said after several minutes of scribbling. "Any questions, just text me. And I think I should have enough fabric to put on all of the frames, even with six more. And I'll need the pattern transparencies to do the printing at all." She let out a small huff as she eyed the boxes of shirts to be inked. Adrien had sorted them out and thankfully they were all present and in both the correct colors and sizes (though there had been a few terrifying minutes when they thought that she was over a dozen shirts short, before she realized that there was a second box of shirts stashed in the hall closet), but it was yet another pile reminding her of how incredibly far behind she had gotten. When Marinette had initially set the due dates up she had thought that she was being ridiculously generous with the timeline and that the far-out due dates would give her plenty of wriggle room, but now those deadlines were almost here and all she had to show for her work were a million half-finished projects around the room.

"Do you have a flash drive or something with all of the transparency files on it?" Adrien asked, pulling her attention back from her mental berating. "I can run that errand tomorrow, too. I only have two classes to go to and an hour and a half meeting with Ben, so I'll have plenty of time."

Adrien was definitely the Best Boyfriend Ever.

The week continued in a blur of work. Tuesday evening, Adrien finished building the frames and then he and Marinette worked together to get the fabric properly stretched and attached. He had gotten everything that Marinette had asked for during the day, which meant that the screen printing stuff would be all ready to go later in the week. In the evening, Adrien cut lengths of chain for accents on some of the pieces and pressed in studs on a couple of the pieces sitting in the kitchen, which meant that Marinette could sew the liners in and count those pieces as done.

(The best part? Since she had already sewn the liners, putting them in didn't take long at all and Marinette got to feel super-productive as she finished off three jackets in one night. And, making the day even better, they got the news that Alya had gotten past the second round of cuts and her entry had gone on to the proper judges to see.)

During the day, Marinette worked on finishing up requested revisions on album covers in between runway shows, sending them off as she finished and waiting for a confirmation email in return that would allow her to either check the piece off for good or send her back to do a couple more tweaks. Even with all of the stress that she had been under when designing the pieces, Marinette had to admit that she was proud of them. The artwork had turned out wonderfully, and she had managed to push herself with some of the design elements, too. They showed a range of techniques and varied from minimalistic to intricately detailed.

Thursday evening found Marinette still furiously sewing and Adrien pressing in yet more studs in a very decorated jacket. He spent the entire evening working on the piece and Marinette noticed him making a face and shaking out his fingers every so often, especially as it got later.

She felt bad about asking him for his help, she really did- so many studs in a short period of time really made the fingers sore—but he had saved her a solid twenty hours of work so far (two jackets OR two tops OR eight to ten pairs of pants and skirts- her mind started, and Marinette shushed it), and he could ask her for something else to do if he so desired, or even go back to doing his own work.

Speaking of which...
"Are you sure you don't have studying to be doing?" Marinette asked, letting her sewing machine slow to a stop before swinging around to look at Adrien. She wouldn't put it past him to focus too much on her stuff just to be kind, even if he had work of his own. "You've been spending all of your evenings over here. I thought you had papers to write."

"Wrote 'em during the day," Adrien said cheerfully. "And did my studying during the day, too."

"And that's enough?"

"For right now, yes. I don't think I could do it forever, though." He worried his lip, just a bit. She didn't miss it, even though he was clearly trying to hide it so he wouldn't worry her. "And I'll have to take at least one evening to study next week, since I'll have an exam and two papers to finish. And then I have two exams the week before break, and one after."

Marinette nodded. She would probably be done with everything that Adrien could help with by that point anyway. "Take off whatever time you need, really. You've been a huge help." She gestured at the neat piles of clothes stacked and labeled on the couch and at the printing screens, piled neatly on the kitchen counter. "I couldn't have gotten this far without you. I would still be scrambling and panicking myself into a knot." She smiled up at him as he came over to wrap her up in a hug. "I've been able to focus so much better since we came up with the plan to get everything finished."

Adrien just grinned and buried his face in her neck.

"I've managed to get all of my designs finalized and approved," Marinette continued. "And I got revisions done for several album covers and those have been submitted, so I'm waiting to hear back from the last of those. And the one cover that I hadn't gotten a first draft of yet- it's maybe a third of the way done. I'll have to work on that and get it done- well, not this weekend, since I have to finish up a bunch of orders first, but next week at least, so I can get it submitted for critique."

Marinette also sincerely hoped that none of the other people who had had her do revisions needed any more changes. Being able to check all of them off would be a huge relief.

"So how are the studs different than the other hardware you mentioned?" Adrien asked after another minute. He released her from the hug and straightened back up, stretching and twisting to get the aches out of his back. "You said they were easier?"

"Yeah, the others need more than just the one poking tool," Marinette explained. "And they have two pieces that lock together from opposite sides of the fabric. It usually takes a couple tries to get it right." It wasn't that the studs were hard, exactly, just different. There were more steps and more tools, but not that many more. She was sure that Adrien wouldn't have any problems.

"I'm sure I'll pick it up," Adrien assured her. "I might be slower than you at it, but..."

Marinette pulled him back down for a kiss. "That's fine. As long as it gets done, the time doesn't matter. I wouldn't be able to do this without you."

She wasn't even exaggerating. Adrien had been focused on whatever task she gave to him to do, working hard to finish the job. Between the errands he had run, the organizing he had done, his work on the frames, and all of the hardware...

Yeah, it was a lot. It added up quickly.

"Well, then I should get back to work," Adrien told her. "I'm almost done with the jacket, and then it'll be ready for you again."
"No rush," Marinette assured him. She turned back to her machine and started sewing again. The machine hummed, needle a silver blur as it worked its way up the seam, one stitch at a time. "I certainly have enough to do in the meantime."

Chapter End Notes

I didn't mean to be two days late. In my defense, the internet in the place I'm living in has been going in and out (and it was out for four hours this afternoon) and when I arrived at my job, the whole "getting settled" thing took longer than expected. Also, the 12:30 ferry that I was supposed to take from WI to MI was cancelled to to wind/waves and I had to get up at 4 to catch the 6:00AM ferry and it was still really choppy then).

Will try to get back on schedule, but honestly it all depends on the internet and if we can actually keep it fixed or not.
"Oh, this stuff smells," Adrien grumbled Friday evening as he and Marinette worked side-by-side in her bathroom. The space was only lit by the dim red light from a few flashlights, and even those weren't pointed towards their work. Apparently too much light could make the mixture Marinette was making set before it was supposed to, so they had to work in near-darkness to get the screen printing screens ready to go.

"I would turn on the bathroom fan, but I don't think there's any way to do that without turning the light on, too," Marinette said. She accidentally elbowed Adrien as she reached for the next screen to coat. "So, uh- hopefully this isn't too poisonous?"

"Oh, that's comforting." Adrien spread the mixture across his own screen, doing his best to get it spread out evenly across the entirety of the fabric. Marinette had demonstrated how to do it earlier, but it was a little hard to see what she was doing clearly when it was so dim. "And so how are all of these supposed to dry in here? There's not enough space."

"Um." Marinette didn't sound too confident. "Well, normally whenever I do this, I just store the screens wherever I make them, but there's too many this time. I set up a drying area in my bedroom and taped a double layer of black garbage bags over the window so light couldn't get in, but I don't know how we're going to get stuff from here to there. It's not like either of us can see in the dark, and we can't turn on the lights even for a moment."

Adrien sat straight up at that as an idea clicked in his mind. "Wait, repeat that again."

"We can't turn the lights on even for a moment?"

He shook his head, then realized that she couldn't see him. "No, before that."

"Neither of us can see in the dark- oh!" Marinette exclaimed, catching on in an instant. "If you transform, you'll be able to see! But don't do it in here," she added quickly. "I don't know what kind of effect that kind of light would have on the mixture."

"Oh, don't worry," Adrien said. He finished his work on his screen, then felt his way up so he could stand. "I have no idea where Plagg is. I gotta find him first, and then I'll transform in the living room. I'll close the bathroom door on my way out."

"Don't turn on any lights!" Marinette called after him. Adrien laughed.

"No need to shout, bug. I haven't gotten that far," Adrien teased. He whacked his knee against the toilet and swallowed a swear, instead edging forward more carefully. "Oh, boy. This is gonna be difficult."

"I'll go get Plagg!" Tikki suddenly piped up from somewhere to Adrien's left. "He'll meet you in
the living room."

It took Adrien nearly five minutes to work his way out of the bathroom, close the door so none of the light from his transformation could get in, and edge down the hallway to the living room. Once there, he didn't dare go too far in. The risk of disturbing any of the piles of clothes was just too great.

"Plagg, stop sniggering over there and just transform me," Adrien ordered. He held out his hand in wait, and sure enough, there was a squeal as Plagg was yanked towards his Miraculous. A flash of light lit up the room, and suddenly Adrien could see again.

Sure, maybe everything was tinged green from his night vision, but what did that matter?

Chat Noir headed back towards the bathroom with a spring in his step. It was much easier now, and soon he was stepping back into the dark bathroom. It was nearly bright as day with his cat vision, and Chat Noir had no trouble with maneuvering his way among all of the screens littering the floor.

"Better?" Marinette asked. She turned and squinted up at him. "Can you move the finished screens to the bedroom and set them up like I told you earlier? And once that's done, we can go to bed."

"On it!"

Saturday dawned far earlier than Adrien would have liked, especially with how late they had worked the previous night, but he wanted to help Marinette finish the work on her printing screens. While she could probably manage by herself, every minute counted and his help would probably shave at least half an hour off the entire process of setting and washing the screens.

So he rolled out of bed, made pancakes while Marinette showered, got dressed in his most grungy clothes (after all, Marinette had said that this part of the process could get messy; she had said the same thing about the their previous night's work and she had definitely been right, so he was going to listen to her advice), ate, and followed Marinette over to her very chemical-scented apartment.

"I'm opening all of the windows first," Marinette announced, dashing across the room. "Shoot, I should have done this last night, but I thought it would get too chilly in here. Aaaand I don't know why I cared, because I wasn't even going to be over here."

What followed was a series of mad dashes to and from the darkened bedroom, bringing the dried screens out and keeping them hidden from the light until the pattern laminates were in place and could be put in the sun. The exposure for setting for each screen didn't take long at all, and then Adrien was running the screens back inside. It really didn't take long to do each individual screen, but there were a lot of them. Some of Marinette's designs required multiple screens because there was more than one color on one shirt.

"Washing time!" Marinette announced as soon as the last of the screens were set from the sun. "C'mon, I'm gonna wash them in the shower. You can hand the screens to me."

Grinning, Adrien let out a low whistle. "Whew! You're inviting me to shower with you? Spicy!"

Marinette groaned and swatted him, but she couldn't hide the small smile of amusement that flitted across her face.
The next part was by far the messiest as water sprayed all over the bathroom while Marinette tried to wrangle the shower head to point where she wanted it. It could be taken down to be used as a handheld shower head, but she just didn't have enough hands to hold on to it, the frame, and the sponge all at once.

"How did you do this before?" Adrien asked with a laugh as he slid past Marinette to take the shower head from her. "It looks like you need three hands at the very least."

"I think I propped the frames up on something," Marinette admitted. She ran the sponge over the screen, and Adrien was almost surprised to see the design emerge as certain sections of the chemical wash rinsed out. She compared the design with the laminate, nodded, and then set the screen aside to grab the next one.

And the next one, and the next one, and the next one.

"And here I thought you said that the screen-printed shirts were fast and easy," Adrien joked halfway through the process. He was absolutely drenched, thanks to the few times when Marinette had accidentally held the screen too close to the sprayer and all of the water came right back at him. She had apologized, of course, but Adrien had jokingly sprayed her back and they had decided to call it even.

"They are!" Marinette protested. "Once the screens are done, they're really fast."

Adrien tried not to laugh. "Yeah, so, funny thing... we have to make screens for what? Each shirt? Several per shirt? That seems like a really important time component."

"If they order more of the same pattern, then I can reuse the screen," Marinette told him. She switched out the screen she was working on for the next one. "And there are several shirts in the same order with all the same pattern."

"Do you think people would order more of the same pattern?" He would have thought that they might want a couple shirts with the same pattern for different band members, but if that was the case then they would surely order all of those shirts at once, right? "Like, how likely is that?"

Marinette shrugged, then cringed as another spray of water reflected up into her face. "It depends on how big the band is. If they have a good following, then they might want more shirts to sell to their followers."

...oh, that sounded like that could be a big commission. Adrien's Marinette-is-overworking-herself alarm went off again. "That sounds like...a lot of work."

"It wouldn't be!" Marinette assured him hastily. "It would be one or two designs, probably, just repeated a bunch of times. It would be a one-time thing making the screen. And I would order pre-made shirts for those, too. It would just be the applying the ink and setting it that I would have to do. And I would set aside a large chunk of time to do it, too. And if they're a really big band, they would probably just buy the pattern to have a commercial manufacturer do the printing to sell."

Adrien nodded warily. In his mind, the jury was still out on how long that would take. His definition of fast and Marinette's definition of fast seemed to differ sometimes.

Both of them were fully soaked by the time the last screen was cleaned and ready to dry, mostly because they had devolved into water fight mode at the end. Adrien swore that he was just trying to help clean Marinette up- after all, she had lots of little flecks of the chemical emulsion mix on here from the sections that had washed out all over here, and surely she wanted those washed off, right?
And what was the point in waiting for things to wash off in the washing machine when he had a shower head in his hand? - but Marinette had squealed and splashed him back. The screens had been forgotten for a few minutes as they focused on getting the other as wet as possible. Only Tikki flying in and demanding to know what on Earth they were doing made the two of them get back on track.

"I'm going to have to put some towels down to get the water up," Marinette said ruefully as she looked at all of the puddles on the bathroom floor. "Any chance I can borrow your towels, too? I promise I'll wash them."

"I can wash them, too," Adrien pointed out a bit breathlessly, shoving his sodden bangs out of his face. "The puddles are partly my fault, too. But yeah, I'll get all of the towels over in my apartment." He looked down at his dripping clothes. "And some dry clothes, too."

"Yeah, I should change, too." Marinette tugged her shirt off, wringing it out. An impish look flickered across her face, and she snapped the shirt at him, sending a splattering of water his way.

"Very funny," Adrien said immediately, moving to shed his shirt as well. Maybe he could wring it out over her head. "But don't you know cats don't like-"

"I thought you were trying to be productive today!" Tikki scolded them, zipping back through the bathroom door. "And the puddle in here is starting to seep into the hallway carpet. Are you going to do something about that?"

Yelping, Marinette scrambled to get out of the tub. She grabbed the sole towel left in her bathroom and laid it out next to the door. It immediately turned dark with water. Adrien followed at a slower pace, pulling his shirt off and wringing it out in the tub before trying to wrestle it back on. It stuck to his skin oddly, but it would work for now.

(And by for now, he meant "for thirty seconds until he could get back to his place and change").

Adrien headed back to his apartment, wincing as he dripped on the carpet. He grabbed dry clothes and all of the towels in his bathroom, even down to the hand towels and washcloths (there had been a lot of water on that floor) before trotting right back to Marinette's apartment. Much to both his and Marinette's horror, the carpet outside of the bathroom was slowly getting more and more wet. They threw down all of the towels to try to get the water soaked up, but there was no way to fully dry the part of the carpet that was already sodden.

"I want to get the frames back outside to dry and to make sure they're fully set before I use them," Marinette told Adrien while they changed into dry clothes and dropped their sodden things into the bathtub. "Do you think I could use your balcony for that? It gets more sun in the afternoon."

"Of course. And, uh... remind me again why it is that the sun is so important?"

"It sets the emulsion mixture," Marinette told him. "The UV light does, at least. That's why I used the transparencies to get the pattern on. The dark parts of the pattern block the light, and then the mixture behind those parts doesn't set and washes out, and then later the ink goes through those washed-out parts. Setting the screens out for the rest of the day means that I'll be sure that it'll hold up."

...that sounded like something he would be interested in, actually. Chemical reactions could be cool.

"Do you think you'd be willing to do the rest of the hardware today?" Marinette asked, then
corrected herself. "Except for the snaps. Those are hard to get in exactly the right place, and I'll do them. But if we get those done, then I'll have my kitchen counter back."

Adrien grinned. "Sure. I like being Master of Bling."

Adrien didn't miss Marinette's slightly worried glance at the clock as they hauled the frames and all of the pieces he had to decorate over to his apartment. It was fast nearing midday, and she still had a lot of sewing to do.

Like, a lot of sewing. He was pretty certain that she had wanted to finish assembling all of the pieces that she had already pre-cut, and that was on top of the screen printing that she wanted to do on Sunday. It was a ridiculous amount of work to do, really, but she had deadlines to make. As long as she got enough sleep and actually ate, he would be happy.

"Why don't you eat, and I can get the frames out to dry?" Adrien suggested. "I have wraps in the fridge. They're the same kind that I made for you during Fashion Week."

Marinette laughed, even as she made a beeline for his fridge. "What, did you just make a giant batch of them?"

"Yup!"

Now that the screens weren't in such a delicate stage, Adrien could carry several at a time out to the balcony to set up. He noticed during one of his trips in that Marinette had vanished- his guess was that she had scarfed the wrap and had headed straight back to her apartment to sew- but that was fine. The sooner she got to work, the sooner she would get done.

"Hey, Adrien!"

Adrien paused in setting out the last of the screens and glanced around, trying to locate the source of the call. His eye caught on a movement and he glanced up to see Marinette's coworker Sarah waving to him from her balcony, one floor up. He waved back.

"Has Marinette roped you into helping with commissions?" Sarah called with a grin. "I know she said that she had a lot to get through."

"Actually, I volunteered," Adrien called back. "She has a huge backlog of commissions to get through right now before she can get it down to a reasonable amount."

Sarah frowned. "How much does she have to do? It was just Fashion Week! She should have restricted what she was accepting more!"

Adrien cringed. Apparently Marinette hadn't shared the full extent of her overworking herself with her teammates, which… was understandable, really. Some of Marinette's co-workers might then think that Marinette wasn't applying herself fully to her main job. Still, he trusted Sarah. "Yeah, about that... she didn't want to turn anyone down or wait list them, so she was accepting everything. And she's going to wait list any more requests until she's caught up and has a bit of a break, but right now she's buried. So I'm helping her get through some stuff so she can have a better idea of what she has left."

Sarah winced at that. "Oh, I can understand why she might do that, since she's so young yet," she said sympathetically. "I've never gotten a high enough volume of commissions for it to really be a problem, but Marinette seems to be a band favorite right now. Does she need any help sewing? I already ate lunch, so I could bring my machine down and do a bit of sewing today in exchange for dinner."
"Oh, that would be great!" Adrien could make dinner no problem- he was running out of things he could actually do to speed Marinette along anyway- and Sarah and her sewing machine could really help Marinette put a dent in her pile of work to do. Adrien could take care of the hardware while the two women sewed. "She's got a ton of stuff cut and ready to sew."

"I'll be right down, then!" Sarah called. She grinned and vanished inside. Adrien quickly made sure that the last screen was laid out flat and headed in as well so he could tell Marinette that she would soon be having yet more backup.

"Won't you have enough to do without making dinner?" Plagg wanted to know when Adrien came back in. "You have, like, a million rivets and eyelets and other shiny metal things to put on the outfits."

"I'll have to make dinner anyway for Marinette and I. It won't be that hard to make an extra serving." Adrien stepped around the outfits set out on the floor, all marked with where the hardware was meant to go. "And it won't take all day to do the hardware. It only takes a couple seconds for each rivet, really."

Adrien stepped out of his apartment, leaving Plagg behind. He paused at Marinette's door- hopefully Marinette was actually at a point where she could use the sewing help, and hopefully she would be open to the help, because he knew that she could be annoyingly stubborn about things at times- and then he shook the thought off. He knew that she had a lot of things cut out but not sewn together, and she was floundering so much right now with the number of commissions that Marinette would surely be thankful for the help. Besides, it wasn't as though Adrien had commissioned a stranger to come in and sew. Sarah was Marinette's friend, and just like Adrien himself, she wanted to help Marinette.

"Hey, Buginette," Adrien announced, stepping into Marinette's apartment and looking over at where she was (very predictably) parked in front of her sewing machine. "I found more backup."

Marinette paused the sewing machine and turned to look at him. "What?"

"Sarah volunteered to come down and help you sew in return for dinner," Adrien told her, grinning when he saw Marinette's eyes go wide and a relieved look start to spread over her face. "And I was going to have to make dinner for us anyway, so it won't be hard to make an extra serving. Do you want me to help you clear off the kitchen table so she can sit there?"

"Oh, that would be great."

It wasn't long before Sarah was knocking on the door. Adrien let her in and pointed her towards the table, grinning at her exclamation when she caught sight of the piles of clothes organized around the room, then left the two designers to work. Tikki flittered after him as he headed back to his apartment to start work on the hardware.

"Marinette is lucky to have such great friends," Tikki commented. She looked happy. "They'll probably get through a lot of the stuff that Marinette has cut today! I bet that they'll manage to finish up at least one order today, if not two, and then with the screen printing tomorrow...that'll finish up several commissions!"

"That's going to be nice," Adrien agreed. "And I picked up boxes yesterday, so we can package things up right away and get them sent off. I might even start packing things up this afternoon if they're almost complete, just so it isn't so crazy over there." He grinned remembering the look on Sarah's face when she first spotted the insanity that was Marinette's apartment. Adrien had to wonder how horrified Sarah would have been if she had seen the mess before Adrien got
everything organized.

Before Adrien got started with the hardware, he got out cheese for Plagg and cookies for Tikki. The two kwamis settled down (Plagg on the balcony to nap in the sun and Tikki on the table to watch Adrien work) and Adrien started in on the first piece, one with only a few rivets for emphasis in a few select places. Marinette had taught him earlier in the week how to put the studs in using a scrap piece of fabric, so that Adrien wouldn't mess up any of her nearly-completed pieces.

That would be a disaster.

"So are these pieces done once the rivets are in, do you know?" Adrien asked Tikki as he carefully punched the first hole and then set aside the hammer to thread the rivet through. "Or is there still work left to do on them?"

Tikki frowned as she thought about it. "I think there's still stuff left to do on some of them, at least. Ones with lots of studs or rivets get a lining put on after, like with the other ones you worked on before. But I think she has most of the liners done, they just have to be attached."

"I'll bring pieces over once I finished a couple, then," Adrien decided. He tapped the thin tool-what it was called he really didn't remember, even though Marinette had definitely told him several times- twice with the hammer, firm but not so hard that he might smash his fingers, then set the tools aside to check his work. The rivet was firmly in, so he moved to the next one, and the next one, and the next one.

"Can you put some music on, Tikki?" Adrien asked as he put the last rivet in the first jacket and checked to make sure he had gotten everything for the piece.

"On it!"

Adrien worked his way around the room to the beat of Jagged Stone's newest album. He did the pieces with the fewest studs and rivets and eyelets first, then brought the pile over to Marinette for her to inspect and sort into piles of finished and needs a lining before he went back to work on the hardware-heavy pieces.

Those really did take a long time. It sped up a little when Adrien punched a whole slew of holes first and then did a bunch of rivets one after another instead of doing one at a time, but it was still late in the afternoon by the time Adrien finished up the last piece and brought it to Marinette for a liner.

"Time to start working on dinner," Adrien announced to the kwamis as soon as he had dropped the last piece off and was back in his apartment, stretching and twisting to try to work out the stiffness that had settled in his back. He would have to use his rice bag heat pack later to try to fix that. "And then while stuff cooks, I can work on my homework a little. Ben said that he thought my essays are all ready to go, but I want to quick double-check on a couple things before I turn it in, and I have some other stuff to work on."

Tikki frowned. "Are you neglecting your own studies to help Marinette?"

"I've got everything under control!" Adrien hastily assured her. "I can spare the time. I just can't completely stop studying. And if I'm really running short on time, I can probably do without the essay read-throughs, since they're technically only rough drafts." He let out a frustrated huff. "It's too bad this didn't happen during the summer. I would have had entire weekends and my evenings free to help and I could have taken time off to do the print shop errand... but then again, I think I've done most of the stuff I can help with, at least for now." After all, he couldn't help at all with the
sewing, or the designing, or the pattern-making or anything. The best he could do was keep on top of his own work so that when Marinette could use his help, he could spare the time.

Adrien moved through the kitchen, cutting potatoes and chicken and heating the oven. It really didn't take long at all, and then he was tossing everything in oil and spices and arranging it in the dish so things would all cook through before sliding the dish into the oven and setting the timer. He rinsed off his hands—handling potatoes always made his hands feel gross and starchy— and then headed out to the balcony to bring in all of the screens that were still sitting outside. They were all dried and very much set, which was perfect. It looked like everything had come out nice and clean, which meant that Marinette wouldn't have to redo anything.

Which was fantastic, of course. She really couldn't spare the time right now to redo any of the screens.

With the screens safely stored away, Adrien settled in at the table to study. He only had two exams before spring break started and they were in classes that he was doing well in (thank you, Ben) so he wasn't scrambling or anything, but that didn't mean that he could slack off before the tests. He was partway through his flash cards when a beep reminded him that he had to grate some cheese to go on top before the dish came out of the oven.

"Well, some studying is better than no studying," Adrien said cheerfully, hopping up and setting the flashcards aside. "And I can study after dinner, too, unless Marinette has something else I can help with."

"I thought you were going to start getting stuff into boxes after dinner," Tikki said, zipping after him as Adrien took a block of cheese out of the fridge and rummaged around in a drawer to find the grater. "Are you going to study after that, then?"

"Boxing things up shouldn't take long," Adrien told her as he started to grate the cheese. Plagg roused from his spot in a ray of sun and floated closer, and Adrien automatically swatted him away. "I already have the piles all sorted out. I might need to sort the pieces that got finished today, but it still wouldn't take a whole lot of time. I just have to put things in the boxes and then seal up the ones that are finished." He scooped up the grated cheese and dumped it into the measuring cup he had taken out. It wasn't quite enough, so he picked up the block of Mozzarella and started grating again. "And you said that there would be a few things finished today and maybe several more tomorrow, right?" He groaned. "That's going to be fun to try to carry to the post office. I don't even know how I'm going to manage."

"Marinette could get a couple boxes," Tikki pointed out. "Even if you leave at different times, you could just each take as many boxes as you can carry. Maybe some of the boxes could wait for another day. And I don't know if the screen stuff is actually going to be finished tomorrow. I think it has to dry overnight and then get heat-set."

"Fair enough." Adrien picked up the next handful of cheese and tossed it in the measuring cup, frowning as he did. He could have sworn that the cup had been fuller before. "I just want to get things out so Marinette can check them off and delete it from her commissions list."

"She just collapses and hides the row," Tikki told him. "She doesn't delete it. It's so she still has that information on record, but it isn't muddying up her spreadsheet."

"So Marinette can do that, then." Another handful of cheese, and it was still not enough, which was rather odd. "I just want her list of incomplete commissions to shrink, and soon. She's so stressed out about the whole thing."
Tikki nodded. "Yeah! That's what I told her when she just kept accepting new commissions, but she was sure that she could keep on top of things, even when that list started getting ridiculous."

Adrien nodded, trying to figure out how much Marinette would have left if she got everything she wanted to finished in the next two days. Tikki had said earlier in the day that with everything that had been cut out finished, two commissions would be fully completed. Once the screen printed shirts were done, two more would be completed and three would be really close, with just one piece left to cut out and sew together for each. If she did the cutting tonight and maybe tomorrow morning, then maybe Sarah would be willing to come over again tomorrow (in exchange for another meal or two, of course) and finish those up.

That would be seven out of twelve commissions complete, and three of the others almost done. The other two were all in different stages of in-progress.

And speaking of done, it seemed that he finally had enough cheese. Setting the grater and the chunk of cheese aside, Adrien turned around and started setting out potholders for when the dish would come up out. After a couple seconds' consideration, he decided to make a tossed salad to go with their meal, since they didn't have a whole lot of fruit around for a fruit salad.

"Plagg, stop stealing the cheese," Adrien said in utter exasperation when he turned around to find that he was mysteriously short of shredded Mozzarella yet again. "I need to have it ready to put on, and I can't do that if you're stealing half of it every time I turn my back."

"Put it in the fridge," Tikki suggested. "Plagg hates going in the fridge."

Plagg gave Tikki an utterly betrayed look and darted in to try to steal another pawful of shredded cheese. Adrien swatted him away and quickly shredded another quarter cup of cheese to stuff in the measuring cup and stick in the fridge before Plagg could try to take any more. The move was largely useless, though, since the timer went off seconds after the fridge door closed and Adrien had to take the cheese right back out so he could sprinkle it over the top of the dish before it went back in for the final few minutes. With the timer set (and the rest of the cheese block safely in the fridge, away from Plagg), Adrien headed over to Marinette's apartment to summon the two sewers.

"Oh, perfect timing," Marinette said as soon as she spotted Adrien peering around the door. She flipping off her sewing machine and stood, stretching. "I was just about to suggest a break. My back was starting to complain."

"Do you want to borrow my rice pack?" Adrien offered as Sarah finished up a seam and stood up as well so he could escort them across the hall. "I don't want you uncomfortable."

"Maybe, yeah. Only if you don't need it, though."

"Oh, it smells good," Sarah said happily as they entered Adrien's apartment. She grinned at Adrien. "I gotta admit, I really can't cook at all and I'm always so jealous when I hear about the stuff you two make. Whenever Marinette brings leftovers for her lunch, I always have to keep myself from stealing it because it smells so fantastic."

"I can give you the recipes," Adrien volunteered. "There's some really simple ones that anyone can do. I used to not be able to cook at all, either," he added when Sarah looked extremely dubious. "But my friends taught me, and now I only screw up sometimes."

Marinette grinned and elbowed him as they sat down around the table. "My parents and I keep trying to teach him how to decorate cookies and cakes, too, but he's kind of hopeless at that."
"Yeah, well, I'm not an artist, am I?"

Dinner flew by as the three of them laughed and joked. Adrien noticed when he went into the kitchen for seconds that some of the melted cheese on top of the chicken and potatoes had mysteriously vanished. Clearly Plagg had decided that he hadn't had enough Mozzarella earlier. He heard Marinette let out a small snort of amusement when she went out for more several minutes later and he glanced over to see her making shooing motions.

Apparently she had caught Plagg red-pawed.

With dinner finished, Sarah and Marinette went back to work while Adrien washed up the dishes and put things away. The leftovers were almost completely devoid of cheese now, he noticed. Maybe they should have brought the whole dish out to sit on the table instead of keeping it in the kitchen so Plagg wouldn't be able to get to it.

Once everything was properly cleaned up, Adrien dug out the pile of boxes he had bought earlier in the week plus a roll of packing tape and headed across the hall. Once he had wrestled his way through the door (it was hard to open it properly with his hands full), Adrien started popping open the boxes and taping the bottoms shut so they would be ready for him to start filling them.

And then he started the long process of packing up commissions, working his way slowly around the room.

Adrien couldn't help but grin as he loaded outfits into boxes, triple-checking each outfit against each order packet and adding the colorful sticky notes to each box that were still missing pieces. Marinette's apartment was slowly starting to look like less of a disaster zone, now that most of the pieces of fabric that had formerly been simply piled along the wall were now sewn into actual outfits.

Of course, finishing all of the outfits that had been in-progress didn't mean that Marinette was all caught up with her commissions. She still had a few final preliminary sketches to alter and album art to work on plus a couple outfits that had been designed but hadn't had the pieces cut out- though at least she did have all of the materials for them, and once she got the sketches approved then she would have a whole new set of outfits to sew. But getting all of the in-progress outfits done would just mean that a bunch of her commissions were finished and she could be paid in full for the pieces, and that Marinette would be less stressed without her apartment being absolutely filled with stuff and with a shorter list of things to work on.

"I don't know how you managed to live in here with all of this mess," Sarah said as she finished up another seam. She glanced over at Adrien as he filled another box. "Like, how could you even move around? How did you eat? You were using your kitchen as a storage area!"

Adrien grinned as he folded an elaborate cape to fit in the box. "Simple. We tend to eat over in my apartment. There's less chance of accidentally finding thread in our drinks then. That's always a plus."

That got a laugh out of both Sarah and Marinette.

"How long do the screen-printed shirts take?" Adrien asked after ten minutes of careful packing and list-checking. The commission he had just run across had one jacket and half a dozen screen printed shirts. The jacket was done- it was one of the ones he had just studded, and now it had a lovely soft liner- so it was just waiting on the shirts.

"Not very long now that the screens are made," Marinette told him, not looking up from where she
was sewing pockets on a pair of pants. "It'll take some time to set stuff up for the printing, and for things to dry and for me to iron things- and shoot I don't have an iron or an ironing board-"

"You can borrow mine," Sarah said immediately.

"You are a godsend," Marinette told her coworker. "And then once stuff is ironed, then it's done," she finished. "It's just that I have so many to do, so I'll probably be doing that all day."

Sarah grinned, turning to look at Adrien. "Yeah, it's definitely a good thing you eat over at your place. It's gonna smell like paint and ink or whatever over here."

"Ink," Marinette corrected. "And there's a bleach-like chemical that I use on some of the darker shirts, and that really smells. I'm going to have to have all of the windows wide open."

Adrien frowned over at her. "Do you have something so that you aren't breathing all those chemicals in? A face mask or something?"

"Yes, mom."

Adrien laughed and went back to packing things into boxes. Sarah wasn't so appeased.

"It's not healthy to be sleeping in the same apartment if it's not well-ventilated!" she scolded Marinette. "And I could still smell the screen mixture when I came in. It's one thing to work in it for a few hours, but it's something entirely different to be breathing that stuff in all night." She sent an impish look at Adrien, and he suddenly wondered how much Marinette's coworkers suspected about the two of them. "Unless...you didn't sleep over here?"

Marinette looked panicked for a moment, then her expression smoothed out. "Yes, well, sleeping on the couch in Adrien's apartment is better than breathing that stuff in all night."

"Uh-huh. The couch."

"It's quite comfortable once you pile a bunch of blankets on the couch," Marinette offered. That was a lie, of course- or, well, Adrien supposed that maybe with a ridiculous number of blankets the couch might not be so bad, but it would take more than the number of blankets he had in London.

"Hey, this one is finished," Adrien announced a minute later. He had checked the list three times, and everything was there. "Can I tape it up and get the labels taped on it, or did you want to stick anything in there?"

Marinette was at his side in an instant, looking at the list. It only took her twenty seconds to confirm that the order was in fact finished. "Just stick the printout on top, I think. Then they can see their order and check for themselves if they want. And then yeah, it can get taped up and labeled and put by the door."

Grinning, Adrien did just that. The box went next to the door and he moved down the line.

"Hey! Here's another one done!" Adrien exclaimed a few minutes later. He adjusted the front of the topmost jacket and then arranged the order printout on top of that. "That's two down!"

"Yeah, and ten to go." Still, Marinette looked happy. "How many more do you have left to check?"

"Three. But there's several orders just have the screen printed shirts left," Adrien added quickly when Marinette looked downcast. "Three so far. So they don't have that much left to do, right?"
She sighed. "Oh, I suppose that's something. I guess things will look a lot better after all of the screen-printing stuff is done. That's a lot of shirts."

Adrien had to laugh at that. "Oh, you're telling me." He had had to go through the boxes of shirts and- yeah, there were a lot of them. Over fifty, easily. Maybe even over sixty. It was going to take a long time to get them all done, but each individual shirt... well, Marinette had sworn up and down that shirts individually didn't take up that much time, especially when she had help with the ironing.

As it turned out, one more order was completed, and that box went over by the door as well. Four orders total only needed the screen-printed shirts to be complete, and Adrien set those closer to the door as well.

"I can come by tomorrow afternoon," Sarah told them as they wound up for the night. "I might not stay quite as late, but I can probably get a good chunk of a jacket done in that time."

Adrien grinned. "I'll make homemade mac n' cheese," he volunteered. "With Cheddar and Gruyere and Parmesan."

"Oh, I'm coming whether you want me to or not," Sarah announced with a grin. "I haven't had any mac 'n cheese other than the boxed stuff for... well, I don't know if I've ever had truly homemade mac 'n cheese."

"There's boxed macaroni and cheese?" Adrien asked, puzzled. That wasn't something he had ever heard of. Marinette sighed and rolled her eyes at him before addressing Sarah.

"I could definitely use more sewing help, but... I had been planning on doing all of the screen printing stuff tomorrow, just to get it out of the way." Marinette looked like she was starting to reconsider that decision. The offer of more help was just too tempting. "But I suppose I could maybe..."

"I can sew while you ink, I'm not going to be offended by that," Sarah assured her. Marinette grinned.

"Well, in that case... I would love the help!"

There were only three pieces for Adrien to bling out Sunday morning. He worked on those in his apartment while Marinette worked on cranking out seemingly endless screen-printed shirts in her apartment. Sarah showed up after lunch and set up her sewing machine in Adrien's apartment, since Marinette's place smelled strongly of ink.

"She's got clothesline strung up left and right," Sarah reported after making a trip across the hall to get something to sew. "And dozens of shirts hanging up to dry. It's going to take her forever to heat-set those."

"I'm going to do that," Adrien told her. "Ironing is something I can do, no problem." He grinned. "Even if I never did my own laundry or anything at home, I'm not totally helpless. Marinette has told me how to do that kind of stuff."

"Oh, I should have guessed." She sat down at the sewing machine and started working. "You two
work together well. Marinette was telling me yesterday how much you've helped, and honestly? You'll probably be up to forty hours of work you'll have done for her by partway through next week."

Adrien shrugged. "I don't mind helping. I wouldn't want to be doing it all the time, but Marinette was just buried in work."

"Oh, you aren't kidding. I can't believe how full Marinette's apartment is!" Sarah paused and adjusted the fabric before starting to sew again. "I can't tell her what to do, of course... but I would suggest that in the future, she shouldn't take on more than one or two commissions at a time. She can draw out the designs for one while sewing another with two commissions at once... or she could have more time to do other stuff and only do one at once. But it doesn't make sense to take on twelve commissions at once."

"I think she knows that now." Adrien snapped a rivet into place with a sharp whack of the small hammer. "And a lot of the orders came in right after Jagged's album dropped and that article about her ran but they've been slowing down since then, according to Marinette. So hopefully she only gets a reasonable number of commissions going forward. I could see her getting stressed out over a long wait list, too."

Sarah laughed as the sewing machine whirred again. "Oh, she might! But that's a sign of success, to have wait lists out the door. And then if she has commissions, then she can afford to not get a job right away whenever she moves back to Paris. Or maybe she'll end up just doing freelance and commission work, should she so choose. Most people can't survive on just that, but..."

"But most people aren't Marinette," Adrien finished. "If any of the bands that she's designed for want more shirts for merchandise, or if they want more pieces, then that's a regular source of income. Well. Regular-ish."

They went back to work, and Adrien finished up his pieces. Sarah set her work aside temporarily to sew in the liner of the jackets, and then Adrien ran the finished pieces across the hall to put them in their respective boxes.

The smell of ink was almost overwhelming.

"Oh boy, this place is practically a hazard zone," Adrien commented as he ducked his way around the clotheslines and hanging shirts. "I don't know how you can breathe."

Marinette's laugh was muffled by the mask covering her nose and mouth. "Yeah, well, I'm standing by the open door. It's not quite so bad over here."

"If you say so." From the looks of it, all of the windows were open, as was the patio door. Adrien could hear the bathroom fan humming merrily, and even the fan over the stovetop was rattling along. "Is it this smelly normally when you do screen printing?" If it was, that could be a problem if they wanted to move in together. Right now, they at least had his apartment to escape to. If they only had one apartment and it smelled like this... well, that would be a problem.

"I always did it on my balcony at home," Marinette explained. "I should have dragged my table out there so I could do the same thing here, but I didn't think of it. All of the screens are going out on the balcony once I'm done with them for now, though. That might help with the smell a little bit."

"You could probably hang shirts out on the balcony, too," Adrien suggested. He glanced around and then corrected himself. "Well. Some shirts, at least. There's a lot of them."
He had thought that there were a lot of shirts when they were just in the box, or set out along the wall. It looked like a while lot more when they were hung up all over the room.

"I do have some out on the balcony," Marinette told him. "I just couldn't fit that many out there without risking them brushing against each other and smudging ink. And in the future, I think I would just do small batches. I'm tired of inking stuff already, though I am, like, three-quarters of the way through everything, I think."

"Anything I can do to help?" Last jacket folded and put in the correct box, Adrien headed over to investigate what Marinette was doing. "Or should I stay out until it's time to iron?"

Marinette only had to think for a second. "Just wait until it's time to iron. I don't want anyone else putting the ink on, just because it's important to get the screen straight, but it's hard."

"Got it." Adrien ducked in for a kiss, then remembered the mask and swerved to the side to kiss Marinette's cheek instead. "I'll clear out. Remember to take breaks, yeah?"

"Yes, mom." Marinette pulled off her mask briefly to kiss him back. "I promise. And I'll go outside to get some fresh air sometimes, too. I know it's important. And thank you so much for all of your help, it's making things go so much smoother."

"Anything for you, love," Adrien assured her, planting another kiss on her forehead. "I'm glad to help. Always."
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay in posting! If you read my other story, A Musical Connection, I'm sure you already know that I had some computer problems (hardware issues that meant that I couldn't have it on without damaging the computer) and so I didn't have my computer for two entire weeks.

On a related note: I'll mention this again next chapter, but I have one more chapter of this plus one side story/outtake written, edited, and ready to be posted. I've been working on the last year of HTFAM as much as I can and HAD been hoping to keep the break between the outtake and Ch. 34 being posted down to a month, but not having my computer to work on really threw me off.

Saturday morning, Adrien groaned as he woke up to the sound of an alarm blaring. He lay there for a few moments- it was Marinette's alarm, and she always turned it off pretty quickly- but the lump at his side didn't even budge.

In the background, the alarm continued to beep.

Frowning, Adrien pushed himself up and reached over Marinette to turn the alarm off before bending down to check on his girlfriend. Within a second, it became obvious that Marinette was very much asleep. Her breathing was deep and even, and she hadn't even budged on the bed.

Okay, so she clearly needed more sleep. Adrien checked her phone to make sure that she didn't have any more alarms set (she didn't; clearly she had been planning on getting up with the first one) and then he rolled back over to fall asleep.

Maybe he should have tried to wake her up, but Adrien was worried. She had been pushing so hard to get things finished for weeks now, stressing out and worrying herself into the ground. Adrien knew that she had made a lot of progress on her commissions, too- of her twelve commissions, nine were finished, two were nearly done, and one, well...

The last one required some work still, but there would be plenty of time. They had all weekend and the week, and after that was Easter Break.

Adrien fell back asleep, one hand resting against Marinette's hair. He didn't wake up again until the bed shook and he heard a shriek of "What do you mean it's ten-thirty?"

It took Adrien a few seconds to remember that a) it was the weekend, so he didn't need to try to scramble to try to get ready as well and b) it was 100% his fault that they slept so late, so he should probably be working on keeping Marinette from panicking too much.

"It's still plenty early," Adrien said, reaching out to snag Marinette before she could shoot out of bed and end up tripping over her own feet and hurting herself in the scramble. "Bugaboo, slow down. There's plenty of time in the day still. And since you got enough sleep, maybe you'll be able to focus better."
Marinette blinked and turned to look at him. "Wait- did you turn the alarm off?"

"You were sleeping through it, so I figured that you could use the extra time." Adrien slid out of bed after Marinette. "And you're mostly caught up with commissions. It's not going to help anything if you end up making mistakes because you're exhausted or if you work so long that you make yourself sick."

"Oh, I suppose. I just want to get everything finished before break, though!" Marinette yanked a new shirt on and hopped across the room as she tugged on a pair of lounge pants. She snagged a comb and started yanking it through her hair. "And I'm so close! I want to get a lot done this weekend so I can maybe take it a little easier during the week."

Adrien nodded to thin air. Marinette was already in the bathroom, frantically brushing her teeth. With a sigh, Adrien decided to head out to the kitchen to get breakfast ready.

"That was nice of you to let her sleep," Tikki said, popping out of the hall closet. Plagg was close behind, probably because he wanted his morning cheese. "She's been yawning at work really often."

"Are you telling on me?" Marinette demanded incredulously from the bathroom. "Tikki!"

"We just want you to take care of yourself, love!" Adrien called over his shoulder. "If you aren't doing anything wrong, then Tikki wouldn't be able to tell on you!"

He got a rather rude noise as a response. Laughing, Adrien headed to the kitchen and got some toast going.

Twenty minutes later, Marinette had been fed and headed over to work in her apartment. Adrien cleaned up and tried to figure out how he could help her now. There was no hardware to attach to anything, no chains to cut, no more screen printed shirts to iron (because Adrien had spent all week long chipping away at those to get them finished)... but there were several boxes to mail yet, sitting in a neat stack just inside Marinette's door. He could get those mailed off before the post office closed for the day, and then Marinette would be able to fully check those commissions off of her list.

(Adrien was pretty sure that by the time the last of the commissions got sent off, everyone at the post office was going to know him by name. Since he could only carry two boxes at most over at a time, he had been making a lot of trips.)

"I bet you'll be glad when this is all done," Plagg said as he rode along on Adrien's shoulder as Adrien struggled to carry the two large boxes. "Then you'll have your wife all to yourself again!"

"She'll still be taking commissions, just not so many so she won't be so stressed. Hopefully she'll only be working for an hour or two every night instead of four." Adrien paused to push one of the boxes against a railing to he could adjust his grip. "But yeah, I'm looking forward to this batch of commissions being over. She's planning on taking a bit of a break from the commissions to recalibrate a bit so she can do quality work again, so I'm looking forward to that." It looked like the start of her break was going to line up well with the start of his break. Adrien had a large rough draft paper project due plus two midterms that he really had to study for, so he would be busy for most of the week. Any study breaks he took would be spent helping Marinette finish up in any way he could.

It was going to be a busy week.
"Dude, I thought you normally started studying ages ahead of time," Paul commented when he saw Adrien studying before class on Wednesday. "What's going on?"

"I've been spending a lot of time helping Marinette with commissions." Adrien flipped the page and kept reading. "She's only catching up now, so I'm having to crunch all of my study time. It's not that bad, though. And part of the problem was that I had the Quantum Mechanics exam last week and I had to really focus on that then."

Paul winced and nodded. "Yeah, that exam was hard. But it looked like you sailed right through it!"

"Yeah, because I studied!" Adrien had been pleasantly surprised at how straightforward the exam had seemed, so much so that he had spent a fair amount of time reviewing all of the questions and his answers just to make sure he hadn't misunderstood anything. Part of him was still worried that he had forgotten or misunderstood something important, but they were meant to be getting the scores back during class today. "I just really want to know how I did. Like, I think I did well, but who knows."

"I already know what's going to happen," one of Paul's other friends joked from the next row back. "You're going to do better than most of us and you'll still wish that you had done better, because you'll have made, like, three 'stupid' mistakes."

Adrien shrugged. So he had high standards, so what. He didn't like losing points on things that he should have gotten right.

Adrien had to put the book away as the professor entered, stack of graded exams in her arms. Everyone sat up and watched as she handed the exams back. Some people looked thrilled when they got their papers back. Others shrugged and put their returned exams away- they must have gotten the grades that they were expecting- while others groaned, flipping through the pages to see where they had gone wrong. Paul made a bit of a face at his paper before flipping through. Adrien accepted his own paper from the professor and grinned at the near-perfect score.

Clearly even spending so much time helping Marinette hadn't affected his scores. Marinette would be pleased to hear that, since she had been so concerned about how her mistakes when it came to dealing with commissions were costing him study time, too.

Adrien practically hummed his way through the rest of the day. He returned home to his apartment, studied for a couple hours, then did a quick run to the post office to mail one more package of clothes. Marinette just had one more commission to finish now, and based on the state of the pieces around the sewing machine, she didn't have too much longer to go. They were more intricate than a lot of the other designs- apparently the band had some sort of owl theme and an owl's face had to be worked both into the design of the jacket and the top. It was a gorgeous design, one that would no doubt have the band coming back for more- but it was a lot of little fiddly pieces, a lot of piecing, a lot of short seams and odd joins.

Adrien was of the opinion that it was very good that this particular commission was the last one. Marinette could take her time working on it instead of feeling like she had to rush at all.

Once the package was in the mail, Adrien headed back to his apartment to study. He was busy
writing up a summary sheet when Marinette arrived home, looking a little wilted.

"Photoshoot day," Marinette explained. She shoved her hair back out of her face. "Lots of hot lights that we had to run around in all day. I don't know how the models do it."

Adrien grinned at that. "Easy. We don't run around. We just sit and look pretty and try to keep out of the way of the people running around."

"I'm taking a shower," Marinette decided. "I feel half-dead right now, but I still want to work on my commission like normal tonight. If I keep working on it, I'll be done with it and have it sent off before my birthday!" She headed towards the bathroom, still talking as she went and completely missing the frozen look on Adrien's face. "That'll be nice, to just be able to kick back and relax then."

"Right, right, of course!"

Tikki gave him a somewhat unimpressed look as soon as the bathroom door shut and they heard the water start running. "You forgot, didn't you?"

"I knew it was coming up," Adrien defended himself. He checked the calendar on his phone. "And I know it's on Saturday. I just wasn't on top of, ah, remembering stuff." He scrambled for a second, trying to think of what he could do for Marinette's birthday. She had indicated interest in having a relaxing day, which meant nothing crazy. Maybe he could invite a few of Marinette's closest colleagues and friends for a dinner together and they could all eat out somewhere. He didn't know what he could get her as a gift, though. If he could buy relaxation...

Suddenly it hit him like a train. He and Marinette had talked about going to the Bath spa at some point, and they hadn't done that yet. They could both use some relaxation time in the warm waters and maybe even a massage. Adrien scrambled for his computer, pulling up the Bath Spa page. He scrolled through page after page, trying to figure out when they would want to go. It would be easiest to go Sunday, because Marinette wouldn't have work, but Sundays were busy and it sounded like the services would be more limited. Midweek was least busy, but Adrien wasn't sure how good of an idea interrupting Marinette's work week would be.

Monday would probably work best, then. It was definitely a good thing that Marinette wouldn't be returning to Paris until Thursday evening and that he hadn't gotten his train tickets yet (much to Nathalie's everlasting ire). Sure, he was meant to have fittings Tuesday, but if he got an early train back to Paris then maybe the fittings could be pushed to Tuesday afternoon and evening.

But what if there was something going on at Madam Rosalie's on Monday that Marinette wouldn't want to miss? He wouldn't want that to happen and make a day at the spa turn into a stress fest. Maybe he could ask Madam Rosalie, but then again, she might not know everything about what was going on in Marinette's design group at all times. It would be better to ask one of the members on Marinette's team.

"Is Sarah home, do you know?" Adrien asked Tikki. She narrowed her eyes at him.

"You aren't going to ask her about what to get Marinette, are you?"

"So little faith! No, I just want to ask her about timing for Marinette's present." Adrien headed for the door, figuring that since Marinette was home, Sarah probably was as well. "And I might ask about if people on Marinette's team might be interested in getting together on Saturday."

"Oh!" Tikki promptly cheered right back up. "Okay! In that case, Sarah is home."
Adrien checked to make sure he hadn't left his computer open to the Bath Spa page and then headed upstairs to Sarah's apartment. She answered within a couple seconds and raised an eyebrow when she saw him standing there. "Adrien! Does Marinette need more help on something? I think I'm too wiped to be much help today."

"She's good with the commissions right now," Adrien told her. "I just had a question- is there anything important going on at work on Monday? I wanted to get Marinette a trip to the spa up in Bath for her birthday, and from what I can tell it would be best to go on Monday instead of over the weekend so it's not so busy."

"It's her birthday soon?" Sarah sounded surprised. "Oh! Shoot, we totally forgot. She should have said something! We always go out for lunch or dinner when it's someone's birthday. I'll have to tell the rest of our team. What day is it?"

"Saturday."

"She should have said something," Sarah repeated. "I think most of us should be able to be here, though. How does dinner on Saturday sound? Do you know what her favorite restaurant is?"

"That Greek place down the road is a big favorite of hers," Adrien told her. "But about Monday-"

"It's just a normal day," Sarah assured him. "And I can talk to the head of our group to make sure Monday stays normal so Marinette can miss it. Do you know what you're doing at the spa? There's some really great massages and everything."

Adrien just grinned and shrugged. "I figured that I would leave the specifics up to Marinette to decide. I'm guessing that she'll probably go for some sort of massage, though, after all of the time she's spent bent over her sewing machine lately. At the rate they were going, both of them were going to have aching backs like a pair of elderly grandparents before they got back to London. He had seen her stretching and twisting like he did whenever his back got stiff, and more and more frequently. "Have you been? Any suggestions?"

"I like the traditional massage, but then again that's the only one I've ever done." Sarah grinned. "So maybe I'm not the best person to ask. And I've only done it twice, since that place is expensive. But it was great."

"Fabulous." Adrien couldn't help but smile as well. Hopefully Marinette would like her present. "So, what time do you think would work best on Saturday?"

The last piece of the commissions was finished Friday afternoon and mailed three minutes before the post office closed, and the last of the edits for the last album cover was sent off several hours later. Once it was sent off, Marinette collapsed in bed and just slept for a solid fifteen hours. Adrien did his best to not wake her up either when he went to bed or when he got up Saturday morning, though he did fetch his heated rice pack and arrange it on her back for her both times in hopes that it might help alleviate some of the pain that she was getting from being hunched over her sketchpad (or her tablet, or her sewing machine) for so long.

"Ah, she lives!" Adrien announced with a grin when Marinette stumbled into the kitchen mid-morning, yawning widely. "Happy birthday, Bug."
"Mm-hmm." Marinette yawned again and hugged him. Adrien tried not to laugh as she snuggled into his chest.

"Are you seriously still tired?"

"No making fun of the birthday girl," Marinette informed him. "'S not nice."

Tikki giggled. "But Marinette, you've been sleeping forever! Do you even know what day it is anymore?"

For a moment, Marinette looked truly alarmed. Then Tikki giggled, and Marinette pouted as she swatted at her kwami. "Don't joke like that! I thought I had slept for an entire day for a minute!"

"Technically, if it were Sunday, you would have slept for a day and a half," Adrien teased, dodging his own swat. "And I wouldn't have said anything about your birthday, either."

"Ooh, you're being terrible," Marinette grumbled, but she kissed him anyway. "So what are we doing today?"

"Besides sleeping, you mean- ah! I yield, I yield!" Adrien yelped, dancing away from a pouting Marinette. "Well, I was making mac 'n cheese for lunch, and then we can do your favorite Greek place for dinner? It sounds like some of your team members want to join us for that."

Marinette perked up. "Really? We did lunch last year, but I thought maybe we wouldn't this year since my birthday is on the weekend."

"So you didn't even mention it?" Adrien asked incredulously. "I said something to Sarah and she immediately started asking around to see if people could come. She said that someone named Lily wouldn't be able to make it because she was going home to see her parents, but the others could come."

The first part of the day went by fast enough (probably because Marinette had slept through most of it), and then they were heading down the sidewalk towards the restaurant. Adrien carried his present for Marinette (wrapped in festive paper) in the bag hanging at his side, just in case the opportunity came up to give it to her while they were at dinner. Sarah had texted them to say that she and several others were already at the restaurant, holding a table so that they wouldn't find themselves standing around waiting during the diner rush.

"I actually first ate here for Ellen's birthday last summer," Marinette told him as Adrien ushered her in the restaurant's door in front of him. At his slightly puzzled look- who was Ellen, again?- Marinette explained. "She was an intern last year, but now she's working at some fashion house up in Glasgow, I think. It was closer to where she grew up, so she could see her family more often."

"Aha."

"Oh, look, there they are!" Marinette exclaimed, pointing. Adrien glanced over and saw six people sitting around a series of tables pushed together in the middle of the room. He recognized most of them, either from other dinners together or from ducking into Marinette's workplace. Only two of them were guys, which surprised Adrien slightly. He had always gotten the impression from his father that there were a good number of aspiring male fashion designers as well, nearly as many as women designers, but Marinette's team was apparently skewed two guys to six women.

"There's a lot of women on your team, aren't there?" Adrien asked Marinette as they headed towards the table. "Is that typical?"
Marinette shrugged. "Yeah, at least at Madam Rosalie's place. Her aesthetic is just something that draws more women than men, I guess." She giggled. "We design practical stuff for women, that's probably a deciding factor. A lot of men don't tend to think about things like pockets and bra straps when they're designing tops and dresses, and that's fine in some companies. Not for Madam Rosalie's, though."

"Happy Birthday, Marinette!" the table chorused as they approached. Marinette turned a bit pink as all of the attention turned to her, and several people from other tables turned as well to glance over. She didn't waste any time in settling down in one of the chairs that had been left open in the middle of the table and waving shyly to everyone. Shannon laughed.

"Don't go turning so shy on us! Man, is it ever a good thing we hadn't gotten the chance to ask the servers if they ever sing to people on their birthdays."

"Oh, don't tease her like that," Mrs. Kelley scolded playfully. "And happy birthday, dear. I'm glad you chose this place. It's my favorite, too."

Even with as busy as the restaurant was, it didn't take long for them to order and for a couple appetizer plates to arrive. The eight of them laughed and talked as they waited for their meal to arrive, and Adrien learned more about everything that was going on at Madam Rosalie's. With the spring Fashion Week done and a number of photoshoots for late spring and early summer done, they were in a bit of a lull now, getting final polishes done on the spring lines and little details cleaned up before they could move on to proper summer designs. Pieces from photoshoots and runway had to be put away, and shoes and repeat accessories sold off. They had to communicate with the manufacturer how to make specific pieces so they would match what was shown in the catalogue, and then the fabric room had to be reorganized so that the heavier-weight fabrics and more wintery colors were put away until fall and the light cottons and silks and pale-colored fabrics more common in summer were brought forward for easier access.

"I kind of just want to go driving into the scraps and fabric ends bin and see what I could make out of some of that stuff," Emily admitted. "Like, just make something crazy, something I would wear but that might not sell really, really well. I've seen patchwork dresses before and I would love to make one. Or five, or ten, or-"

Shannon was laughing. "Okay, okay, we get it," she teased. "But honestly, I think it would be fun to just go bin-diving some time and then have some quality alone time with the fabric and a sewing machine, just to see what would come out. There's some crazy variety in the fabrics in there."

Adrien couldn't help grinning and shaking his head at the number of agreements from around the table. He would never stop being amazed by how creative designers could be, creating endless variations on dresses and shirts and skirts and jackets and everything, and on such a regular basis, too. If he saw a bin of leftover fabric, he would think quilt, or maybe...uh...

"I might be able to persuade Madam Rosalie to let you guys scavenge the bins," Mrs. Kelly offered. "I know she's mentioned before how full it's getting, and with the bit of a lull before we really have to dive into the summer stuff. We might have to put it aside at a moment's notice to do actual work, though."

There was a cheer around the table.

Dinner arrived shortly, and they all dug in. Adrien had to swat Marinette's fingers away she tried to swipe a slice of pita bread from his plate, and then the second his back was turned to talk to Justin,
the pita bread piece *mysteriously* vanished.

Adrien sighed and stole a bite of her spinach-feta pie in retribution.

It didn't take long for them to finish their meal, even with all of the talking and laughter among the group. They ordered dessert, and while they were waiting Mrs. Kelly passed a colorful bag down the table to Marinette.

"We all pitched in to give you a little something for your birthday," she told Marinette. "And I might have done a small amount of digging in the ends bin, too."

Grinning, Marinette took the bag and pulled it down into her lap to peer into the large bag. The first thing she pulled out was a clear bag of what *looked* like fairly common sewing supplies—a set of white pens, rotary cutter blades, and *three* seam cutters, plus what was apparently a sharpening stone for her scissors. Adrien was puzzled—surely Marinette's coworkers knew that she already *had* stuff like that, and she had gotten some similar stuff from her parents at Christmas—but Marinette seemed thrilled.

"Oh, this is great!" she was exclaiming, digging through the bag. "My marking pens are all practically dry after all that leather from the commissions, and I swear every blade I own is pretty dull. And I can *always* use more seam rippers!"

"Yes, I know," Sarah told her dryly. "Considering that you told me that you own *five* and yet it still took you five minutes to track down any of them whenever we needed one."

...ooookay, so maybe he didn't have a *great* idea of what designers did and didn't need, despite being the son of one and dating another. *Huh.*

Maybe he should start taking notes.

The next thing to come out of the bag was a small iron and something rolled up in a tube. Marinette inspected the packaging and then grinned. "A travel iron and roll-up ironing mat! That's great!"

"We figured that a small iron would mean that you would be able to take it back to Paris once you're done in London," Abbey explained. "And it's useful for travel, too, if you need to iron something on the go but don't want to haul along a big iron. And that's a good brand, I have one just like it."

"Thank you!" Marinette exclaimed. "This is great. My old iron at home died right before I came over to London, so I'll definitely be using this all the time."

"And you'll be able to do your printed shirts whenever you want," Sarah pointed out. "Travel irons might be smaller than normal, but they don't lack anything in power."

Grinning, Marinette dug into the bag one last time, and pulled out several pieces of folded cloth. Adrien had been around designers for long enough to be able to tell that the pieces were probably no larger than half a meter (or a meter at *most*), but they were fun colors and clearly quality fabric. Adrien couldn't tell just by eyeballing the fabric if there would be enough for Marinette to make a shirt or skirt—he had no idea what kind of yardage was needed for anything, really—but judging by the gleam in Marinette's eyes, she probably already had plans.

"Oh, I loved working with this fabric!" Marinette exclaimed as she thumbed through the folded pieces. "This is great! Thanks, guys!"
There was a chorus of "You're welcome"s from around the table as Marinette packed her gifts back into her bag for easy carrying. While she was distracted, Adrien slid his present onto the table in front of her. It was a small box, not at all like the large bag that Marinette's coworkers had gotten her, but Adrien wouldn't let the difference in size bother him.

After all, great things could come in small packages, and he was sure that Marinette would love it.

Marinette blinked in surprise when she glanced back up and saw the package in front of her. It only took her a second to see the tag and glance over at Adrien with a questioning look before starting to unwrap it. The first thing she pulled out was a cute bird-shaped patchwork pincushion. Marinette groaned.

"Adrien!"

Adrien grinned as everyone around the table looked on in confusion. "What?"

"Still?"

"It was a good idea!"

"I'm lost," Abbey admitted. "What's wrong with it? That's a really cute pincushion."

"It's part of a joke," Marinette told the rest of the table, trying not to laugh. "It wouldn't make sense out of context, but he's been getting me something bird-themed for every holiday ever since Christmas."

Emily grinned at them. "So... just Christmas and now, or for Valentine's Day, too?"

Marinette froze, deer-in-the-headlights look on her face, and floundered. Adrien froze for a moment as well, then recovered and tried for some of that tried-and-true Chat Noir charm and smoothness. "Well, you know, it was an opportunity to give gifts, so I did."

"Well, it is pretty," Sarah told them, though she was grinning widely as well. "I don't know where you find stuff like that."

Adrien grinned at the opening that she had just handed him and Marinette groaned, burying her face in her arms. "Well, I had to do a bit of hunting, but I was happy with my catch in the end."

"I regret everything."

"You know it's funny."

"Is there something else in the box, Marinette?" Sarah asked, craning her neck to peer into the box. She glanced over at Adrien. "It looks like there's a brochure or something."

Marinette reached back into the box and pulled out the Bath spa brochure. Adrien had stuck a Post-it with the information for what day he had gotten the train tickets for and that he would pay for entry and whatever treatment she wanted. He had made sure to call ahead to check that there wouldn't be any groups taking up the spa and that there were treatment package spaces still available, so they wouldn't get to Bath and discover that they couldn't get in because something was reserved.

That would have stunk if that happened, especially since they had to have train tickets and Marinette would have to take a day off.
"I remembered that we had talked about going there last time we were in Bath," Adrien told Marinette. "And it would be a chance to relax after the last few weeks."

Marinette was grinning as she flipped through the brochure. "I love it!" Then she laughed. "I like the white-out over the prices. Very subtle."

Adrien grinned. "Yeah, I thought so too." He hadn't wanted Marinette obsessing over the prices and just trying to pick what might be cheapest over what she actually wanted to try. While yes, some of the spa packages were maybe a little expensive, it was hardly as though he couldn't afford it. He had years of modeling payments saved up, plus what he had earned the past summer with his job, and he only really had groceries as an expense at the moment thanks to his father paying for everything else. "So, does that work for you, going on Monday?"

"I already got it cleared with Madam Rosalie," Sarah piped up, grinning at Marinette's startled look. "She said to tell you to have fun."

"Well, I was already thinking about taking an extra day off next week to relax and get my head back on straight after all of those commissions and photoshoot week," Marinette admitted, a smile on her face as she flipped the brochure over again to look at one of the pictures. "So this is just, like, an upgrade of that day. Thanks, Adrien! I can't wait!"

It was mid-morning by the time Adrien and Marinette arrived at the train station on Monday, loaded down with bags packed with their swimming things and a light lunch. Marinette had left both her tablet and her sketchbook at their apartment after several minutes of consideration, admitting that if she brought either along, the idea that she should be looking for design inspiration would be in the back of her head the entire time.

"I feel like I've done nothing all weekend," Marinette admitted as they found their seats and settled in for the ride. "I haven't designed anything, the only reason I touched my sewing machine was to unplug it and get it covered so that it wouldn't get all dusty, and I haven't cleaned things up from my commissions at all. And I haven't responded to anyone on the wait list yet."

"Doing nothing is a good thing sometimes," Adrien reminded her, and he could see Tikki nodding in agreement just inside Marinette's bag. "You'll get creative burnout if you keep going at the rate you were going, and that's no good if you're in the middle of a commission. Add on to that the fact that it would affect you at work, too, and that wouldn't look good."

"No, it wouldn't," Marinette agreed. The train gave a small shudder as it started up, and then they were slowly starting to pull away from the station. "It helped- creatively, I mean- that what I was designing for commissions and what I design at Madam Rosalie's are so different in style, but there's only so many ideas I can come up with in a short amount of time."

The train picked up speed, and their conversation turned towards the upcoming holiday. Marinette was looking forward to going home, even if she would doubtless be spending at least a day working in the bakery. The stuff she helped with- the decorations, mostly- were apparently mindless work for her and were all but automatic after so many years and hundreds upon hundreds of similar treats decorated in just the same way. Adrien would be doing fittings, photoshoots, and commercials (what a surprise), leaving him with only odds and ends of time left to meet up with Alya and Nino.
Well, odds and ends and Thursday evening, when the newspaper contest people were hosting an awards dinner where the winners would be announced. They had learned the previous week that Alya had gotten past the semi-finalist pool and into the finalists, and she had invited them to join herself and Nino for the dinner since her parents weren't able to make it. Of course, both Adrien and Marinette had accepted. It would be a good time to be able to see their friends for an extended period of time, and if Alya won they would be able to celebrate with her.

And if she didn't win... well, they would be there to distract her, then. At least for a couple days.

"I think Ladybug and Chat Noir should make a short appearance if Alya wins," Adrien said as the train slowed for their stop. He scooped up their bags and pulled Marinette to her feet. "Not at the dinner itself, probably, since it'll be hard to excuse ourselves without it being obvious. But afterwards, once we've all gone home for the night."

Marinette grinned. "I think that would be a great idea! And it would be fun to go out for a run either way. It's been way too long."

It had been. Adrien's legs were itching to go out and run- he could tell that he had lost some muscle tone without his superhero activities and at some point, his photographer was going to notice as well.

Maybe he should look into getting a gym membership of some sort. It wouldn't be as much fun as going out as a superhero, but it would be better than not getting that energy out just because the moon was out or the weather was poor. It might also help him with his back problem if he spent more time moving and less sitting, since the problem seemed to be with him spending too much time sitting hunched over at a desk.

They headed down the sidewalk towards the spa, bags slung over their shoulders. They barely had to wait at all to pay for their passes. Marinette had picked out a couple's package that included a massage and a meal, a choice Adrien heartily approved of. He had once learned how to do a bit of a shoulder massage, but Marinette had gotten so tense over the past few weeks that having a professional work their magic would be much better. He had booked their treatment as soon as Marinette decided on it Saturday evening, and the massage would fall about halfway through their spa time.

"Oh, that's expensive," Marinette murmured immediately when the price came up. "Adrien-"

"Nope, you didn't see anything," Adrien teased her, sliding one hand over her eyes while he handed over his credit card to pay. "And honestly, it's not that much if you take everything into consideration. It's passes for four hours for two people, plus a meal for both of us, plus a massage for both of us. It would cost more if we got all of that separately."

"I don't need a massage-"

"But you wanted one and you're getting one, and it'll feel wonderful." Adrien signed the receipt and tucked his credit card back in his wallet and took the receipt and the bracelets the cashier handed him. He slid one on Marinette's wrist and the other on his own before urging her forward. He glanced at the receipt, checking the times on it. "We'll have some time in the pools first to unwind a bit, and then we'll have the massage. Now c'mon, let's go get changed."

"What about us?" Plagg wanted to know, peering out of Adrien's bag. "Do you expect us to stay in your bags for- what? Six hours, with the massage and the lunch and the pool time? That's forever."

Adrien sighed, poking Plagg back into the bag before anyone could see him. "No, you can go out as
long as you don't get spotted and as long as you don't completely pig out in the kitchen. And if you aren't back by the time we leave, we'll hang around outside so we don't get charged for the extra time. Tikki, can you keep an eye on the clock once it's about time for us to leave?"

Tikki popped out, beaming up at him. "Don't worry, Adrien! I'll make sure we're back before your time runs out. And if we get too far from you, we'll know anyway."

Once again, Adrien couldn't be more thankful for Tikki. The little kwami could keep even Plagg in line so that Adrien wouldn't spend the whole time worrying about what trouble Plagg might be getting up to.

Once they had changed, the two of them wasted no time in heading down to the main pool area. Adrien hung back to let Marinette slid into the water first with a happy sigh (and no, he was not just doing that for the view), then followed.

Ahh. Oh, Adrien could see why people might come back here frequently. The warm water was heavenly, and the lazy tendrils of steam rising up from the water made the whole scene feel a bit surreal. There weren't a ton of other people in the pool, but the drifting steam obscured most of them from view, making it feel even more private.

Adrien just had to remember that it wasn't completely private and he couldn't kiss Marinette or flirt ridiculously. He could manage that. Probably.

"Oh, I like this." Marinette was already paddling around, flipping over to float on her back. "Best birthday gift ever."

"I hope you know that I'm doing my best to stop myself from splashing you," Adrien informed her with a grin. "But I figured that it wouldn't be very relaxing."

"Rude."

"Hey, I said I wouldn't do it!"

Marinette rolled back over onto her stomach to grin over at him. "Uh-huh. And I'm just supposed to trust you?"

Adrien pouted at her and reached through the water to snag her hand so he could press a kiss to her knuckles. "But of course, my lady! What do you think I am, a ratty alley cat?"

Marinette pasted on an overly thoughtful face, and Adrien laughed.

The two of them drifted between pools and even ventured over to try out one of the steam rooms. Adrien saw a couple people giving them lingering looks- apparently some people recognized him, and maybe Marinette as well- but the spa's ban on bringing phones or cameras into the pool area meant that no one was snapping pictures of him pulling faces at Marinette while she paddled in circles around him or both of them wandering around the spa together.

"I'm going to turn into a raisin by the time we leave, but I'll love every minute of it," Marinette told Adrien as they pulled themselves out of the pool to head over to where they were supposed to check in for their massage. "I'm so much more relaxed already."

"Hopefully this will relax you even more." Adrien guided Marinette around a corner with one hand on her back. "Your parents won't be happy with me if you go home with an aching back because you overworked yourself."
Marinette giggled. "What, did they tell you to keep me from overworking myself? They're so overprotective sometimes."

"They had me promise to try to keep you from overworking yourself when I got your sewing machine back in the fall," Adrien told her. "Which I failed to do, by the way, because someone didn't ever mention to me that she was absolutely buried in work. Which reminds me- I meant to ask Tikki why she didn't say anything, but I keep forgetting."

Marinette cringed. "Yes, well... I thought I had it under control, until I didn't. And I won't let it happen again. I'll only accept one commission at a time to work on, and I'll give myself really long deadlines. That way, I only need to do a little bit of work per night. I can be finished for the evening when you're done with your homework, or even before, and I can work on my own projects too if I want. And I'm going to take a break before I start anything else. I want designing to be fun again."

Adrien couldn't help but grin. He had hoped that Marinette would say that, but he hadn't been able to help worrying that Marinette would want to do two commissions at a time, or otherwise push herself to do as many commissions as possible without overwhelming herself just to get her resume and portfolio built up. He just hoped that she would keep the same attitude even months in the future, when the piles of commissions and late nights and her aching back were just distant memories.

"And promise me that you'll work on not sitting for so long that you hurt your back when you're doing schoolwork," Marinette said, looping her arm through Adrien's. "I wasn't the only one overworking myself in the past couple months."

"I promise," Adrien said immediately. "I just took Ben's advice too literally about the papers for classes this semester. He told me that too when he proofread everything before midterms, that I tried to shove three-quarters of a semester's work into a quarter of the time. He's making me suggested timelines again for next year's classes, since he's taking them now, and I've gotten strict instructions to stick to that schedule, or at least not get more than a week ahead." He made a face as a thought occurred to him. "But I'll have to find someone else to read through my essays for grammatical errors for me, since he'll be graduating. So I might try to be a couple weeks ahead of schedule- but nothing like what I did this semester, I swear!" he added quickly when Marinette gave him a displeased look. "It's just that since other people will be busy with their own projects at the same time I have stuff due, I'll need to have mine ready to proofread a little early. Or I'll try to find another proofreader from the tutoring center."

"And you'll remember to take breaks?"

"I'll take breaks to get up and stretch and walk around a bit," Adrien promised. "No more sitting for hours on end and only getting up if I want something to eat- or if Plagg wants to eat. I know the problem was that I was sitting for too long instead of getting up and moving around, because when I was younger I always had to do homework between akuma attacks and photoshoots and my other activities so I couldn't just be getting up and doing other stuff all the time. But enough about that-ready for our massage?"

It was two very relaxed and loose superheroes who left the spa several hours later, muscles freshly massaged and hair still damp from the pools. Plagg and Tikki had managed to return to their bags
while Adrien and Marinette changed into their street clothes, so there was no need to wait around before they headed back towards the train station.

"I've never been so relaxed in my life," Marinette said happily, bumping up against Adrien's side as they walked. She stretched, bending backwards before continuing to walk. "It's hurt to bend like that for weeks, but now it's fine again."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it." They paused at a street corner to let a car pass before crossing. "I'm glad that you picked that package. We got plenty of time in the pools, plus the massage, plus the meal. Totally worth it."

Getting on the train and sitting in the less-than-comfortable seats there was a bit of a shock after the uber-comfortable spa chairs, but Adrien wasn't going to let it bother him. Next to him, Marinette nodded off ten minutes into the ride, her head pillowed on his shoulder.

All in all, it had been a wonderful day and a very successful birthday present. Adrien wished that he wouldn't have to head back to Paris so early the next day, so he could have more time to spend with Marinette now that they were both so relaxed and ache-free. But he supposed that Marinette would be at work for the next couple days, and he would be earning money to replace what he had just spent (and then some) with his modeling, even if it wasn't the most enjoyable work in the world for him.

Smiling, Adrien settled back into his seat and adjusted Marinette's head against his shoulder. Perhaps they wouldn't get to have quite as much time together post-spa as he would have wanted, but he wasn't going to let that tarnish the time that they did get to spend together before he had to go back to Paris.
"Adrien, your father wishes to speak to you."

Adrien sighed as he paused, halfway to his room, then turned to face his father's assistant. "Can it wait at all? The last photoshoot ran over and I have to get ready for Alya's dinner event over at the Grand Paris. I'm already running late as it is."

Nathalie gave him a long, unimpressed look, and Adrien sighed and reversed course, heading for his father's study. Nathalie ushered him in, and Mr. Agreste glanced up as soon as Adrien came in. He didn't look impressed, and Adrien wondered if somehow the pictures from his early-morning shoot had already gotten passed along to him and they somehow weren't up to standard or something. That would be fast and scarily efficient... but to be fair, most of his father's employees fit that description pretty well.

"Father? Nathalie said you wanted to see me."

Mr. Agreste nodded. Instead of simply explaining anything- because what fun would that be, Adrien thought sourly- he reached for something on his desk and passed it to Adrien. It only took a couple of seconds for Adrien to realize that it was a magazine, that it was in English, and that there was a picture of him and Marinette splashed across the cover, clearly just outside the spa in Bath. They looked close, with Adrien's arm around Marinette and her gazing up at him. Their hair was clearly damp, and it was obvious that they had just spent a large chunk of the day together in the spa.

Oh, great. They had forgotten that while there were no cameras allowed inside of the spa, there would definitely be cameras outside, once they left. Adrien took the magazine and flipped to the article, skimming through it. Thankfully there were no photos of them being closer together than the one on the cover and there were no pictures from inside the spa itself, and it looked like most of the people who had given them sideways looks in the spa hadn't said anything about the two of them. However, clearly not everyone had been so kind to ignore them.

And it was pretty obvious that some staff member had talked, because the magazine noted that the two of them had gotten a couple's massage package. And of course the magazine then had to make a huge deal about that fact.

"Getting a massage together isn't something you do with a friend," Mr. Agreste said testily, frowning at Adrien. Saying that he looked supremely irritated would be an understatement. "Neither is going to a spa together, at least not when it's a man and a woman we're talking about."

"It was Marinette's birthday present!" Adrien protested. He couldn't help but be supremely irritated about the article. It wasn't his fault that some people apparently didn't understand the concept of privacy. Honestly, it was super invasive, especially considering that a staff member had blabbed. He was definitely going to complain to the spa, because that was flat-out not okay, and whoever was responsible deserved to get fired. "Both of us had worked really hard this semester, and we were both really, really stiff from being hunched over a computer or a sewing machine, in Marinette's case. So I thought it would be fun to go to the spa."

"And get a couple's massage?"
Adrien shrugged. "It was part of the package that Marinette picked. It was less expensive to get that particular package and have a couple's massage than it would be to get the exact same stuff only with separate massages."

Mr. Agreste didn't look particularly mollified. "Expense is hardly an issue for us, and you know the papers won't accept that."

"Except I was paying for it, not you, and at my age, it's important not to go crazy with spending money," Adrien argued, frustration welling up. If he had spent money on two separate spa packages, he probably would have been scolded for wasting money. There really was no winning with his father. "If people want to ignore that, that's their problem."

"Adrien, you know that image is important," Mr. Agreste told him severely. "And once again, I'll have to ask you to take care of the rumors around this, and to be more careful in the future."

Adrien swallowed the sigh, knowing that it was pointless to keep arguing, especially if he wanted to be remotely close to getting to the awards dinner on time. "Of course, Father."

"That's all. You're excused."

Adrien nodded and left, magazine still clutched in his hand. He would have to mention it to Marinette so that she wouldn't be taken off guard. Hopefully she hadn't gotten caught by any nosy tabloid reporters before she left London.

Just to be sure, Adrien checked his phone again. Marinette hadn't mentioned anything about being bothered in any of her texts as she got onto the train and headed to Paris, so maybe they hadn't been expecting her to leave the city mid-day, or maybe they thought she had headed back to Paris with Adrien already.

"I could have told you that that would be too obvious," Plagg sniggered as soon as Adrien had gotten into his room. "And why don't you just tell your father the truth? Maybe he would be a little mad at first, but who cares what he thinks? He's stupid."

"He's made it very clear that he still doesn't want me dating while I'm in London," Adrien pointed out, sending the text he had written to Marinette before heading to the bathroom so he could shower and wash out all of the hair product from the photoshoot. "Even when it's Marinette that's always coming up as the potential girlfriend, he has a problem with it. I don't know why. I always thought that the dating ban was because he didn't want me falling in love there and then deciding to stay, but Marinette is from Paris."

"Does your father maybe think that Marinette has permanently moved to London?" Plagg asked. Adrien shrugged.

"I don't know. Maybe. I don't know why he would think that, though. Or why he wouldn't ask me about it instead of nagging me about spending time with her all the time."

Adrien rushed through his clean-up, sending frequent glances at the clock as he washed up and blow-dried his hair. He had already been running late after the final photoshoot of the day, and stopping to get scolded by his father yet again had just added to his lateness. He had to comb and re-style his hair (with much less product than the photoshoot had used) in a rush, then dig through his closet for a suitable outfit. Alya had said that it would be a semi-formal event, so he had to find a suit, and preferably one that wasn't too high-fashion and clearly ridiculously expensive. Once he had pulled it on and brushed off the specks of dust and stray hairs, Adrien shot out of the room like a cannon. His driver was already waiting in front of the house, and it didn't take too long to get over
to the Grand Paris, where the dinner was being held.

"Dude, I was starting to think that you wouldn't be able to make it," Nino said with a laugh as Adrien slid into the seat next to him at one of the tables. "You missed most of the social hour. Did a photoshoot run over or something?"

"That, and my father wanted to talk to me," Adrien told him, scowling for a moment before remembering that there were loads of people with cameras milling around. The scowl smoothed out into a professionally blank expression. "Apparently it couldn't wait until tomorrow, or until I got home from this."

Nino made a face. "Oh, naturally."

"So what did I miss?"

"So far? Not much." Nino glanced around, and Adrien did the same. There were still a lot of people milling around talking instead of being seated. He could spot Alya and Marinette- and wasn't Marinette gorgeous in that dress? - standing partway across the room talking to an older couple. "A lot of people talking, of course, and some music, and that's really it. It's not even decent music, it's some elevator music nonsense. And whatever they're playing it on has terrible sound quality."

Adrien laughed at that. "You would notice something like that."

"Honestly? Anyone with ears should have been able to notice." Nino made a face at the reminder of how awful the music had apparently been. "But since a lot of the organizers are really getting on up there, I maybe shouldn't be so surprised that they couldn't hear how bad it was."

Adrien hastily muffled his snort before anyone could hear him.

It didn't take long before people started drifting towards their assigned seats. Alya grinned when she spotted Adrien and she didn't waste any time in rounding the table to crush him in a hug. Marinette giggled at him as he theatrically gasped for breath until Alya released him.

"It's been forever! And I thought you said that there might be times in between shoots where you could come see us!"

"Yeah, and then I stayed in London for longer than I thought I would, and all of my fittings and everything got crammed together," Adrien pointed. It had been stressful, but staying for the spa visit had been so worth it. "And any breaks I do get are at weird times, when you're meant to be working. I've been spending pretty much all of that down time trying to get some studying done for the rest of the semester."

Alya let out a huff. "You work too hard. Take a break every once and a while, why don't you?"

Adrien just smiled and shrugged. He had been taking a number of breaks- he had gone out as Chat Noir several evenings, when it was late enough that there weren't enough people out to immediately spot him. No one had seen him yet, and he was planning on keeping it that way probably until Saturday. But he couldn't exactly tell Alya that.

Once everyone was seated, waiters and waitresses swarmed out of the kitchens with trays of food. Several worked to set up a soup and salad line, while others put platters of food and baskets of bread out on tables.

"My mom is working in the kitchens tonight," Alya told them as a waiter placed a large platter of cooked chicken on their table. "She said that she would try to stick her head out when awards are
announced, but between this event and the regular hotel guests they're pretty busy down there."

"Oh, I can only imagine." From what Adrien knew, this was a pretty busy time of year at the hotel. People came into Paris to visit their families for Easter and quite a few stayed at the high-end hotel. Others stayed elsewhere but came to the Grand Paris for dinner. The kitchen would be buzzing with activity, and as head cook Alya's mom would be hard-pressed to spare the time to leave.

Another few platters arrived, effectively disrupting their conversation as everyone started to dig in. As he ate, Adrien glanced across the table at the two other couples that sat across from them. He couldn't tell if it was another contest entry finalist and their family or friends or if there were other guests invited as well. He wasn't completely clear on how many finalists there were or if other people from the newspaper had been invited to attend the dinner too. There were so many people around the room, and even if he subtracted three to four guests per finalist...

Well, that was a lot of people still, and surely the field of candidates had been narrowed down more than that? How many people had entered, anyway?

"So how many finalists are there?" Adrien asked Nino over the sound of silverware against plates and quiet conversation around the room. "There's so many people here!"

Nino frowned as he thought about it. "Ten finalists, I think? Or maybe it's even down to eight or five, I don't know. Alya told me, but she also told me how many people there were at all of the other stages, too, so maybe I'm getting them confused. But then a lot of the permanent staff from the local branch of the newspaper gets invited and some bring a guest. All past winners are invited, too, and then they might have a guest, too, and of course there's the judging panel." He shrugged. "It's not all finalists, I can tell you that much."

"Ah." That made more sense. If it was only ten finalists (or even only five finalists), then it made sense that Alya might be more optimistic about her chances. If Alya weren't already deep in conversation with one of the women across the table, he would have asked her directly.

"So I've forgotten to ask before, but did you and Marinette finish up whatever it was that was keeping you so busy that Alya and I couldn't visit?" Nino asked. On Alya's other side, Marinette paused and turned to look at the two boys, frowning slightly as she did. Adrien frowned himself, trying to remember when on earth Nino had contacted them about a possible visit. He didn't remember anything like that.

"Wait, when did you ask about coming over?"

"A few weeks back," Nino told her, and finally it clicked in Adrien's mind. Aha. He had wondered what Nino was talking about. It had been long enough and Adrien had given it so little thought at the time that he had completely forgotten it. "I texted Adrien like normal, because he responds faster than you do normally-"

"I'm usually at work!"

"-but instead of the normal 'yeah come on over when are you going to arrive?' we got a 'It's not a good weekend, we're going to be crazy busy probably until the break'. And then there was no further explanation after that at all. But seriously, Adrien, you didn't even ask Marinette? Rude."

"I knew what her answer was going to be!" Adrien protested. "When you texted- Marinette, that was the week where both of us were so busy. I think I got the message on the day when I went to the print shop to get all of those transparencies for the screen printing stuff run off. I just responded
and then forgot about it, because I had a million other things to think about."

"Wait, what was going on?" Alya demanded, pulling out of her other conversation and frowning at Marinette. "Was this when you had a couple too many commissions to do?"

Adrien snorted. "Try **eleven** too many commissions," he corrected, trying to not laugh when Alya and Nino gaped and then turned their stares on Marinette. "She had **twelve** total to work on. If we had had any guests over, we wouldn't have been able to do as much work that weekend as we did."

"We could have still come over and helped with your work somehow!" Alya protested. "If we had known that you were so buried..."

Adrien snorted before Marinette could respond. "I'm not sure how much there would have been for you to do. I think I took care of everything that a non-sewer could do, and I still had time left over."

Marinette nodded in agreement. The most Alya and Nino could have done would be speeding up the ironing, if Marinette had done the screen-printed shirts on Saturday instead of Sunday (and provided, of course, that they could have rounded up two more irons and ironing boards), but Adrien had done a fantastic job doing that on his own, and maybe speed up the studding work. Then there would have been the problem of sleeping arrangements when Marinette's apartment was completely unusable. She wouldn't be able to stay in her own room (even now, hints of the screen-printing chemicals and ink lingered in the air, even though the place had been airing out whenever it wasn't raining), and there would be no way that she would want to sleep on Adrien's couch, especially with Nino and Alya sleeping nearby on the inflatable mattress.

Alya sighed, slumping in her chair. "Okay, **fine**, I understand why you said that you were busy. How did that happen, that you got so many commissions?"

Adrien let himself zone out a little bit while Marinette told Alya and Nino all about all of her commissions so he that could glance around the room. There were a few tables where people clearly all knew each other well, while others where there wasn't **quite** as much conversation between the different groups. Some people were quite tense and only picking at their meals- other finalists, Adrien guessed. Alya had a bit of tension in her shoulders, too, but it wasn't **quite** as obvious. He was willing to bet that she believed in her topic and her research strongly enough that she wasn't overly concerned.

That could be a good thing if she won, or it could backfire very, **very** badly if she didn't win or even place in the top three. Adrien wanted to believe in her, of course, but he had had enough fencing tournaments or basketball games when he was younger when he went in a little too confident in his skills and then was crushed when he didn't **quite** end up coming out entirely on top. It was much better to go in wanting to just do his best and then be willing to be happy for the winner.

Once dinner was done and their plates were cleared away, the next thing on the program was overviews of the finalists' work. There apparently **were** only five finalists after all, and each had an interesting topic. All were well-researched, all had fabulous plans, and all would be **very** deserving winners.

Alya looked a little more nervous now, as did the other contestants. The judges had had each of the finalists stand up when their project was first announced, and all five looked a little queasy. They clearly all just wanted the announcement of who had won over with, but dessert came first.

"That's just **unfair,**" Alya grumbled as the generous slices of cake were delivered to the table. "I know these are absolutely delicious, but I'm so nervous that I won't be able to enjoy it."
"Ask for a to-go bag," Nino suggested as he shoveled a generous forkful into his mouth. He gave a hum of delight as he chewed. "Oh, this is good. Marinette, did your parents bake for this?"

Marinette shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't spent any time in the bakery today. I got home, washed up, and then immediately got ready to come over here. They could have made a floor-to-ceiling replica of the Eiffel Tower in the bakery and I wouldn't know."

"That's not fair," Alya groaned, prodding at her cake. "You're taunting me with potential Dupain-Cheng cake and I'm too nervous to enjoy it."

"Maybe they won't clear things away until after the evening is over," Adrien suggested. That was what he would do, since he would know that the very people that the celebration was for wouldn't be able to eat anything. "It wouldn't really make sense to clear things away right away. It's not like the plates are in the way of anything."

Alya just nodded and prodded at her cake some more, glancing between her watch and the judge's table frequently as she did. Adrien went back to enjoying his dessert, and he had to admit, Nino was right. The cake was so good, he wouldn't be surprised if it was a Dupain-Cheng creation. But he couldn't fully enjoy it like he would have wanted; while he wasn't anywhere near as nervous as Alya was, Adrien couldn't deny that the anticipation was giving him butterflies.

*Good* butterflies. Or, well, non-akuma butterflies. Normal butterflies.

Ten minutes later, most of the room had finished their cake and everyone was either staring at the head table in anticipation or chatting with their neighbors. The head of the competition- Mrs. Beaumont, Alya had told them- stood up, dinging her spoon against the glass. The room gradually fell silent, and all eyes turned to the front.

"And now for the part of the evening you've all been waiting for," Mrs. Beaumont announced, beaming out at all of them. She had three envelopes in her hands, one bronze, one silver, and one gold. One for each of the winners. "As always, I want to first thank all of the contestants for putting so much work into their entries. It was a delight to get to read all of them and learn about what our reporters are interested in, and I speak for our entire panel when I say that I hope that no matter what the outcome is tonight, we want you to forge on forward with your research, because it is outstanding." She paused for applause. Adrien grinned as he joined in. He knew how hard Alya had worked for her entry to get this far, and he was sure that the other contestants had done just as much work on their own pieces.

Mrs. Beaumont waited for the applause to die down before continuing. "Now, I could keep on talking about the need for innovative research in reporting and all the good that comes out of it, but I think we'll spare all of you and jump right to the winners. Without further ado- in third place, receiving a grant to help further their research, is..." She paused, pulling out a slip of paper from a bronze-colored envelope. "In third place - Ms. Sylvia Millet!"

Everyone clapped, and a dark-haired woman hurried forward to receive her certificate and the check, grinning the whole way. She posed for a photo and shook hands with the judges, and then headed quickly back to her spot.

Mrs. Beaumont waited for the applause to die down before continuing. "Now, I could keep on talking about the need for innovative research in reporting and all the good that comes out of it, but I think we'll spare all of you and jump right to the winners. Without further ado- in third place, receiving a grant to help further their research, is..." She paused, pulling out a slip of paper from a bronze-colored envelope. "In third place - Ms. Sylvia Millet!"

Everyone clapped, and a dark-haired woman hurried forward to receive her certificate and the check, grinning the whole way. She posed for a photo and shook hands with the judges, and then headed quickly back to her spot.

Mrs. Beaumont waited for the applause to die down, then picked up a silver envelope. "Thank you, thank you... now! In second place, receiving a grant and two months of travel funded... congratulations to Mr. Tristan Pascal!"

There was more applause, and a tall blond man dashed forward with a wide grin on his face. Once he got his photos and shook hands with the judges, the whole room went silent with anticipation.
Adrien glanced to the side and saw that Alya had a death grip on Nino and Marinette's arms, looking absolutely frozen as she waited to hear if she had managed to achieve her dream...or if she would have to content herself with an honorable mentions position, which wouldn't get her any travel or money for her research.

"And now for the winner of this year's research competition," Mrs. Beaumont announced to the deadly silent room, picking up the gold envelope and opening it. "Receiving a very generous grant and six months of funded travel to the destinations of their choosing in order to further their research, please give a very loud round of applause to this year's first place winner- Ms. Alya Césare!"

Chapter End Notes

So, as I mentioned last chapter: I'll be posting a chapter of the HTFAM Outtakes story in just shy of a week (it was originally part of the main story, and then was scrapped in favor of a time skip), and then HTFAM-verse will be taking a short break so that I can get a bit farther ahead with my writing of the final bit. I'm working to keep that break short (I only have five chapters left to write, and I have chunks of varying sizes of all of them done), but I'm also working on the PatBC sequel because I was planning on starting to post that soon (lots of projects and SO LITTLE TIME YIKES).
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

So there was a bit of a timeskip here, just to make the story go a bit more smoothly. Assorted things that happened during the skip:

-that Outtakes chapter, where Marinette moved in with Adrien for good and subleased her apartment to her coworker Abbey;

-Adrien had a summer internship at a Physics lab;

-Alya took off on her trip; and

-There were a couple trips to Paris, where they got to see their friends a few times.

The story picks up in the fall, after Adrien is back at school. Enjoy! :)

"Shoot, I'm gonna be late!"

Abbey laughed as Marinette frantically shuffled papers around, trying to get everything into some semblance of order before she left. An embroidery sample tumbled off of the desk and onto the floor, and she scooped it up to hand back to Marinette. "You could just watch the vlog later, you know. Like the rest of us non-Frenchy people."

"Alya would know, and Alya would end me." Marinette found the last of the papers she needed and shoved them into her bag. "And she was hinting something about doing something special since Adrien's birthday is coming up, either during the vlog itself or later in the week."

Abbey grinned at her. "Are you doing anything special for your boy's birthday?"

"Of course. You saw what I was making for him." Abbey had been kind enough to let Marinette use her apartment- well, the balcony on her apartment- when she was screenprinting Adrien's gift, so that Adrien wouldn't suspect anything. "And I'll be baking a cake tonight, and then his birthday dinner on Saturday. He didn't want anything too crazy, since he's got schoolwork to focus on." Marinette glanced at the clock again and eeped. "I gotta go! See you later!"

Marinette raced out of the building, waving to her other coworkers as she passed. She slung the strap of her bag over her head as she headed down the road, just barely on the edge of running. There were probably a few people staring, but that didn't matter.

Alya's fifth travel vlog was going to start in seven minutes, and Marinette was not going to miss it.

There was a minute left before the start by the time Marinette had raced up the last of the stairs and burst into her and Adrien's apartment. At the table, Adrien glanced up from the computer and lit up when he saw her.
"I was starting to think that you wouldn't make it!"

"I got in a designing groove and lost track of time," Marinette apologized. She plopped down in the chair next to Adrien. "Tikki was the one to remind me that it was time to go."

"Good job, Tikki," Adrien said with a laugh. He grinned at the small god as she popped out of Marinette's purse. "Otherwise, I bet Marinette wouldn't have remembered until Alya texted her wondering what she thought of the vlog."

Marinette spluttered. "You could have reminded me too, you know!"

Adrien shrugged. "Sure, I could have. But I figured that you were probably on a design kick, and I didn't want to interrupt you. Besides, the vlog will get posted later on. You could have watched it then, and Alya would have just had to wait for your reply."

Marinette just shrugged. She knew that Alya always posted the vlogs once the livestream had ended (and then she would give them English subtitles once she had the time, which usually meant while she was traveling). "I know. But I wanted- oh! Here she goes!"

"Welcome, everyone!" Alya exclaimed as the screen came to life and showed her sitting in a small room. She was wearing a new outfit- a light, loose top with wide sleeves and gorgeous designs on it, probably something that she had just bought. For once, her long hair was tied up, presumably because of the heat. "And hello from Egypt! I've been here for the past week, learning more about the Egyptian Ladybug. And the first thing to know- she was known as the Goddess Ladybug! Like our current-day Ladybug, she had a yo-yo as a weapon. And as you might know from one of my earliest Ladyblog videos, she kept the king at the time from sacrificing an innocent person in order to try to bring back his dead love. She also kept her community safe from wildlife and any attackers. Very cool!"

"She also kept the community safe from evil spirits that looked like animals to normal people," Tikki piped up. "Most of the time, wildlife didn't come particularly close to where the people were! There was too much activity for them."

"She was the sworn enemy of the king after she kept him from completing his attempt to bring back Nefertiti, but guards were very reluctant to go after someone who was seen as a goddess!" Alya continued. "I've got some photos of some of the papers describing her and what she did. I'll post those later. But first, let me catch everyone up on what I've been doing!"

"I'm glad she's enjoying herself," Adrien said as Alya chattered on about the tours she had gone on and the experts she had talked to (through her translator, of course). "And I'm glad the newspaper is letting her post these on the Ladyblog instead of limiting her. I suppose it reaches a slightly different audience than her newspaper blurbs?"

Marinette shrugged. "Maybe? Actually- yeah, I think you're right. The pieces she does for the newspaper tend to be more cultural pieces, instead of strictly focused on her research. And not everyone looks at the Ladyblog, so it won't conflict with her piece at the end."

Marinette had to admit that it was a great way to keep the Ladyblog active and relevant now that she and Adrien- and by extension, Ladybug and Chat Noir- were out of the country. It was fresh content with new holders, and as a bonus the renewed traffic meant that Alya could get a decent amount of money from advertising on the Ladyblog. That could either go towards her savings, or be earmarked for helping with the cost of any future Miraculous research.

"Can you say hi from us?" Marinette asked as Alya started flipping through the comments for
questions to answer. "And tell her not to get kidnapped by anyone wanting to use her for a sacrifice this time."

Adrien laughed as he typed exactly that. "She's going to complain and say that that's not her fault, you know."

"It was entirely her fault. She should have stayed hidden instead of running out and then getting distracted when we arrived."

"Okay, it was not my fault that I got kidnapped, Adrien and Marinette," Alya said only seconds later, and they both snickered. "Okay, maybe I could have paid a little more attention to my surroundings and- okay, okay, yeah, maybe I could have left a little more space between myself and the fight, but how else was I supposed to get good footage? And I was fourteen, so stop bugging me about it. Anyway, on to the next question, from Lindsay-"

"It's always about the good footage with her," Marinette sighed. "I'm just glad that Lucky Charm always fixed things. Otherwise, she would have been in serious trouble."

Adrien nodded in agreement.

Five minutes later, Alya signed off. "I have a meeting and dinner with a local historian that's going to tell me even more about what other kinds of things the Goddess Ladybug did," she told the audience. "Feel free to leave any more burning questions, and I'll see if I can find the time to make and post a short video answering as many of them as I can! No promises, though, since I have a lot on my schedule, and I also need to get some cool stuff posted, in honor of my friend Adrien's birthday coming up. Stay Miraculous, everyone! Bye!"

"That was nice," Tikki said. She swallowed the rest of the cookie that she had grabbed from the kitchen halfway through the webcast and wiped the crumbs from her mouth. "Some of the details aren't exactly correct, but it was a long time ago and my holder didn't exactly share everything with her people. In fact, she never even corrected the idea that she was a goddess. She just said that she was needed elsewhere and then retired once the last of the demons were driven from the area and the king had died."

Adrien grinned. "That's clever. I think everyone figured out that we're not immortal gods, though."

Plagg, who had been napping in the sun, squinted over at Adrien. "Speak for yourself, kid."

"He was," Tikki said in exasperation. "Really, Plagg, if you listened-"

Adrien put the computer away as Marinette headed into their kitchen to start dinner, both of them ignoring the bickering kwamis. She stepped out of Adrien's way automatically as he joined her, reaching past her to grab a knife to cut up an onion.

It made her smile to think about how comfortable they were together. Even out of the suits and in a non-fighting environment, they were truly a team. Part of her had been a little worried when they first officially moved in together that somehow they would run into problems that they hadn't had when they had her apartment as a backup, but so far, those fears seemed unfounded.

Subleasing her apartment to Abbey and then turning it over completely once the end of her lease hit at the start of the fall had been a great decision.

"Should I get this browning?" Adrien asked. He shook the cutting board filled with sliced onion at her. "Or is the meat not ready yet?"
"It's ready!" Marinette grabbed her own cutting board and made a few more quick cuts. "Or close enough, at least. But it'll need garlic, too."

"Got it!"

"Adrien, fingers away from the frosting."

Caught, Adrien's hand retracted from the bowl. He pouted at her.

"Not even a little taste?"

"Not until I'm done frosting the cake, you can't!"

"But Tikki has!"

Marinette spun around to see a pouting Tikki flying after Adrien. "You told! I told you not to tell on me!"

"That was only valid if I got some frosting, too!"

"Both of you, out of the kitchen," Marinette ordered. "Plagg is the only one allowed, since he isn't stealing anything."

Adrien snorted, even as he stepped out of the kitchen area and Plagg smugly zipped in, carrying his rice heating bag. "Princess, Plagg steals from us whenever we're making anything with cheese in it."

"But I'm not making anything with cheese in it right now, am I?" Marinette took the bag from Plagg and popped it in the microwave to heat it up for him before he could start to whine. "So he's allowed. You two will get any leftovers, but you have to wait. And Adrien, don't you have stuff to work on anyway?"

"Yeah, I guess. But the siren call of sugar summoned me to the kitchen when I started working on it."

Marinette hastily muffled a laugh before Adrien could interpret it as an invitation to return to the kitchen. She returned to trimming her cakes and cutting them in half to fill with frosting and chunks of chocolate. The microwave dinged and she removed Plagg's heat pack, setting it where he would be out of the way. Plagg let out a delighted little trill and settled down, smirking at a pouting Adrien and Tikki.

Adrien's birthday cake was a two-tiered chocolate cake with vanilla buttercream, with chunks of chocolate between the layers. He had insisted that she didn't have to go all-out decorating it, but, well...

It was something Marinette enjoyed doing, and besides, she wasn't exactly running short on time now that she only had one commission to work on. She could spare the entire evening to make and decorate a cake for Adrien.

"I'm so glad that I don't have quite as many papers and other writing things to do this semester," Adrien said as Marinette finished trimming and crumb coating the bottom layer, which promptly
went into the fridge. She had to push a few things out of the way, but it would work. "And Ben said that next semester should be similar."

"I still don't fully understand why they couldn't have balanced the writing-heavy classes out more." Adrien had explained it before, about how some classes were prerequisites for others and how they got more into the research-y classes later in the program. But she still thought that something could have been done to keep Adrien from practically drowning under papers for two semesters. "Or at least have the professors talk to each other and adjust assignments accordingly."

Adrien just shrugged. "I learned a lot, though. It's all important stuff to know and I don't know if I can really think of much anything that could have been dropped or scaled back at all without affecting how much I learned. I'm just glad that year is over." He grinned. "And more electives this year! I like getting a little more freedom to choose my classes."

"Yeah, that was my favorite part of uni, too," Marinette started stacking the second layer of cakes, slightly smaller than the first. She had chocolate chunks left over, which she dumped in the bowl with all of the cake trimmings. With the layers stacked, she started trimming the edges to make them more even. "I took some costume-making courses just for fun, since I had space in my schedule thanks to the summer courses I took. Those were absolutely great, and I learned some techniques that I've been using on my commissions."

"Ooh! Did you have outfits that you actually made during those, then?"

Marinette glanced over. Adrien had apparently forgotten his homework in favor of watching her. Either that, or he was deliberately procrastinating. She was rather suspecting the latter. "Yeah, of course. I'll show you next time we're back in Paris. Most were tailored to my size, since I didn't really know anyone going to any costume parties or anything." She was surprised that she hadn't shown Adrien her costumes already, but maybe he had been busy when she modeled them for Nino and Alya. "It's too bad we didn't talk about this before we went back to Paris in September. I think the next time we'll both be in Paris will be- what? Christmas, probably?"

"Probably."

Marinette made a face as she started to crumb-coat the second layer. They had gone back to Paris several times over the summer- twice before Alya left, once shortly after, and once right before Adrien had to start his next semester. The first two had, of course, been to visit Alya before she took off for six months. The third visit had been to visit Nino, to distract him from Alya's absence, and the forth had been for Adrien's now-annual end-of-summer photoshoot for his father. Marinette had tagged along for part of the time, and they both visited with Nino and their other friends while they were there. Adrien had gone over to her family's house several times, and it would have been the perfect time to show him all of the costume pieces she had made while in university.

Ah, well. It would have to wait until Christmas, then.

They both worked in silence for a few minutes. The second layer of the cake went in the fridge while Marinette colored some of the frosting for piping. The layers came out for a final coat of buttercream, then they got stacked. Marinette felt Adrien's presence come up behind her again as she considered the cake, trying to decide where to start with the decorations.

"I'm not done yet, kitty," she chided playfully. "No trying to steal anything. Plagg, keep an eye on him."

"Turning my own kwami against me!" Adrien exclaimed in mock offence. "And no trust, to boot. I
just wanted to watch you work your magic."

"Uh-huh. So why are your fingers creeping towards my frosting bowl again?"

"I thought it was the scraps!"

Marinette just shook her head and grinned as she turned back to work, starting to frost the first flower on the lower tier. She would have to use the short step stool she had bought to be able to decorate the top of the cake properly, but that could come later. She kept the corner of one eye on Adrien, making sure he didn't try to sneak any of the frosting.

She would have some left over, she already knew that. But she had been planning on mixing it together with the cake scraps for another treat that they could have before Adrien's birthday dinner. Adrien just had to be patient first.

Adrien was yawning by the time Marinette had piped the last flower onto the top of the cake. His arms snaked around her waist as she stepped back from the cake. "That looks incredible, Bug. Need any help putting it away?"

"No, I just have to cover it and then it'll be fine." Marinette picked up the large cake box she had grabbed earlier in the week and opened it, carefully lowering it over her work until it reached the table. "We'd be in trouble if I had to keep it in the fridge. We have no space."

"Haven't you kept other cakes in the fridge before?"

Marinette had to think about it for a second. "Maybe, yeah? I think I've put fruit in between the layers before and then it has to go in or the fruit will spoil. But this just has the buttercream and chocolate."

"Ah." Adrien yawned again. "I think I'm going to go get ready for bed." He shot a hopeful look at the frosting bags on the counter. "Unless I could have some frosting first?"

Marinette giggled. "How about you go get ready and then come back out here before brushing your teeth? Then the frosting will be ready for your tasting."

Adrien grinned. He pressed a quick kiss to her cheek, then obediently dashed off towards their bedroom. Marinette tried to smother her grin as she giggled over his childlike eagerness.

As soon as Adrien was gone, Tikki popped over. "Ooh! Leftovers!"

Marinette snatched the bowl of scraps away before Tikki could dive in. "Patience! Let me finish mixing this up first, and then you and Adrien can have some."

Tikki let out a little squeal of excitement and went to perch on the fridge, watching Marinette as she carefully squeezed and scraped all of the extra frosting into the scraps bowl. The rest of the dishes got washed up, and then Marinette turned her attention back to the leftovers. The bits of cake got broken up as she stirred, working until it was only a little bit chunky. She pulled out an ice-cream scoop and made up a bowl for herself and Adrien, and a smaller bowl for Tikki. Plagg got a chunk of Camembert.

"Oh, I love you," Adrien said happily as soon as he returned to the kitchen and was handed his bowl of cake and frosting mix. "This is amazing, Marinette. Never mind the actual cake, this is great."
Marinette laughed at Adrien's contented expression. "Ah-hah! So that's the real reason that you're dating me, for the sweets!"

"Mm-hmm." Adrien leaned over to kiss her. "And you're the sweetest of them all. The treats are just a bonus."

Her cheeks turned red at that and she ducked her head. Adrien just grinned.

Adrien was having a very, very good day. He had had a lie-in that morning- Saturdays were the best- his favorite dish for lunch, and now his friends from school (plus a few of Marinette's co-workers that he knew well) were coming over for dinner. The weather had been lovely, and he had spent part of the afternoon reading out on the balcony.

In short, it was the perfect way to spend his birthday, and it wasn't even over yet.

Adrien set the table as Marinette worked on adding the finishing touches to dinner and a few appetizers. It would be a tight fit with six of them at a table meant for four, but they would make it work. He and Marinette were used to being up in each other's space all the time anyway, so they would be together on one of the cramped sides.

"Oh, there were two packages for you in the mail today," Marinette called over. "One from Nino, and one from Alya."

Adrien perked up. "Birthday presents?"

"I assume so."

It wasn't long before Ben arrived, followed by Paul. Sarah and Abbey, the two of Marinette's coworkers that Adrien knew best and was friends with, arrived five minutes later. They were grinning and giggling over something.

"I'm not even going to ask," Adrien said dryly as he greeted them. He knew both of the women knew about his relationship with Marinette, and they were likely giggling over some sort of joke about it. "I'm glad you could make it."

Sarah grinned. "We heard that Marinette would be baking and we didn't want to miss it," she told him. "And I suppose we wanted to wish you a happy birthday, too."

Adrien just grinned. He couldn't lie- he wouldn't turn down an opportunity to have Marinette's baking, either, even if he had to sit through something boring in order to eat.

Not that his birthday dinner would be boring, per say. Just that he wouldn't blame them for coming just for the cake. Adrien could definitely confirm that the cake would make pretty much anything fully worth it. They had sampled the leftovers mix again after lunch, and it was every bit as delicious as Adrien remembered.

He was going to have to hit up the gym at the university after this if he wanted to stay in modelling shape, but again- so worth it.

"I'll have snacks out in a minute," Marinette called from the kitchen. "I just have a few more things
to get ready.

Adrien promptly trotted over to check on Marinette. She had only just pulled a few cheeses out of the fridge. She was sliding a round of Brie into the oven and rolling a chunk of goat cheese in a mix of dried cranberries and nuts. Adrien could see where the cheeses would go—there were crackers and apples on a platter, with a shallow dish for the Brie to go on once it came out.

It was also obvious why she hadn't gotten it started earlier. With their guests there, Plagg couldn't venture out to steal the cheese. If Marinette had pulled the cheese out before, there would be chunks missing before it ever reached the table. With the goat cheese, it probably wouldn't ever reach the table.

"Anything I can do to help?" Adrien asked. "Or is it a matter of just waiting for the Brie at this point?"

"It's just the waiting, mostly." Marinette placed the goat cheese log on the platter. "I have a few things to cut up yet, but I can get it done in under ten minutes."

"I can help, and then you can come out and socialize." Adrien stepped around Marinette to reach for some pita bread. She had made it earlier in the day, and Adrien had been itching to get his hands on it ever since. "How many pieces to a round?"

"I was thinking six."

Adrien nodded and started cutting as Marinette put the finishing touches on the other trays. Soon enough, only the Brie was left, with six minutes left before it could come out. Adrien and Marinette stepped out of the kitchen, Adrien heading over to where Paul and Ben were standing and Marinette going to join her coworkers.

"-so I'll have to go back for a Masters to get much higher in the lab, but for now it's a great way to put everything I learned to use and really see it in action properly. I also get to see what kinds of research are going on and what new ideas are being thought up—y'know, what kind of questions are being asked. It's interesting to hear about, and it really gets me thinking about what kind of things I might want to look into, if there are any questions I want to answer." Ben shrugged. "Right now, it seems most everything I come up with is already answered or being looked into, but that's fine. I'm still learning the ropes."

"I wish I could have gotten an internship at one of the Physics research labs over the summer. It sounds like a great experience." Paul looked envious. "But I guess there's next year. I'll just fix up my resume in the meantime."

"There's people in the Tutoring Center that can help you with that, you know."

Paul looked interested. "Really?"

"Is that where you picked up all of those formatting tips?" Adrien asked, joining their conversation. Ben had helped him with his resume the previous year, polishing it up and making it look properly professional instead of, well, a beginning uni student's resume. "They really helped make mine look a whole lot better. Before, it was just kind of meh."

"Same with mine," Ben told him. "But yeah, it was something I learned there. It's funny how a few changes can make something like that go from boring to crisp and professional, huh? They're not even big changes."

"Oh, my god. Are they seriously talking resumes right now?"
All three of them glanced up to see Marinette, Sarah, and Abbey giving them an exasperated look. Adrien just grinned.

"What, and you three weren't talking fashion two minutes ago?" he teased. He raised an eyebrow when all three shook their heads. "Really?"

"We talk about other stuff, too," Abbey informed him, still grinning. "Sarah was telling us about how her father decided to dig up a stump in front of their house. Apparently it's a little more work than he was anticipating."

Paul looked puzzled. "Wait, why are they digging it up?"

"They want to plant another tree, and there's not enough space to plant it elsewhere." Sarah shrugged, looking amused. "And my dad wanted to make sure that the old roots wouldn't get in the way, so he dug out this giant pit to try to get all of the roots that he could from the top meter or so. And it was a big tree when it died, so it had pretty large roots, too. My uncle decided to turn a couple of them into cutting boards, since the wood was still good."

"Why did the tree come down in the first place?"

Sarah made a face. "It died. Or it was on the way out, at least. There was one really large branch that was dead and the rest was really skimpy on the leaves, so my parents had it cut down before it could come down in a storm and damage the house or something. And now they can plant a new tree sooner and get it growing."

"And they couldn't hire someone to dig it out...why?"

Sarah laughed. "My dad figured he could do it himself," she told them as the timer went off in the kitchen and Marinette let out a yelp and dashed off. "And he did, to be fair. It was just more work than he was expecting."

Paul looked incredulous. "How could he not expect digging up a bunch of tree roots to be a lot of work?"

Conversation petered off a bit as snacks were brought out and everybody moved over to fill up a plate. Adrien helped himself to several crackers heaped with melted Brie, relishing in the flavor. It was a simple snack he rarely got to have, since Plagg refused to share his baked cheeses at all and any attempts to make it for himself resulted in Plagg claiming the cheese within seconds of it coming out of the oven and eating half of it before Adrien could open the bag of crackers to go with it.

Maybe they would just have to have snacks like this every time they had people over. Plagg would sulk later on about it, but he would manage.

"So you've gotten assigned a new tutor, right?" Ben asked after everyone had been eating for a few minutes. "I think I remember you telling me something about that."

Adrien nodded. He had gotten a new tutor, since it had worked out so well the previous year. "Yeah. I've only had a few meetings with him so far, but it seems to be working out all right. Except he's a grad student, and he already said that he can't edit my papers since he TAs for a couple of the courses and it would be a conflict of interest or something."

"I can look at your papers if you want," Ben assured him. "It's no problem, as usual. And I think he might just be misunderstanding what you want. It's not the content that you need a second set of eyes for, it's the writing."
"I think he's just trying to dodge out of the work," Paul chimed in. "I know the guy Adrien's talking about, and he *hates* teaching others. He'd rather just spend the time on his own project."

"He does a decent job with the teaching, though," Adrien objected. Sure, he was no Ben and Adrien didn't think they would ever develop the same rapport that he and Ben had, but his grad student tutor *did* do a good job of tutoring.

With him, at least. Ben had mentioned before that it was easy to tutor Adrien, so perhaps it was a matter of Adrien's learning style just working well with the way his tutor taught.

"Again, I'm guessing that he thinks there would be some fairly heavy edits needed," Ben told them. "Like step-by-step walking through, even if you *are* in your final year and should be past that. If he knew it was just grammar and checking the bibliography-"

"He's never going to let me forget that," Adrien complained half-heartedly. "*Once* I messed that up. *Once.*"

"-then he probably wouldn't mind doing it, but I really don't mind reading stuff over," Ben finished. "It's a good excuse to see you, at any rate. It's strange *not* seeing you at work."

"It's quieter now with the summer interns gone, I bet," Adrien commented. He and Ben had somehow ended up at the same place over the summer- Ben in a permanent entry-level position, and Adrien as a summer student intern- without realizing it beforehand. They hadn't worked together, really, but they ran into each other a lot. "Fewer people bumbling around being lost."

Ben grinned at the memory. Adrien had gotten lost on his second day, getting completely turned around on the wrong floor and having to be escorted back down to the right lab by an amused senior physicist. Ben had been nearby to see the whole thing. "Hey, at least when I started there were *other* people being lost. If I had started during the school year, then I would be the one weirdo new guy that couldn't find my way around."

"Like I was, since I started a week after everyone else." Even with an actual job in his field, Adrien hadn't been able to get out of this start-of-summer photoshoot. His job had been understanding and accommodating of his other work, enough that Adrien wondered if Nathalie had perhaps reached out to them.

He *hoped* not. He didn't want Nathalie and his father trying to interfere with his other jobs in the future, especially considering that he wanted to quit modeling once he had gotten a permanent Physics job back in Paris.

"We were trying to get Adrien over at Madam Rosalie's place last summer, but no luck," Sarah told the others. She was grinning. "We had to go with some other blond model for the latest ad campaign, but they weren't half as fun as Adrien. Absolutely no sense of humor, that guy."

The evening continued, dinner coming out after people stopped refilling their plate with appetizers as much. Once they had stuffed themselves, Adrien opened the presents he had received. Paul and Ben had both gotten him a book- Ben on a Physics study, Paul a book of puns in English- while Sarah and Abbey had brought him a gift card for a flower shop in the neighborhood. Nino had sent a CD with new music mixes, and Alya had sent several fun key chains that she had bought during her travels. His father (well, Nathalie, probably) had sent a pen.

That left Marinette's present.

"I honestly don't know what it might be," Adrien said with a laugh as he held the box by his ear,
shaking it slightly. "You would think I might have at least a clue, but..."

"Okay, stop trying to guess and just open the present already," Sarah said with a laugh. "I know what it is, but then again Marinette wasn't trying to keep it a secret from me."

Adrien grinned and pulled the paper off, revealing a plain box. He opened the box and saw a t-shirt sitting on top, light green with printing across the front, reading:

\[ \sqrt{-1} \ 2^3 \Sigma \pi \]

*and it was delicious!*

Adrien laughed. "Oh, I like this one," He said happily, pulling the shirt out. It was clearly screenprinted, something Marinette had designed and made. Under it was a second shirt, this one light blue. It read *Where does bad light go?* and then under it *in a* and a picture of a prism.

"Oh, that must have been hard to print," Sarah said, leaning forward. "With that many colors? Wow. I wouldn't even touch a design like that."

"It was fun to watch her do that one," Abbey told Sarah. "Lots of painter's tape was involved. That and a hairdryer."

Adrien pulled out three more shirts, all adorned with different math and science jokes. His grin got wider with each one. The last shirt had a cat pun, and he laughed and pressed an impulsive kiss to the top of Marinette's head. "Thanks, Mari. I love them!"

He was going to wear them *every day*. They were the best shirts he had *ever* owned. They weren't meant to be the height of fashion, which made them even better. They were meant to be *fun*.

Adrien was still grinning over his shirts when Marinette went to get the cake. The *ooohs* and *ahhhs* pulled Adrien's attention back to the table. Marinette was bringing the cake out slowly, candles lit and shining. She didn't seem to be struggling under the weight at all, which was impressive considering just how *much* cake there was. Paul and Ben dove out of the way so she could set the cake down on the table.

"Man, I normally just get a plain round cake for my birthdays," Paul said, entirely impressed. "If my parents are feeling fancy, then *maybe* there's sprinkles or something on top."

"My parents taught me how to decorate cakes," Marinette told him. She got the cake settled and stepped back. "They run a bakery-patisserie. My mom is even better at the delicate decorations than I am. You should see some of her creations, when she has a good amount of time to work on it."

Their guests looked suitably impressed.

Adrien blew out the candles, plucking a couple of them out and licking the frosting and cake crumbs off of them. Marinette started cutting generous slices, serving them up onto plates and passing them around the table until everyone had a piece.

"Oh, this is *heaven,*" Sarah said happily after she had taken her first bite. "I don't know how you two stay as skinny as you are if Marinette can make stuff like this. It's *so* good."

"Genetic lottery," Adrien suggested. He licked a generous dollop of frosting off of his fork. "And running in the gym at school."
"Or running late, probably," Abbey joked. She grinned at Marinette. "How many days have we seen Marinette dashing in minutes before a meeting? She can move impressively fast. She just flies up the stairs."

It didn't take long for them to finish up their cake. Adrien brought plates into the kitchen while Marinette cut pieces for their guests to take home, so that they wouldn't be completely drowning under the amount of cake left. Ben helped gather up the wrapping paper for them, piling it neatly on his chair so they could throw it away later.

"Thank you all for coming," Marinette told them, handing everyone a Tupperware of cake. "We enjoyed having you over!"

"We enjoyed eating your food," Sarah told her with a laugh. "And thank you for having us."

The others nodded. One by one they left, with Abbey leaving last. She waved a cheery good-night and headed across the hall, carrying her cake. As soon as the door was closed, the kwamis materialized out of nowhere.

"I smelled cheese," Plagg complained, sniffing dramatically and floating towards the kitchen. "And no one offered any to me. Is there any left?"

"Some. I think there's a bit of Brie and a lot of the rind left-" Marinette started. Plagg let out a cheer and zipped off before she could finish.

"So much for leftovers from that," Adrien said dryly. He hadn't been expecting the leftover cheese to last, of course- cheese rarely did with Plagg in the house- but he hadn't expected Plagg to finish it up tonight.

Oh, well. At least that would mean that they wouldn't have to get any containers dirty from storing the cheese overnight. And Plagg would probably lick the plates clean, which would make them easier to wash.

Tikki blinked up at them more politely than her counterpart. "May I have some cake?"

Marinette laughed. "You didn't have enough earlier?" Still, she led the way back into the kitchen. "I'll cut you a small slice."

"If any slice could be considered small with that cake," Adrien commented with a laugh. The tiers were tall enough that even a thin slice contained a good deal of cake, which was the best way for cake to be, in Adrien's opinion. "I'll start loading the dishwasher."

Plagg was noisily slurping up the remaining bits of Brie and rind when they got to the kitchen. Adrien opened the dishwasher and started loading in their used plates while Marinette cut a bit of cake for Tikki, moved the rest of the cake back to its place in the kitchen, and covered it. Between the two of them, they got the kitchen back in shape and everything put away before long.

"Well, that went well," Adrien said around a yawn. He stretched, grinning when Marinette's eyes slid down to the exposed skin of his stomach. "Bedtime?"

"Sounds good." Marinette flicked off the lights in the kitchen and dining area, ignoring their kwamis passed out on their respective cheese and cake plates. Adrien scooped up his gifts as he passed the pile. Unsurprisingly, the t-shirts from Marinette were on top. Adrien grinned down at them again, snickering to himself a little as he noticed the little cat paws ambling around the words on the cat-pun shirt.
It was so cute.

"I can't decide if I want to wear one of these to bed just so I can put it on right away, or if I want to save them and wear them out all week."

Marinette laughed as she followed him back to their bedroom. "I'm glad you like them."

"I love them. I'm not going to wear anything else, ever." Adrien grinned down at his shirts. Even when he got clothes from his father, they weren't unique, just one piece that was pulled before it went to stores and given to Adrien. But these were unique pieces, made just for him, handmade by his amazing, fabulous girlfriend.


Chapter End Notes

For those non-geeky people out there: \( \sqrt{-1} \ 2^3 \pi = i 8 \) (sum) \( \pi \), aka I ate some pie.

My brother has a t-shirt like that and he wears it all the time.

Yay last arc of HTFAM! I'm not strictly done writing the chapters- I have three left- but I'm far enough ahead that I should be able to finish those up pretty quickly (and I'm on the last chapter of There's No Camembert in Tibet, which is my other big project atm) (I should be able to write 3 chapters before January, right? Right???).
"Big news, y'all!"

Alya was beaming at them from the computer screen. She had texted both Adrien and Marinette that this was a vlog that was Not To Be Missed, and they had both assured her that they would be watching her live, just like they did every other week. Marinette had taken off from work a little early, and now she and Adrien were curled up on the couch together, watching Alya onscreen.

"So I've been here in Russia for almost a week," Alya started, grinning. "I was researching an ancient Ladybug/Chat Noir pair- though that's not what they were called, of course, but I'll get to that later- and I happened to be talking to another historian, once that is friends with the woman I've mostly been talking to. And this guy had heard about my research, and he wanted to tell me about something he had found when going over the historical records."

"More users?" Marinette guessed. "Not Ladybug and Chat Noir?"

"It's possible," Tikki told her. "Likely, even."

"So there were some reports of some strangely-dressed people in a small village in southwest Russia- oh, two centuries ago? A bit longer, even? He was showing me some printouts of the reports- he was really nice, had it translated into French already for me- and he said that right around that time, there were reports of famines and wild storms, one storm so strong that a river reportedly changed course! We couldn't go there, of course- it was too far away, and hard to get to, and I have quite the full itinerary already- but he showed me pictures and video footage of his tour of the site. Of course there's not a whole lot there anymore since stuff filled in a bit and there's trees growing in what was supposedly the old river bed now, but it was cool. There were cliffs that had crazy cracks in them- and supposedly those happened after one of the storms, too.. The landscaping is just..." Alya shook her head, apparently lost for words. "It's strange. Jagged and smooth all at once. Some of it has had geologists shaking their heads trying to figure it out."

"Rouge spirits," Tikki said at once. "Just like you heard about up north. They scarred the land. The users- they were probably from the temple in Tibet, just there to deal with the spirits. Not people who were already there, like at the castle."

"That would make it harder to blend in then, wouldn't it?" Marinette asked. "Like, small village, mysterious newcomers that arrive just when two superheroes turn up out of the blue to fight the demons causing crop failure? It wouldn't take much to put two and two together and realize that oh, hey, those visitors must be those strangely-dressed superheroes."

Tikki made a face. "Yeah, that was the problem with having all of the Miraculous in the temple in Tibet. Sure, the users were all well-trained before they went to battle and sure, we learned a lot, but then when the need arose for us to help somewhere, it was hard to blend in. Users just arrived, fought for however long it took, and left again."

"So I decided to look more into those records," Alya was saying on-screen. Plagg, finally awake, floated over to see what the fuss was about. "And one user- hang on, we actually commissioned an artist to do some sketches of the superheroes from the descriptions of the locals. Here it is!" She held up a piece of paper. On it was a drawing of a tall, thin man in red robes, decorated in gold and
black with images of dragons. Black dots decorated his face in the general pattern of a mask, though the top extended into his hairline. The second figure was a woman, dressed in a white dress with black boots and gloves. She wore no mask.

"Dragon and Goat," Tikki said immediately. "Oh, I remember that! Some Russian witch had tried to bless her crops and instead managed to summon the demons to curse them instead. The Rat had to keep an eye on her for almost twenty years and summon other users to come and help whenever things went awry."

Plagg snickered. "Which they did. Often. She never learned."

"I kind of want to commission this guy to do all of my illustrations for superheroes, since he did such a great job with these," Alya said. She was grinning. "I'll put his details and a link to his website in the description box below, in case anyone is interested in seeing more of his stuff. But aren't these great? But like I was saying, these outfits plus the stuff going on at the time screams superhero. And what's possibly the most exciting part of this- in my eyes, at least- is that this confirms that there were famines and storms that weren't what they seemed and were likely magic-caused by something that Miraculous holders could fight!"

"Ooh, that's right," Marinette realized. "Because she has those other reports of famines around the time and place where Miraculous holders were meant to be. So this really strengthens her argument for looking into those more."

"And I have some other instances- not as well supported, of course- where there was a Miraculous holder at the same time that there was a famine and strange storms," Alya continued, unknowingly echoing Marinette's words. "So I'll reach out to more historians with this information, and hopefully I'll get more information. I'll keep you updated on that. Keep your fingers crossed for me!"

"That was a gorgeous painting," Marinette said as Alya started to update them on the Ladybug and Chat Noir that she had intended to go to Russia for. She had commissioned a drawing of them, too, but they hadn't been completed yet. "Though I think it would be cool to have drawings from different artists all over the world, each doing the Miraculous holder from their region."

Adrien nodded, grinning. "Yeah, that would be cool. You should text her that. You'd get different art styles, then. But I like her idea of having the drawings, both to go with her article at the end and for her book. That would make it a lot more interesting to page through."

"It makes it easier to picture the users." Marinette nodded. "Also, then it's not just maps or pictures of the land."

Tikki flew into their faces, frowning. "Shh! I wanna hear what she learned about Lady Red and Black Leopard!"

"Oh, those are cool names. I'm jealous." Adrien grinned at Tikki's renewed shushing. "Okay, okay we'll be quiet now. Probably."

Alya wrapped up ten minutes later with a quick reminder that she would have to miss the livestream the next week as she would be traveling during her normal time.

"I'll spend the time getting caught up on subtitling things," Alya told them. "Since I know I'm
behind! And maybe I'll post pictures of the duo if those drawings get finished up in time. But I'll be back the following week. Stay Miraculous, everyone!

"Well, that was nice," Adrien said as the livestream screen went dark. "And she actually found a decent amount of information, too. I'm always surprised by how much gets saved over the years."

Tikki giggled. "Well, people do keep journals and diaries. And the historians knew what Alya was looking for before she arrived, so they probably had plenty of time to look things up and have everything in order to present to her when she arrived."

Adrien nodded. He remembered Nino commenting on that after his first trip to see Alya. Apparently Alya had arrived and was greeted by piles of photocopied journal pages and paintings, bookmarked history books, and a list of places to visit. They only had a limited amount of time in each place, and the historians tended to be as eager as Alya to make the most of their time together.

After all, it wasn't every day when one got to try to find hints of historical superheroes in the old journals. They would get listed in Alya's article and in her book, thanked for their help, and obviously they got paid for their time. It was an attractive offer now that Alya had the funding and backing to actually make her book a reality.

"When is Nino going to visit her next, do you know?" Marinette asked as she retreated to her sewing table. She had a commission in-progress, silvery fabric and leather clashing yet coming together in a spectacular fashion. "He went for a few days when she was in Greece, I know, but has he decided on when he's going next?"

"Not when she's in Russia, that's for sure. She's in the middle and that's ages away and expensive to get to." Adrien had to think about it. "I don't know. Alya isn't exactly close right now. He probably won't be visiting a whole lot until she gets back to this part of the world."

Marinette made a face. She knew it was expensive for Nino to fly out and visit Alya, especially when the flights were longer and he would have to take a long train ride to get to where she was, but she didn't think she would be able to handle being away from Adrien for as long of a time as Nino and Alya had been apart, not now that they were dating and used to seeing each other every day.

Marinette started sewing again, and Adrien dug his books out of his bag. He wanted to get a good start on his work for the weekend, mostly so he and Marinette could have one of their stay-in dates Sunday evening. Adrien got distracted for a few minutes thinking about the date and how he could maybe make it a little more special- he was getting flowers for sure, even if he hadn't entirely decided how he was going to get them without alerting the press. Admittedly, though, the press had been bothering them less as of late- apparently their story was no longer selling, which really wasn't a surprise. No one in London cared about a French model that much. Still, it didn't hurt to be careful.

Maybe he could persuade Abbey or Sarah to pick the flowers up for him. He'd just have to send the gift card along with them and give the best instructions he could about what kind of flower(s) and how much he wanted. They would probably be willing to do it, too. It would be in return for a bit of teasing, of course, but it was never mean-hearted at all.

Pulling himself out of musings over flowers (what kind would Marinette like best?), Adrien refocused on his work. He had readings to do for his Physics of the Universe class and he really wanted to understand the piece about dark energy.

It was a lot to take in. Adrien had to read the piece through slowly, taking notes as he went. It was
interesting and there were a lot of complex theories there, but oof was it ever a dense piece.

Adrien had just started re-reading the piece for a fourth time when Marinette let out a squeal of excitement. He glanced over to see his girlfriend staring at her phone with a look of glee on her face, commission forgotten in her lap. She looked up and waved her phone at him.

"Ivan and Mylène got engaged!"

"Oh?" Adrien hopped up- it was time for him to take a break, anyway- and headed over. On Marinette's phone screen was her Facebook feed, with a large photo of Ivan and Mylène in front of the Eiffel Tower. Ivan was down on one knee, bringing him pretty much to eye level with Mylène, and he held a tiny box. She swiped to the next photo, where Mylène was kissing Ivan, who apparently hadn't managed to get back up again.

Or perhaps he had simply decided that it would be easier to kiss his new fiancée if he was on her level for once.

"That's great!" Adrien exclaimed as Marinette scrolled down to comment on the news. "That's- wow. Wow, we are at an age when people get married, aren't we? That snuck up on me."

Marinette nearly choked laughing. "I know people our age who already have kids- and yes, that is plural. They're proper adults and everything."

Adrien let out a somewhat squeaky noise at that, rather like a dog's toy. "Multiple kids?"

Tikki giggled at him. "When we started binding with humans, some people had kids in their teens. Not in all cultures, though, and not everyone, and it was late teens, mostly, but..."

"Oh, gosh." Adrien made a face. "And here I am, still in school!"

"Almost done with school," Marinette corrected. "Unless you're going to do a Master's program in the future."

Adrien shrugged. He hadn't decided yet if he wanted to continue, though if he did he would definitely go to a university in Paris so Marinette could get a permanent job while he got another degree. He thought he might imitate Ben and do a couple years of work before deciding, because.

"Mylène says that Ivan proposed in front of the Eiffel Tower, right where they landed when Ladybug and Chat Noir saved them after the Stoneheart battle," Marinette reported, reading the block of text Mylène had posted with the photo. "Where Ivan confessed his feelings- or, rather, where Ladybug passed over Ivan's song lyrics so Mylène could read them," Marinette read with a laugh. "Aww, I'm glad I got to be part of their love story! They're so sweet together."

"And you suggested the song in the first place too, didn't you?" Adrien grinned at Marinette. "It seems like your parents aren't the only shippers in your family."

Marinette turned a lovely shade of pink. "They were cute together! I saw the way they looked at each other and I had to help!"

Adrien just grinned and kissed her.

Ivan and Mylène's engagement was still on his mind the next day as Adrien went to classes and holed himself up in the library to study before his final, mid-afternoon class. They were the first people his age that Adrien knew who were getting married, but that was probably more due to the fact that he didn't know a ton of people his age well enough for him to know if they were married
or engaged at all.

...that was pretty sad, actually. Maybe he should actually try to talk to the other models he worked with more.

Sighing (and getting a dirty look from a student studying nearby), Adrien turned his attention back to his notes on angular velocity. He was pretty sure he understood the most recent lesson, but he wanted to review before trying to do any of the practice comprehension questions.

One hour ticked by, and Adrien dove into the problems at the end of the chapter. He had to work a bit slower than he would have liked thanks to the amount of writing in each question, but he was getting everything right on the first or second try.

And then Adrien's phone lit up as a message came in. He glanced over for a moment, slightly distracted, then ignored it for another few minutes as he struggled with a problem in his homework. After a few more attempts, Adrien gave up on the problem for the time being and picked up his phone. He had a couple emails- his tutor was apparently rescheduling their Tuesday meeting, which was a pain but he would manage, and a professor was reminding them about an upcoming due date- plus a text from Nino. He opened it eagerly, wondering what his friend was up to.

_Nino_: Hey quick question can I visit next weekend

_Nino_: I want to talk to you guys about something

Adrien grinned, setting his phone aside to check his planner. He didn't think he had anything scheduled or any big projects due shortly after the weekend, but it didn't hurt to check. A quick skim told him that his schedule was largely free- he had a rough draft for a short research paper due on Tuesday, but it was largely done save final edits. He could deal with having a visitor, and it would be nice to see Nino again.

Adrien grabbed his phone to text Marinette. He knew she was busy, but Tikki might respond for her, which was just as good.

_Adrien_: You don't have anything going on this weekend, right? Having a visitor wouldn't be a problem?

Message sent, Adrien turned back to his textbook. The problem didn't make any more sense than it had before. Adrien was starting to suspect that there might be a translation issue going on, or maybe it just wasn't very well worded. He snapped a picture of the problem in the book and sent it off to Ben, then moved on to the next problem while he waited for a response. He had only gotten as far as writing down the key details when his phone lit up again.

_Nino_: and if you need further persuasion I can bring stuff back to Paris for you/Marinette

_Nino_: if you have anything you can send back atm that is

Adrien had to think about that. _Did_ they have anything to go back? They had sent back a decent enough chunk of stuff during their summer visits, things that they were sure they wouldn't need over the rest of the school year. Marinette had stuffed her suitcases with screen-printing screens that she knew she wasn't going to use again for orders but that she thought might be usable for her own projects, since they weren't _specific_ to the band that the order had come from. There had been a couple summertime outfits that had also already made a return to Paris, but not _too_ many since they would have warm weather again before they left.

Maybe Marinette had ideas of what could go back. She was the one with more outfits and stuff...
from her sewing, after all.

**Marinette:** Nothing on my schedule! finished my commission yesterday and haven't started the next yet

**Marinette:** so having a visitor would be fine I think

Adrien grinned. That's what he had thought, but it was important to check. He would hate to have Nino over if Marinette had planned an outing with her coworkers or had a commission she wanted to focus on and she didn't want the distraction.

**Adrien:** we'd love to have you! When will you arrive?

**Nino:** Fri evening! Will text you the time when I know exact time

Adrien turned back to his homework, grin on his face. It would be fun to see Nino again, even if it hadn't been *that* long since their last visit. As time went on, it seemed that he missed Paris *more*, not less.

This weekend couldn't come soon enough.

---

Adrien froze three hours and twenty-two minutes later. He was an idiot. *A* actual idiot. How could he have forgotten the one key detail about Nino's visit? His friend would be staying with him, of course, and there was no way that they would be able to hide the fact that he and Marinette now shared an apartment. If they hadn't originally been next-door neighbors, they would probably just hide Marinette's things and see if Marinette could stay with Abbey in her old apartment for the weekend, just sleeping on the couch or something. That still could have been dicey- what if Nino decided to go knock on her old apartment's door if she was running late for something and Abbey answered instead?- but it might have worked.

But there would be no way for him to hide that she was no longer living next door. There was too much of a chance that Nino would see Abbey with Marinette when Marinette went in or out, and Marinette would have to either borrow Abbey's extra key or knock whenever she wanted to head in. And Nino might want to see Marinette's apartment, and it would be *blatantly* obvious if he saw Abbey's apartment that it was no longer Marinette living there.

"I'm so stupid," Adrien groaned that evening as he and Marinette sat down to dinner. He had explained the whole problem, since he hadn't explained *who* their visitor would be before, and now Marinette looked nervous as well. "I mean, what else could I have done, though? I couldn't exactly just tell Nino that no, I didn't want him visiting. *That* wouldn't be at all suspicious."

"*You could* just tell your friend the truth," Plagg pointed out from his spot on top of the fridge. He didn't like all the stress during his dinner. It gave him indigestion, and he found the whole thing ridiculous. "You've been dating, you forgot to mention it before. Whoops."

"He's right, you know," Tikki agreed. She had found the whole cloak-and-dagger evasion thing just as perplexing as Plagg did. "There's no need to get too upset about it. You were going to tell him eventually, right?"

Both Adrien and Marinette made a face at that.
"I kind of wanted to keep on waiting to tell them at this point," Adrien admitted a bit sheepishly. "Like right now, it's just a 'whoops forgot to mention that' moment. If we keep waiting, it could be a pretty funny reveal once we get back to Paris if we play things right."

"Yeah, I want to see Alya's face when she learns about it," Marinette agreed. "And if Nino finds out about us, then he'll tell Alya and we'll miss that. And if Alya knows, it's really likely that it'll spread enough for Adrien's father to find out."

They both puzzled over the problem for several moments before Marinette spoke up. "What if I go back to Paris to visit my parents that weekend, then? If I'm not here, as long as my stuff isn't laying around all over the place, Nino shouldn't have any reason to suspect that I'm living here. Then all I have to do is arrange the trip without my parents mentioning it to Nino, so he doesn't figure out that I set it up after he talked to you about visiting."

"Maybe just pretend that you already made the reservations," Adrien suggested. "And you meant to mention it earlier, but you just forgot. They'll probably be so happy about seeing you that they won't mention it to Nino."

"That sounds good." Marinette paused for a moment, then glanced around at the apartment. "Uh, so after dinner I need to buy those tickets, and then we need to do some serious cleaning."

Chapter End Notes

Marinette totally thought that Adrien had been talking about having one of his school friends over for dinner lol

Is the continued secret-keeping entirely for the sake of future shenanigans? Absolutely.

Also, because I keep getting questions about it (this is why you should read author's notes, people): please pay attention to the story rating before asking about the status of Adrien and Marinette's physical relationship. I'm not going to change the rating and as such have to keep the content appropriate for younger fans. There might be a few more obvious hints of stuff going on behind the scenes in some chapters, but it's not going to get more direct than that.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Happy HTFAM-iversary! :D :D :D

Saying that Nino was a little put out when he arrived and found out that he had just missed Marinette would be an understatement. Apparently he had really been looking forward to talking to both of them.

"I could have rescheduled if you guys had remembered earlier," he grumbled as he and Adrien took the bus back to Adrien's apartment. "Geez. What are the odds of that happening?"

Adrien winced, feeling slightly guilty. Nino didn't get worked up easily at all, so there must have been some reason for the visit besides just seeing old friends. He hadn't mentioned any problems with his relationship with Alya at all before, so maybe there was some other reason entirely.

At least Adrien hoped that whatever was upsetting Nino wasn't something to do with Alya. He really wasn't good at relationship advice, even after dating Marinette for over a year.

Communication was key, he knew that much. Split the chores equally, and help each other. Show the other person that you love them, and surprise them with little gifts and favors. He thought that that was pretty straightforward, really. At least in theory.

"Marinette had forgotten that she had bought tickets to go back to Paris for this weekend," Adrien said, shrugging and making a can't-be-helped face. "She only remembered literally last-minute, and only because she got the email with the ticket reminder."

Nino laughed at that. "Classic Marinette. I thought she had gotten better at remembering things like that."

"She has gotten better. She's just been so busy with both work and commissions that she forgot," Adrien said immediately, feeling slightly defensive on his girlfriend's behalf. Sure, Marinette could be slightly forgetful at times, but it wasn't as though she didn't have a perfectly good reason for that. In school, she had been a superhero on top of everything else (being a student, being class president, helping in her parents' bakery, doing assorted commissions for people, building her design portfolio and teaching herself new sewing skills...). Now, she had both her normal job and a fairly steady stream of commissions to deal with on the side. Even though she was doing an impressive job of balancing everything while still having time left over to spend with Adrien and to relax, it was still a lot.

Nino just shrugged. "If you say so."

The bus pulled to a halt and they hopped off and started walking towards Adrien's building. Dusk had fallen now, and the streetlight were on. A cold gust of wind blew up the street, making both men shiver.

"So how's your work going?" Adrien asked as they walked. Nino hadn't mentioned it much during their last few phone calls, clearly distracted about something. Adrien was willing to bet that that
"something" was probably Alya. "You said there were a couple different movies you were working on?"

"Yeah," Nino confirmed. "One's another indie, and then- you'll never believe this- this big-shot director called me up, wanted to know if I could do the soundtrack for his next movie! So I'm starting on that while I polish up the stuff from the small film. I'm super-excited about it! It could be my breakthrough into getting, y'know, proper steady jobs all the time that actually pay a decent amount. I'm still DJ-ing some evenings, just so I still have that money, but hopefully I won't need to do that anymore soon. Or I'll at least be able to cut down on my hours."

"That's great!" Nino really deserved it. He'd been working so hard for years to try to get a job like that, and for someone to finally notice his hard work and talent was just great. "Next thing you know, you'll be a famous movie soundtrack composer."

Nino snorted and shoved him lightly. "Yeah, yeah. Whatever, dude. I just hope this leads to other jobs, that's all. I don't need to be famous."

Adrien laughed and knocked him right back. "Industry-famous, I mean. Well know enough that directors come knocking at your door. Not necessarily famous like people running after you in the streets."

"Yeah, that would suck." Nino sent a look at Adrien. "Have the tabloids been bugging you again? I know they had kind of been giving up on that gradually."

Adrien couldn't help but grin. "Yeah, they've been giving up on harassing Marinette and I. We're boring and they just keep getting the same answers to their questions. There's an occasional article, but..." He shrugged. "People are tired of seeing the same claims over and over. It's not selling anymore. Also, people have stopped caring about some random French model and his designer friend."

They reached the building and Adrien unlocked the door, ushering Nino in in front of him. They headed upstairs, passing Abbey on the stairs. Adrien waved in greeting and then hurried ahead so that he could unlock his apartment door and get Nino in before Abbey could come up and give the game away by going in to what used to be Marinette's apartment.

That was way too close. Hopefully they wouldn't have that problem again while Nino was there. Adrien felt a little bad about not slowing to chat with Abbey like he and Marinette normally did, but he wasn't entirely positive that she would remember to act like she lived in another apartment on the floor once they reached their respective doors. In fact, he wasn't even sure that Marinette had told Abbey that a friend from Paris was visiting them over the weekend.

He would apologize and explain later. Abbey would understand, he was sure.

"Your apartment has really come a long way since the first time I first saw it," Nino told Adrien as he stepped in and glanced around. He spotted Adrien's slightly puzzled look and rushed to explain. "I mean, the first time Alya and I visited, there wasn't that much here. There was just what you could carry in a couple suitcases and what you had ordered- and, like the furniture and all, but the place was just really, really bare. And now it actually looks lived in. You have all sorts of little knick-knacks here. It looks like a home, instead of a temporary living place."

Adrien laughed. "Yeah, I like it," he admitted. "But it's a curse as well. Marinette has a lot of stuff too, and we're both wondering how we're meant to get it all home once we're done in London. We're going to have to do a couple trips at the end of the year, I think, and maybe ship some stuff. It's been a pretty common conversation topic even though we have a couple months left."
"Are you leaving anything here?"

Adrien had to think about it for a moment. "Well, the furniture, obviously," he joked. "And the kitchen stuff and whatnot. I think the landlady might be a tad bit upset if we ran off with that stuff. But in all seriousness, yeah, there's some stuff that I really don't need to take back," he added before Nino could groan at him too much. "Like, my dad got sheets and towels and whatnot for me when I moved here, and I have plenty of that stuff back in Paris. Marinette did the same, I know. I think we're just going to wash that stuff and donate it. It would cost more to ship it back than it would to just replace things."

Nino nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense."

"I don't know what else we might get rid of," Adrien said. He led the way into the kitchen and pulled out the soup he and Marinette had made to heat it up. "Any food left over, obviously. Marinette bought a sewing table for herself, and that'll probably go to one of her coworkers. Stuff like that. But I like a lot of the things we've acquired and I don't want to get rid of much of it."

"What about your fake marriage certificate?" Nino asked. He grinned at Adrien. "I like that you still have that up, actually. Like, did you never find anything better to put in that frame?"

Adrien had to laugh. "What are you talking about? That's the best thing that could go in that frame. It's such a big part of my London experience. I'm gonna keep it forever."

"You're going to go to all the trouble of bringing it back to Paris? Really?" Nino gave Adrien an incredulous look. "Dude. It's just a piece of paper. You've got the photos and everything, if you wanted reminders of your prank."

Adrien just grinning, shaking his head. He knew Nino wouldn't understand it. The fake marriage certificate reminded him of the start of his time in London, and the start of a new period of his life. It was funny, and, well, what else was he going to put up on his wall? Pictures from his photoshoots?

Nino and Adrien joked and laughed as the soup reheated and they sat down around the table. Adrien checked his phone before he tucked in and saw that Marinette had gotten into Paris and had gotten home safely. Her parents were happy to see her, of course, but still were a little puzzled over her sudden decision to visit. Adrien typed out a quick reply and then put his phone away so he could focus on his dinner.

And so he could talk to Nino, but Nino didn't seem to be in a super-conversational mood now that their meal was in front of him. In fact, he seemed rather distracted.

"This wasn't just a normal visit, was it?" Adrien asked when Nino fell quiet again during dinner. "Was there something you wanted to talk about?"

Nino laughed, finally setting down his fork so he would stop fiddling with his food. "You know me too well. Yeah, there is, but I kind of wanted to talk to both you and Marinette at the same time..."

Adrien tried not to look too alarmed. If Nino came back to London for another weekend, they would have a really hard time trying to hide the fact that he and Marinette were living together. He would have to find some other solution. "We could maybe Skype Marinette so you can talk to her, too."

Nino grinned. "Yeah! That would be great. I didn't really want to make another trip over, since I'm
trying to save my money at the moment."

Adrien blinked at the comment. "...for trips to see Alya?"

Nino shook his head. "Not... not exactly. But that's part of what I wanted to talk to you guys about, actually."

Completely lost, Adrien just nodded and reached for his phone. "All right. I'll text Marinette and ask when she can Skype us. Her parents will probably be off to bed soon, so I'm sure she'll be free before long."

Nino nodded.

It didn't take Marinette long at all to respond eagerly. Apparently her parents had already headed off to bed and she was more than willing to Skype with them. She wanted to know what news Nino had to share, and she didn't want to have to just hear it secondhand. Adrien had to hold back the affectionate greeting on the tip of his tongue when Marinette's face popped up on his computer screen. They had done so well so far with not making their Paris friends overly suspicious, and to trip up now would be a letdown. Instead, he contented himself with a "Hey, Marinette!"

"Hey yourself," Marinette shot back. Her eyes were twinkling. "Long time no see, stranger."

Adrien just snorted.

"Okay, less flirting from you two," Nino said, pushing Adrien over so he could sit in front of the screen as well. "Hi, Marinette! So I hear you forgot about your trip until last minute."

Marinette made a face and stuck her tongue out at him. "Yeah, yeah. I thought it was next weekend, not this one. Otherwise I would have let you know ahead of time so we wouldn't miss each other." She made another face (She's so cute, Adrien thought rather dreamily) and then refocused on them again. "So what's up? Adrien said that there was something you wanted to talk to both of us about?"

Abruptly, Nino was nervous again. "Yeah. I, uh, it's, well..."

"Dude."

"I'm thinking about asking Alya to marry me!" Nino suddenly blurted, words rushing out together in a blur. "This December, when I go to visit her in Tibet."

Both Adrien and Marinette gasped.

"Congrats, Nino!" Marinette exclaimed, grinning. "Adrien! Give Nino a hug for me!"

Adrien was already on it, practically knocking Nino over in a tackle of a hug as he grinned. "That's so great! So that's why you're trying to save money right now! Have you gotten a ring yet? Man, marriage fever really has hit our group of friends, hasn't it?"

"I've narrowed it down to two choices," Nino said, shoving at Adrien's side. "Dude, get off. You're squishing me."

Adrien just laughed and wriggled forward a bit more for maximum squishage. Nino groaned.

"So did you want our opinions on the rings or something?" Marinette asked, leaning forward in a failed effort to see them better. "Adrien, get off Nino."
"I like how he listens to you but not me," Nino muttered when Adrien pushed himself back up. "And yeah, I thought I would ask you, actually, since you'd probably have a better idea of what Alya would like. And then I just wanted input from you guys on, y'know, how to do the proposal itself. Because I have some ideas, of course, but..."

Both of his friends grinned, eager to help.

"Well, if you have pictures of the rings, then you can send them to me now," Marinette said, scooting closer to her screen. "And then you can tell us about your ideas! I haven't really heard about Alya's plans for the Tibet part of her trip yet, so you'll have to tell us about that, too."

"Sending," Nino said, tapping at his phone and shooting the pictures in a text to Marinette. Adrien craned his neck to look at the rings. Both were fairly straightforward bands, one with small sapphires on either side of the middle diamond and the other with smaller diamonds alongside the large one, and both would be perfect for Alya. On the computer, Marinette let out a coo of delight.

"These are perfect, Nino!" she exclaimed. "Alya would love either one, really."

"But would she love one more?" Nino asked anxiously. "They're pretty much the same cost, so that's not an issue."

Marinette hummed and looked back at her phone. "I personally like the top one more, but that's just me."

"I concur," Adrien chimed in.

Nino let out his breath. "Okay, that's great. I was honestly about to just flip a coin and decide that way, but if both of you like that one better, then that's fantastic."

"So what about your proposal plans?" Marinette asked immediately. "You said you want to do it in December? And then Alya has a month of travel left after that, right?"

Nino nodded. "Yeah. I originally wanted to wait until she got back home but then I thought, then what makes it special? She's been seeing cool stuff for months. How is a proposal going to be memorable after that? And I had always thought that I might propose while we were traveling at some point, but after this year I think she'll be traveled out for a bit and, well, we can't really do a trip just for no reason plus a honeymoon. And she'll be in such a cool place in December, so..."

"Makes sense," Adrien said, grinning. "So what's the plan?"

Nino let out a long breath. "Well, it's not set in stone yet, but I'll be going on a Wednesday evening, then I'll be accompanying Alya on a couple outings. Then we have Saturday and Sunday to do whatever, since she's scheduled those days off. I leave on Tuesday, and then she heads on to the next place on Thursday. So I figured I would propose on Saturday, so we have a couple days together to, uh, celebrate-

Marinette and Adrien both snorted.

"-but outside of that? I really don't know. I was thinking about maybe a hike because it's gorgeous in the area she'll be in, but it'll be freezing and the weather might not cooperate, plus from what I understand, she'll be out hiking with her guides to various spots connected with the Miraculous during the week, so she'll probably be tired of that by the time the weekend gets there."

"She'll probably be ready for a massage and some hot tubs," Marinette said with a laugh. "Something indoors and warm. Pampering."
Nino grinned. "You're the best, Marinette. I like that idea. So maybe I can find some sort of spa to go to during the day or something?"

"Ooh! Or maybe hot springs," Marinette said, shifting in front of her computer again. "I know Alya mentioned those when she was looking at stuff for Tibet. She said it was too bad that she probably wouldn't have time to go to them. I mean, they're outside, but the one that she'll be closest to has an absolutely gorgeous view according to the brochures Alya was looking at. You're outside, but you're in the pool and surrounded by stream and warmth and then there's snow, like, half a meter away."


"And probably a little less expensive than a spa," Marinette pointed out. "O a lot less expensive, probably. And it's a nicer setting. More unusual. You can find spas anywhere, but hot springs are less common."

"So I could maybe propose there," Nino said, nodding to himself. "We'd obviously have to have towels and coats, like, right there for when we get out, so I could keep the ring box in my coat pocket and then...maybe I could get out first, and then while Alya is still in the water, turn around and propose right there..." Nino was on a roll now. "And then a restaurant afterwards. I'll maybe drop a few openings for her to let me know what restaurants she's maybe interested in next time I call her- hopefully they won't be booked forever in advance- and we can do that after, and then, ah... back to the hotel, probably." He let out a long breath, grin spreading across his face for real now. "You are actually the best, Marinette, has anyone ever told you that? I never would have thought of that."

"And I'm chopped liver, apparently," Adrien said with a laugh. "But I think that sounds amazing, Nino. Alya's gonna be so thrilled. Are you gonna try to get someone to take pictures of the proposal or nah?"

Nino made a face. "I...don't know? Like, if the opportunity comes up for me to somehow get someone, then sure, I might try, but I mostly want pictures right afterwards. We'll send you selfies afterwards for sure."

"I'm so happy for you guys," Marinette said again, grinning. "I can't wait to see those pictures and to hear how it went."

"You have to wait a couple months yet," Nino reminded them. "And I don't think I need to remind you not to breathe a word of this to Alya, right? I want her to be completely surprised."

"No problem, dude," Adrien assured him. "We won't breathe a word."

The rest of the weekend was mostly filled with Adrien and Nino hanging out. Since the weather outside had taken a turn for the crummy- "Seriously, dude, all of this rain is just depressing. How do you live here?- they mostly just hung out in the apartment and played video games. Nino kept adding new handicaps for Adrien so he could try to be able to win for once. Some were more successful than others.

"How are you still winning even when you have a blindfold on?" Nino had complained after Adrien narrowly beat him. "That's absolutely ridiculous, dude. Insane."
Adrien had just grinned. Plagg, who had decided to be helpful for once by hiding in Adrien's collar and whispering directions into his ear, sniggered quietly.

Nino headed back to Paris midday Sunday, and Adrien saw him to the train station before heading to a cafe nearby. Marinette would be coming in on the same train Nino would be leaving on shortly, and there was no point in heading back to the apartment early by himself. As he nibbled on the croissant he had ordered (nowhere near as good as the ones the Dupain-Chengs made, but still decent enough), Adrien thought about the bomb Nino had dropped on him over the weekend.

Nino and Alya would be getting engaged.

Really, it shouldn't have been a surprise. Nino had mentioned thinking about getting engaged before, and his only reservation had been Alya's trip and how being engaged or married while she was gone might affect them more than if they were simply dating. Now that Alya's trip was partway done and would be drawing to a close in January, it made sense that Nino would be thinking about engagement again. He could take advantage of the amazing places Alya was travelling to with her research to give Alya the magical proposal she had always wanted.

And all the planning and talk of engagement had gotten Adrien thinking. While he and Marinette had technically only been dating for just over a year now, he knew that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, without a doubt. They wouldn't be able to be public with their relationship until they got back to Paris and an engagement wouldn't change that.

But if they got engaged right before they went back...

It was something to think about. Also, he couldn't help but think that it would be funny to go back home and announce that they were engaged out of the blue, which would mean that they would have to keep their secret, well, secret for another few months.

Adrien's phone chimed, and he immediately lunged for it. Marinette's familiar contact popped up on his screen, beaming up at him.

Marinette: Just got in! I think I saw Nino on the platform, but only for a second and the crowd was too thick to check. I wanted to go over and say hi :(

Adrien grinned and hopped up, clearing his table and heading back to the station, the remaining part of his croissant in one hand. He had missed seeing Marinette, even though she had only been gone for two days. How Nino managed to go weeks without Alya, he wasn't sure. It had to be hard.

He was only outside for a minute before he spotted Marinette coming through the crowd with her little bag. He trotted towards her, a grin on his lips. She just rolled her eyes when she saw him.

"Miss me?" Adrien teased as he joined her and they headed together towards the bus station. "It's been forever!"

"It's been two days," Marinette corrected. "But yes, I suppose I did miss you, even though we video-chatted during that time. Can you believe it?"

"It's great news," Adrien agreed, picking up the change in topic easily enough. He had known that Marinette must have just been bursting, wanting to talk to someone about Alya and Nino's soon-to-be engagement. "I actually should have been expecting it. Nino had talked about getting engaged before, but he was just worried about the timing with Alya's trip. So it makes sense that he would want to propose now."

"Alya is going to be thrilled," Marinette said. She was grinning. "It's going to be just her kind of
proposal. Somewhere exotic and unique, but she'll be nice and comfortable in the hot springs."

"That was an amazing idea," Adrien told her. He had seen how much Nino had lit up at the suggestion, and he had spotted Nino reading up on hot springs in the region of Tibet that he and Alya were going to be visiting several times over the weekend. He seemed to be trying to figure out which would be closest and still have the best view and the best premises. "Nino was really thrilled to have more of the details in place. And I can't wait until he proposes. I want to hear how it goes, but there's still more than a month to go!"

Marinette laughed.

"Why now, though?" Adrien wondered. "Why are people getting engaged all at once now? First Ivan and Mylène, and now Nino and Alya. Well, within a couple months, at least. Soon. It's like there's an engagement bug going around."

"Well, I assume people were waiting until they graduated, for one," Marinette pointed out, giggling. "And then they probably wanted to earn some money before having a wedding. A couple years gives them that. They can get their careers properly started and get the time off they want for the wedding and honeymoon. And they've been together forever."

Adrien nodded. There was no denying that. He wasn't surprised that either couple would get engaged (or be considering it), just the fact that both couples would be making the same move within months of each other.

"So how was your weekend?" Adrien asked, deciding to change the topic for now. They reached the bus stop and sat down to wait. "Did you enjoy seeing your parents?"

"I did," Marinette agreed. "It was nice to work in the bakery for a bit again. I got to do some decorating, as usual." She giggled. "And I had to do a fast shower before I took the train back, because I was mixing up some bread last-minute to help my dad and I started the mixer up too fast and the flour went all over. I looked like a ghost."

Adrien laughed. That was so typically Marinette. "Oh, I wish I could have seen that. I bet you looked adorable."

"I looked a mess is what I looked, thank-you-very-much."

It didn't take long for the bus to come, or for them to get back to the apartment. Once they got back, it was time to return their apartment to normal.

"Oh, I'm astounded that Nino didn't notice anything," Marinette said as they hung up their coats. Up on the top shelf, Marinette's heavy sweaters and coats had been hastily covered by Adrien's sweaters, and the result was messy, to say the least. "We kind of just have things covered up everywhere."

"It helped that he was distracted," Adrien agreed. He pulled his shoes off and headed back to their bedroom, where they had stored most of Marinette's things that hadn't been simply covered to keep them out of sight. "I'm just glad he didn't come back into the bedroom at all. The stuff back there wasn't very well hidden- though at least we did remember to take out the trash this time around."

"Well, we didn't exactly have anywhere else to store things." They rounded the bed to pick up the sewing table, with Marinette's sewing machine perched on top of it. "How soon do you think they're going to get married? Do you think they'll have a long engagement, or a short one?"

Adrien had to think about it as they slowly moved table and machine around their bed. Truth be
told, he really didn't know. Nino had wanted to propose over a year ago- or, well, he had considered it some at that point, at least- so maybe they would want a wedding sooner rather than later. But then again Alya was going to be busy with getting all of her research organized and ready to publish, so maybe it would take them longer to plan the wedding. He couldn't remember if either Nino or Alya had ever mentioned to him what kind of wedding they would want to have- large or small, fancy or straightforward, even if they would have a wedding or if they would rather elope.

Yeah, he was pretty sure that they had never mentioned any of that stuff.

"It probably depends on a lot of things," Adrien said as way of answer. "I mean, we could ask Nino since he and Alya have probably talked about getting married before. Or we could wait and ask both of them after Nino proposes."

"I know Alya has mentioned wanting a late spring or early summer wedding, when the weather won't be too hot," Marinette continued, like she hadn't heard Adrien's comment. "So it'll either be a short engagement, or just over a year. I'd guess that they would go for the just over a year just to have the time to plan, but maybe I'm wrong."

"What are Ivan and Mylène doing?" Adrien asked as they set the table down for a short break. "Have they told you? You saw them over the weekend, right?"

"Early fall next year," Marinette said immediately. "Around the same time when they first started dating, though I think that decision was part because of that and part because Mylène loves fall."

"Does Ivan love fall, too?"

Marinette laughed. "Ivan loves making Mylène happy. And I don't think he had a super-strong opinion on the season." She perked up suddenly, clapping her hands together. "Oh! And speaking of Ivan and Mylène, Mylène wants me to go dress-shopping with her when I'm home for Christmas. She's going to look into making an appointment right after the holidays so I don't have to take too many more days off, but she'll let me know what she finds."

Adrien grinned as they picked the table back up again and kept moving. "She doesn't think Alix can give her the best dress advice? I'm shocked."

"I think Alix is in charge of helping with refreshments." Marinette maneuvered the table into place against the wall and they carefully set it down. "Or music, or maybe just the bachelorette party. Mylène didn't exactly have a ton of details squared away yet, since they only just got engaged."

"And now Nino and Alya are going to be getting engaged."

"Yeah."

Adrien swallowed a so who do you think is going to be next? He knew a few of their other lycée and collège friends were dating people, but he wasn't entirely sure how serious those relationships were, partly because he didn't want to pry and partly because... well, he hadn't been in Paris for the last two-plus years and even before that, he only saw some of his former classmates on a rather infrequent basis.

Slowly but surely, the rest of their apartment got back to normal, clothes and baskets of cloth and magazines going back to their normal spots. Adrien refolded the last of his sweaters and put it back in its spot before turning back to an exhausted-looking Marinette, who was surveying their living room with a tired look. A thought hit him and Adrien snuck up behind his girlfriend with a mischievous twist to his lips.
"We forgot something," Adrien said, grinning when Marinette turned to him with a puzzled expression. "Something *important."

Marinette frowned as she tried to figure it out, oblivious to his arm snaking around her waist to pull her closer. "Really? Wha- *eep!"

"*This,*" Adrien murmured, swallowing her yelp of surprise with a kiss. She melted into him with a hum. "Love you, Bug."

"I love you too, *Chaton.*"
"Delivery for one Marinette Dupain-Cheng who *definitely* lives across the hall and not with her secret boyfriend at all no siree!"

Adrien laughed as he answered the knock on the door to see Abbey standing there with a box and a postcard balanced on top. "You don't *have* to announce that every time you have something for Marinette, you know."

Abbey answered his laugh with a grin of her own as she handed over the package and card. "But what fun would *that* be? I always check to make sure there's no one in the hallway first, in case that helps. I don't want to be the one to spoil your secret."

"That's appreciated." Adrien set the box down on the couch. "Is Marinette still at work?"

"I assume so, if she isn't over here." Abbey glanced towards the staircase. "I think she was over in the fabric design department. We were looking into making an ombre winter coat and Marinette was going to look into if our machines could handle the dying on that kind of fabric."

Adrien frowned slightly, puzzled. In his experience, it was usually the head of the design group that talked to other departments, not an intern- even if that intern *had* been there for three years. "Why was Marinette talking to them instead of Mrs. Kelly? Wouldn't that be more typical?"

"Yeah, maybe in most groups. But Marinette has been working with the fabric design people more than the rest of us, so they know her better and she understands their jargon." Abbey shrugged. "It just made more sense to send her. Mrs. Kelly figured that they would be more willing to work with Marinette than with her."

That made sense. Marinette had mentioned working with the fabric design team before, talking about the challenges of patterning and how different types of fabric and the size of the knit or weave affected how the pattern looked. It just hadn't clicked that *oh, right, Marinette has a lot of experience with that team.* "Would it have to be made off-site if the on-site people can't do it?"

Abbey shrugged. "I don't know. Hopefully. I mean, we would probably hand-dye the original, but we want to produce and sell the coats, too, and hand-dying each one would, uh, not exactly be ideal."

"Or consistent, probably. And no one wants to go home every night with hands dyed weird colors."

Abbey made a face at the thought. "Yeah, exactly. Anyway, I'd better go. I have a date tonight. Have a good evening."

"And you too," Adrien responded. "I hope your date goes well!"

Abbey nodded and waved before vanishing into her apartment. Adrien headed back to the kitchen to continue layering the lasagna that he was making for dinner. He hummed as he placed another level of noodles on top of the cheese and sauce of the layer below it, then added more sauce. He swatted Plagg away from the cheese again with a sigh.

"I'm *hungry!*"

"Give me a minute and I can get you some of your cheese," Adrien said, sprinkling the cheese on and quickly covering it. "And you just ate an hour ago. I swear I'm going to find something else for
you to eat that doesn’t cost so much.”

Plagg made a rude noise. "I wouldn't eat it. I want cheese!"

Adrien just rolled his eyes as he got a chunk of Brie out of the fridge for Plagg to eat. He was lucky
that he and Marinette were doing well enough financially to not have to worry about the impact
Plagg’s eating habits had on their budget. Maybe his kwami would cooperate if they ever had to
tighten their budget belt, but Adrien doubted that they would ever find out.

He had just popped the finished dish into the oven and set the timer when the door opened and
Marinette came in. He stepped out of the kitchen, breathing a small sigh of relief as he did so.
Between the stove and the oven it had gotten pretty warm and the heat had started to make him feel
a little ill, especially since he was still wearing a heavy sweater since it was so chilly outside.

Adrien quickly shucked it and tossed it over the back of the couch. Their apartment was kept warm
enough that he didn't really need it.

"Hey, Kitty," Marinette greeted him, rolling up on her toes to kiss him. "How are things going?"

"Well, I met up with Paul today," Adrien told her, taking her coat and heading to the closet to hang
it up. "Over his lunch break. He read over two of my essays for final edits, so I have those finished
up now. He said he can meet up again this weekend to look at my other projects." Which was
good, because his grad student tutor still didn't do reading papers, even though Adrien had tried to
explain that no, he didn't need any help with the content, just the grammar. "And I got those
changes fixed, so I can just check those off my list of things to do."

"Great! I have a few things I need to check off my list of things to do, too. Not too many, though." Marinette glanced over at her sewing machine. "Then I can really start doing Christmas presents."

Adrien tried not to laugh. As far as he had been able to tell, Marinette had started do Christmas
shopping several weeks ago. She had come back from a shopping trip for both the fabrics for a
commission and a whole pile of other fabrics. They were the kind of fabric that was used for quilts,
and Adrien's suspicions were confirmed when he spotted quilt patterning pieces on the floor. A
good number of blocks had even already been sewn together, in between her commission work. He
wasn't sure if she had started anyone else's presents yet, but something told him she probably had.

Marinette headed to her sewing machine while Adrien sat down with some notes to review. Tikki
and Plagg settled down in front of Marinette's computer to watch a movie, each wearing a single
earbud. An air of domesticity settled over them all, making Adrien smile just a bit.

This is what he wanted from life. Never mind the career path, or where they lived, or any of that.
As long as he was with Marinette, he would be happy.

The sewing machine hummed in short starts and stops as Marinette got a jacket liner in and
attached, complete with pockets. Her tongue poked out of the side of her mouth as she worked, a
slight crease appearing on her forehead while she did difficult parts.

Not that Adrien was staring or anything, of course. He was focusing on his homework like a good
student.

By the time the timer went off, Marinette had finished the jacket and was snipping threads off of it.
Adrien cleared the table and pulled the lasagna out, making a pleased noise when he noticed the
browned cheese and bubbling sauce. He set it on the counter to cool a little and firm up while he
set the table and pulled out the leftover salad from the previous night. Before he had gotten far,
though, there was a sound rather like a cat getting its tail stepped on. Adrien spun around to see a
whining Plagg, frantically trying to get molten cheese off of his paws and tongue.

Adrien just sighed, turned the sink faucet to cold, and left it to run while he brought the salad out to
the table. Seconds later, the sound of splashing and gurgles floated out of the kitchen as Plagg flew
straight under the running water.

"How much do you want?" Adrien asked Marinette as she came to hang over the divider between
kitchen and dining area. "A big piece, middle, or small?"

"Middle, please."

Adrien served the piece up, then turned to his own plate. After a moment of deliberation, he took a
small piece. He was feeling a bit tired and if he were going to go to bed early, he didn't want to do
so on an overly full stomach.

"Abbey dropped by with some stuff from Alya," Adrien commented as they sat down. "And she
said that you were doing something with the fabric printing team this afternoon?"

Marinette perked up. "Yeah! It took a bit of back-and-forth, but I think we've reached a good
decision, I'll just have to talk it over with my team. We'll have to make a slight compromise on the
outermost fabric because they can't do fabric quite as thick as we were thinking, but Sandy
suggested a liner in between to make up the difference and that should work. And we'll have to
print out a few sample pieces to get the ombré just right, but that's honestly the fun part! And--"

Adrien listened as Marinette filled him in on her day, occasionally eating a few bites of his dinner
as he did. Marinette frowned when she finally got to the end of the story and she noticed his still-
full plate.

"Are you not feeling well?"

Adrien glanced down, frowning when he noticed that he had only taken maybe five or six small
bites. "I'm not that hungry, I think. I was standing over the stove in a really thick sweater for too
long and that made me feel a bit off."

"Do you want me to turn down the heat?" Marinette was already halfway out of her chair, ready to
head straight for the thermostat. "I can do that, just give me a moment--"

"No, it's fine. I took the sweater off." Sure, it was a little weird that the ill feeling hadn't entirely
vanished yet, but he was sure it wouldn't help if he was cold on top of that. "I'll finish this up and
then maybe go to bed early. Maybe I'm just tired."

Marinette immediately looked concerned. "Are you coming down with something?"

"No, no," Adrien assured her. "I never get sick. This is just a little bump. Really."

Adrien was not feeling all right.

Sniffling miserably, Adrien reached for the box of tissues closest to him. It seemed like overnight,
an entire gallon of crud had been shoved in his nose. No matter how much he blew his nose, he still
couldn't breathe.

"Oh, Adrien," Marinette sighed, rolling over. Adrien could feel her hovering over him. "You're sick after all, aren't you?"

"Ugh," Adrien groaned. "I can't be sick. I have class today, and I need to study, and -"

"You'll be staying home and resting," Marinette told him. "That's the only way you'll recover. I'll pick up some vitamins to help, and make you some soup. You can get notes from your classmates." At his groan, she frowned at him. "Adrien."

"Fine, fine, I'll stay home. I just have a couple classes today and tomorrow. I'll miss lab tomorrow if I'm still feeling sick then, but-"

Marinette pressed him back into bed firmly. "You can email your professor this afternoon. Rest."

Adrien sank back down, half-dozing as Marinette moved around their room, combing her hair and getting dressed. Even though he was only half-awake, Adrien still noticed that Marinette's clothes were definitely not the kind of thing she normally wore to work.

"You don't have to miss work for me," Adrien protested when he realized that Marinette wasn't leaving at all. "I'll be fine. I'm an adult, I can take care of myself."

"You're sick. Let me take care of you for a day." Marinette sat down on the edge of the bed, pulling the covers up to his neck. "And I want to make sure you actually eat something. You might be an adult, but I know you. You'll just stay in bed all day and not take care of yourself."

Still, Adrien protested. "You're using up your days off. You'll be needing those this year."

"I'll work from home. I have some prints to work on, after all, for some designs our team came up with. It might actually be easier to work from here, since one of the other teams at work is having model fittings and that is always hectic." Marinette brushed his hair off of his forehead, checking his temperature with the back of her hand as she did. "I'll run over to work and grab the stuff I need for that really quickly and check with the rest on the team on the coat printing, then I'll be back in case you need anything."

Once Adrien had been set up with everything he could possibly need, Marinette headed out, leaving the two kwamis to keep an eye on Adrien. Adrien sniffled miserably, reaching for his phone to text Paul and a couple other classmates to see if he could get notes from them. He would probably be out today and tomorrow, and then he would have the weekend to recover enough to be back in the classroom on Monday. This was the worst time of the semester to be out- they would be dealing with their most complex theorems and other things they had spent the entire semester building up to, and Adrien was probably going to have to schedule extra time with his tutor to get fully back on track and ready for finals.

It did not help that some of his classes, for the first time in his program, only had a final. That really put the pressure on.

Adrien dozed off once the texts were sent and only woke when the bed dipped under Marinette's weight once she returned. He blinked his eyes open, watching as she sat on the bed with her tablet in her lap, making adjustments to whatever was on her screen. A pile of test-size fabric prints sat next to Marinette, a variety of patterns and colors thrown together. Some had more iterations than others, which made Adrien guess that they were either closer to final print or just being trickier to get just right.
Mid-morning, Adrien couldn't possibly sleep any longer. He sat up partway, watching Marinette work. She would inspect the bit of fabrics, sometimes looking at the pattern itself, sometimes looking at something in the drape of the fabric and how it worked with the pattern. He wasn't quite what she was looking for, but sometimes she nodded, pleased, while other times she would make a face and make a note of something on her tablet.

It was relaxing to watch Marinette work. She was so focused on her work, but behind that focus was a true passion. Expressions flitted across her face as she worked with the fabric, and her tongue stuck out ever-so-slightly as she focused on making slight changes to her patterns. When she got something to work the way she wanted to, Marinette practically lit up.

Even as miserable as he was feeling, Adrien still couldn't help but enjoy watching her.

"I'm going to go make you some lemon tea with honey," Marinette announced mid-morning, setting her tablet and fabric samples aside. "That'll help with your throat. And I'll get you something to eat, too."

"Not hungry," Adrien muttered. He knew he should eat, but he didn't feel like it. His stomach was still roiling a bit. "But I'll take the tea."

Marinette sent him a sharp look. "You'll take the toast, too."

...on second thought, it was probably not a good idea to argue with Ladybug. She got stubborn when she had her mind set on something, and she wasn't going to back down.

Adrien sat up on the edge of the bed so he wouldn't spill anything when Marinette brought back the tea. He winced as he ran a hand through his bedhead.

Maybe he should take a shower or something after he had his tea. He didn't really want to do anything, not really, but it was probably a good idea. He had heard that the steam might help him clear up his nose, too, which was really tempting at this point.

He had forgotten what breathing normally felt like. It was awful.

"I'll make you chicken soup for lunch," Marinette said, making Adrien startle. He hadn't realized that she had returned already. "I've got the ingredients for it. But have this for now."

Adrien took the toast and tea with a quiet thanks. Marinette headed back out to get the soup going, and Adrien sipped cautiously at his tea. There were two pills on his plate and Adrien considered them for a second before shrugging and washing them down with a gulp of tea and a bite of the toast. He wasn't sure what exactly they were, but he assumed that Marinette wasn't trying to off him or anything.

One shower and a round of teeth-brushing (and hair-combing) later, Adrien wandered out to the living room, trailing a blanket behind him. Marinette had gotten set up at their table with her tablet, her computer and a sketchbook and was hard at work.

"Oh, you look a bit more alive now," Marinette commented as Adrien came in. She considered him and then grinned. "Well, better than before, at least. I'm not sure that's really saying much."

Adrien tried to muffle a laugh and ended up in a coughing fit.

They fell into a comfortable silence as Marinette worked and Adrien pulled out his phone, scrolling through his messages and checking his email. Occasionally Marinette got up to check on the soup, occasionally stirring it a bit.
"Any news from Paris?" Marinette asked when his phone buzzed with a message. Adrien checked, grinning when he saw that the text was from Nino.

"Nino said that his final itinerary for his Tibet trip was finalized today," Adrien reported, reading the text. His brow furrowed. "Which...about time, really. He leaves pretty soon."

"What on earth did he still have left to finalize?" Marinette asked, looking over at him. She looked about as startled as he felt. "Tickets get expensive when they're last-minute like that!"

Adrien consulted the text again. "Train and motel, apparently. The plane tickets he got ages ago." Oh, that was better. Those kinds of things didn't really increase in price, he was pretty sure.

Well, train tickets might. The hotel at least shouldn't.

"And he's looking forward to it?"

"Oh yeah."

Adrien spent most of the rest of the day resting, occasionally having a bit to eat but not so much that he felt ill again. Once four rolled around, Marinette saved all of her drafts, set aside her sketchbook, and headed over to her sewing machine to work on her quilt. She had gotten more pieces together the night before, enough that a pattern had clearly started to emerge, but it clearly needed a good bit of work still.

Adrien rolled over to watch Marinette as she lined up two edges and slid a pin into the fabric to keep it in place. "That's an interesting pattern. Pretty, though."

Marinette grinned, holding up the section of pieced top she had made. "It is, isn't it? It's called a double wedding ring quilt. I knew I had to make one as soon as Nino told us the news. Maybe I should have waited until their wedding to give it to them, but..." She shrugged. "I'm sure they'll have a wedding registry that we can choose from, and I wanted to be the one to make their quilt. Otherwise they would probably would end up with a stupid store-bought one."

"That's a traditional wedding quilt, isn't it?" Adrien watched as Marinette turned back to the machine and sewed up the seam. "I know that much, at least."

"It is! I couldn't resist." Marinette picked up another partial block and started pinning edges together. It looked a bit awkward with the curved edges, but Adrien knew Marinette would work her magic and then it would look amazing. "I've been meaning to make them a quilt for ages, but I just never got around to it."

Adrien dozed off as Marinette continued to pin and sew. He woke up a few times with his nose clogged, and he just sniffled and blew his nose before burying himself in the blankets again.

Ugh. He had been starting to feel better, and now he just felt crummy again. How was he going to get well enough to go back to school so he wouldn't fall behind?

Adrien had just fallen asleep- or so it seemed to him, at least- when Marinette was shaking him lightly to wake him up. Adrien rolled over, yawning-

-and nearly rolled right off of the couch.

Marinette laughed as she caught him. "Easy there, kitty. You don't want to hit your head on top of everything else."
"Forgot where I was." Adrien pushed himself up, yawning. "What's up?"

"You should eat again, and have more vitamins," Marinette told him. "It's been a while. And then if you're going to sleep, sleep in our bed. You'll get a crick in your neck otherwise."

Adrien followed Marinette to their table. She had more soup set out for him, with several slices of lightly buttered toast. There was a steaming cup of tea at his spot, and Adrien sniffed it. The warm steam cleared his nose just enough for him to be able to pick out what it was.

Ginger and honey. Mmm.

"You're a rock star," Adrien told Marinette as they started to tuck in. "Seriously. I probably would have made some toast and called it a day."

"I'll be going into work tomorrow, so you had better eat more than that," Marinette warned him. She pointed at Plagg. "You're in charge of making sure that he eats well. If I get any complaints from him that you're bugging him too much, I'll go buy some of that Gournay cheese you were drooling over from the cheese shop."

Adrien spluttered as Plagg cheered. "Marinette! My own girlfriend, conspiring against me with my own kwami."

Marinette and Tikki both giggled. "To make sure you take care of yourself! So there's leftover chicken soup, plenty of bread- I bought more fresh this morning- tea and honey, yogurt- and you will eat some, even if it tastes too sweet- oranges, crackers, vitamins for you-"

"I'll be fine," Adrien assured her. "And I'll eat. You don't need to have Plagg on my case."

"I think it goes without saying that the cheese offer is off the table if you keep Adrien from resting," Tikki told Plagg, which was good because his traitorous girlfriend was still giggling over his distress. "Marinette, maybe we can make up a list of what you want Adrien to eat minimum, so Plagg can know when to stop bugging him."

"I don't want Adrien to eat so much that he gets sick," Marinette objected. "I just want him to at least get some food in his stomach whenever he's up."

"But by putting Plagg in charge?" Tikki objected.

"Hey! What's wrong with me being in charge?"

"It'll be fine," Marinette assured them. "Really."

The next day, Adrien was woken up from his mid-morning nap by a cracker hitting his forehead. He blinked, then glared at Plagg, who was floating above him with his little stubby arms full of crackers.

"What was that for?"

Plagg blinked down at him innocently. "What? You moved, so I figured that you were up."

"I was sleeping."
Plagg shrugged. "And now you're up. Eat." He deposited the entire armful of crackers on Adrien's blanket-covered lap and then zipped off, looking very proud of himself.

"I ate two pieces of toast earlier!" Adrien yelled after his kwami. "And I had juice, and my vitamins!"

Plagg's voice floated back around the corner. "Eat your crackers!"

Sighing, Adrien pushed himself up in bed, gathering up the crackers and nibbing on the edge of one. His appetite had been returning - he hadn't even needed any urging to eat the toast earlier - so Plagg's help wasn't even needed.

Hopefully his kwami would consider his job done after that. For once, Plagg's laziness could work in his favor.

But it didn't.

When he got up to eat lunch, Plagg followed him around the kitchen, adding random things to his plate. Adrien sighed as he removed two apples, an orange, and an entire sleeve of crackers from on top of his cheese sandwich (which looked curiously plundered around the edges). Once he finished his meal, Adrien made sure that everything in the kitchen was properly put away, and then went to go do a little bit of homework before going down for another short nap.

This time, he woke up to a cup of yogurt balanced on his forehead, a spoon precariously perched on top.

"Plagg, cut it out," Adrien called, removing both cup of yogurt and spoon off of his head before sitting up. The cup was still cold, which meant that Plagg hadn't put it down long before Adrien woke up.

There was no response, so Adrien got up to put the yogurt away - he wanted to sleep, not eat - and headed right back to bed. This time, he pulled the covers up over his head so that he wouldn't get woken back up again unexpectedly.

Surely Plagg couldn't bug him like this.

When Adrien woke up, he breathed a small sigh of relief to find that there were no bits of food balanced on top of his head. He pushed the blanket down, yawning - and came eye-to-eye with Plagg.

"Eat."

"Oh, my god." Adrien pushed himself upright, reaching for his phone. "Look, I'm texting Marinette to say that you're annoying. Will you cut it out now?"

Plagg zipped over to peer over his shoulder as Adrien typed in his message and didn't leave until Adrien hit send. Then he made a pleased noise and zipped off.

As soon as he was sure that Plagg was gone, Adrien quickly typed out another message.

*Literally just sent that to get Plagg off of my back. He's made himself into a real pest. He keeps waking me up.*

As soon as the text sent, Adrien deleted it from his history. He didn't want Plagg to dig through his
phone and decide to continue to pester him just because he thought that Adrien was jeopardizing his cheese.

With Plagg out of his hair, the rest of Adrien's afternoon was much more restful. Adrien finally got around to eating the yogurt that had previously been balanced on his head and reading through the lecture notes that Paul had sent him. By the time Marinette was unlocking the door and stepping inside, Adrien felt good enough to pull out some leftover macaroni and cheese to heat up for their dinner.

Naturally, that was when Plagg mysteriously rematerialized.

"Get off, you little rat, you have your own cheese right there!"

"But I love macaroni and cheese!"

Adrien swallowed a swear when Plagg bit him. "You can have some after Marinette and I finish dinner if there's any leftovers."

Plagg scoffed. "If? I'm a god! I shouldn't be relying on leftovers!"

"Plagg, you have your own cheese." Marinette's tired voice joined the conversation, and Adrien spun around to see her standing in the entrance to the kitchen. "It's not leftovers. Leave our food alone."

Adrien quickly shoved the pan into the stove and headed over to hug Marinette. He took a step back and gave her a worried look. "Are you feeling all right? I didn't get you sick, did I?"

"I just didn't sleep well, that's all," Marinette assured him. "You were snoring a bit because you were congested and that kept me up for a bit, and then I had a crazy day at work. But I've been taking the same vitamins you are, so even if I do get sick it shouldn't be quite as bad."

Plagg zipped up to her. "Did you get my cheese?"

"Well, that depends." Marinette set down her bag and considered Plagg. "Did you interrupt Adrien's naps?"

"No!"

"Yes, he did," Adrien said, exasperation clear in his voice. Plagg scowled at him.

"I did not!"

Adrien fixed his kwami with a Look. "Uh-huh. So what do you call dropping crackers on me when I was asleep?"

"It was only one cracker, and I was just flying by to deposit them on your bedside table!" Plagg protested. "I just over-estimated how many I could carry."

"And then you accidentally dropped one while you were just happened to be flying over my head?"

Plagg nodded. "Uh-huh."

"And what about the yogurt you put on my head?"

"I thought you were awake!"
"My eyes were closed."

"An innocent mistake!" Plagg claimed, eyes wide and pleading. "How was I supposed to know that you were asleep?"

"And then you decided to hover in front of me and pounce the second I opened my eyes!"

"You woke up on your own that time! You can't blame me!"

Adrien was pretty sure that there was steam coming out of his ears.

Marinette was giggling. "Oh, boy. It sounds like you two had fun today."

Adrien just made a dubious expression. Fun was pushing it. Exasperating would have been a better way to describe it. Irritating, disruptive, and not particularly restful would have also worked.

"Can I have my cheese now?" Plagg wanted to know. "I worked so hard to make sure that he ate!"

"You did pester him when he was sleeping, which I told you not to," Marinette stepped around Adrien and opened the fridge, starting to unpack the bag she carried. Plagg hovered over her shoulder, eager and impatient as Marinette tucked a fresh bag of cherries, some carrots, and a bin of spinach into the fridge. "But there was some effort, so I'll give you a small piece."

Plagg let out an excited squeal as Marinette pulled out a hunk of Gournay from the bottom of her bag. He hovered anxiously as she sliced off a small chunk and tossed it to him, and then he zipped away to enjoy his treasure.

"He really didn't deserve that, you know," Adrien told her, pressing a kiss to her cheek as Marinette wrapped up the remaining cheese and put it in the fridge. "He just purposefully made a pest of himself so that I would text you. I finally had it when I woke up to find him staring at me. It was unnerving."

Marinette giggled. "But you know that he would have bugged us if I didn't give him at least a little. If it's any consolation, I got the smallest chunk I could buy. The people there think I'm mad, since normally we buy cheese in bulk."

Adrien groaned. "We're going to have such a reputation there by the time we go back to Paris. There and in the grocery store."

"It's just going to be worse when we're back in Paris and have been there for a few years," Marinette pointed out. Closing the fridge door, she turned back to him and wrapped him in a hug. "We'll have to spread our shopping out. Cheese store one week, grocery store the next, farmer's market the week after that..."

Adrien groaned louder at that. "I'm gonna have to keep modeling to pay for that. Honestly, can we just put Plagg on a diet of cheesy popcorn or something?"

"Ooh, did someone mention cheese?"
Chapter 38

DJWifi Engagement Day (as Marinette and Adrien had dubbed it) started like any normal weekend day: Adrien and Marinette woke up, grumbled about it being too early, rolled over to sleep for a bit longer, then woke up again and properly got up, yawning all the way.

And then the reminder of what was going to be going on in Tibet that day popped up on Marinette's phone calendar, and she squealed. What followed was a lot of kerfuffle as she and Adrien tried to figure out what time it was in Tibet and if it might be time for Nino and Alya to make their journey to the hot springs yet. Then there was more panicking and a whole lot of scrolling through phone logs as they tried to remember if Nino had actually ever mentioned what time of day he and Alya were planning to go to the hot springs.

"I think he mentioned them having dinner afterwards," Adrien finally remembered after nearly half an hour of discussion. They had considered texting Nino and just asking, but they didn't want to risk Alya seeing the text and realizing that something was up. "So they would probably go there early to mid-afternoon, which would be, uh..."

They both tried to do more time conversions.

"Sometime in the morning here," Adrien finally concluded. He winced. "...that didn't narrow it down at all. Good job, me. And he might have changed the plan around a bit since we last talked, too."

Marinette tried not to laugh.

"Nino would have texted us if he had asked her already, right?" Adrien asked. He grabbed his phone, scrolling through his messages in case he had missed anything. There were a few texts from Nathalie reminding him that he was expected to be in shape for the winter photoshoots, but he ignored those for the time being. "Because we knew about it? I mean, I can understand not wanting to text everyone they know individually, but since we helped plan the proposal..."

"I'm sure he'll text us," Marinette assured him. She grinned. "You know, I'm pretty certain that you getting nervous for him isn't going to help Nino at all. Anyone would think that you're the one proposing instead of him."

"Ha-ha." Adrien was pretty certain that he would actually be less nervous when it came time for him to propose, since he would know what was happening. But he knew that Alya would say yes—she and Nino had been together for something like seven years, after all, and had been living together for several of those years. So he supposed that there was no reason to be nervous— and he wasn't, really, just anxious to hear about how it went. After sitting on the secret for so long, Adrien was bursting to hear how it went.

"It'll be another hour at least, I think," Marinette said, pulling Adrien out of his thoughts. She waved her phone at him. "Before they go to the hot springs, I mean. Just based on the timing that Nino told us that I can remember."

"So we have time to eat," Adrien concluded. "Fantastic! Uh, do you think I could get away with just texting Nino something asking what they're up to today? Is that vague enough that Alya wouldn't suspect anything, do you think?"

Marinette just giggled and gave him a gentle shove towards the kitchen. "Just go make breakfast,
Adrien went, but he made sure to bring his phone with him.

Mid-morning, Marinette's phone let out a chime and she immediately stopped sewing to grab it. Adrien abandoned the homework problems he had been half-heartedly working on to go hang over Marinette's shoulder and read the texts on her phone.

**Nino**: At the hot springs! We'll be here for a bit before I ask. Wish me luck!

**Marinette**: Good luck from Adrien and I!

"Good luck from the Lady Luck herself," Adrien quipped as Marinette sent the message. "It ought to go well now. Like, the only things that I can think of that might go wrong are-"

Marinette clapped a hand over his mouth, nearly tipping him over into her lap in haste. "You'll jinx it!" she complained. "Don't say anything until Nino lets us know how it went!"

Adrien mimed zipping his lips, and Marinette removed her hand from his mouth. He shrugged sheepishly at her and grinned.

"Oh, the waiting is gonna **kill** me," Adrien complained a few minutes later, staring at their phones in front of them. His homework lay abandoned over on the table. "Do you think he'll ask soon?"

Marinette snorted and grabbed his hand before he could grab his phone and check it again. "No, I don't. They're probably going to relax for at least an hour first. If Nino asks right away, then Alya might not want to stay and relax as long because she'll want to jump his bones. If he waits, then she'll be relaxed and not be expecting anything."

Adrien grumbled and flopped down face-first on the couch.

"I'm not going to be able to focus on my studying until we hear from them," he complained. "Which isn't great at this point in the semester. What am I supposed to do for an entire hour?"

"You could cook," Marinette suggested. Adrien gave her a **look**.

"I would end up chopping a finger off!"

Giggling, Marinette abandoned her sewing machine and the quilt on it to slide over next to him on the couch. "Well, maybe I can distract you, then?"

Adrien's grin grew and he reached for her. "Oh, now **that** sounds like it might work."

---

Forty-five minutes later, Marinette's phone chimed. It took only a moment for it to register and then she and Adrien immediately lunged for the phone. When Marinette unlocked it, they immediately saw a selfie of Nino and Alya. They were surrounded by steam and water and were both beaming, with Alya holding up her hand to show the camera her ring.

**Nino**: She said yes!

"Like we ever thought she might say no," Adrien said with a laugh. "But I'm glad that nothing
went wrong. I would have been worried about dropping the ring in the water."

Marinette went wide-eyed and groaned. "Oh, god. That would have been awful. That totally would have ruined their picture-perfect proposal."

"I'm guessing that it might be difficult to find a ring in the bottom of the hot springs," Adrien agreed. "...or would it maybe not be so bad? Were they going to the ones where the hot water gets shuttled into paved side pools because it's too hot otherwise?"

"Mm. I can't remember which ones exactly had that." Marinette frowned, thinking about it, then shrugged. "Either way, it doesn't matter now, I guess. Nino didn't drop the ring, and now it's safely on Alya's finger."

"But now how is anyone supposed to top that?" Adrien jokingly complained, but he kept an eye on Marinette to see her reaction. "Now Nino's set the bar for everyone else in our group."

Marinette laughed. "Not really. Alya's always been the one to want an adventure-filled life, so of course her taste in engagement settings is on the exotic side. But I think there's beauty in simpler settings, too. Look at Ivan and Mylène- Ivan proposed under the Eiffel Tower, and since we live in Paris and see the tower every day some people might think that it's either too common of a place or too overdone, but Ivan first confessed there. He proposed right where we landed after the Stoneheart battle."

"And with the same words that he used the first time around in his song," Adrien finished. "Yeah, that was really romantic, with those parallels. And Mylène loved it, of course. It was just her style."

"Simple yet romantic," Marinette agreed. She was smiling softly, remembering when Mylène and Ivan had shared the news. "Different people have different perfect proposals."

Adrien looked thoughtful at that.

"I wonder how long it'll take before we get more news from them," Marinette continued. "I bet they'll stay at the pool for a bit longer to enjoy the water, and then they won't call until they've dried off and gotten dressed again afterwards."

Adrien groaned. "Great, more waiting."

"Impatient kitty." Marinette ruffled his hair, and Adrien leaned into the gesture. "Don't you have studying to do?"

"Can't we go back to you distracting me?" Adrien asked hopefully. Before she could answer, Adrien's conscience kicked in and he sighed. "Actually no, you're right. I should study."

Marinette smothered a laugh as Adrien trotted off to go collect his notebooks.

The two of them worked- Marinette on the quilt for Alya and Nino, Adrien on his homework- for nearly an hour, occasionally exchanging a couple words as they waited for Nino and Alya to contact them again. An hour ticked by, and then two before Marinette's phone rang, making them both jump. Marinette practically tossed the quilt aside as she lunged for her phone and answered.

"Alya! Hey, how's it-"

Adrien laughed as Marinette yanked the phone away from her ear. On the other end of the line, he could hear Alya's excited shriek.
"Everything all right over there?" Adrien asked, leaning forward so that he could talk right into Marinette's phone. "Alya?"

"Oh, my god!" Alya half-shrieked into the phone. "Oh, my god, you guys- Nino and I are getting married! He just asked me, and, and-"

"Congratulations, you guys!" Adrien said, grinning. "We get photos, right? You got pictures?"

"Of course!" Alya sounded so, so excited, and the two of them exchanged a grin of amusement. "My translator's sister was going to the same hot springs that we were going to when Nino proposed, and Nino got a camera to her beforehand, and oh, my god, the fog cleared right when Nino got out of the water and got down on his knee in the snow right next to the springs and asked me and there were mountains and hot springs and it was amazing and everything was beautiful and oh, my god, just- it was perfect, it was more than I could have ever dreamed of. I... it was amazing."

"I was frozen," Nino added in. There was a clear grin in his voice, though. "I only wrapped a towel around my shoulders because it looked like Alya was about to get out of the water and there was no time to get warmer clothes on- but that ended up being a good thing, actually, because right after I got the ring on her finger she yanked me back into the water. Some really nice strangers near us loaned me an extra towel of theirs afterwards so I could actually get dried off properly and not get freezing cold and sick."

Adrien and Marinette both laughed.

"And now we're going to this amazing restaurant and the food there- you guys, all of the reviews say that it's incredible and right now we're back at the hotel getting ready so we're not gonna stay on the phone long, but I just wanted to call you guys and my parents and oh, my god, this whole day- just. I'm just on the moon right now. Over the moon, even."

"And I'm glad she said yes," Nino chimed in. "I was a bundle of nerves all day and I was trying so hard not to let it show."

"Well, we'll let you go, then," Marinette said, grinning. Her best friend sounded so happy. "I'll expect those photos- well, maybe not right away, I'm sure you guys have better things to do than upload pictures to send to us-"

There was a distinct "you've got that right" on the other end of the line.

"-but soon, at least. It's so great to hear from you guys, and I'm so glad it went well!"

They exchanged their good-byes, and then Nino and Alya hung up so they could call their parents.

"I'm really glad that went well," Adrien said, picking his notebook back up. "And I'm glad Nino didn't freeze, because Tibet and winter and being out in the wind while soaking wet sounded very, very cold."

"Oh, I know. Thank goodness for friendly locals with extra towels." Marinette was grinning as she set her phone aside and picked the quilt top back up again. It was getting really large, nearly complete. "Otherwise he would be sick and miserable."

Adrien winced as he thought back to when he had been sick only a couple weeks ago. That wouldn't have been fun to deal with right after their engagement, especially since Nino would have a lot of traveling to do to get home and that would be miserable when shivering and sniffing and tired and sick. And if Nino got sick, then it would have been easy for Alya to get sick, too.
After all, he and Marinette had tried to be careful, and Marinette still got sick. She hadn't gotten as ill as he had, or been down as long, but she had caught the same thing.

Thankfully Tikki was a much better carer than Plagg.

They fell back into a comfortable silence. The sewing machine hummed along in the background, steady and constant as Marinette worked on the long seams connecting the pieces. The faint sound of music from an apartment a few down was occasionally audible over the sound of the whirring machine, but it was never so loud as to be annoying.

He and Marinette would be lucky to find an equally good apartment with equally good neighbors once they moved back to Paris. They might have to move a few times first before they found something perfect for a longer-term fit.

Not a forever home, of course. That would come when they both had established careers and had had a discussion about how many kids they wanted (and therefore how many rooms they would need) and could actually afford a larger place. But a good home, for now.

The sun had moved noticeably across the sky by the time Adrien set his pencil down and headed into the kitchen to make a late lunch for them. He buttered up some bread and started slicing up cheese, working quickly before Plagg could smell it and start hampering his efforts to get the sandwiches on the stove.

"Done with the top!" Marinette announced, holding the very large quilt top up as Adrien stuck his head out of the kitchen to see it. The fabric flowed into her lap and down to the floor, where it pooled around her feet and under the sewing table. "Big enough for their bed. That's them sorted, at least."

Adrien glanced over. "Uh, doesn't that need a back? And quilting?"

"I'm going to have a professional quilter do that part." Marinette got up and started laying the quilt top down on the ground so that she could fold it up. "I've done it before, of course, but Sarah has a friend who's just amazing at quilting. She's got a long-arm machine and everything, and can do all of these fancy designs. I had her do the final quilting on your quilt, too."

Adrien tried to remember exactly what the quilting on his quilt looked like. He had given it a good bit of attention shortly after getting it, of course- he knew that it was handmade and not just done by a machine in a factory somewhere, of course, and therefore every stitch was made by a human who put actual effort into it and he should appreciate that effort- but the exact designs eluded him.

There were fern-shaped swirls, he knew that much. And more angular designs, and little curls. It varied across the quilt, never too big of a block of the same design. It was spectacular work, and he knew that Nino and Alya would love their quilt as much as he loved his.

"I'm going to request that one corner get sewn with their names, with space to put the date of their wedding on later, once they decide that," Marinette continued. "I have this whole plan, actually- in the opposite cover of the quilt, I'm going to have the day of their first date, in the panther's cage, with a little cat face. And then I want to have other important dates in the rings that link across until it reaches the wedding date ring. It just adds a personal touch to the whole thing."

And that was the exact reason why Adrien always knew to pay attention to every stitch in the homemade gifts that he got. There was just so much thought put into them, he didn't want to miss anything. Even if Marinette delegated some of the actual work, clearly she had at least a bit of creative input.
"It's funny that you finished the top on the same day that they got engaged," Adrien said, returning to the sandwiches. He pressed them down, listening to the sizzle as the butter fried. "Are you sure that the quilter will be able to finish it before- when? Were you thinking Christmas?"

"Before Alya's return. I'll just tell Nino that I have a joint gift for them that they'll get when Alya gets back." There was a soft thump as Marinette put the folded top down on the couch, and then she appeared in the kitchen behind him. "And Angela will probably be swamped with stuff to get done before the holidays, but I've heard that there's a fairly big drop-off in deadlines afterwards. And if she thinks that she'll still be busy then, then I'll just show Nino and Alya the top and give them the physical quilt after it's done. Or if they decide to go for a wedding this spring, then maybe then. It all depends."

"Plans A through J, in typical Ladybug fashion," Adrien nodded, grinning. "And because I gotta ask- what's going on with the commissions wait list during the holidays?"

"It's on hold. I have a couple groups lined up for after the holidays, and I'll have to do more screen-printing then. But it's only maybe three groups, and I haven't gotten more requests recently." Marinette shrugged. "I think people know not to send in inquiries near the holidays."

"Smart, smart."

Plagg had woken up and was sniffing around by the time Adrien had pulled the sandwiches off of the griddle. He didn't cut them- cutting a grilled cheese sandwich left more edge open for Plagg to steal from- and then spent two minutes whacking his kwami with a spatula so that there would actually be cheese left in the sandwiches once Marinette finished setting the table. Plagg yowled after one particularly hard whack sent him out of the kitchen.

"I'm a god! You shalt not hit gods with a greasy spatula! That's the rule!"

"Gods shouldn't steal, only take offerings, I thought," Adrien shot back. He stepped aside to let Marinette grab her plate and escape with it. "And I would have gotten some of your cheese out so that you could eat, but someone was making a nuisance out of himself."

Plagg floated after him as Adrien made a dash towards the table. "Yeah, you, because you have no respect for gods!"

Five minutes of arguing (and some scuffling- Adrien couldn't deny it) later, Plagg had been settled with a hunk of Gruyere and a promise of cheddar cheese popcorn later in the afternoon and Adrien and Marinette were tucking into their sandwiches. Adrien had just finished nibbling the crust off of his grilled cheese when his phone chimed with an email. Adrien picked it up, saw an email with attachments from Nino, and immediately flipped open his laptop so that he could pull them up on a larger screen.

"Oh, that's nice," Marinette said immediately when she saw the first photo. Nino knelt on the rocky ground, towel around his neck, box in his hand. Alya's hands were clearly clapped over her mouth in surprise, though the steam coming off of the hot pools put the whole thing in a misty cast. It was a fantastic shot, clearly done with a decent camera (Adrien winced at the thought of what might have happened had the photographer accidentally dropped it into the water with them- presumably Nino had at least had enough common sense not to try to use Alya's good camera), and was probably the coolest engagement photo that Adrien had ever seen.

Not that he had seen that many, of course- his group of friends were only just starting to get engaged- but still. Very cool, and very Alya.
There were two more pictures of the engagement itself, including one of Nino sliding the ring on and another of Alya practically yanking him back into the water to kiss him. The last photo was a selfie of the two of them, with Alya showing off the ring, a grin stretching across her face.

Marinette and Tikki immediately started squealing about how cute it was. Adrien stared at the photo for a moment more.

Something about how seeing Nino and Alya engaged really drove it home that yes, people their age were getting married. It made it properly real, in a way that just hearing Nino's plans and the phone call earlier hadn't.

(Had Ivan and Mylène been engaged for several months longer than Nino and Alya? Yes, of course. But they were Ivan and Mylène, and had been together for essentially as long as Adrien had known them. And while Adrien was friendly enough with them, they weren't super-close friends like Nino and Alya were. It was different, thank-you-very-much.)

"It really makes it real, doesn't it?" Adrien said. He looked over at Marinette. "Before, it kind of felt like we were playing at adults, you know? Especially for me, I think, since I'm still in school and everything. But now..."

"Adrien, we live together." She paused. "But yeah, I think I know what you mean. Weddings are all official. But I think it's one of those things that people make a really big deal about, but it's just making a relationship official for the government too, now."

"Yay, paperwork," Adrien joked. "The real hallmark of adulthood that no one ever tells us about."

Marinette laughed, nudging his foot gently with her own. "So cynical."

"I kid, I kid." Adrien grinned when she stuck out her tongue at him. "I'm excited for them, I really am. It just hit me that oh, hey, we're adults. Even if I don't always feel that way. Like, adulthood has always been this big, scary concept, you know?"

"I know," Marinette assured him. She smiled at him, soft and affectionate and wow. "But don't worry, Kitty. With the two of us together, I know that we can face anything."
Chapter 39

Adrien was delighted when he came home to find Marinette baking cake. The fact that the cake was apparently for her office's holiday party instead of something to eat at home did little to dampen his good mood.

After all, he would get to eat the delicious scrap cake and leftover frosting mix again, but wouldn't have to be tempted by a bunch of leftover cake for the rest of the week when he was meant to be getting slimmed down for his photoshoots over the holidays, which were coming up fast. It was a win-win solution, as far as he was concerned.

(And maybe there would be a slice or two of cake left over, a single serving rather than an entire cake. His diet-of-sorts could handle that much cake, at least.)

With the counters and the stove thoroughly claimed by the cakemaking process, Adrien and Marinette had leftovers for their dinner while the cakes cooled in the fridge. While Marinette pulled them out to trim and do a crumb coat, Adrien loaded the dishwasher up.

"Any chances for a treat for my help?" Adrien asked hopefully, leaning over Marinette's shoulder and pressing a kiss to her cheek. "That looks good."

Marinette giggled and broke off a chunk of the cake she had just cut off, passing it back over her shoulder and popping it in his mouth. "There. Some energy for you so you can study."

"Mmm. Delicious, as always." Adrien licked his lips to catch any lingering crumbs and then pressed another kiss to Marinette's cheek. "Thanks, love."

"Do I get a taste?" Tikki wanted to know immediately, popping up from around the corner. "Pretty please?"

"Oh, look at what you've started," Marinette said, trying to sound exasperated and failing. "One small piece for you, too, Tikki, because I suppose that's only fair."

Grinning, Adrien headed out of the kitchen while Tikki zipped in to get her prize. He settled down at the table, pulling out a reading that he wanted to go back over before his finals. As he read, occasionally marking something important. In the kitchen, Marinette started to hum as she worked.

Of course, he couldn't stay at the table forever. Not when he already knew the information in the paper he was re-reading and when he had extra energy just begging that he get up and move around, and when Marinette had just produced a delicious-looking bowl of frosting to go on the cake.

"Shouldn't you be studying for your exams?" Marinette asked with a laugh after his fifth none-too-subtle attempt to sneak just a little bit, Mari, honestly, tugging the bowl of frosting out of Adrien's reach. "You were just saying that you needed to brush up on some of the concepts before the first of your exams start."

"Oh, but sugar." Still, Adrien headed back to their table, though to clean up his study things rather than to stick his head back in his books. "I'm going to go out on a run tonight as Chat Noir. You interested?"

"I wish, but I have some stuff that I want to work on." There was a clatter as Marinette accidentally elbowed one of the measuring cups right off of the counter, and she yelped. Adrien hastily hid his
grin at the sound. "Once I finish with this, I mean. And I have to clean my decorating things up."

"I can help you with that bit once I get back," Adrien offered. "I won't be that long, probably."

Marinette just waved him towards the balcony cheerfully. "Take all the time you need. This has to chill before I do the final coat, anyway. And I need to work on your present."

After a bit of teasing and a promise that he wouldn't spy on Marinette just to try to get a hint of what he would be getting for Christmas, Adrien transformed and headed out. The chilly air bit at his cheeks as he ran and jumped, doing his best to stay away from streets with an excessive number of streetlights and staying closer to the rooftops instead of making fantastic leaps up into the sky.

It wasn't not Paris, and it never would be, but it was good enough for now. They would be back in Paris for the holidays in no time, and then Ladybug and Chat Noir would be out and about probably for several evenings.

Chat Noir stayed out for nearly two hours, making sure not to go down the same street twice. He wanted to make sure to give Marinette plenty of time to work on his present, so that she wouldn't have to keep cramming it into her breaks at work. By the time he returned and rapped on the balcony door, waiting a minute before letting himself in, Marinette had returned to working on the cake, though Adrien could see that the sewing area had been used recently.

"Oh, your skin is freezing," Marinette complained when he ducked into the kitchen to see how the cake was coming and teasingly press his cold cheek to her own. She squirmed away from him, and Adrien let her go with a laugh. "Did you have a good run?"

"Yeah." He grinned. "And I worked off enough calories to have a bit of cake and frosting mix, once you're done."

Marinette's lips twitched. "Subtle, very subtle. And I already brought your present over to Abbey's apartment for storage, so you can stop looking around for it," she added when Adrien wandered back into their main room. "She says hi, by the way. And she offered to help me get the cake to work, since she has a car now."

"Oh, good." Walking for any distance with a cake as big as the one as Marinette was making wouldn't be fun, especially on icy sidewalks. "Do we want to invite her and Sarah over to dinner after the last of my finals are over and before I leave? Thursday evening, maybe? I'll cook. It would be fun to hang out with them again."

"I'll ask!"

Adrien settled on the couch while Marinette smoothed out the outer layer of frosting on the cake. Plagg went back to his half-eaten cheese slice on the table, loudly smacking his lips as he did. Adrien rolled his eyes at his kwami and then picked up a book from next to the couch, flipping through to try to find his spot.

He would have to pick up another book over Christmas, while he was in Paris. While he was sure that the books he could find in London would be all well and good, he preferred spending his downtime reading in his own language.

"Adrien, I need more cheese," Plagg whined, twenty minutes later. "I didn't get enough for the amount of time you forced me to keep you transformed."

Groaning, Adrien pushed himself off of the couch. "You're a floating stomach, I hope you know that. Always asking for cheese"
"Can I have a pot of fondue for Christmas?" Plagg wanted to know as he followed Adrien into the kitchen, clearly ignoring Adrien's comment. "Ooh! Or a never-ending fondue fountain? Then I would never have to bug you for cheese again."

"Right, and how do you think that fountain would refill itself, exactly?" Adrien pulled out a wedge of Camembert, handing it to Plagg.

He didn't expect a thanks. He didn't get one.

"How's the cake coming?" Adrien asked, turning to look at it. He blinked, startled. "Wow, Marinette."

Two tiers, vanilla cake with cranberry filling, with vanilla buttercream had never looked so good before. More of the frosting, colored holiday-red, was piped in little arches along the tops of each tier and in professional little dollops along the bottom. Little gold sugar beads were pressed into the red frosting, and sugar-paste holly leaves were arranged in artful bundles.

Still, Marinette wasn't looking entirely satisfied. She tilted her head to the side, surveying the cake. "I don't know. It just needs something more, you know?"

Adrien grinned as he headed to the cupboard above the fridge, rolling up onto his toes so he could pull out the small bag inside. "Well, we do still have a couple gummy rats left over from Halloween..."

"Wrong holiday, Adrien!" Marinette scolded, but the effect was ruined by her laugh. "Get rid of those if you aren't going to eat them, seriously. They're gross."

"They taste just fine!" Adrien protested, but he was laughing, too. Marinette had made her feelings about the gummy rats quite clear back when he presented them to her the day after Halloween, when they went on sale, and he was honestly surprised that she hadn't thrown them away already. "Just close your eyes and bite-"

"Ew, ew, ew."

Grinning, Adrien pulled out one of the gummy rats and unwrapped it, biting off the head just to get a reaction. Marinette shuddered, turning back to her cake. She picked up her bag of frosting and piped on another line on the lower tier, filled with fancy flicks and turns.

Adrien would never cease to be amazed by the things Marinette created. She always made things look easy- and Adrien knew from experience that the large majority- a very large majority- of those things took a fair amount of practice, and a delicate touch.

Adrien didn't have that touch. Mr. Dupain had tried to teach him how to do cookie and cake decorations on a few occasions, and Marinette had done the same several more times, and he just made a mess.

Twenty minutes later, the cake was completed and in a box on their side table in their counter. Adrien hung over the divider as he watched Marinette break up the scrap cake that had been shaved off of the tops and sides of the layers, combining it with the leftover frosting. Tikki popped up at his side, quivering with excitement as she waited for some of the treat.

"You would think that I had two sugar-powered kwamis instead of one," Marinette said with a laugh when she turned around to see them. "Okay, okay. I'll scoop some scrap cake up for both of you. Stop giving me those kitten eyes already!"
Adrien and Tikki exchanged a high-five.

On her first day back in Paris for the winter holidays, Marinette arrived back home after a day of wedding dress shopping with Mylène tired and somewhat exasperated.

"Mylène had a couple university friends and aunts and cousins that decided to tag along," she explained to her parents as she helped set the table for dinner. "And they all had ideas for silhouettes for the dress that they wanted to see, even though those shapes just did nothing for Mylène and I could have told them that from the start. Or the lady in the store could have, if they had listened. So we wasted half of our time with that before they got to the shape that I suggested, and then of course they had all these ideas about the neckline."

Her mom groaned. "Oh, gosh. The neckline. Don't even remind me."

"That was Sabine's least favorite part, from what I've heard," Tom said with a laugh when Marinette shot her mom a puzzled look. "All of the friends and relatives that she brought along with her had opinions about it. I didn't realize that there were options."

"Oh, papa." Marinette laughed and rolled her eyes. "But anyway, we did finally get around to the neckline that I suggested and Mylène liked that, but we haven't found the dress. So we're going again after the holiday and only looking at dresses with that shape and that neckline." She groaned. "And then we'll have to debate sparkles versus lace versus plain, and I'm sure everyone will have opinions on those."

Sabine laughed. "It sounds like you and Mylène would have found the perfect dress for her today if you two had gone alone."

"Maybe not the perfect one, but we would have gotten further without Mylène's cousin insisting that she needed to see Mylène in a mermaid gown, never mind that Mylène is the wrong body type to pull that off. But everyone was in town for the holiday, so they all had to tag along. And for those who couldn't fit in the store in person, they got other family members to Facetime them in."

"So it should be better after the holidays is what you're saying," Tom finished. "Mylène is lucky that you'll be around again, when you come back for Alya's return. And then I'm sure that you'll be helping Alya find her dress after that. Has she or Nino said anything about when they're planning on having the wedding?"

"Not yet. She's still focused on finishing her trip and getting the most out of her time left, I think."

Her father shot her a mischievous grin. "And then how long do you think it'll be after that before you're the one looking for a wedding dress? Or do you think you'll sew your own?"

Marinette promptly turned red. "Papa!"

He just feigned innocence. "What, dear?"

"Tom, stop teasing her." Sabine regarded her husband with an amused expression as she set a pot of dumplings down on the table. "It won't make her and Adrien realize their feelings for each other any sooner."
"Maman!" Marinette protested, though it was mostly for show. Her cheeks were still warm from her dad's comment, and she found that she couldn't just forget about it.

She had wondered what it would be like to get engaged or married to Adrien, of course, but they had only been dating for a year and a half and it was best not to rush too much. And though she had sketched out elaborate wedding dresses when she was younger, Marinette had since discarded them as obnoxious and not very practical. She hadn't really planned anything since, even though she and Adrien were now actually dating.

Hmm. Well, maybe she could keep an eye on the trends when she and Mylène (or she and Alya) were out shopping-

"And besides, I thought we had already decided before that Marinette was going to use the dress that she wore in that photoshoot," Sabine said, giggling at the look on her daughter's face. "You truly did look like a bride, Marinette. So gorgeous."

Well, Marinette couldn't disagree. She had loved the dress, and it would look even more spectacular if it were properly fitted to her instead of the hasty fitting that Madam Rosalie had done. It had still looked good- even rushed, the alterations team did a good job and of course the photographers knew how to work their angles so that the imperfections in the fitting wouldn't show or could be easily Photoshopped - but it could look even better with the excess fabric cut out instead of stitched flat.

"Will Adrien be joining us on Christmas?" Tom asked as they sat down for dinner. "It's been ages, even if you guys did manage to make a trip over here over his break."

Marinette nodded, narrowing her eyes at her father's triumphant grin. "Yes, because his father is an awful human being who doesn't know the meaning of celebration and Adrien deserves a good holiday."

"And we're always happy to see him," Sabine said. "And I believe that I heard that he was on a bit of a diet recently for his photoshoot, so we'll make sure to have a box of sweet things to send back home with him afterwards."

Marinette grinned. Adrien would love that, she knew. He had been grumbling about having to restrict his diet to get back into shape for the photoshoots. He had never had that problem before, but with the need for him to sit and study so much, combined with the inability to go out on energy-burning runs as Chat Noir on a regular basis, Adrien had actually had to work to get back into shape.

He hadn't gained a ton of weight or gotten horribly out of shape or anything, but he had been on the edge of model-shape and there was no point in ignoring that and then having to deal with his father loudly pointing that out for the entire break.

(Yes, Gabriel Agreste was a horrible, horrible parent, and it stunk that they had to work around him so much. But soon Adrien would be done with school and they could be open with their relationship and he could quit modeling altogether, and only interact with his father when he wanted to.)

Thankfully, after that the conversation steered away from weddings and Adrien. Marinette relaxed as her mother recounted a story about a foreign customer who didn't know much French and was looking for one particular pastry, but wasn't very good at describing what it was. There had been a bit of interpretive dance, and some not-even-close words used, and it hadn't been until the woman drew out the pastry in question that Sabine had been able to help her.
"I don't know why she didn't just look on the shelves in the first place," Sabine said with a laugh. "She was just one of those people who needs to be pointed at everything, but I don't know why she would travel abroad if she can't even speak the local language. Maybe she was just passing through France on her way somewhere else, but..."

Marinette couldn't help but giggle. "You think she might be just as lost in other countries?"

"She wouldn't be if she would just look around instead of relying on shopkeepers for everything." Sabine let out a long sigh. "I'm glad that most of our normal customers only come ask us questions when they truly can't find something and actually made an effort first. Dealing with customers like that, when there were so many people that needed to be rung up or who wanted to pick up orders-it's just exasperating."

"It makes me glad to be working in back when I hear stories like that," Tom said with a laugh. "Sure, I have to deal with the doughs not behaving properly and creams splitting sometimes, but they're easier to deal with than a customer that thinks they're right all of the time. And I can beat it into submission."

Sabine and Marinette both laughed at that.

"You've had some frustrating customers of your own, haven't you?" Sabine asked Marinette. "I know you said that you were getting some emails that were less than polite."

"Oh, they didn't even get to the customer stage," Marinette scoffed. "I informed them that I had plenty of customers who were more than willing to pay my prices, and then I blocked them. I don't have the time to waste arguing with them, and I'm hardly in dire need of commissions."

"But you're not overworking yourself again, I hope," Tom checked. "You have a full-time job, remember that."

Marinette nodded, wincing at the reminder of that awful, awful time. Looking back, there were some designs that she had done that she really wanted to revisit and improve because she hadn't brought her absolute best game. They weren't bad, and she wasn't at all ashamed of her work, which was a relief, but they could have been even better. "I've only been taking one commission at a time, and I only work on it for a maximum of two hours every night."

Her parents nodded, looking pleased.

"So what have you been working on recently?" Sabine asked. "I know we've gotten some details over the phone, and I've seen all of the photos you posted, of course. But I haven't heard anything about those for a couple weeks."

Marinette swallowed the bite she had taken and grinned. "Well, that's because I've put stuff aside to do Christmas presents. I've got several things lined up to do after the holidays- one at a time, of course," she added hastily when her dad opened his mouth to say something. "It's just that I've emailed with the groups and gotten the general number of pieces and theme hammered out, and they've agreed to pay my prices and are confirmed on the waiting list."

Tom looked satisfied. "Good."

"So tell us more about ones you did earlier this fall, then," Sabine urged. "There was one right after Fashion Week that I think you said you really enjoyed?"

Marinette lit up, remembering that particular set of outfits. "Yeah! The group has a steampunk theme for their next album, and so I got to go really outside of what I normally do. It was really
great. I had to do more sketches than usual to really get what they wanted, but I was thrilled with how it all turned out. It was just so creative! And I got to use lots of complicated techniques for these really cool effects."

"And what kinds of pieces did you make?"

As Marinette dove into a more detailed description of all of the pieces she had sewn, pulling out her phone to show off her photos, she couldn't help but feel fully at home, here with her parents in Paris.

She couldn't wait to move back.

"I bring holiday greetings and a castaway!" Adrien called up the stairs late Christmas Eve, and Marinette had to stop herself from rushing down the stairs to greet him like an overly excited kid. Instead she contented herself with trotting out of their living room to the top railing of their stairs, peering down to see Adrien headed upstairs, closely followed by Nino.

Grinning, Marinette waved. "Hey, Nino! Fancy seeing you here!"

"Hey!" Nino waved back. "I just got the news earlier tonight that I'll be hanging with my cousin Chris and going on an out-of-town adventure with him tomorrow, so I thought I might pop by to see you guys tonight for a little bit. And your super-cool parents, too, of course" Nino added when Marinette's parents ventured out to see who she was talking to. "I wanted to get your presents to you, too."

"Oh, but you have to hang out for a bit, Nino," Tom assured him. "And Adrien, did you remember to lock the door behind you when you came in?"

In answer to Mr. Dupain's question, Adrien sighed, handed the bag he was carrying to Nino, and turned to trot right back down the stairs to the door.

Marinette muffled a giggle at the kicked-puppy slump to his shoulders. She knew it was all just for show, because Adrien was a big dramatic dork.

"Merry Christmas, Marinette," Nino told her as he rounded the last set of stairs and trotted up to give her a hug. "And Merry Christmas to you, too, Mr. Dupain and Mrs. Cheng. Sorry I didn't ask before coming."

"Oh, that's fine," Marinette's mom assured him. "We have plenty of cake. We were waiting to have it until Adrien arrived," she added when Nino perked up. "He loves it so much, and he never gets to eat enough sweets."

Adrien laughed as he caught the tail end of their conversation, having raced back up the stairs after locking the door. "Normally I do. Marinette keeps me in stock with treats and when she doesn't, there's a bakery nearby that's quite good. I've just been lacking recently, because I wasn't getting enough exercise to eat everything I wanted and be in shape for modeling."

"Ah, yes, I can imagine that your final year of classes must be quite busy. You're doing a lot of studying, yes?" Tom herded them into the living room and then set out pulling a fifth chair to the table. "And in Physics, too! I imagine that's got to be intense."
"It is, but I'm enjoying it. And I've been getting tutored by a grad student this year, so I don't fall behind if I mishear something in class. Or if I get sick," Adrien added, grinning at Marinette. She rolled her eyes at him. "And then get *forced* into staying home."

Nino laughed and wriggled his eyebrows at that. "And how did Marinette know that you were sick, hmm?"

"Yes, do tell," Sabine piped up, coming back from the kitchen with a stack of plates. She grinned at the two of them. "How did you know that Adrien was sick, dear daughter?"

Marinette huffed and sent her mom a flat look. "We live across the hall from each other. I popped in to snitch some leftovers for my lunch and found him looking like a swamp monster."

Adrien barked out a startled laugh at that. "Thanks *so much*, Marinette."

Nino was grinning. "Did you get pictures?"

"*Nino! Dude!*"

"Alya's been trying to get a bad picture of you for *ages*, dude," Nino explained, grinning at Adrien's betrayed look. "She'd be thrilled to see you looking like a swamp monster."

"I was a good-looking swamp monster, though, right Mari?" Adrien implored, turning wide kitten eyes on her. He grinned when he saw her lips twitch in amusement. "Right?"

"If it helps you sleep at night," Marinette teased, putting the pout right back on his face.

"Betrayed by my own partner," Adrien muttered in Marinette's ear as her parents and Nino laughed. "*Rude.*"

Marinette just ruffled his hair. "Hey, at least I didn't take any pictures."

"*Ruder.*"

It didn't take long for Marinette's parents to get everyone settled at the table and served a generous portion of the Yule Log cake. They had only just dug in when Sabine focused in on Nino.

"So I hear you got engaged recently," Sabine said, grinning at Nino. "Congratulations to you and Alya! I saw your photos online. Truly stunning location you chose there."

"Marinette and Adrien helped me plan," Nino admitted, grinning. "I was struggling to choose between two different rings and they helped with that, and then they came up with the location. I couldn't have done it without them. And they managed to not tell Alya or make her suspicious by texting me right before I was going to ask."

Marinette laughed. "We had to sit on our hands pretty much, because we were so anxious to hear how it went. Adrien probably would have exploded if you hadn't given us that update about getting to the hot pools."

"She means that she kept me from texting you beforehand," Adrien admitted. "With the time differences, we weren't sure when we should be expecting news."

Nino let out an exaggerated sigh. "And thank goodness for Marinette, then! Alya took several seconds to really figure out what was going on, since she wasn't expecting it at *all*. And that was great, to know that I hadn't, like, blown the secret by getting too nervous."
Once the cake was finished, they all moved to the couches to open presents. The elder Dupain-Chengs decided to open a single present each and then head off to bed.

"I'm afraid that we're just not used to staying up so late anymore," Tom said with a laugh as he bid them good-night. "Nino, Adrien- make sure the downstairs door gets locked after you. You remember how that works, right?"

"I'll make sure it's locked behind them, Papa," Marinette assured him. Tom nodded.

"Good. And Adrien, remember to grab your bag of goodies before you leave," Tom reminded him "Now, we really must go. Good night and merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas!" Nino and Adrien chorused, waving. Tom and Sabine vanished down the stairs, and then the young adults were left alone.

"Your presents, from Alya and I," Nino intoned, tossing one package to Adrien and another to Marinette. "Mostly from Alya, honestly, since she's the one traveling to all of these interesting places. We have Christmas gifts for the next five or six years sorted out at this point."

Marinette eagerly tore into her gift and let out a squeal at the colorful beaded bag that tumbled out. "Oh, it's so pretty!"

"It's from Russia," Nino explained. "Alya thought you would like it."

"I love it. It's gorgeous." Marinette turned the bag over, running her fingers over the glittering beading. "Thank you guys so much! Let me text Alya really quickly and thank her- it's daytime over there, right?"

Nino shrugged. "I think so? Actually- yeah, it is," he corrected himself. "We literally just Skyped earlier and it was mid-morning there. So she'll be up, but she might be busy."

"Oh, this is cool!" Adrien exclaimed, pulling out the figurine he had gotten. "I like this!"

"We figured that you could use little knick-knacks for decorating your own place once you get back," Nino explained. "Since you mostly just have, like, trophies and stuff in your bedroom and I don't even remember what all you have in your apartment in London besides that marriage certificate."

"That's coming back with me," Adrien told him with a grin. "I might have to bring it back early so that it doesn't get left behind, but it is coming back."

Nino groaned and thumped his head against the couch arm. "You guys give me a headache, honestly."

Nino opened Adrien's present to him next and grinned at the music poster- signed, of course- and pile of CDs. He flipped through them with an intrigued look. "Oh, I don't recognize these groups. Are they ones Marinette designed for?"

"Yup! I got to know their music a bit while Marinette was designing stuff for them, and I thought you might be interested in listening to them," Adrien explained. "They're kind of along the lines of Jagged Stone, but they're not as well-known."

"Cool." Nino flipped through them. "Oh, they're signed! And Marinette's signed them, too! Nice touch."
"And I already told you about your and Alya's gift from me," Marinette told Nino, grinning. Nino laughed.

"Yeah, you told me that it had to wait until Alya got back. Very mysterious." Nino grinned, though. "But yeah, it makes sense to wait if it's a joint gift. I'll wait patiently. Now hurry up and open your gifts from each other. I'm about to fall asleep."

"Oh, cool!" Adrien exclaimed a minute later as he pulled a coat out of wrapping paper. Nino let out a low whistle as Adrien pulled it fully out and turned it around. "Oh, wow. I can see where you worked in a little steampunk influence, too, with these buttons and the lapels. I love it!"

Marinette grinned. Nino slid over to look at the coat as well as Adrien laid the coat out on his lap to get a better look at it. "Dude, that's awesome."

"It really is. Thank you so much, Marinette!" Adrien told her. "I like this so much better than the jacket my father was trying to force on me. I'm going to wear it for the rest of the winter."

"You've got to be the most fashionable Physics student there is," Nino joked. "Between your father and Marinette, you're kept on the edge of fashion."

Marinette and Adrien both burst into laughter, making Nino jump.

"Not everything Marinette gives me is tip-top fashion," Adrien told him, still laughing. "I got science pun shirts for my birthday. They're my favorite ones to wear."

Nino just groaned. "Of course they are. You're such a giant nerd."

"Hey! Puns are cool!"

After Marinette opened her gift (a gorgeous necklace, and another bird-shaped soap bar that made her groan), Nino bid them good-night.

"I'm gonna be sleepwalking tomorrow if I don't go to bed, like, ten minutes ago," Nino explained, gathering up his things. "Thanks for having me over. Adrien, are you leaving now as well?"

"I'll help Marinette clean stuff up," Adrien told him, waving Nino out. "Just lock the door after you, will you? I don't know how long it'll take for us to finish getting things cleaned up."

Nino just yawned, nodded, and waved at them before heading out.

It didn't take them long to clean up- the mess looked worse than it was, honestly- and then Marinette had a chance to check her phone again. Alya had responded to Marinette's text message, and wished her a merry Christmas. Still, the message seemed distinctly less enthusiastic than Alya usually was.

"I can tell that Alya is really down about being apart from Nino and the rest of her family for Christmas," Marinette said after the last of the wrapping paper was bundled away and the counters had been wiped down. She pushed her phone over for Adrien to read. "So I was wondering- want to go out as Ladybug and Chat Noir and give her a Christmas gift?"

Adrien grinned, pulling Marinette to his side. "Superhero holiday kisses out on the town?"

She grinned back at him. "You read my mind."

Once they were sure that Nino had, in fact, remembered to lock the door downstairs, they headed
out to Marinette's balcony to transform. Soon Ladybug and Chat Noir were tearing across Paris, waving to a few people who were still out and about.

"Where do you want to take the photos?" Chat Noir asked. "The Eiffel Tower? The Arc de Triomphe and Champs-Elysees? The big Christmas tree in the square?"

"Well, we were seen on the Eiffel Tower last year," Ladybug decided. "And the Champs-Elysees is probably still busy, so- the square?" She grinned and pulled two Santa hats out from behind her back. "And then we can wear these when we take the picture."

Chat Noir spluttered and glanced behind her. Smooth suit ran all the way down Ladybug's back, leaving no place for anything to be hidden. "Where were you keeping those?"

Ladybug only smiled.

It didn't take long for them to reach the square. Only a few people lingered, the rest gone to celebrate with their families or simply gone to bed for the night. The superheroes waved to them as they landed, then quickly arranged their Santa hats on their heads and arranged themselves for a superhero selfie with the brightly decorated tree clearly visible in the background. They took one of just the two of them beaming at the camera, and then another of them kissing in front of the holiday scene.

"Oh, Alya will like that one," Chat Noir said appreciatively as they looked over the photos. "I like that one. Thank goodness she'll be posting this online so I don't have to make up some excuse about why I have a never-seen-before superhero photo in my room."

"No, you'll just have to explain why you decided that it was so important to print out and keep a physical copy of two superheroes kissing," Ladybug teased as she pulled the Ladyblog up on her yo-yo. "And before you say that you'd just keep the photo in our bedroom so that not as many people would see it, remember that Nino and Alya do sometimes follow us back to our rooms. You'd have to explain to an actual reporter why you're keeping a picture of kissing superheroes on the bedside table."

Chat Noir lifted a finger, ready to rebut Ladybug's argument and then lowered it with a grumble, realizing that she was right. "Fine. It'll be my laptop wallpaper, then. At least until I can have a picture of the two of us as civilians on there without people thinking anything of it."

"Oh, I suppose that might work." With a few clicks, Ladybug submitted the photos from her yo-yo using the burner account that she had made years ago. The Ladyblog let out a merry ding as the page confirmed that the photos had been received. "There! Want to take bets about how much time it'll take before Alya sees and gets it posted?"

"Not long, probably," Chat Noir said with a laugh. "Though we might have to wait until she's not quite so busy for her to see the notice. At least that should make Alya's Christmas just a bit brighter."

"It should," Ladybug agreed. She leaned over to give Chat Noir a kiss on the cheek. "Merry Christmas, Kitty-Cat."

"And Merry Christmas to you as well, my love."
Nino was jittering almost nonstop. While Adrien couldn't blame him, it was starting to attract some stares.

"I just can't believe she's home," Nino told him as they waited for Alya in the Paris airport's baggage claim area. "I mean, I've known her schedule and when she was going to be coming home for months, but I've gotten so used to hearing from her when she's traveling and telling me where she's off to next for a week that to hear that she's coming home properly, and I can wake up next to her every morning..." Nino shook his head, grinning. "It was something I really took for granted before she left. I didn't think about how different it would be to start my day without Alya right next to me, even if we don't always talk much when we're getting ready for work. It's just- all these little things that I didn't notice after living together for two years that just really tripped me up when she wasn't there."

Adrien nodded. Although he couldn't admit it, he knew what Nino meant. Even if Marinette had gotten up before he had, he could still tell that she had been there. Waking up truly on his own when he was home was different, and it definitely wasn't something that he preferred.

Even if waking up with Marinette occasionally draped across his chest and making it hard to breath (or the inevitable cuddling, even in summer months) wasn't always sunshine and roses, he preferred it to his lonely bed.

"So I'm looking forward to all of the little things most, I think," Nino finished. He grinned. "And once Alya's rested up, I'm looking forward to splitting meal duty again. There's some things that she makes that I don't dare touch, and I've been rotating through the same menu ever since she left."

"That's the best part of splitting cooking duties." Adrien checked his phone. Marinette had said that she would be arriving soon- dress shopping with Mylène had run over and so she hadn't been able to hitch a ride with him to the airport- and he wanted to make sure that she would be able to find them. There were no messages yet, though, so maybe she was still on the bus to the airport. "That, and not having to eat the same thing for a week straight."

"Do you think you'll find an apartment to share with Marinette when you two move back, then?" Nino wanted to know. "So you two can keep cooking together?"

Of course, Adrien wanted to say. They wanted to stay together, and they certainly wouldn't be able to have their privacy if they stayed in his old room at his father's house and they wouldn't have enough space long-term for both of them plus Marinette's designing if they stayed in her old room. Besides, they wouldn't want to impose on her parents. But Nino didn't know that they were dating, so instead Adrien settled on a "Maybe. I'd have to ask her."

Nino shook his head, utterly exasperated. "You two might as well be married, really. You're glued at the hip anyway."

Adrien only grinned. If only Nino knew...

Adrien's phone buzzed then, and he hurried to pull it out. There was only a short message from
Marinette.

At airport. Headed inside.

Shoving his phone back in his pocket, Adrien immediately looked up and started glancing around. After a minute, he spotted Marinette in the crowd nearest to the door and rolled up on his toes to wave to her. She spotted him and waved back, hurrying towards them.

Next to him, Nino craned his neck. "What? Did you see Alya?"

"No, Marinette. And Alya's plane isn't scheduled to land for another..." Adrien checked his watch. "Five minutes, if it's on time. And Alya said that she would text you when she landed, yeah?"

"Right, sorry. I got excited." Nino settled back down. "I gotta say thanks to you guys for coming to Paris for this. I would have been a mess waiting here by myself."

"Could Alya's family not made it at all?"

Nino shook his head. "The twins are busy with school, her mom had a huge catering event that she couldn't get out of, and her father was supposed to come but then the zoo's panther came down sick and he couldn't get away. He did lend me his car, though, so that we wouldn't have to wrestle with all of Alya's things on the bus." He winced. "It was just a whole slew of unfortunate timing, really. We'll swing past the zoo on our way home so that they can see each other for a bit, and then we'll go to the hotel to see her mom, and then we'll go to their place for dinner."

Adrien laughed as Marinette scooted up to his side. "Alya's going to be dead on her feet after all of that."

"You aren't just going to let Alya sleep when she gets home?" Marinette asked. She looked a bit harried, hair more ruffled than normal and clothes a bit rumpled. "Does she know that?"

Nino grinned. "Yeah, I told her last week, and she approved the plan. Of course, that was before she got on an 18-hour flight."

They all laughed.

"So how was your day?" Adrien asked Marinette. "You look a bit worse for wear."

"Gee, thanks." Marinette rolled her eyes at him. "It was all right. We did find Mylène's dress, though, so there's that."

Adrien grinned at the news and Nino looked over, finally distracted from Alya's impending arrival. "Oh, that's great! She was really hoping to find something today, wasn't she?"

Marinette nodded. "She really was. Mylène was completely burned out when we started since we hadn't had much success before, but then we looked back at some of the dresses that she had liked parts of and she found a skirt that she really liked and a top that was almost perfect, and they can be combined together for a nearly perfect dress."

One of Adrien's eyebrows quirked upwards. "You keep saying almost. What was wrong with it?"

"The top- it's this gorgeously cut halter top with a kind of low back, and Mylène has two moles on her back that she doesn't want showing," Marinette explained. "She doesn't like having her entire back exposed like that. So I came up with this idea of having an Eiffel Tower made of lace fill in that space a little bit. And then there can be some more of the lace in four flare panels on the skirt,
which would tie the design in more. It would replace the existing lace, and then we asked—well, I
recommended, and then Mylène asked—for the gold beading to be replaced with silver."

"Wait, so did you actually find a lace Eiffel Tower to fit in the area?" Nino asked, looking properly
interested. "Or is this something that you would make?"

Marinette looked sheepish. Adrien sighed, but he couldn't help but smile fondly at her. "You really
couldn't resist, could you?"

Nino laughed.

"It'll make the dress perfect!" Marinette protested. "And it's easy to make, too. I have the
dimensions that I need to make sure that the thicker section for the first floor will be right where it
needs to be to cover the moles. Mylène loved the idea, because then she gets to have a fairly open
back that she's still comfortable with. So she has the new dress on order, and I'll make the lace
sections as soon as I can." There was a pause. "Uh, but I might need to ask Madam Rosalie if I can
use one of the company machines to do it. I'm sure she'll say yes, as long as they aren't needed."

"What are you going to do when you aren't at Madam Rosalie's anymore?" Adrien teased. "You
won't have access to all of those lovely machines of hers."

Marinette stuck her tongue out at him. "I'll figure things out. And once I get into a new design
house, then hopefully they would have the same kinds of machines. If not, well..." Marinette threw
up her hands. "I'd be really tempted to buy ones of my own, but they're so expensive!"

"So will you be too burned out to help Alya find her dress?" Nino asked, grinning at Marinette.
"I've heard that it's taken a couple outings."

"Oh, gosh." Marinette looked exhausted. "Yeah, Mylène had too many friends and cousins along
for our first trip, so it was a complete bust. They all had ideas for shapes they wanted to see, and
they were all wrong for her." She paused. "When is Alya going to go dress shopping?"

"Well—" Nino glanced around, then turned back to them. "We were thinking of telling you guys
together, but as long as we're talking about it—Alya and I are going to get married this spring. So
I'm guessing that she'll start looking at dresses pretty soon."

Marinette's eyes were huge, and Adrien was sure that his were the same. Sure, they had known that
there was a possibility that Nino and Alya would go for the shorter turn-around, but they had
thought it wouldn't be terribly likely. After all, Alya had stuff she had to get done for the
newspaper, and there were a few final leads for her research that she wanted to follow up on before
she forgot about them. The two of them had talked about moving to a new apartment shortly after
Alya's return, too, or at least within a few months, and that was another big thing on their plate.

It would be a lot, even without the wedding planning.

"I just—wow, you guys must be superheroes to be able to balance all of that," Adrien told Nino. He
smothered the grin that came with the words so that Nino wouldn't notice anything off.

Marinette noticed, though. Adrien heard her exasperated huff by his side and had to keep from
grinning at that, too, especially when her fingers jabbed into his ribs.

"Well, we're going to be keeping it fairly simple. Church wedding so we can have both wedding
and reception there instead of having to find some venue for both that actually has an opening
when we want it, for one." Nino nodded like that was a big decision off of their backs. Adrien and
Marinette waited for more...and got nothing.
"And...?" Marinette prompted. "Flowers, food, dress, suit, decorations...?"

"Tablecloths, napkins, style of silverware?" Adrien added, grinning wider when he got an elbow to the stomach from both Nino and Marinette.

"I think the church has a standard set of tablecloths and napkins and silverware that they use, thank-you-very-much," Nino sniffed. "But we can ask, I guess. It would be good to make sure. And we were planning on ordering the croquembouche tower from your parents' place, Marinette- we'll talk to them about that soon and figure out flavors, I guess. See, we have been planning."

Adrien applauded sarcastically. Nino elbowed him again.

"Look, Alya's flight just landed," Marinette cut in before Adrien could start listing off other details required for wedding planning, just for the express purpose of bugging Nino. "Nino, how big of a plane is it? How long should we expect it to take for Alya to get off?"

Nino groaned. "I don't know. It might be a while. I don't think she's near the back of the plane, though, so there's that." His phone buzzed and he pulled it out. "It's Alya. She said that it might take a good ten minutes before she can get off, and then there's the getting through the airport."

"So that's, what, a good fifteen to twenty minutes of time for us to quiz you about stationary for wedding invitations," Adrien said, grinning. "So, have you decided what kind of parchment you're going to use?"

By the time Alya arrived, Nino had a whole list of things for him and Alya to think about for their wedding written up and looked about ready to throttle Adrien, who was helpfully not helping matters by asking about matching pocket squares for the men and table centerpieces for the reception.

"Do I even want to know?" Alya asked in exasperation after she had given Nino a kiss. "Marinette? Do I even want to know what these two clowns have been getting up to?"

"Adrien's not being helpful," Nino said right away, before Marinette could say anything. "I regret inviting him along. Is it too late for me to find another Best Man?"

They all laughed as Adrien spluttered.

"No, we do have a lot to consider," Alya admitted as soon as she spotted the list Nino held and caught on to what was going on. "I knew that as soon as we decided not to wait a year. But at least next year should be calmer. And we already decided to put the honeymoon off for a bit, since I've already been traveling so much recently."

"We both did," Nino added. "Since I've taken several weeks off of work in the last few months to visit. So we might wait for next winter and go somewhere warm and sunny, or go on our first anniversary or something. We didn't discuss that part too much yet. We've been busy."

"And we're about to get busier, even if we'll be in the same place." Alya ran a hand through her hair. "But let us have a few days to relax first! I need to shower, and I need to sleep. When are you two taking off?"
"Tonight. We have work and school tomorrow!" Marinette added when Alya's expression dropped. "We already took today off, and we're going to be missing more, I'm assuming, with coming back to help you guys with wedding stuff."

"Of course, of course." Alya stepped over to give both of them a hug. "I'm so looking forward to when you two are back in Paris and we can just see you whenever. That's, what- five months yet?"

"Four and a half?" Adrien suggested, exchanging a look with Marinette. "Yeah, that sounds right."

"Four and a half," Alya repeated. "That's so long, unless you're talking four and a half months to plan a wedding. In that case, it's short."

"And you don't even have that," Adrien pointed out. "Good luck with that, really."

Alya waved an airy hand. "Oh, my mom and Nino's are working to put together a list of relatives to invite and we've got a list of our friends already. We're not doing super extended family or anything, so it shouldn't be too large of a crowd. We'll be fine."

"I'll take your word for it." Adrien grinned as Alya turned and they followed her to the luggage carousel. "And I'll be a listening ear for when you decide to panic because your candlestick holders are lopsided or something."

"Candlestick holders? Is that what you've been bugging Nino about? Marinette, control your boy."

Alya practically talked their ears off as Nino navigated their way out of the airport and back towards their section of the city. She wanted to know which of her vlogs they had watched (all of them, Alya), and then dove into a deeper detailing of some of the users that she had found most interesting.

"I've got so much material to go through for my articles for the paper, and then I gotta organize it for my book," Alya finally finished as they pulled in to a spot in the zoo's parking lot. "Like, I could go on for days. The vlogs I posted were just barely scratching the surface, really. And I got so much traffic on the Ladyblog for those. I'm still getting a lot of traffic, more than I've gotten for years. The ads I decided to put on the site are actually earning me a decent amount of money now."

"Are you going to keep doing the vlogs?" Adrien asked as they all piled out and headed for the zoo's employee entrance. "Like, just updates on what you're working on? I'm sure people would love to hear hints about your work and see more of those awesome drawings."

Alya laughed. "I gotta keep some stuff secret for my book! But maybe I could do little updates every two weeks or something, depending on how busy I am. I might only be able to manage once a month for the next few months," she added, glancing over at Nino. "Since I've got the wedding planning to do, too. But yeah, it would keep some interest in the Ladyblog going, and keep people interested in my book."

"It's a good way to keep the Ladyblog active while Ladybug and Chat Noir are out of the country, too," Nino chimed in. "For however long they'll be gone. And there hasn't been even the slightest whisper of where they might have gone. They've shown up during the holidays, and that's it. Oh, and Alya- your father said to meet him by the panther cage."
"Sweet!" Alya pulled a key out of her pocket and let them in the door, then led the way towards the panther enclosure. "And speaking of the superheroes- so you all saw the picture they submitted to the Ladyblog, right? Of them kissing at Christmas?" Alya let out a little squeal. "It was so cute! They're adorable together. I wonder how soon they'll be getting married."

Nino laughed. "Alya, they've only been together for, what? A year?"

"They've been confirmed for a year, but they could have been together for ages before that!" Alya was in full Ladynoir shipper mode, her face alight with enthusiasm. "They might have been together for years but have just been keeping it on the down-low. Either way, they're perfect for each other. Why wait?"

Marinette glanced towards Adrien and wasn't surprised to see him glancing back towards her, a small smile playing on his lips. She felt her cheeks flush and she glanced away for a second, suddenly feeling unreasonably shy.

"ALYA!"

The moment was broken when Alya's father spotted them. He was washing his hands and arms and wearing an apron. He shed it and quickly came towards them, scooping Alya up in a hug and swinging her around. Alya gave a delighted laugh, hugging her father back as he set her down. He gave her another hug, then released her to get a good look at the ring on her finger. Nino stepped closer with a grin and was given a hug as well. Marinette watched with a fond smile, pulling her coat tighter as a chilly wind blew across the zoo.

Adrien was at her side in an instant. "Are you cold?"

"Only when there's a wind." She stepped closer to his side, but not too close. They had gone for a year and a half without arousing too much suspicion from their friends in France, and now Marinette was determined to make it the rest of the way. "I'll be fine, kitty. I promise."

"If you say so."

Soon enough, Alya's father had to return to his work and they were on the way to the Grand Paris. Marinette noticed Adrien scanning Chloe's social media as they drew closer and raised an eyebrow at him in question.

"I just don't want to run into Chloe," Adrien admitted with a sheepish grin. "But it sounds like she's in the middle of a spa day right now, so we should be all right. From what I remember of her, when Chloe spends the day at the spa, she spends the entire day."

Nino laughed. "You'll have to deal with her occasionally when you come back to Paris."

"Yeah, but I can wait until then, believe me." Adrien pocketed his phone, zipping the pocket back up to keep it safe. "I think she's gotten worse over the years. I thought she would grow out of it."

Alya made a bit of a face at that, then shrugged. Her eyes caught on Adrien's coat then, and she gave it a proper look over. "Hey, that doesn't look like one of your father's designs. It looks nice, though."

Adrien grinned, and Marinette couldn't hide the pleased smile when he smoothed a hand down the front of the coat proudly. "Yeah! It's Marinette's design. I love it. I've brought all of my other coats back to Paris to leave here, since it's all I'm going to wear for the rest of the season."

"You don't say."
"Well, all of the coats that my dad picks out for me are boring," Adrien complained. "I mean, they look nice, but he's known for a fairly strict style most of the time. Strict and clean and classic. I like the imagination in Marinette's designs more."

They didn't stay at the Grand Paris for long, because Mrs. Cesare had to get back in the kitchen to help prep for a particularly large catering event. Their final stop was at Alya and Nino's apartment, which had only gotten more stuffed with things since the last time they had visited.

"I've been bringing back stuff that she bought back whenever I visit," Nino explained to Adrien and Marinette as they all piled in. "And she went to a lot of places, so..."

"He would come with a half-empty suitcase and leave with a bursting one, every time," Alya said with a laugh. "And there were a few things that I shipped. I'm not normally a huge shopper, but there's only so many times when I'll be able to travel like that."

"So you guys get to be buried under a pile of stuff until you find a new place," Adrien summed up. "And you get to plan a wedding like that. Uh, have you considered renting out a storage unit to use until you can actually move? Because add in wedding magazines and you trying to get your research in order to all of this- plus anything to look at apartment listings- and you'll be wasting half of your time trying to find stuff."

"That's not a bad idea, really. It would make moving easier, too if we don't have to pack up and move everything at the same time." Nino glanced around their living room area. "I'll look into that, actually. Right away. And then we can maybe invite Ivan and Mylène over to help move stuff and pick their brains about wedding planning."

Marinette laughed. "You know that they're giving themselves a full year to plan and order things. Mylène ordered her dress earlier today, and they aren't getting married until fall."

"Yeah, but they've done research. And they would actually be helpful with sharing it, unlike Mr. Candlestick Holder over here." Nino gave Adrien a stink eye. Adrien only snickered in response. "And they did say that we could call them up to brainstorm together, though they don't know what kind of schedule we're planning on and- wait, don't you remember that?" Nino asked when Alya looked puzzled. "It was when they were congratulating us. Maybe you just forgot about it because Ladybug and Chat Noir sent in their congratulations right after and you were too busy squeeing over that to pay attention to other stuff."

Adrien and Marinette exchanged a grin. They had posted a photo that they had taken while transformed of themselves holding up a card congratulating the Ladyblogger on her engagement after she made a short post on the Ladyblog sharing the news. They had both gotten excited texts from Alya over that, though the Ladyblogger was slightly disappointed that the photo, which had been taken in front of a plain white wall, hadn't given her any clues about where the superheroes were.

"The people I was working with then actually sent someone over to check and make sure that I was okay," Alya admitted, giggling a little at the memory. "They thought that I had injured myself somehow or something, and I had to explain what was going on. They responded so quickly, too!" Alya added. "Like, within a day. That means that they're paying attention to the Ladyblog and my research, and that's so cool!" She spun around in a circle, grinning widely. Nino grinned, amused by his fiancée's enthusiasm, and then edged past her to bring the first of her suitcases back towards their bedroom.

"So if you're done spinning, I have something for you and Nino to open before Adrien and I have to leave," Marinette said, glancing at the clock. Adrien had already pulled his phone out to summon
the Gorilla to bring them to the train station. She handed Alya the large, lumpy package that she had carried up the stairs. "It's a joint Christmas gift."

"Cool!"

As soon as Nino returned, he and Alya pulled the wrapping paper off of their present, and Marinette grinned as she watched their jaws drop once the quilt came into view.

"This is- wow, Marinette," Alya finally managed. She unfolded the quilt partway, draping it over their knees. "This is so pretty! And it's huge, so it'll cover our bed easily. I love it!"

"Look, Alya- that's the date we got together," Nino pointed out, running his fingers over the stitched date. "And the cat face- so cute! And then- oh, this is our first date, with the ice cream."

"It's a- what did you call it, Marinette? A double ring wedding quilt?" Adrien asked, looking at Marinette for confirmation, and she nodded. "A traditional wedding gift."

"It's gorgeous. I absolutely love it," Alya told them. "And we'll definitely appreciate it, since our bedroom here is a little drafty."

Marinette was grinning, clearly thrilled with their reactions.

"There are more of our dates on here," Nino announced. He had been steadily working his way across the chains, apparently having caught on to the pattern of where Marinette had had her quilter sew. "The big things, like the night I had my first gig as a DJ and then we had a date afterwards, and that time we went on that hike and then shared a tent afterwards, and- oh! Here's our engagement day, in the second to last ring."

"I'll fill in the date for your wedding once you decide," Marinette told them. "I had my quilter do the rest, but it'll be easy enough to finish up that bit. She told me what kind and color of thread she used so that it'll match."

"Oh, cool!" Alya was inspecting the dates as well now. "I love it! It's really personalized for us. How on earth did you remember all of these?"

"I looked back at my diary for those years for most of them," Marinette told them, still beaming proudly. "I had a general idea of when it was for a lot of the dates, but I didn't know the exact date until I looked it up."

"I love it!" Alya exclaimed again. She jumped up to hug Marinette. "Seriously. Best gift ever."

As always, their visit had to be cut too short. Adrien had classes the next day and notes to catch up on, and Marinette had to be back at work. They had said their good-byes to their friends and made them promise to keep the two of them updated on the planning progress.

And then they were back on the Eurostar, headed for London.

"I can't believe they went for the get married in under a year option," Adrien said with a bit of a laugh once they were settled and the train was underway. "Absolutely insane. But at least it'll keep them busy in Paris, so we won't have to worry about them coming over and. Uh." He glanced
around, suddenly realizing that maybe it wasn't a fantastic idea to blurt out anything about their living arrangements while out in public. He scrambled for a way to better finish his sentence. "And we'll have plenty of excuses to go back to Paris to help and to get our things back there."

"It's going to be a matter of balancing trips back with spending enough time in London," Marinette pointed out. "You have your studies and I have my commissions. And it would be expensive to travel back and forth every weekend to help."

"Not to mention tiring," Adrien agreed. "And they'll have their families to help, and other friends. Alya's dress shopping might be hard, though, if she wants your help."

Marinette sighed. "It will be. And she can't drag that out forever, even if she is going with the off-the-rack option. She'll need to get it fitted, and that takes time. So I might need her to send me pictures, or maybe we can video chat or something."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out." Adrien patted her arm, clearly restraining himself from wrapping his arm around her shoulders instead. "You said that you would tell her what kinds of shapes to look at, right? So she can use that to narrow her options down and then you can come in and help her make a final decision."

"Well, she'll be the one making the final decision. I'm mostly there to give feedback and steer her and her consultant in the right direction." Marinette flopped back in her seat. "Man, if they could have waited, I would have been able to go dress shopping with her in person, and we wouldn't have to worry about the whole scheduling thing."

Adrien just gave her shoulder another sympathetic pat.

It was dark by the time their train pulled in at the station, just in time to only just miss their bus.

"Great," Adrien groaned, rubbing his grumbling stomach. "Just great. Now we'll have to wait, what? Half an hour?"

Marinette was glancing around. The area near the train station was bustling, as was normal, but there weren't a ton of people out about, since it was cold and damp and miserable. If they went even a street over, they might be able to duck into an alleyway unnoticed. From there, they could transform and just hope that people had their blinds closed and wouldn't look up when they were walking in the street.

And if they did...well, hopefully the Ladyblogger was too busy in Paris to hop a train over to London and investigate.

With Adrien still grumbling and looking around, Marinette snagged his arm and pulled him along the sidewalk. He yelped, then caught on to what she was thinking and immediately trotted after her, trying not to look like he had just thought that someone was attempting to abduct him. It didn't take long for them to find a suitable alleyway, and then Ladybug and Chat Noir were bounding over the rooftops, each lugging a suitcase in one hand.

"Uh, do you know the way?" Chat Noir asked after a few minutes of jumping over streets and scrambling to keep his balance on snow-slick rooftops. "I honestly have no clue where we're supposed to go."

Ladybug giggled. "I don't know either. I was just planning on going in this general direction for a bit and then checking my yo-yo to see how much I had to alter my course. Which-" She landed on a rooftop and paused, flipping open her yo-yo to see a map of their section of London. "We need to
be headed a bit more to the left."

"And how much farther do we have to go?"

"At the speed we were going? Ten more minutes, tops." Ladybug picked up her suitcase and started running again. "Ugh, I wish the suitcases could have gotten sucked into our transformation. Running with them is a pain."

Chat Noir could only nod and wince as his suitcase twisted in his hand and whacked a chimney as they passed. They would be lucky if they weren't spotted- or, worse, reported to the police as suspected intruders. Normally they were a whole lot quieter and a lot more agile.

"I kind of feel like I've been hit by Reverser again," Ladybug said with a bit of a giggle as her suitcase knocked loudly against another rooftop. "I haven't felt this clumsy as Ladybug for ages."

"I wish we had brought backpacks or something. Or cord, to turn our suitcases into backpacks."

"Oh, that would be a fashion statement."

A wet snow started falling as the two superheroes made their way across London, making the roofs even slicker. Chat Noir had to reach out and grab Ladybug at one point when she started sliding on the shingles, nearly losing his grip on his suitcase in the process.

"Almost there," Ladybug managed, struggling to her feet. "I can see our building. I'd say if we can get a block closer, that's good enough. Then we can drop down and detransform and just walk."

"Sounds like a plan!"

Getting down from the rooftops didn't go much more smoothly than running and jumping across them. Ladybug slipped and fell most of the way before catching herself, bending a gutter rather badly in the process when her yo-yo snagged on it.

"I'll have to come back and fix that some other night," Marinette said with a sigh once they had detransformed. She peered up through the snow- sleet, practically- at the damaged gutter. "Hopefully I can just yank it back into shape."

"It's amazing that we didn't leave a trail of bent gutters and broken shingles behind us when we were fighting in Paris," Adrien commented, pulling up his hood against the weather. "Or broken statues and chimneys from your yo-yo."

"I think Lucky Charm fixed a lot of damage," Marinette pointed out. They stepped out into the street, pulling their suitcases along the slushy sidewalk. "Because my yo-yo definitely broke a lot of stuff. The Eiffel Tower, for one."

Adrien sniggered. "Out of context, that sounds absolutely ludicrous," he said, grinning. "A yo-yo, take down the Eiffel Tower? But it is crazy strong."

"Most of the akumas we fought sounded just as crazy." Now that they were history, Marinette could laugh thinking back on some of the designs. "There was the giant baby, Mr. Pigeon-

"Oh, but he was terrifying. To my nose, at least."

"You are a terrible cat."

Adrien only laughed.
As they rolled into their building, one of the wheels on Adrien's suitcase, abused beyond what it
could take, popped off and rolled into a corner. Adrien groaned and ditched his listing suitcase to
go after it. When he held it up, Marinette had to laugh.

"I'm gonna have to get new wheels," Adrien grumbled, coming back with the dinged-up wheel in
hand. A chunk of it was straight-up missing, presumably from a direct hit to a chimney. "I mean,
they weren't in great shape before, but I think they aged twenty years in a single trip across
London, and- oh, crud." Adrien had turned his suitcase over to try to replace the wheel and found
the axle bent way out of whack. "Okay, can we take the elevator? This suitcase is a mess."

"Of course." Marinette led the way to the elevators, her own suitcase wobbling unevenly behind
her. "C'mon, kitty. Let's get home and then we can fix everything up."

Chapter End Notes

As always, reviews make my day!

My apologies for the wonky updates at the moment- I had been hoping to get back to
my normal schedule, but between starting a new job, baking a ton of Christmas
cookies, trying to apply for spring jobs, and being behind on editing thanks to NaNo,
I'm not as on top of things as I wanted to be (and on top of that, there's a large chunk of
an upcoming chapter that I kind of want to re-write completely, which is a pain.)
Hopefully I can get settled back in to my schedule soon (though the holidays might
throw it off again :/), but if not then I'll just update when I can.
Chapter 41

Adrien spent a good chunk of the morning of Valentine's Day wondering if maybe he should go out and brave the crowds (and potential lurking fans) to get a different present for Marinette. He knew that they had agreed on a simpler date this year- they were going to one of their favorite comfy stay-in dates, where they just lounged around in their matching pajama sets and played video games and ate take-out- but this was their second Valentine's as a couple. Surely he shouldn't make it too laid-back.

"Marinette will love your present," Tikki assured Adrien, making sure that her voice stayed low so that Marinette, who was getting up one room over, wouldn't hear. "She doesn't need you to be spending a ton of money on her just because you can. It's a cute present, and she'll like it a lot."

Adrien worried his lip but nodded anyway. He knew that Marinette liked the cute gifts instead of the expensive ones, but it was hard to escape all of the advertisements about buying loved ones jewelry for the holiday. They were plastered across billboards all over the city, played across TV screens, danced in the little ads on his computer screen, and were sandwiched in newspapers and magazines alike- buy jewelry! Rings, necklaces, earrings, bracelets! Make her happy for Valentine's Day!

It was exhausting, and Adrien didn't appreciate the way that the ads made him doubt his gift to Marinette.

"It's your version of a teddy bear, and those are common enough presents for Valentine's Day," Tikki reminded him, clearly picking up on what he was thinking. "She'll love it!"

Adrien nodded and continued making crepes for breakfast, making sure not to burn any. He had had to sacrifice a little sleep to get up early enough to start breakfast so that he would have it ready before Marinette had to go to work, but it was worth it. They would taste delicious.

"I smell something tasty!" Marinette sang, appearing around the corner. She grinned when she spotted the crepe pans on the stove. "Oh, yum!"

"Happy Valentine's Day, Bugaboo," Adrien told her, leaning forward to kiss her. "You look gorgeous this morning."

Marinette laughed. "I haven't even gotten dressed yet."

"Mm-hmm. Your bedhead is adorable." Adrien grinned at Marinette's blush and reached over to ruffle his girlfriend's hair up a little more. "And you'd look adorable in anything. Or out of anything."

"Adrien!"

Adrien just laughed. "Go get ready, Bug," he told her, giving her a gentle push out of the kitchen. "I'll get the crepes ready."

"Best boyfriend ever." Marinette vanished back around the corner with a grin, a bounce in her step. Adrien watched her go, then went back to making sure his batter was the right consistency.

(He had once packed his flour while measuring it instead of keeping it loose and fluffy and, well...that was definitely not correct. Crepes were not meant to be that thick.)
By the time Marinette emerged, dressed and ready for the day, Adrien was placing the last of the crepes on a large platter and bringing it out to the table, setting out plates and pouring juice for them both. He had set out an array of jams and a bottle of maple syrup on the table as well, just so Marinette could choose what she wanted.

"You are amazing," Marinette proclaimed, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "This looks fantastic. Best morning ever."

Adrien just grinned. "I wanted to make it special."

The (proper) kiss that he got in return made the early(ish) wake-up call and all of the dishes he would have to wash up well worth it.

They made an interesting little group, Adrien had to admit once they were all settled. He and Marinette sat on one side of the table, their knees bumping occasionally as they ate. On the other side, Plagg had refused any crepe and was nibbling his way through a generous slice of Brie. Next to him, Tikki had gotten a full-sized crepe, because Adrien had forgotten to make a small one, and strawberry jam and icing sugar were clinging to her cheeks as she ate. They would have to remember to help her clean up later.

...well, at least it would be good practice for when they had kids that needed their mouths wiped after eating.

After they had finished breakfast, Marinette kissed Adrien good-bye and trotted off to work, sounding very cheerful indeed as she greeted Abbey in the hallway outside of their apartment. Adrien grinned as he started rinsing the dishes, sticking what could go into the dishwasher in and hand-washing the rest.

"Are you going to spend the rest of the day cooking some ridiculously meal for your lover?" Plagg wanted to know as Adrien dried the last of the dishes and put everything away. "Because that's boring."

"Is it so hard for you to say girlfriend? And no, I have to go to class. And we've agreed to do pizza for dinner, so I'll get that dough going once I get home." Adrien wrinkled his nose at the thought of having to knead the dough for the pizza. It wasn't his favorite thing to do, even if he did enjoy the end product. They didn't have a dough hook to do the kneading with, so he had to do it all by hand instead.

And the dough had to be kneaded for something like ten minutes, all constantly. While it wasn't difficult to knead, necessarily, it was tiring and it tended to make his arms start to ache. But they got pizza out of it, so it was worth it. And Marinette had sworn up and down that they would get a proper mixer once they moved back to Paris, so they would only have to hand-knead their dough for a few more months.

"That's not very fancy."

"Valentine's Day isn't about being fancy, Plagg. It's about spending time together, and this year Marinette and I decided that we wanted to go for something laid-back and relaxed." Adrien headed back into the bedroom to change and get ready for the day. "It'll be fun."

Plagg snorted. "You spend the evenings together all the time anyway. How is this any different?"

"Easy. I won't be studying at all, and she won't be designing. We'll just hang out and talk and play video games and eat tasty food." It wasn't as though they never did that- they didn't spend all
weekend on homework and commissions, after all- but it was the intention that counted. They were calling it a date, so therefore it would feel more datelike than playing a few rounds of Mega Strike on an average Saturday afternoon.

"And you always do that, too."

"Fine." Exasperated, Adrien turned to his kwami. "You really want to know what's going to be different? Fine. The difference is that you aren't going to want to be out here when Marinette and I are, and you definitely aren't going to be in the bedroom once we head back there."

"Ew, ew, ew, ew! I didn't wanna know that!"

"I'd wish you a happy Valentine's Day, but I'm sure that you and Marinette are being boring and not even remotely romantic even though we all know you should be, so I don't see the point." Paul said as he sat down next to Adrien. "And just FYI, my sister made up this giant glittery obnoxious card for you for Valentine's Day with, like, a poem that's three pages long and obnoxiously sappy that she wanted me to deliver to you today with a bouquet of roses, but I binned the card on my way here and gave the flowers to my mom."

Adrien tried not to laugh at Paul's long-suffering expression. "I appreciate that, thanks."

"Do you normally get a lot of cards from your admirers?" Paul asked while they waited for class to start. "At home, I mean."

"Oh, gosh. Yes. But my father's secretary started filtering out the cards after I complained about the, ah, contents of some of the letters once I reached lycée." Adrien made a face at the memory. The contents of some of the letters had gotten creepy, to say the least. His father had ordered Nathalie to look through the cards, and Adrien had told her to just bin everything rather than wasting her time with the sorting. After all, if any of his friends wanted to give him any cards for the fun of it, they could give them to him in person. "So I have no idea how many cards I get nowadays, because she knows that I don't really care to see any of them."

"Brutal."

Adrien shrugged. "None of them know me. Why should I open all of those cards and read them, just because someone thinks that they're in love with me because they've seen some ads that I'm in and read a few magazine articles about me? I don't have the time."

"Fair point."

As class started, Adrien wondered when he should tell Paul that he and Marinette were actually dating. After all, Marinette had told her team at work the truth about their relationship. But she had told them because Abbey was moving into her old apartment, and it would be impolite to make Abbey lie about where she was living to her friends and coworkers, and impossible to do besides with Sarah and several other people working at Madam Rosalie's also living in the building. And Paul lived at home, with a sister who seemed to be a big fan of his. If she heard that Adrien was dating Marinette...

Well, he could deny it again, but Adrien had long since gotten tired of that. Maybe he would wait until the end of the semester, just to be safe. It never hurt to play on the safe side when it came to
keeping secrets.

Lecture went by in a flash, and then Adrien headed to his discussion class. Paul hadn't managed to get into the same section- he had gone for an eight o'clock discussion instead- so he waved good-bye to his friend and headed to discussion. That went by in a flash, and then Adrien was headed back to his neighborhood, a bit of a spring in his step. A delicious smell tickled his nose as he headed down the street, and he was struck by an idea.

Grinning, Adrien spun around and changed course, ducking into their favorite bakery to pick a few things up instead of passing it by. He knew that Marinette was going to be whipping up some cookies for them to have with their pizza later- or maybe she was going to dig into their stash of chilled dough from previous too-large batches to bake, he wasn't sure- but there was nothing wrong with a midday treat.

Well, as long as he could brave the crowds in the bakery, which was far busier than usual with plenty of people who had had the same idea as Adrien.

Adrien headed out of the bakery nearly twenty minutes later with a bag in his hands and a whistle on his lips. He had managed to snag the last of Marinette's favorite treat plus one of his own favorites (plus a cookie for Tikki and a cheesy breadstick for Plagg, he wasn't cruel), which he was going to count as a success.

"That was insane," Plagg grumbled as they headed down the street. "Insane! Why are there so many people?"

Adrien gave his kwami a Look- or, rather, he tried, because it was difficult to crane his neck to look at Plagg properly when his kwami was in his jacket. "It's Valentine's Day."

"So?"

Adrien let out a long-suffering sigh. "So a lot of people are trying to pick up a fancy dessert for their dinners with their significant others tonight when they wouldn't normally bother. And clearly the bakeries are trying to account for that by making more, but they can only make so much product at a time. And they probably have people who placed orders that they have to bake for as well. And obviously the cashiers can only go so fast without making mistakes or accidentally damaging anything, so the line gets really long."

"And then there are the idiots who get to the front of the line and still don't know what they want."

Adrien tried not to laugh. It would only encourage Plagg, and while he had a point... "Well, maybe their first choice was out or something."

"Then they should have a second choice ready. And a third. It's called planning ahead." Plagg peered up at Adrien. "Don't tell me that you would have stood there looking around like an idiot if they had sold out of the kind of stuff you bought. You had options that you would have gone to next."

"And I was keeping an eye on the display cases to make sure that they had what I wanted," Adrien admitted. "And to know if I would have to change my order. It's what I always do, and I think it's a good habit to have."

"Yeah, well, other people should take up that habit too." Plagg sounded grumpy. Clearly he wasn't in a great mood, maybe because of the promise of future romance and ooey-gooey human grossness in the near future. "So are we going back home now?"
"I gotta get this to Mari first." Bag clutched tightly in his hand, Adrien sped up his step, carefully avoiding the slick spots on the sidewalk. "Otherwise it'll be cold, and she won't want to eat sweets right before dinner."

Plagg groaned and rolled over in Adrien's pocket. "Remind me how you two aren't married already?"

"It's totally a boyfriend thing to do!"

Marinette's coworkers were not surprised to see him there. Sarah's head popped out into the hallway and she eyed the bag he carried with a grin.

"Oh! Treats!" She made a big show of clapping her hands over her heart. "You shouldn't have, Agreste! You're so sweet to us."

Adrien couldn't help but laugh. "Very funny."

"Seriously, though. No flowers?" Sarah stood up from her chair and came out fully, pushing her chair back to her desk. "I would have thought that a big sappy romantic like you would have gone the flowers route."

"There really wasn't any way for me to do that without being seen," Adrien admitted, because low-key Valentine's date or no, he would have liked to get flowers for Marinette. There just wasn't a good way to hide them, and if he was spotted in a flower shop, they would end up in the magazines again and he was enjoying not having articles written about his personal life too much to risk setting them off again.

Sarah made a face. "Oh, I suppose. But you'll have to let the world know someday, Sunshine!" she added, and Adrien had to wonder when on Earth Sarah had met Alya in order to pick up that nickname. "And believe me, you guys will be seeing all of the magazines that cover it!"

"I don't doubt that," Adrien grumbled, though he really wasn't upset at all. "I think we have an entire box in one of our closets that's devoted to magazines that you guys have brought us with articles about Marinette and I in them."

Sarah snickered.

"I'm gonna do a dramatic reading of the best of the articles after you two go public and give it to you guys when you get married," Abbey told him, appearing around the corner with an armful of shimmery silver fabric. Adrien grinned at her and waved with his free hand. "Marinette said that you surprised her with crepes for breakfast this morning. That's very French of you."

Adrien laughed. "We are French," he pointed out. "And now I'm bringing her a treat before I go get dinner started. There's dough that needs to proof," he explained hastily when Sarah and Abbey looked too impressed. "It's not- we decided not to go fancy this year. Fancy meals make too many dishes."

"I suppose that would take away from the romance of the evening a bit," Sarah allowed. "Except it's you two that we're talking about, so I wouldn't be surprised if you could still make it ridiculously sweet somehow. It's, like, a superpower of yours." She grinned, mischief lighting up her smile. "Speaking of which- does your superhero-researching friend know about you guys yet?"

Adrien shook her head, enjoying the way Sarah's eyebrows shot up. "No, we haven't told her. We figured it would be funnier if we waited until we got back first," he explained at her exasperated expression. "And we didn't want to risk the news getting out early, either. The press in Paris won't
"It will be funny. I wish I could be a fly on the wall when they find out, honestly." Abbey grinned at him. "They'll never trust the two of you unsupervised again. But I should let you get whatever that is to Marinette- we have a meeting in ten minutes, so you came just in time, really. She'll probably be in her cubicle."

"Thanks, guys!" Adrien headed past them, through the familiar rows of cubicles. He waved to a few of Marinette's other coworkers as he passed them, and then ducked into her cubicle. It took a minute for Marinette to notice that he was there, and that was only because of the tempting smell drifting out of the bakery bag. 

"Hey, Adrien!" Marinette bounced up out of her seat to press a chaste kiss to the corner of his lips. "I didn't expect to see you here today! Are those treats I smell?"

"Mm-hmm. I got your favorite." Adrien fished out the almond crème-filled pan au chocolat and handed it over to her. "Last one in the bakery, too. I got there just in time."

"Oh, yum." Marinette took the treat and a napkin and bit into it with a blissful expression on her face. "Just what I needed. We just have a lot of meetings scheduled today, because the Spring runway collection needs to be really revamped so that it's actually cohesive. We have too many different ideas going on right now, so the Men's runway outfits look like they're from an entirely different fashion house than the Women's line and the kid's stuff as well."

Adrien gave her a hug, careful to dodge the powdered sugar from the pastry puffing off as Marinette bit into the flaky layers. "Good luck with your meetings. I'm sure it'll work out. And I should probably get home and get started on the pizza dough so it's all ready to load up once you get home."

Marinette perked up. "Oh, yeah! Pizza and video games and relaxing. I can't wait!" She polished off the last few bites of her treat and licked the sugar off of her fingers. "But I, uh, have a meeting-"

"Yeah, Abbey told me. I just wanted to get your treat to you." He reached down into the bag and pulled out Tikki's cookie, wrapped in a napkin. "And for Tikki, since I was there."

Marinette grinned, taking the cookie. Adrien heard a quiet cheer from inside of her bag. "Great! I'll make more cookies when I get home."

"A fresh batch or should I get some of the dough from the freezer thawing?" Adrien wanted to know.

"Fresh, though we probably won't bake all of it tonight. I'll bake a trayful and throw the rest in the fridge." Marinette turned back to her desk, gathering up some papers into a folder. "Then I can bake more tomorrow, when we aren't trying to make pizza at the same time and have a date."

There was another cheer from inside of the bag. Adrien muffled his laugh.

"Well, someone is happy about that," Adrien commented. His pressed a kiss to Marinette's forehead and then stepped back. "I'd better go, then. Have a good rest of the day at work."

She kissed him properly. "I will. And you remember how to not kill the yeast, right?"

"That only happened once, I swear. Once." Adrien resisted the urge to stick his tongue out at his girlfriend, instead contenting himself with a quick kiss pressed to her cheek. "See you later!"
Adrien was trying to wrestle the pizza dough into a vaguely circular shape of the right size and thickness when Marinette arrived home.

"Where do you need me?" Marinette called as she kicked off her shoes. "Do you need help with the pizza, or should I go straight for the cookies?

"I need the Queen of Breads to come win an argument with this dough for me," Adrien told her. "And I'll get some of the you-know-what ready."

Plagg appeared, suddenly awake. "Did I hear you say something about cheese?"

"I just fed you and no, you did not." Adrien pushed his kwami back out of the kitchen. "Can you ever not interrupt us making dinner? And don't you remember that it's Valentine's Day? It's gonna get sappy in here really fast."

Plagg gagged and zipped away.

Marinette laughed as she washed her hands in the sink and pulled out an apron. "You're so mean to him."

"He deserves it most of the time, really." Adrien handed her the rolling pin and went to go grab the mozzarella out of the fridge. "And he knows perfectly well that it's Valentine's Day and I don't necessarily want to have him hanging around like a nosy third wheel all of the time."

"Do you want me to go to the back room, too?" Tikki inquired, flitting around the corner. "I was planning to eventually, of course, I was just hoping to maybe have a warm cookie first."

Adrien grinned at Tikki. "You know we don't mind having you around. You actually know when we need to be alone."

Tikki giggled. "Plagg knows, too. He just likes to ignore that sometimes so he can play up the being a grumpy old sourpuss."

"Ah-hah. I knew it!"

With Marinette's help, it didn't take long for them to get their pizza loaded up and in the oven. She got started on the cookie dough and Adrien took the short break to warm up Plagg's little heat pad and bring it back to his kwami, who was napping on their dresser. Even asleep, it didn't take long for Plagg to register the heat and wake up long enough to flop face-first on the pad.

"You're welcome," Adrien said a bit sarcastically as he stripped out of his flour-covered clothes and pulled out his Ladybug jammies. He wiggled into them, making face at a loose thread that he found. It wasn't hard to find a pair of scissors to clip it- a side effect of living with someone who was heavily involved in the fiber arts, and Adrien really wanted Marinette to count all of her scissors when they packed up at the end of their time in London because there had to be at least half a dozen in their apartment- and then Adrien headed back out to help Marinette.

Well. "Help". He really wasn't contributing to the forward progress of cookie-making. In fact, he was rather hindering Marinette's progress.
"Oh, go set the table or something," Marinette said with a laugh, swatting him away from the cookie dough. "First I have Tikki trying to steal the dough, and then you do. Shoo, shoo."

Laughing, Adrien dodged the swat from the towel she was holding and darted out to the living room to set the table. He had gone for a few romantic notes, of course—there were the presents that he had picked up, and then the ruby red candles in the center of their table. Lacy placemats—paper, not actual lace—were set out across from each other, just for a touch of Valentine's, and napkins matching the candles added the final touch.

"Oh, that looks nice," Marinette said from the kitchen. "Festive, but not too upscale for a pajama date."

"I hope you know that I'm going to take you out for a ridiculously fancy dinner next year," Adrien told her, grinning. He had already started thinking ahead, to when they could be open about their relationship. "And there won't even be dishes to do afterwards. It'll be amazing."

"Woo-hoo! No dishes!"

With the table ready, Adrien headed back into the kitchen to start on the dishes before their date properly began. With the cookie mix made, Marinette covered the top of the bowl and stuck it back in the fridge to chill a little before baking, out of reach of both Adrien and Tikki.

"I'll go change," Marinette told Adrien, one hand brushing down his back. Adrien grinned when her hand wandered a bit far south, cheekily giving his rear a squeeze before darting back into their bedroom.

Oh, they were going to have the best cat-and-bug chases across the rooftops of Paris once they moved back. Nothing inappropriate in the public eye, of course—they were still superheroes and role models—but they could tease and chase and pounce and wrestle all they wanted.

It was going to be so much fun, and Adrien couldn't wait.

He had cleared most of their prep dishes when Marinette came back, dressed in her Chat Noir pajamas, a pair of fuzzy cat ears perched cheekily on her head. She grinned at his expression, hip-checking him as she reached for the dish towel and started drying.

"Where did you get those?" Adrien asked with a laugh. "And are they staying on all night?"

Marinette shrugged. "If they don't bug me, they'll stay on. And I got them at a costume shop. It was easy enough to find." She grinned. "And if you don't remove them first."

Adrien flicked the water off one hand and reached over to bat at one of the cat ears. "I like them. They're cute." He grinned. "Not as cute as the wearer, of course, but still adorable."

The blush he got from that was welcome. He liked making his Lady blush when he showered her with compliments, and it truly never got old.

Once the first round of dirty dishes was washed and put away, they headed out to their living room while they waited the pizza to cook. Marinette pulled up Mega Strike on her computer, setting it up on their side table and handing Adrien one of the controllers. They set up a two-on-two game against another pair online, and then plunged into battle together.

Their opponents never had a chance. Even in online robot format, Ladybug and Chat Noir were a force to be reckoned with. They got three battles in before the kitchen timer chimed and they had to set aside the controllers for a bit to eat.
"I wish there were difficulty levels online," Adrien commented as they headed for the kitchen. "I mean, the people we played weren't complete beginners or anything, but they weren't exactly a challenge."

"I think there's some way to find more advanced players to play against, if we go to the forums first. But then we'd have to find a pair that's actually online," Marinette shuffled the pizza from the pizza pan onto their largest cutting board. "Which can be difficult sometimes. I mean, the site has some way to filter out who isn't online at the moment, but when people keep their computers on and stay logged in, that messes with the program."

"Ah-hah."

Marinette cut up the pizza with a few deft strokes of their pizza cutter, and then they dug in. Adrien piled a couple slices of the gorgeously cheesy pizza on his plate and headed over to the table to set it down. While Marinette got her own slices, Adrien pulled out a pair of wine glasses and poured them each a glass of grape juice to go with their meal, since Marinette wasn't a huge fan of wine and really, neither was he.

And then they could really get their date started.

Perched at their table, eating cheesy pizza and vegetable salad in their pajamas, it was about as far as they could get from the previous year's fancy dinner, with their best dress-up outfits and their several side dishes and steak that wouldn't have been out of place at a restaurant.

But Adrien loved it. They didn't have to make everything fancy and go out of their way to dress up for their date to be romantic. They could be relaxed and as giggly as they wanted.

"Oh, you have some cheese trying to escape," Marinette said, interrupting herself mid-sentence to lean over and swipe the cheese off of the corner of his mouth. She popped the bit of cheese in her mouth, then glanced back over at him. "Oh, wait, you still have a bit of sauce-"

She leaned over to kiss the sauce off at the same time Adrien stuck his tongue out to try to lick his lips cleaned. They broke down in giggles when Adrien accidentally licked Marinette's lips instead.

"Here I was trying to be romantic, and instead you licked me," Marinette complained, but she was giggling. "Fail."

"To be fair, I wasn't expecting you right there." Adrien grinned over at her. "But I have to say, pizza sauce tastes very good on your lips."

"Oh, just eat your pizza."

When he got up to get another slice of pizza, Adrien was amused to see that the pizza still had all of the cheese on it, which must have been a first for them. Clearly Plagg had been squicked out enough by the idea of seeing him and Marinette be all romantic and gooey together that he had decided to actually stay away from his favorite food for once.

"Okay, the plates can probably wait until later," Marinette said once they had both finished both pizza and juice. "I have something for you."

Adrien grinned. "What a coincidence, I have something for you as well!"

Marinette scammed to their bedroom, while Adrien recovered her presents for her from the very top shelf of their large closet in the hallway. He stashed them under the table for the time being, knowing full well what Marinette's response would be when she saw the bulky package.
"Ta-da!" Marinette announced, returning with a slim, rectangular package. She handed it to him. "For you, kitty-cat."

Adrien took the present and pulled off the wrapping, revealing a book. It was from a series that he had wanted to read, but had never been able to find in stores when he was in Paris. He opened it with a grin, flipping through the first few pages. "I've been wanting to read this! Thanks, Mari!"

Marinette grinned, pleased. "Plagg said you would like it."

"He does make himself useful every once in a while." Adrien set the book down to grab his gifts for Marinette, putting the smaller one to the side to hand over the large one first. "For you, my Lady."

Marinette gave Adrien a fondly exasperated look as she accepted the larger package. "Kitty, this is too much."

"You haven't even seen what it is yet!" Adrien protested with a laugh. "At least wait to open the box."

"It's big, and that's enough to tell me that it's too much." Still, Marinette tore open the wrapping paper and pulled out the box inside. With one last wary look at the still-grinning Adrien, she pulled off the tape and opened the box.

And then Adrien was pleased to see a grin spread across her face.

"It's so cute!" Marinette squealed, pulling the ladybug pillow out from its bed of tissue paper and hugging it to her chest. "It'll go with my cat pillow."

"Are you referring to me, or to an actual pillow?" Adrien teased. "Because if you're referring to me, I've already found my match." He leaned over to press a warm kiss to her forehead. "I already have my Ladybug."

"I'm talking about an actual pillow, silly. I had to leave it at home in Paris because it was too big to bring over." Marinette giggled. "And it would be a bit too big for our bed, I think. It's already a bit cramped with the two of us as it is. We'll have to get a bigger bed when we move back to Paris."

Adrien couldn't argue there. With too many extra blankets and pillows, they would get crowded out of their own bed. A bigger bed, piled with blankets and pillows of all shapes and sizes, would be the perfect place to sprawl and nap. "Is it cute?"

"It's a cat. Of course it is." She giggled at his expression. "But not as cute as you."

"I'm handsome, thank-you-very-much. Hardly cute." Adrien brushed his hair back, preening like the model he was. Even in pajamas, he knew his best angles. "One handsome cat."

Marinette just sighed at him, rolling her eyes affectionately. "Uh-huh. Whatever you say, Mr. Cutest Cat."

"Mr. Handsome-est Cat says that you need to open his other present for you," Adrien leaned over, grabbing the much smaller package off of the floor and placing it in front of Marinette. "Purr-ty please?"

"Why do I have a feeling that I know what this is?" Marinette didn't hesitate to pick this present up and tear off the paper. It didn't take long for her to reveal the bird-shaped candle inside. She laughed as she pulled it out. "Oh, kitty. How long are you going to keep doing this?"
Adrien grinned. "Until it's not funny anymore. And it's going to be funny for quite a while, I think."

"At least it's not rats." Marinette muttered under her breath, and Adrien tried not to laugh. "Most of the time, at least."

"I'll keep the rats to Halloween-time, I promise," Adrien said with a bit of a laugh. "They're not as cute, and it's hard to find anything shaped like a rat for most of the year."

"And thank goodness for that."

Adrien did his best not to snicker at that. With presents open, Marinette popped back into the kitchen briefly to scoop out some cookie dough to bake and then they went back to their video games while they waited for the cookies to be ready. This time, they got a tougher team of opponents to fight, and so the battles took longer.

"Nice job!" Adrien said with a laugh once they once again emerged victorious, exchanging a fist bump with Marinette and then kissing her. "Ladybug and Chat Noir save the day!"

Marinette laughed at that. "And we're even using the Ladybug and Chat Noir bots. How fitting."

"I liked the catbug that we used against Gamer the most." He had hoped that Megastrike would create a similar bot in their game after that, but they hadn't. He wasn't sure if it was because they hadn't heard about it- they must have, there were dozens of Megastrike fans in Paris who had been thrilled with the security camera footage of the fight from the stadium and who had messaged the company, exclaiming over the Ladybug and Chat Noir combo bot- or if they were worried that there was some sort of copyright claim that the superheroes had over the design, or if it was something else entirely. Maybe the Catbug was too overpowered.

He would have thought that they would have at least considered trying a partners game where, like with him and Ladybug, one person controlled the movements and the other controlled the attacks. Maybe they had, but there weren't enough people who could work together on the same wavelength as well as he and Marinette could.

The timer went off, and Marinette scurried into the kitchen to pull the cookies out of the oven. Adrien followed her, but just to put away the leftover pizza for another meal.

"Now these have to cool," Marinette reminded him before Adrien could reach for any of the piping hot cookies. "And then we can eat far too many of them."

"We're going to have to go out on a run soon," Adrien said with a laugh, eying the gorgeous way the molten chocolate glistened under the kitchen lights. "It'll be worth it, really, but we will."

Marinette groaned. "A run out in the slush. That's no fun."

"Or maybe we can get in to some of the group fitness classes on campus. I'll look into what they have there when I go by the gym next."

"Ooh, that could be fun."

Once the cookies had cooled enough that they could eat them, Marinette piled them onto a tray and they headed back out into the living room.

Their next battle went a little bumpier- as it turned out, it was difficult to effectively work the controllers while eating the delicious cookies. But then Marinette put her cookie between her lips
to free her hands and her adorably determined face slid into place, and within a minute, their opponents had been flattened.

"You get scary when you're not winning," Adrien said with a laugh. "Scary determined. The poor suckers never stood a chance."

Marinette giggled as she set her controller aside to retrieve her cookie and eat it properly. "It's the same thing that always happened when we got into a tight spot when fighting akumas. I just get hyperfocused and it seems like everything slows down, enough that I can plan out all of my attacks and see what needs to be done."

"Remind me to never get on your wrong side."

An hour and a half later, they were pleasantly stuffed with cookies and they had defeated several more opponents online. It was getting later, though, and they had school and work the next day, so they decided to call an end to the games for the night.

While Marinette turned her computer off, Adrien headed into the back bedroom. Both kwamis were snoozing on the dresser, curled up together on Plagg's heat pad. Tikki stirred when the light turned on, head lifting up and sleepy blue eyes peering around. She blinked twice when she spotted Adrien, and then gave him a look of understanding and zipped out of the room, heading to the more permanent kwami bed set up in the living room. Plagg stayed stubbornly asleep.

Sighing, Adrien poked his kwami. A sleepy green eye glared up at him.

"What?"

"Marinette and I are going to bed," Adrien informed his kwami. "So, unless you want to be here when she comes in-"

Plagg bolted up, suddenly awake, and phased through the wall in a black and green blur in his rush to leave the room. Adrien laughed, then headed over to their bed to straighten the sheets— not that they would stay straight for long, of course, but it was nice to make the bed look nice for a short while, at least— before heading into the bathroom to quickly wash up.

After all, Adrien had a sneaking suspicion that he might be too tired to wash up later on.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

Just as a heads up- there are a fair number of time skips in this chapter! I think I was envisioning 1 week between dress shopping trips and maybe 1-2 weeks after that before Marinette goes back to Paris.

Chapter 42- aka the chapter that made Google think that I'm getting married. Thanks, search history.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alya wasted no time in starting the search for her dress. Only a month after her return to Paris, she started searching for her wedding gown, with a bit of remote assistance from Marinette.

While Alya headed for the store on the other end of the line, Marinette got herself set up at her sewing table, a project on one side of the table and her phone propped up against a can on the other side, where she could see the screen but the phone wouldn't be in danger of getting knocked over.

"I'm glad you could make it like this," Alya told her as she entered the wedding dress section of the store. "I mean, I was worried that you would leave me to the taste of just my sisters because I know full well you can't just be coming back to Paris every weekend. They would have me dress up in a glittery ball gown."

"Oh, no, that wouldn't be doing anything for your figure," Marinette said immediately, wincing at the thought of what kind of ridiculous dresses Alya's sisters would be drawn to. They were at that age where big and fluffy would absolutely be a draw. "And sparkles..."

"I'm thinking that lace would be better," Alya said. The camera frame shook as they sat down on a bench. "I don't want a completely plain dress. I know that simplicity can be gorgeous, but I don't want to go completely plain. But sparkles... I think that that can get overwhelming pretty quickly."

"Wait, who do you have with you?" Marinette asked when she heard a long sigh heaved from behind the camera. "Not one of your sisters, is it?"

Alya laughed. "Nope. They don't have any patience for shopping."

"And I do?"

Marinette laughed properly as she recognized Alix's voice. "Alix! How did you get roped into this?"

She could hear the scowl in Alix's voice as she responded. "I lost a dare to Kim. Kim owed Alya a favor. I've been signed up as a camera-carrier for all shopping sessions that Alya needs. So if we could find a dress, say, today, that would be appreciated."

"Not happening!" Alya called back. "I wanna find the perfect dress. My mom's already warned me that it's probably not going to happen on the first trip."

Alix groaned louder.
"If it helps, you'll only have to do two trips at most before I come back to Paris to help in person," Marinette pointed out. "I think I was planning on coming the first weekend in March, because that's the very latest that Alya should be ordering her dress. So it's not like you're going to be in servitude for the entire year."

"Oh god."

"Anyway, I got your text with what shapes I should think about looking at," Alya interrupted before Alix could start groaning again. "Or maybe I should say I got your essay on dress shapes. And I'm gonna say right now that I'm in the best shape I've ever been from running around the world catching planes and hiking and everything, so I'm gonna go for the figure-hugging ones. I don't have anything that I want to hide, thank-you-very-much."

"If you got it, flaunt it," Alix droned in the most bored voice she could possibly manage. "Yaaaaay."

Marinette tried not to laugh.

When Alya vanished into the changing room with a consultant, Alix let out a huff and set Alya's phone down so she could pull out her own. The beeps and dings of a phone game floated over the connection as they waited. Marinette picked up her tablet and returned to working on a grey-on-grey t-shirt print design for one of her customers as she waited. It wasn't long before Alya came out, looking distinctly uncomfortable in a ruched fit-and-flare dress.

"Ugh."

"Thank you, Alix," Alya said with a laugh. "That's my feeling, too."

"It's too many lines on you," Marinette agreed, picking up her phone and squinting at the screen to get a better look. She couldn't make out the details like she would be able to in person, but even like this she was wondering what the designer had even been thinking. The likelihood that anyone would look good in that dress was slim, to say the least. "You don't need the ruching."

Alya nodded, turned, and headed back into the changing room. Alix resumed her game, and Marinette went back to her design. It wasn't long before Alya returned. There wasn't any ruching this time, but...

"That neckline isn't doing much for you, and the flare is just..." Marinette shook her head. "It's a little too distinct. The elements of the dress just aren't working together."

"I don't like the neckline either," Alya admitted. "And I'm not sure about these straps, or the lace design. It's just not me."

The next dress got a ugh, no that made both Marinette and Alix giggle before it even left the dressing room. The one after that...

"It's a nice dress, and it's closer to what I was envisioning on you," Marinette said, tipping her head to the side. "But..."

"I'm not a huge fan of the tiered ruffles," Alya decided, turning around and looking at herself in the mirror from every angle. "And again with the neckline...and I don't know about the sparkle, but maybe that's just because I'm not a huge fan of the dress overall."

The consultant nodded and led Alya back to the changing rooms.
"Are you sure about that shape, Marinette?" Alix asked after a minute. "I mean, I think I kind of get where you're going with it, but it seems like a good chunk of the designers that made that style have, like, zero design sense."

"There's bound to be a good one there," Marinette said. "But yeah, it's also a silhouette that's not done well a lot of the time. Not everyone handles the flare section well. It's best when there's a pattern from the top part that can cover the seam well, and to have the flare be a little less dramatic from the start."

Alix groaned. "And you couldn't have said that when the consultant lady was out here? Are you and Kim conspiring to make my life miserable or something? I overheard the lady say that the next dress is gonna be the last one for this consultation."

Marinette winced, glancing at the clock. She hadn't thought that a ton of time had passed, but if Alya had only booked the appointment for an hour and a half, then yeah, it would be almost over. Picking out dresses from the giant stock and then getting them put on and clipped in to fit took a while, meaning only a few dresses per consultation.

Alya came out in the last dress, and Marinette could already see even on her phone screen that she was shaking her head. It was obvious why-the transition from fitted to flared had a seam line right there, making Alya look a bit cut off at the knee.

"A softer transition there would be much better," Marinette told her friend and the consultant. "Both in terms of not having quite such an obvious seam and in not going from fitted to quite such a dramatic flair."

"We'll have to keep that in mind at your next appointment," the consultant told Alya. "But right now, we're out of time."

Alix cheered. The poor consultant looked confused at her sudden enthusiasm, but managed a smile and ushered Alya back to change into her street clothes again.

"I kind of hoped that we would be able to find something at least close today," Alya said once she emerged and had taken her phone back from Alix. Marinette saw the background shift as they walked out of the store. "But maybe my standards are just too high for getting something off of the rack. I'd trade the fitted look for a more traditional silhouette if it would be easier to find something that looks good."

"We'll give it another try next weekend," Marinette assured her, grinning when she heard Alix's loud groans. "And then we can do a marathon search when I come if you haven't found anything good."

"I don't have to be there, right?" Alix wanted to know. "When you're here, I mean."

Alya feigned confusion. "You mean you weren't enjoying shopping? Really? That's so unlike you, Alix!"

"I hate you guys."

Their second dress search, Alya explained as they waited for the consultant to finish up with her
previous appointment, was scheduled to be a bit shorter due to the last-minute sign-up, an hour instead of an hour and a half. She was hoping to maybe get a couple good dress choices at this appointment, and make a final decision when Marinette arrived.

"If there's something you really like this time, you could just buy it and get fittings started," Marinette pointed out, making sure that she had everything out for the beading work that she was going to be doing while Alya shopped. "Otherwise you start running the risk of rush fees."

"How much is it going to have to be fit?" Alix asked from behind the camera. "I thought the nice thing about off-the-rack stuff was that it already came in your size. That's pretty straightforward to me."

"No two bodies are alike, though, so it needs to be properly adjusted to fit everywhere." There would be no drooping bust cups or straining seams in sight. "It's important for formalwear for things to be fitted properly, because otherwise it shows, and it just looks sloppy. It makes an expensive dress look like something bought from the bargain bin at a department store."

"They should make wedding dresses out of Spandex, then. It fits itself to the body."

Marinette laughed at that. "I think some women might object to that. Not everyone wants a completely form-fitting dress. Some dresses are designed to hide trouble spots, you know."

"And I wouldn't want to wear Spandex on my wedding day," Alya added as her consultant came up to her and Alix. "It's just not a good look, not in white."

Alix made a contemplative noise. Marinette figured that that was the last of her questions and turned back to her work as Alya headed off for the changing rooms, this time working on some intricate beading along the neckline of a dress. The band that had commissioned it had ordered a few pieces, which would probably keep her busy for a few weeks.

"So I've been wondering," Alix said after a few minutes. "Why don't you just design and make Alya's dress? Then she'll get exactly what she wants."

"Except I don't know what exactly she wants," Marinette pointed out. "Even if I were designing her dress, I would want Alya to try on some premade dresses or samples to see what she does and doesn't like. It would suck if I made a dress and then once Alya put it on, she decided that she didn't like it on her like she thought she would. And wedding dresses take a lot of time to make, and I have work and commissions to do."

"And Alya and Nino are getting married crazy fast," Alix finished. "Okay, I guess I understand. And it would probably be hard to do fittings from a distance."

"Oh, god." Marinette was glad that most of the things that she made for the bands didn't have to be incredibly fitted, because she only rarely met any of the band members in person. "Yes. So hard. Impossible. And I would feel strange charging Alya for anything, but between the materials and the time- well, there's a reason that designer wedding dresses are so expensive, and it's not just because of the label."

"But also because of the fancy-dancy label."

Marinette couldn't deny that. "...and also because of that, yes."

"First dress!" Alya announced, bursting out of the dressing room and pulling their attention back to her. "The skirt is pretty good- I get what you were thinking about with this trumpet shape- but I'm just really meh on the neckline. It covers too much."
"Yeah, it's a bit too much going on up there," Marinette agreed. "It looks like a turtleneck, only in lace."

"I hate turtlenecks," Alix supplied helpfully. "They feel like they're strangling me. Like a very weak person is trying to strangle me, rather."

"So very similar in the skirt, but a different neckline," the consultant summed up. "Okay, we can do that!"

"Maybe it'll be the next one," Alix said hopefully as Alya vanished again and Marinette re-set up her phone so that she wouldn't have to hold it. "They're getting close, at least. That last one didn't look horrendous."

...well, the nice thing about Alix was that if something looked horrible, she wouldn't be afraid to say it. Marinette wouldn't have to worry about Alya picking out a dress with some sort of awful lace pattern that she couldn't make out on the phone screen, because Alix would 100% say something about it.

"Alya might want to find a first and second choice," Marinette pointed out, which reduced Alix to a groaning mess again. "But it shouldn't be too difficult to find two things she likes once they've caught on to her tastes."

"It had better not be. I think I'm getting hives from being around all of this satin and lace and glitter nonsense."

"You are not."

Alix only laughed.

"I'm back!" Alya announced, bursting into the frame again. "Check this one out!"

Marinette looked, and a grin spread across her face. Alya looked pleased as she hopped up onto the little stand in front of the couch, absolutely gorgeous in a trumpet dress with sparkly beads. "Oh, that one's nice!"

"That's not too bad, actually," Alix admitted, and both Alya and Marinette laughed.

"That's approval there, then," Alya joked, turning around so that they could see it from all angles. This time, the flair on the dress was softer and more natural, and looked a lot better. "I like this better. I'm just not sure about all of the sparkle."

"Sparkly beads can be clipped off," Marinette pointed out. "But maybe go more in a lace direction? But you can list that one as a maybe, and then we can always look at it again when I'm there."

"Sounds good!" Alya grinned at the camera and then bounced back to the dressing room. The consultant was smiling, clearly glad to have gotten closer to what Alya wanted.

"If I ever get married, I'm going to get married in my roller derby outfit," Alix announced once Alya had vanished into the back room. "Less fuss, more me. All this lace stuff isn't for me."

Marinette tried not to laugh at the thought of what Mr. Kubdel's face would look like if he had heard that. He would argue with Alix, surely, and try to protest, but Alix was far more stubborn than he was.

And besides, the probability of Alix ever getting married? It was minimal, at best. She had never
shown a single interest in romance, and that seemed rather unlikely to change anytime soon.

The sound of beeps and dings on the other end signaled that Alix had gone back to her game, and so Marinette returned her attention to her work. She had to inspect her beading pattern before she could continue, since the constant interruptions had thrown her off.

She had to hope that there weren't any mistakes. The band was paying a good price for the piece because of the glittery beadwork, and it would be a pain to have to go back and rip anything out. But she didn't spot any glaring errors after a practiced sweep of the eye over her work, so she continued. She got three more rows done, then consulted her chart again before reaching more for beads.

"Wait wait wait wait wait wait," Alix said suddenly, startling Marinette enough that she pricked her finger with the needle and nearly upset one of her bowls of beads. She glanced up to see Alix's face filling the phone screen. Apparently she had gotten bored with her phone game and had decided to see what was going on over on Marinette's side of the video call. "Wait wait wait. Did I just see one Adrien Agreste coming out of your bathroom in nothing but a towel?"

Marinette froze, chancing a quick glance over her shoulder. Sure enough, Adrien had clearly finished with his shower and exited the bathroom, because the bathroom door was open and she could hear the fan whirring. "Uh. The shower in his apartment wasn't working, so I said that he could shower over here while he waits for it to get fixed."

Alix arched one eyebrow at her. "Uh-huh. And so he headed into your bedroom in nothing but a towel why?"

"To get dressed, duh. Because that's what people do after they, uh. Shower." Marinette winced, knowing as soon as the words were out of her mouth that they were a crappy excuse.

"And he couldn't have gotten dressed in the bathroom why? He just brought his clean clothes over from his apartment and decided to drop them in your bedroom instead of bringing them into the bathroom with him?"

...crap. Marinette had been hoping that, awful excuse or no, Alix would still somehow buy it. "Yes?"

"Well, that's strange," Alix drawled. The look on her face told Marinette that crap, she'd been caught. "Normally when I shower over at a friend's house after practice or whatever, I change in the bathroom. I only come out in a towel when I'm at home." She paused and considered that. "Actually, no, scratch that. I still get dressed in the bathroom. But if I had my own place, maybe."

Oh, they were officially caught. She should have claimed that she was in Adrien's apartment or something instead. Still, Marinette couldn't help but put in a last-ditch effort to explain away Adrien's presence, just out of habit. "Well, he's more comfortable getting dressed in the bedroom?"

Alix snorted. "Yeah, right. I know model boy has some funny habits, but that's pushing things a bit. You know what I think is going on?" She glanced around, clearly checking for any eavesdroppers before continuing, her voice dropping so that no one would overhear her. "I think that you two are dating and living together. But Adrien's pops is being a bit of an arse, as normal, and doesn't want Adrien dating for his own nefarious reasons. Maybe he figures that Adrien is more effective in ads if he's single or something." Alix shrugged. "And of course, Agreste Senior is probably paying for all of Adrien's expenses over there, so Adrien doesn't want to upset him. So then you two decided to date and live together in secret. Props on that, by the way. I would have thought that Alya would have sniffed that out right away."
Marinette was pretty sure that her jaw had hit the floor.

"I'm not gonna tell anyone," Alix assured her, looking fully pleased with herself. "Because I've heard all about Agreste Senior over the years, and I get not wanting to cross him. But you just gotta promise to tell me exactly how Alya responds when she finds out, 'cause that's fucking hilarious. That's all I ask." She paused. "And also the right to brag to Alya about knowing first when you two can finally tell the world about how sickeningly cute you are together, because she will explode and it'll be hilarious."

"Fine," Marinette grumbled, seeing no point in denying anything further. She had the suspicion that if she tried, she would just end up digging herself into an even deeper hole. "Fine, yes, you've got it exactly right. We're planning to tell people after we get home, since we'll be living on our own and Adrien won't be relying on his father at all."

"Woo-hoo! Vive the liberated sunshine boy!" Alix pumped her fist, then glanced up. "Oh, wait, I think they're about to come out again. I won't say anything more, I guess, but I reserve the right to drag you guys so hard when you get back for all of your nonsense."

Marinette resolved then and there to never let Alix find out about that she and Adrien were Ladybug and Chat Noir and had essentially engaged in some sort of two-person love square for more than just a couple years, simply because they hadn't known each other's identities. Alix would never let them live it down.

"Guys, look at this one!" Alya called, and the view on the camera blurred for a moment as Alix turned the phone back around. It settled after a few seconds, and Marinette picked up her phone to see her best friend positively beaming as she came out in a gorgeous dress.

"They didn't go overboard with the glitter," Alix commented, sounding grudgingly impressed. "That's really nice."

"It's a good amount for an accent without it overpowering you or the rest of the dress," Marinette commented, bringing her phone up close to her face to try to get a better look at the details. "And I like the lace. It hides the seam lines at the flair pretty well, it looks like. And that's not too sharp, either. It flares nicely. And the neckline- how do you feel about it?"

"I like the off-the-shoulder look," Alya decided after a moment, twisting and turning in place to look at herself in the mirror. "I really, really do. It's not something I wear every day, but I do have some fancy dresses that have necklines like this and I'm comfortable in them. I've worn them for an entire day before, too- and yes, Marinette, I was listening when you were rattling off your list of One Hundred And One Tips And Hints Of Selecting A Wedding Dress, courtesy of actual wedding dress designers."

Marinette had to laugh at that. "It was stuff that I heard when I helped Mylène pick out her dress, too." Speaking of their friend, the custom lace Eiffel Tower that she had designed and for Mylène had been made and sent off earlier in the week, and Marinette had liked how it had turned out so well that she had made a few more of them in a variety of colors to make a few dresses as a gift for Mylène.

"Yeah, yeah. In any case, I listened." Alya turned around, letting the skirt flare out. "I really like this! I should probably sleep on it, though, and then make a final decision when you're home next weekend?"

"That sounds like a plan," Marinette agreed, still grinning as she watched Alya turn back and forth in her dress. "And honestly, Alya? It looks gorgeous. I cannot wait to see it on you in person."
Adrien was simultaneously amused and somewhat apprehensive by the news that Alix had figured them out, even if she had promised not to tell.

(He was also rather embarrassed that she had seen him in nothing in a towel, even if he had been in the very back of the frame for a very brief time during a video call. He had pulled that towel off to dry his still-dripping hair only shortly after entering their bedroom—what if he had tugged it off a few seconds earlier? He would have never been able to look Alix in the face again.)

"I'm sure she won't say anything about it," Marinette sighed as she stuffed the last of her winter clothes into her suitcase for her trip to Paris. She had to sit on it to zip it up, pouting a bit as she wrestled with her luggage. "And you won't see her until Easter anyway. She'll have probably forgotten that part of discovering our relationship by then."

"Or she'll remember it expressly for teasing purposes." Knowing Alix, Adrien was betting on that happening. "Ten years from now, we'll meet up for something and she'll go, 'Hey, Adrien, remember that time I saw you wandering around in nothing but a towel?'

Marinette laughed properly at that as she finally got her suitcase zipper done up. "It's funny that you're so wound up about that. She spotted you in the background for a couple seconds, tops, and it was the background of a video chat over a cell phone. You were far less embarrassed about it when I supposedly caught you in the middle of a shower as Ladybug. If I had known that you would get like this then, I totally would have been suspicious."

Plagg snorted loudly. "Yeah, you would have been totally suspicious just from another hint that he was lying, along with the fact that, oh, I don't know, his hair wasn't wet."

Both Adrien and Marinette turned red. "I was trying not to look!" Marinette protested. "I just saw that he was in the shower area and then panicked and stared past him at the wall and then got out of there."

"And afterwards, when he came out with a completely dry towel around his completely dry neck to catch the nonexistent water falling from his completely dry hair?"

"Shut up, Plagg."

Adrien went back to his computer as Marinette continued packing for her weekend trip back to Paris. He was in the process of investigating a few different research labs around the city so that he could write up a decent cover letter to apply to summer internships, which would hopefully lead to future employment in the same lab. He thought that he had a pretty good resume, all things considered, but then again there were probably several dozen other people who could say the same thing.

Hopefully he would get an internship at a place he liked and would get a job there, with room for growth and promotion so that he wouldn't have to do this whole apply for jobs thing again anytime soon. It always felt like he was bragging about himself and going I I I all of the time in his cover letters, even though he tried to mix it up.

*I got this grade. I did this at my previous job. I really enjoyed studying that. I am eager to learn more about this topic.*
Adrien just wanted to get a job and get started once school ended.

"Do you have anything light that you want me to bring back?" Marinette asked, perched on top of her now-closed suitcase. A half-full duffle bag sat at her feet. "I don't think I could bring anything back to your room at your father's house, but I can store stuff in my room."

"I'll get a few things for you after dinner," Adrien assured her. "I just have to get two cover letters done, sooner rather than later."

"Of course!"

It was really a good thing that they weren't overworking themselves again this year like they had last year, Adrien mused to himself as he started working on a cover letter. If he had been drowning under his own pushed-forward homework schedule and trying to keep track of what had to be moved back to Paris at the same time, he would probably go a bit crazy. And there would have been no way for Marinette to handle a boatload of commissions and weekend trips back and forth to Paris to help Alya and Nino out with their wedding. This year, though, they were doing a much better job of balancing school, work, and their personal lives.

They were having more evenings spent together than they had the previous spring, too, trying to keep a couple evenings per week where they set at least a couple hours aside to spend time properly with each other, instead of just hanging out together in the same room but working on different things. While Adrien couldn't bring himself to regret the previous spring entirely— even with all of the stress and back pain that he had had to deal with, it had proved that he and Marinette could manage anything together if they put their minds to it— he couldn't deny that he much preferred their comfortable domestic routine.

(Besides, the previous spring had had the spa trip and, well... Adrien really wanted to go to a spa like that again once he and Marinette could go properly public with their relationship, because he had really enjoyed it and it would be nice to be able to act properly couple-y without fear of their secret getting out.)

It didn't take long for him to get a rough draft written up for both cover letters, and then Adrien headed into the kitchen to throw on some pasta for dinner. Marinette joined him when he was partway through making the sauce, looking a bit exhausted.

"Is packing not going well?"

Marinette shook her head. "It's fine. It's just that I was thinking about how much we have to bring back after three years, and then I was trying to calculate how much we could bring back per trip, and..." She let out a long huff and then shrugged. "I spiraled a bit. It's stressful to have to be moving at all, and to be moving back to another country..."

Adrien wound one arm around her waist, pulling Marinette close as he stirred the bubbling tomato sauce. "Was it bad when you moved here that first year?"

"Oh, gosh." He could practically hear the eye-roll in her voice. "It was awful, but I wasn't so much worried about transporting things. I figured that clothes and some knickknacks would probably be enough, and it wasn't that much to carry. But moving to another country, where I didn't know anyone, and where my first language wasn't spoken? Having to get all set up with groceries and bedding and figuring out where things were? Having to get an apartment agreement set up without ever setting foot in the building first? All of that was terrifying."

Adrien nodded, remembering his own frantic packing. He had been terrified that he was going to
forget something important, even with the packing list that Nathalie had written up for him. And it had hardly been as though he wouldn't be able to get anything that he had forgotten- either he could go out and buy it, or he could text Nathalie and she would have it in the mail to ship to him within the hour. Still, there had been the worry that he would forget something really, really important.

It was silly, really. He wasn't going to die if he forgot to grab his pillow, or a toothbrush, or his pajamas. Really, as long as he didn't forget his phone or his wallet, he could probably make things work.

"Well, we can ship some stuff," Adrien pointed out after a moment's pause. "Light things that are bulky. And if there's things that we can't get back, we could leave them temporarily with Abbey or Sarah and then pop back to London for a visit and to get whatever we had left."

"That's true." Marinette nuzzled into his side. "I'll try not to get too worked up about it. We'll get back what we can get back." She paused for a moment, resting her head against his shoulder. "You might have to remember to remind me of that a few more times before we leave here. I'll probably start panicking every time I have to pack stuff to go home."

"I'll remind you as many times as you need," Adrien promised. The timer went off, and he reached over to turn it off. "But right now, let's have dinner together one more time before you abandon me for the weekend. Do you want to get out some you-know-what before Plagg comes in?"

"On it!"

Alya wasted no time in shuffling Marinette from the train station to the store that she had been going to for her wedding dress shopping, with only the shortest of detours to her parents' house to drop off her bulging suitcases and bag and to pick up some pain au chocolat to have as a snack.

"I'm so glad that you guys are going to come back soon," Alya told Marinette as they hopped off the bus in front of the store. "I know it's still, like, four months, but at least it's at the end of Adrien's semester." She gave Marinette a sharp look as they entered the store. "You two aren't going to pull the same thing on us that you did at the end of your first year where you just turn around and out of the blue say that you're going to stay for two more years, are you?"

"Oh, gosh no. We're moving back. Adrien is already looking for jobs back in Paris." He had told her that he would be polishing up the cover letters that he had written by the start of the week and get them in by Tuesday at the latest, just so he could make sure that his application wasn't coming in last-minute. "And I'm keeping an eye open for spots too, but I haven't found any open designer positions yet. There's still four months left to go, though, so..." Marinette shrugged. "Adrien suggested trying to do the same thing that he's hoping to do and that Abbey did, with entering as an intern and then moving up to a permanent position, but in most design houses, interns don't exactly design. And they're definitely not paid well. Madam Rosalie's is an exception."

"And you're definitely past the intern stage of your career," Alya agreed. "Hold out for those designer positions, seriously. I bet something will open up. And any openings at that level tend to be pretty immediate, right?"

Marinette nodded. "I wouldn't be able to wait four months before starting, right. I'll maybe start getting concerned a month out."
"Or you could just marry Adrien and be a trophy wife that does commissions and doesn't need a day job."

"Alya."

It didn't take long for a consultant to come out to talk to them. Alya told her what dresses she wanted pulled to try on, and then Marinette settled in on a chair to wait. The consultant came back with two dresses, and a couple minutes later Alya emerged from the dressing room in the last gown that Marinette had seen her in, a trumpet dress with an off-the-shoulder neckline and lovely lace detailing. She was positively beaming as she headed for the small platform in front of the mirrors.

Marinette leaned forward, scanning the dress from top to bottom. The lace was placed well, running over the seam at the flair and tapering off. The flair of the dress itself wasn't overly dramatic, either, not sticking out ridiculously like Marinette had seen on some of the other dresses.

"I think I'm decided," Alya admitted as she turned around in a circle again so that Marinette could see the dress from all angles. "I just really like this style, and it's within my budget. I love it just as much now as I did when I saw it the first time."

"It's a good choice," Marinette agreed. The lace was a nice pattern, not too dowdy or fussy, and the few sparkling beads were well-placed. "And you look gorgeous. Nino won't be able to take his eyes off of you."

Alya just beamed.

They left the store a good 45 minutes later, dress bought and Alya's measurements taken for alterations. Alya was bubbling along, grinning as she told Marinette about all of the progress she and Nino had made on their wedding preparations and what she had gotten done as far as organizing her research.

"I had to do a write-up of the highlights of my research two weeks after getting back," Alya told her. "I think you saw it - I put a link to it on the Ladyblog."

Marinette nodded, remembering Alya's big article. It had been super long, and she had to wonder how that translated to the physical newspaper, if any of it had had to be cut or if Alya just got several pages completely dedicated to her research. "Yeah! You reused a lot of the information that you did in the vlogs, I noticed."

"There was some new stuff! And I went into more detail when I did repeat some stuff from the vlogs. My boss has been having me do more articles about traveling, too, and on recommendations of where to stay or things to do in different areas. The main problem then is that I was never in the same area for long, and what I was doing included a lot of one-on-one tours and trips with a local that I chose because of their history knowledge." Alya let out a sigh, then brightened. "So what I've been doing is contacting those people again and asking for their local recommendations. It works really well, actually. I've already learned that the locals tend to know which tourist places treat their staff well and which ones don't, so I can steer people towards places with better business practices, instead of ones that just put on a good face for the tourists."

"Oh, that's great!" Marinette had to admit that that was a great idea. It probably also had the effect of steering people towards businesses that were local, rather than outsiders who came in to make a profit. "That's really cool."

"So that keeps me pretty busy while I'm at work," Alya continued. "And then the rest of the time, I'm working on wedding planning. Nino and I were just at your parents' place trying out flavors for
our croquembouche tower last weekend, after I finished with looking at dresses. We decided to go with a fairly traditional combo, so it would go with our meal. My mom is going to have us decide on a menu this week, I think. And we've got a guest list pretty much done, we just have to check one more time to make sure that we aren't forgetting anyone."

"Do you have a checklist of things to do?"

Alya snorted. "Oh, boy. Do we ever."

Marinette had to laugh. "It's a long list, I take it?"

"Ugh. There's too many little details to think about." Alya rolled her eyes. "If I knew what I do now when Nino and I were deciding on the date, I might have been more inclined to wait a year instead. But we're locked in on our date now, and we can handle it. We just have to sometimes not go with our first choice for flowers or whatever. And let's face it- as long as we have the core elements, no one's going to complain too much."

"People will just be too happy to see you married to care if there were party favors on the tables or whatever." Marinette grinned over at her friend. "So have you guys decided if Nino is mixing the music, or...?"

"He's doing the ceremony and requesting some stuff for the reception, but one of his buddies is taking over for DJing the reception. It's his gift to us." Alya grinned. "And we've hired a photographer, too. It's someone that Mylène and Ivan found for their parties."

"And invites?"

"We've found the cards and the printer, and we're just waiting to make sure that we have everyone listed and have the correct addresses for them," Alya told her. "We're guessing that some people might not be able to make it, if they already have plans, but it should still be far enough out that it won't take people by surprise."

"Shoes to go with the dress?"

"I was waiting until I actually had the dress to do that."

"Wedding rings?"

"We'll be doing that now that I have the dress nailed down!" Alya said with a laugh. "Seriously, we have everything on our list. We got a checklist from a wedding store and my parents went over it to add a few things."

"I'd love to hear about what all you have planned so far," Marinette told her friend as they approached the bus station, pausing to check the schedule. "Unless your apartment is too messy for visitors?"

Alya snorted and shrugged. "Ah, it's only too messy for people who will judge me. You're fine."

Adrien grinned when he heard Marinette's key in the door Sunday evening. He looked up as the door swung open and saw her come in, empty suitcases rattling behind her. She didn't look
completely exhausted, though, just tired, which suggested that the weekend had been less of an ordeal than the search for Mylène's dress had been.

(Another fairly good clue was the fact that Marinette had kept him updated throughout the weekend, texting as often as she could get away without accidentally catching Alya's attention, and it really hadn't taken long for her to text with the news that Alya had gotten her dress.)

"Hey, bugaboo," Adrien said, shoving his computer aside so he could hop up and give his girlfriend a proper welcome-home kiss. "How was your trip?"

"Good. It was nice to be there when Alya picked her dress, and I got to spend some time with my parents. They sent goodies," Marinette added, patting her backpack. "That's the only thing I brought back, besides my tablet and my empty bags. All of my other clothes I left back in Paris."

"That's progress, at least." Adrien took her second suitcase and her bag and followed her back to their bedroom, setting her things out of the way so that neither of them would trip. "Are you up for a date tonight?"

Marinette gave him a half-interested, half-suspicious look. "Date?"

Adrien had to laugh at her expression. "Yeah, I thought we were due for another date. I knew that you would probably be tired from the trip, though, so how does takeout, pajamas, and a movie sound?"

"Amazing."

"Great, because I already ordered!" Adrien startled at the sudden buzz on his phone, then flashed a grin at Marinette. "And I bet that that's them now. I'll go get the food."

"And I'll change!" Marinette chimed in, already pulling off her sweater as she headed for their dresser. "Pajamas, here I come!"

Adrien laughed and jogged out of the room, snagging his wallet off of the bedside table on his way out. It didn't take long to run downstairs and get the food from the delivery girl, paying and tipping her before heading back up. When he arrived, Marinette was setting up blankets on the couch, dressed in her Chat Noir pajamas. He grinned at the sight (no matter how much Marinette had groaned and rolled her eyes when he bought the pajamas, she at least had to admit that they were cute) and then headed into the bedroom to pull on his own Ladybug pajamas.

Marinette had had to alter them a little so that it would fit him, but it was still so comfortable.

"Do we want to bother with plates?" Marinette called as Adrien pulled the shirt over his head. "Or are we just eating straight from the containers?"

"Whatever you want to do," Adrien called back. "If you don't want to do any dishes, eating from the containers is fine." He was planning on making popcorn later on for their movie, but that was only a few dishes and he could wash those up. "Or if you don't mind a few plates, we can do that."

Marinette was still glancing consideringly between the containers and the cupboard of plates when Adrien came out, clearly torn between being lazy and having manners. Adrien laughed and went to get the plates.

"I'll wash them up," Adrien promised as he handed one of the plates to Marinette. "I was planning on making popcorn anyway, two plates won't be a problem."
Marinette's grin was sheepish as she accepted the plate. "Thanks. I'm just too tired to want to bother."

"What was so tiring, do you think?" Adrien asked, waiting for Marinette to serve herself some rice and tofu before serving himself. "Besides just the travel itself?"

"Wedding planning with Alya, mostly," Marinette admitted, flopping down in her chair. "Fun, but there's so much to think about. And they have it all crammed together, when normally the decisions would be made over several months. They have to make all of the decisions at once and then book everything right away instead of gradually."

"So you got to hear about all of it, all at once?" Adrien asked. He took a bite of his tofu and hummed in appreciation. The sauce made it insanely tasty. "That's a lot to take in. We'll have to make sure to allocate more time for our planning."

Marinette turned pink and gave him a smile. "Definitely."

"Did you get to help Alya with other decisions?"

"We went shoe shopping today, since we got little fabric samples to match the dress and Alya wanted my advice." Marinette rubbed her eyes, and Adrien could read the exhaustion in her shoulders. "That was exhausting. Alix was lucky that the consultations limited the amount of time that she spent shopping each day."

"Long trip?"

"There were so many styles of shoes."

Adrien grinned. "How much of a heel did Alya decide on?"

"She tried everything. Low heels to super-high, and she finally settled for a sort of mid-low heel, since she doesn't want her feet hurting. They're pretty heels, but I had to talk her back to ones that were more plain than the ones she liked first." Marinette shoveled another forkful of food into her mouth, chewing and swallowing before continuing. "Since they'll be under the dress, and you don't want too much going on at once. If she lifts the skirts to walk and the shoes are some crazy pattern, that's distracting. And then she was going for sleek instead of comfortable, and I had to point out that some of the shoes were definitely not built for comfort. It's..." Marinette huffed out a sigh. "Fancy heels have their place, and in my opinion it's not under a wedding dress."

"Right." Sensing that Marinette didn't really want to re-live any more of her morning, Adrien changed the subject. Now that she was home, he could tell that she was a bit more tired than she had been letting on earlier. "So, what movie do you want to watch?"

Dinner went by in a flash, and then Marinette went to go pick a movie while Adrien cleaned up, making sure that the kwamis were fed before starting to pop popcorn on the stove. Plagg hung around until Adrien got him set up with his own little bowl of popcorn, and then his kwami zipped off with his prize.

"Plenty of butter, just the way you like it," Adrien told Marinette, placing the giant bowl down on their coffee table and picking up the blanket that he had placed out earlier, wrapping it around their shoulders. It was an older, plain blanket, not the quilt that Marinette had made for him or one of Marinette's homemade blankets. Adrien didn't want to risk getting butter stains on any of those. "Ready to relax?"

"Definitely. Don't get offended if I fall asleep on you, though." Marinette shuffled to lean more of
her weight against Adrien, reclining as she did. "You make a fantastic pillow."

"Pillow at your service, my Lady!"

Sure enough, with a dark room and a full stomach, it didn't take Marinette long to fall asleep. Adrien pressed a kiss to her crown before returning his attention to the computer screen and the movie that was playing. It was one of Marinette's favorites, probably so that she could follow the plot without being entirely awake. Adrien watched the characters cross the screen, munching on popcorn occasionally until he was full. By then, Plagg and Tikki had floated back into the room.

"So much for your date, huh?" Plagg asked, glancing at the sleeping Marinette. "Good thing you didn't decide to go for your other date idea."

"I knew that she was going to be tired." Adrien glanced down at Marinette again. It was a bit hard at this angle, with her head right under his chin, but that was fine. "D'you want to finish up our popcorn? I don't think I'll want more."

Plagg cheered and dove in.

"What was your other date idea?" Tikki asked curiously, drifting closer. "Can you share? I'm sure that Plagg isn't the best for getting feedback for ideas."

"Hey!"

"I thought we could try to recreate a YouTube recipe some evening," Adrien told Tikki. "It would be interesting to see if we could follow along well enough to recreate the dish. And doing the plating, too." That was the part that he was maybe most interested in, since normally he and Marinette just scooped their food up and ate it. Plating their servings like they would get at a restaurant could be fun, a bit of novelty that they could try. "It would make cooking a little different, so that can be part of our date too, instead of just something that we need to do beforehand."

Tikki gave a little wriggle of excitement. "Oh, that sounds fun! That's a fantastic idea."

Adrien grinned. "Thanks." In all honesty, the idea hadn't come completely out of the blue. With Marinette gone and his homework finished for the weekend, Adrien had been looking up stay-in date ideas, just to try to mix things up a little bit for their last few months in London. The sites that he had found hadn't been particularly helpful, mostly because they tended to assume that he wouldn't do things like actually spend time with his girlfriend anyway. One such site had suggested cooking together as a stay-in date activity, which Adrien had originally rolled his eyes at.

He and Marinette cooked together all of the time, so how could it possibly be considered a date? They helped each other out so that the work wouldn't entirely fall on one or the other, since that wouldn't be fair. But then he ended up watching a YouTube cooking channel video, and an idea for how to make their cooking together different enough to be considered a date had popped into his head.

"That sounds like fun," Marinette's sleepy voice chimed in, and she tipped her head back to look up at Adrien. "Not right now, I'm tired, but sometime. Maybe back in Paris."

"You want to wait until then?" Adrien checked. "I thought we could try some here, when we aren't super busy. Maybe start simple, then work up to some fancier ones?"

"As long as we don't need to buy any equipment for them." Marinette stretched, then rearranged herself so that she and Adrien could talk without craning their necks. "That's the one thing I've
noticed with some cooking channel videos, they need a food processor or something and we don't want to be going out and buying anything like that here. Once we get home, we can get a food processor and a proper bowl mixer."

Adrien nodded in agreement. Marinette made a good point. They didn't want to acquire anything new that they would need to carry back to Paris, not if they could help it. "There are recipes that don't use stuff like that, I'm sure. We could probably find something, and then see who can serve it up better."

Marinette grinned, that competitive light flaring up in her eyes and hiding the exhaustion. "So we can each arrange a plate and see who does better?"

Adrien groaned dramatically. "Oh, no. I've awakened the beast! How will I ever survive against such a competitive spirit?"

"Mmm. I might be persuaded to help out, for a price. " Marinette made a kissy face at him. Adrien grinned and dipped in for a kiss, ignoring Plagg as he zipped off.

"Hmm. I think I should be able to pay that price," Adrien murmured against her lips. "I might be able to manage it. It could be hard, though..."

"Oh, shush you."

Adrien laughed.

"You know what else would be super fun?" Marinette asked as they separated. "Doing that, but with a baking video, maybe when we get back to Paris and can borrow stuff from my parents. I've seen some amazing cakes that would be super fun to try."

Adrien laughed, thinking back to his last couple attempts to 'help' decorate things. "I'll do quality control taste-testing and tool cleaning. I'm hopeless with the decorating."

"You just need practice!" Marinette insisted, lips forming a small pout. "We can make cookies and frost them sometime soon."

"Love, you and your parents have been trying to teach me how to frost cookies practically ever since I met you." Adrien leaned over to press a quick kiss to the side of her forehead. "Just admit it: I have no artistic talent, particularly when it comes to the medium of frosting."

"You can learn, though."

"I can contribute a decoration of a stick figure drawn on a cookie, maybe." Adrien patted Marinette's side to encourage her to get up so that they could go to bed. As he stood, wincing as blood rushed back into his legs, Adrien snagged their bowl and brought it back into the kitchen to wash in the morning. "And I can always be your official taste tester, though we might have to bring leftovers to Abbey and Sarah and Ben and Paul so that we don't eat too much."

"I can't wait until we're back in Paris and can just run sweets off as Ladybug and Chat Noir," Marinette grumbled, her voice still sleepy. Adrien caught her waist and redirected her before she could stumble into a doorframe. "I miss being in tip-top shape without even trying. But I like your idea. We can do dates more regularly if we do stuff like that."

"How regular are you thinking?" Adrien asked, looking to Marinette. He had to admit that he had come up with the idea just for that purpose, because right now their actual, designated date evenings were a bit infrequent and sporadic. "Like, a weekly thing, or every other week?"
"Every other week, maybe," Marinette suggested. She smiled at him, so gently that Adrien was sure that his heart skipped a beat. "You're in your last semester, and we don't want to have you struggling to balance dates and your studies."

This woman was bad for his health, really. She could take him down with a smile. But Adrien loved every minute of it.

"Every other week sounds good to me," Adrien agreed. He smiled back at her, reaching out to intertwine her fingers with his as they entered their bedroom. "As long as I'm with you, I'll be happy. No matter what we decide to do."

Chapter End Notes

Yay holiday updating! Do y'all want to know how fun it is to try to write/edit with a zillion family members around? :/ I love visiting, but it makes writing SO difficult.

In other news- I had an interview today for a summer job working with woodpeckers (!!!) and after it ended, I told my family that "I thought it went well!" and "He has 6-7 other people to interview so I'll know in the next couple days!". Maybe 30 minutes after the interview ended, I got an email with the job offer :D. Apparently my fall banding supervisor gave me rave reviews :) Now I just have to find a spring job, so hopefully that goes well!
"I've got another in-person interview scheduled over the break!"

Marinette grinned as she stepped into her apartment and was greeted with an armful of excited boyfriend. Adrien's excitement was the best way to perk her up after a long day. "No way! Which one is it with?"

Adrien was practically bouncing in place as he stepped back to let her in through the door properly. "It's the one I really, really wanted, with the most opportunities to stay on afterwards and advance in the company. I'll get to tour the premises and talk to some of the current interns afterwards. And I scheduled it for after the first one, so..." Adrien let out a little breath, quick and excited. "Hopefully I can work off all of my nerves by that interview. I've let Nathalie know, and she's already had to reschedule a photoshoot."

"Was she upset?"

Adrien shrugged. "Exasperated, maybe, since it's only a week and a half notice. But I warned her that something like this might happen. I warned both her and my father and my father insisted on scheduling the photoshoot for then anyway. They can't be unhappy with me when it's their own fault." His grin returned full force. "Oh, I'm so excited!"

"I'm so proud of you!" Marinette told him with a grin. The phone and Skype interviews that Adrien had done earlier in the semester had made him simultaneously hopeful and really, really worried that he would mess them all up and not get to continue on in the hiring process. His exam and presentations had meant that he couldn't go back to Paris for interviews just any time, and even if he could go over the weekend then the hiring personnel weren't available. It was great that the companies were interested in him, and that they could work with his schedule.

She did wish that she could get as far Adrien had with her own job search, but Marinette wasn't going to let herself be jealous. Adrien had worked hard on his applications and deserved the interviews. Besides, he couldn't do his work independently, like she could with her commissions, and the main reason why Marinette hadn't gotten any interviews was because she hadn't applied to any jobs.

She hadn't applied to any jobs because there hadn't been any job postings for openings that she would be interested in. Everything that she had spotted- well, everything that she had spotted at the design houses that she was actually interested in- was for interns or sewing room, and she was past the intern stage (particularly the underpaid, not-actually-designing intern stage) and overqualified for the sewing room.

There had also been an opening for a junior designer position at Gabriel that Marinette had passed over, but she hadn't mentioned that to Adrien and wasn't going to tell anyone else about it, either. She didn't want there to be any way for Mr. Agreste to try to control her and Adrien, and taking a job at his company would hand that control to him on a silver platter. Plus, Adrien liked visiting her at work, and if she worked at Gabriel then he would run the risk of running into his father when he didn't want to.

And if that wasn't enough to cement Marinette's decision to ignore the posting, the Gabriel aesthetic didn't leave a whole lot of room for creativity and fun flair, and Marinette would miss doing that too much, even if she did enjoy doing formalwear. That would be the main reason she would give if Adrien found out about the opening and asked why she hadn't applied. She didn't
want him thinking that she had given up an opportunity to get a job just because of him, because he would just feel guilty about it.

"We should do something to celebrate," Marinette announced, forcibly pulling herself away from thoughts of her own job search. "So what do you want to do? Eat out? Make a special dinner? Bake cookies?"

Adrien practically squirmed in place, looking abashed. "Oh, I don't know. Don't you think we're jumping the gun a little bit with celebrating already? I just have an interview, not a job offer."

"Two interviews, you mean." Maybe Adrien wasn't nearly as excited about the first of his interviews as he was about the second, but it was still progress in the right direction. "And we'll celebrate again later on when you get something, but we can be excited about this, too."

Adrien grinned. "Yeah! I wouldn't mind a night out, and getting interviews is the perfect excuse. We can go to that one place- you know, with the lasagna and ribs and everything? Over on Gloucester?"

"Sweet!" Marinette liked that place. "Just let me change out of my work clothes and find some more comfortable shoes, and we'll get going."

It didn't take long to change at all, and then Adrien and Marinette were heading out of their apartment and down to catch the bus. It started to drizzle as they waited, but Adrien was prepared with an umbrella. He popped it open, and Marinette didn't hesitate to sidle up to his side to share the protection from the chilly rain.

"I'm looking forward to having less of this weather once we're back in Paris," Adrien said with a laugh. "I hate rain so much. It's so damp, and it feels so much colder than it actually is."

"It'll be nice," Marinette agreed. Then she laughed. "But who wants to bet that it'll rain for a week after we get back? That would be awful."

"Ooh, don't say that, you'll jinx it!"

One short bus ride and an equally short wait in the restaurant later, and the two of them were being ushered to their seats at a small table close to the restaurant's front window. Marinette slid into her seat, glancing around at the other patrons. There were a lot of families sitting around the cheery tables, chatting and laughing. It was a very friendly atmosphere, and one that yelled fun friendly outing instead of date.

That didn't mean that it wasn't a date, but hopefully it would keep people from pestering them.

Once they were settled with a glass of lemonade each and a menu, it didn't take long for them to pick up their conversation where it had picked off earlier. Adrien told Marinette about the differences between the two labs that he had applied to and why he favored one over the other.

"It's a higher pay rate at the other place, too," Adrien finished, picking up his lemonade for a sip. "Not by a huge amount, but enough to make a difference."

"And I bet that as you advance in the lab, that difference might just get bigger," Marinette pointed out. "It would be interesting to see what that would be, but it might be awkward to ask."

"I'm gonna pick Ben's brain to see what kinds of questions I should be asking," Adrien told her. "And maybe he can ask some of his senior coworkers. They would probably have some really great tips."
Marinette nodded.

"But enough about my jobs- did anything new come up for you today?" Adrien asked, glancing over at her. "Or nothing again?

Marinette winced. She hadn't actually checked for- well, almost a week, actually. It didn't make sense to check every day, but she didn't want to sit back and miss anything, either. "I haven't checked. I should, but..."

"It's only additional stress, and it's not like new stuff comes up every day anyway," Adrien filled in. "At least not new stuff on your level. I'm sure something will come up soon, though. I know my father has at least a couple openings every year."

Marinette tried not to wince. After all, Adrien was right that there was an opening at Gabriel. His mentioning it didn't necessarily mean that he was encouraging her to apply, though.

"Though maybe that's because people tend to quit a lot," Adrien continued, oblivious to her cringing. "It's not exactly the most pleasant work environment ever, especially if my father visits. And you've talked about this before, haven't you? That my father's company isn't exactly somewhere where you would want to work?"

"Right," Marinette agreed, thankful that Adrien remembered hearing her mention that. "The work environment and then the aesthetic is kind of limited. It's very formal."

"And you like doing stuff that's a little more wild," Adrien filled in. "A little more creative, a little more fun. It makes sense to wait." He picked up his menu, but his eyes didn't leave Marinette's face. "What will you do while you wait for a better fit to come up?"

"I thought that I would be able to make it by on commissions, but that's really slowed down," Marinette said, but she couldn't help the note of worry that had slipped into her voice. While it was great that she didn't have to fret over an overwhelming wait list, she didn't want to get home to Paris and end up twiddling her thumbs and helping out at the bakery instead of designing and earning money. It would feel like a discouraging step back after three years as a design intern. "It's a good number of commissions for just doing on top of a full-time job, but it's not anywhere near enough to be a full-time job by itself."

"What if you advertised that you were taking commissions?" Adrien asked, setting his unread menu back down. "If you set up a website or something. Maybe you could sell your own designs on there, too. At least, like, screen-printed shirts or some simpler designs."

"It's definitely something to think about," Marinette said slowly. She was already warming to the idea. She could expand her customer base, and maybe do a wider range of designs. "I know Alya was suggesting it when I first started doing commissions, but I was getting so much attention already that I thought there wouldn't be a point. But I could do that, and then have pictures of all of the commissions that I've done."

If the musicians would be willing to let her use recognizable pictures of them, that would be even more amazing. Celebs had a lot of influence, and would make her designs more desirable.

"There's just one problem right now with the commissions website idea," Adrien said before Marinette could get too far into planning anything. "You would probably need Alya's help, and Alya is kind of busy with the wedding stuff."

There was a pause.
"Well, I won't need the site up and running until after I get back to Paris," Marinette said slowly, thinking things through as she spoke. "And I could make some of my own designs to have for sale as well, if I have time when I don't have any commissions to work on. So I can maybe start collecting the photos now and sorting them into different categories so that they're all ready for when Alya does have the time to help me with the site. And it's always possible that something will come up before then."

"But it's good to have a backup plan," Adrien agreed. Marinette nodded, just as their waiter appeared at her elbow.

"Are you ready to order?"

Adrien and Marinette exchanged a guilty look. They hadn't even started looking at the menu. Their waiter seemed to realize that.

"I can return in another couple minutes to check in on you again."

"That would be great, thanks," Adrien told him, but he was already heading off. Marinette quickly turned back to her menu and started scanning over the choices. There were a lot of tasty-looking dishes, and Marinette wasn't sure what she wanted to try. She peered over the table at Adrien. "What are you looking at? I can't decide."

"Do you want to go for two dishes we both want and share?"

Marinette just grinned. Sometimes Adrien seemed to read her mind. "Do you even need to ask?"

With a plan in place, Marinette dove into her work, sketching out ideas for her website. There would be a past work section, of course, and that would be divided into categories. She had album cover art, screen printing, street clothes, fancy dress, and a whole variety of stage outfits. Her pricing page would ideally have examples of different price points, so that people would know off the bat what to expect and wouldn't waste her time with emailing when they weren't willing to pay. And of course it would be important for it to be easy for people to find the Contact Me page (Marinette had learned from experience with professor pages how frustrating it was to have to search for ages to find an email address).

"You should be able to update that page with if you're accepting commissions at the moment," Tikki pointed out as she watched Marinette sketch out her ideas at the table after dinner one night. "And if there's a long wait list. Or just any updates, really, to let people know if you have a lot going on at any given moment."

"That's a good idea," Marinette said, writing it down. "And I'll have to make it obvious, so maybe something that would show up on all of the pages of the site. I'll have to ask Alya for ideas—after the wedding, of course."

"Yeah, don't distract Alya right now. I was texting Nino earlier, and those two are pretty much caught between frantically getting everything set up and trying to ignore it all for a bit. They would totally jump on a website designing thing."

Adrien laughed from his spot across the table. Marinette grinned. Their friends were ridiculous. "The sooner they get the last details ironed out, the sooner they can just sit back. But I can understand the temptation to procrastinate."
A comfortable silence fell over then as Adrien returned to his studying and Marinette sketched out what she wanted her page to look like, adding and taking away details as she played with different looks. It didn't take long for her to get distracted, though, her pencil falling back to the table as the got lost in her own thoughts.

Nino and Alya would be married in less than a month now. Even though the news had long since sunk in, Marinette couldn't help but see it as something big. Something life-altering and a big step and- oh, she didn't even know. Maybe it was because of the other things that tended to come after marriage, like kids.

Maybe it was because she and Adrien hadn't been in Paris throughout the engagement and wouldn't really be there for the transition and really, doing things like dress shopping over video chat and being a sounding board for Alya's planning over the phone really wasn't the same as being there for it in person.

"I'm seeing some pretty deep thought going on over there." Adrien's voice brought Marinette out of her thoughts with a start and she looked up. He was giving her a concerned look. "Everything okay?"

"I guess I'm just now realizing that we're missing out on the whole transition thing with Nino and Alya," Marinette told him.

Adrien frowned. "You think things would really change that much?"

"It's not as big of a transition as you're making it out to be," Tikki told the two of them, making Adrien's expression relax. "Or that the media sometimes makes it out to be. They're still your friends, and they're still together, just like before! It's just that now there's legal ties holding them together. That's all it is. Think about it this way- if Nino had asked Alya later on, do you think their relationship now would be any different? Or if they had decided to wait on marriage for next year, would they be different? Marriage is a way to celebrate love with family and friends. It's a big celebration and everything, but at the end of the day, a relationship is only as strong as the people involved make it."

"Why are you wondering what being married would be like?" Plagg drawled loudly. "You've been acting like an old married couple for years. All the talky ceremony would do would make it official and put some bling on your fingers. And cost you a lot of money."

Marinette and Adrien both turned pink. How had the conversation turned from Nino and Alya's marriage to their relationship?

"He's right, you know. Things don't just magically change once you get married, like I was just saying," Tikki chimed in, hopping on the betrayal train and turning the conversation on its head to focus on Marinette and Adrien. "Maybe it used to be more different, back when people didn't live together before they married, but you've been living together and working around each other for a year now. More, really, even if you did have Marinette's apartment as back-up for the first bit."

Adrien chanced a glance at Marinette. She didn't look overly bothered by the marriage talk, mostly just taken off guard and flustered, and something in his heart skipped. Would she be open to getting married? They had only been dating for less than two years- well, officially dating, at least- whereas all of their friends that were getting married now- Ivan and Mylène and Alya and Nino- had been dating for years, ever since collège. Sure, he knew a couple models that were getting married now that had only been dating for what seemed like a short time- only a year or so, some even less- but considering that some of them were among the models that had congratulated him for getting "married" after "only knowing Marinette for a day", he wasn't certain that they were the
most sensible people in the world.

But they had known each other for years before dating, and had liked each other in one way or another for just as long. With that in mind, did it really matter that they hadn't been dating for years and years? They knew that they would get along well together, no matter what.

"I guess I just wish that I could be there in person to help Alya out more," Marinette was saying, and Adrien pulled himself out of his thoughts to tune back in to the conversation. "And all of the prep that goes into a wedding just makes it feel really big, I think."

"And it is a big commitment, but so is any serious relationship," Tikki told her. "But it is a party, and big parties take a lot of planning! Just think of it like that."

"Back in the day, marriages were just little things," Plagg told them around a yawn. "Everyone dressed up in their Sunday best, went to church, and did their little signature thing on the paper. The whole thing's just been so blown up."

The conversation moved on then as Tikki got distracted by some element of Marinette's website sketch, but Adrien took a minute to get back to his studies.

If he asked...what would Marinette say?

---

Adrien's pre-break exams and presentations went by in a flash, and then he was nervously reviewing the list of questions and things to think about and look for that Ben and his advisor had given him on the train back to Paris. Marinette would be following in a few days, after both of his interviews had already passed.

Adrien couldn't help but think about how much nicer it would be to have his interviews and then go back home to a supportive Marinette instead of his indifferent father and an only mildly curious Nathalie. His father only wanted him to succeed in getting a job because it would be unfitting of an Agreste to be unemployed, and Nathalie wanted to know the outcome either way for photoshoot scheduling purposes. Marinette wanted him to do well and get the job offers because she knew that that was what he wanted.

He was lucky to have her. Adrien knew that there were some people out there that didn't even know him and still would prefer that he stay in modeling until he aged out of it. Some even wanted him to move into acting as well, since then his face would be in even more places.

The Gorilla picked him up at the station, and whisked Adrien off towards the Agreste mansion after piling all of the bags that Adrien had hauled along in back. Adrien had stuffed two suitcases, a backpack, and a bag with things to be brought back to Paris, so much that he had been struggling to keep it in line while he got off of the train and left the station. All of his luggage was stuffed to bursting, and Marinette's would be the same when she returned.

Moving from one country to another really sucked sometimes.

It was the same familiar routine as always when Adrien got back to the mansion. Nathalie met him at the door with a schedule (she had included his interviews and plenty of time to get to them, Adrien noted) and told him that his father was in his office before bidding him good-night and leaving. Adrien glanced towards the bright office and decided to put his luggage away first before
talking to his father. After all, if the conversation went south, it would be easier to leave quickly without having extra baggage to drag along behind him.

...oh, he already missed being able to go into his and Marinette's apartment and having to worry about uncomfortable conversations.

The next couple of days in Paris went much the same as always. Adrien got up, did photoshoots and commercials- and boy was he ever looking forward to never having to do them again- and snacked bites to eat when he had time. He met up with Alya and Nino a couple times when he had a few minutes free that lined up with their free time, and then he went home to sleep in his large, empty room. His bed was cold with only his father's standard-issue, boring sheets and comforter rather than the lovely quilt that Marinette had made for him a couple Christmases ago, and especially without Marinette curled up next to him, but Adrien dealt with it, counting down the days until Marinette would arrive.

And then the first of his interviews came up. Adrien fidgeted through a morning of fittings, then had an hour free before he had to be at the lab. The Gorilla drove him to the lab and dropped him off early, and then Adrien paced. He had gotten a good-luck text from Marinette earlier, and he glanced at it again, hoping that it might help calm his nerves.

Adrien had not been expecting to see another text from Marinette.

Marinette: You'll do great! Swing by the bakery after you're done- Maman and Papa have a treat for you! I love you.

Adrien grinned. A Dupain-Cheng treat? He already couldn't wait.

The Gorilla dropped Adrien off at the Dupain-Cheng bakery after his interview, and Adrien waved cheerily to him as he hopped to the sidewalk. He had done well on his interview, he thought, and it had helped to know that there would be someone waiting eagerly to know how he had done right there for him in Paris.

And he also was very much looking forward to his treat. Anything that the Dupain-Chengs made was bound to be good, and a treat suggested that it was probably more sugary and delicious than anything that he had been allowed to eat since returning to Paris.

"Adrien!" Mrs. Cheng exclaimed as Adrien stepped inside of the bakery, the tinkle of the small bell above the door announcing his entrance. "It's so good to see you. Come over here and tell me about how your interview went and everything that you've been up to since we saw you last. Marinette tells us some things, of course, but I want to hear it all from you."

Adrien grinned as he was pulled behind the counter and given a hug. Mrs. Cheng was shorter than Marinette- Mari had passed her up in lycée- but her hugs were just as fierce. "Hi, Mrs. Cheng. How are you?"

"Good, good. But I want to hear about you." Mrs. Cheng ducked down behind the counter and came up with a generous slice of opera cake on a plate. She handed the plate and a fork to Adrien. "Marinette said that you had one interview today and another tomorrow! How exciting!"

Adrien grinned as he accepted the cake. It looked amazing, and was more than Adrien had
expecting. "Yeah, it is! I'm hoping that one of them works out. They're both great labs."

"Did it go well?"

"I think so. One of my friends from London suggested what kinds of questions I might want to ask and I had answers for all of their questions for me, so that was good. I didn't feel that there were any awkward pauses or anything, so...?" He shrugged. "It felt good. Now I just have to wait and see, I guess."

"Well, I'll keep my fingers crossed for you for sure." Sabine quickly rang up a customer and then stuck her head through the bakery's back door. "TOM! Adrien is here! Come say hi to him!"

"Adrien!" It didn't take any time at all for Marinette's father to appear fresh from the bakery, a fine coat of flour covering the front of his shirt and his apron. Mr. Dupain beamed at Adrien when he spotted him. "How's my son-in-law doing?"

Adrien promptly choked on his opera cake.

"Tom," Mrs. Cheng scolded as she lightly thumped Adrien's back. He gave one last cough and wiped his mouth, setting his cake down for a moment to catch his breath. "No teasing. We were just looking through some old pictures last night, dear," Sabine explained to Adrien. "And we came across the ones from that wedding photoshoot. You'll have to forgive Tom; he's been waiting to spring that on you all day."

Adrien managed a weak smile before Mr. Dupain was scooping him up in a hug. "It's good to see you! You look far too skinny. Have you been eating properly?"

"I've been eating fine," Adrien assured Mr. Dupain, his voice coming out a bit choked. "Marinette and I cook dinner together all the time. I've just started going to the gym at school more and running a few laps when I have time between classes."

"Ah, I used to do that in school," Mr. Dupain told Adrien, letting him free of the hug. "I kind of had to, with all of the food that we made and then ended up eating. It's a nice break from studying for sure."

Adrien grinned, picking his half-eaten cake back up. "Yeah! And I find that I can focus better, too, when I'm not all full of energy and jittery. And I really need that focus, now that we've really gotten into some more advanced topics."

After a few more minutes of chatting, Mr. Dupain had to return to his work in the back of the bakery, but Adrien stayed up front with Mrs. Cheng. He finished his cake (so good) and then helped clean up the area behind the counter, telling her about his classes and some of the outings that he and Marinette had gone out on between customers. She nodded and asked questions, and Adrien couldn't stop grinning.

It was really no surprise that Marinette had turned out wonderful, considering how great her parents were. Adrien couldn't wait to have them as actual in-laws.

And to make it even better? It felt as though the Dupain-Chengs felt the same way towards him.
Adrien's second interview went as well as the first one- better, even- and then he was back at the Dupain-Cheng's bakery, having a celebratory slice of Mrs. Cheng's fantastic quiche and a couple petite fours. He couldn't spend the whole afternoon there, though, because he had promised Nino and Alya that he would come visit them for dinner.

"Thanks so much, Mrs. Cheng," Adrien told her as he finished cleaning his things up and got ready to head out the door. "It was really great to be able to come back here and talk about my interviews. I know that otherwise, I would have spent the time after my interviews worrying over every answer I gave."

Mrs. Cheng just gave him a friendly squeeze. "We were happy to have you, dear. Tom and I love hearing about what you've been up to. Come again any time, if you want a snack or someone to talk to or anything. Our doors are always open to you."

Adrien could only beam and nod.

One short bus ride later, Adrien was hopping off of the bus and starting the short walk over to Alya and Nino's apartment, a bag of bakery treats in his hand. He had tried to pay for them, of course- Mrs. Cheng and Mr. Dupain were running a business, after all- but they wouldn't hear of it.

(Adrien wasn't surprised, not really. He was Marinette's friend, after all, and so were Alya and Nino, and the Dupain-Chengs had never been shy about plying them with food whenever they visited before.)

"So your interviews went well?" Nino asked as soon as he answered the door. "Marinette said that she was sending you to her parents so that they could be excited with you."

Adrien grinned. "Yeah! They're great, really. I'm glad to have them. And I got to distract myself a bit after the interview, which was good. I wasn't expecting that."

"Well, now you gotta tell us about the interviews, because we're dying to hear about it, and then we can get you all caught up on what's going on in Paris."

"Great!"

Falling into conversation with Nino and Alya again as they sat down was the most natural thing in the world. It didn't take long for Adrien to tell them about his interviews, or about what had been going on in his classes. His friends laughed when he got too excited about one particular concept that he had learned about and flew straight into the slightly too in-depth explanation of it for several minutes before noticing their puzzled looks.

"Normally I'm really good at remembering not to do that!" Adrien protested over the sound of their laughter. "I've been working on figuring out how to explain concepts to people at a level they understand for ages, because it helps me understand things better. I've been explaining stuff in my classes to Marinette, like, every night, but sometimes I just...forget, I guess? I got excited."

"Does Marinette understand what you're talking about, or is she just really good at smiling and nodding, Mr. Science Geek?" Alya teased. "I know he was good at school, but you've gotten to some really advanced stuff."

"She asks good questions about stuff!" Adrien protested. "Like, it always sounds like she understands it. But maybe it helps that she's been hearing about it pretty much every night, so it's not so much of an infodump."

Alya was still grinning. "Right, Marinette is so getting a pop quiz when she gets back to Paris. I
gotta see this to believe it."

"Oh, don't *quiz* her! That's so mean!"

Dinner flew by in a flurry of food and conversation, and the conversation moved on to what Nino and Alya had been up to. There were plenty of projects- Nino had been contacted by Max to help write and mix some music for a new video game, Alya had done another installment of her superhero articles and had organized a large chunk of her research, they both had done a lot of wedding planning and had cleaned their apartment, moving a large chunk of stuff into storage to make it a little less crowded until they could find a larger place to move to.

Adrien glanced around the apartment. He hadn't noticed it straight away- probably because his mind had been on other things- but sure enough, the apartment was *much* less cluttered and cramped than usual. There was more space to move around, and there was less *stuff* balanced on top of the shelves. There were things laying around the room, of course- Alya's desk was still pretty covered in stuff, and there were a few notebooks and loose sheets of computer paper laying around- but it was more *normal* clutter rather than clutter from things that didn't really have a designated spot.

Another hour passed, and Adrien was starting to drag a little. He had gotten up earlier than usual and had been busy all day, and the stress from the interview had exhausted him. As Nino and Alya got distracted by some detail about their wedding, Adrien found himself checking out a little. Alya's engagement ring glinted in the light as he gestured, catching his eye. Adrien found himself staring at it as she gestured.

It was a gorgeous ring, there was no doubt about it. It suited Alya perfectly, and Adrien knew that Marinette agreed. But the diamond and the prongs holding it were both on the large side and would easily snag on fabric, which meant that Marinette wouldn't want something similar from him. She would want something sleeker, with fewer parts that could get in the way.

Not that he was actively shopping for a ring or anything, but-

"Earth to Adrien, are you still there?"

Adrien startled, blinking at his friends. Both Nino and Alya looked simultaneously amused and concerned.

"Dude, you just zoned out on us," Nino said with a laugh. "Not sure where you went there. Have you been getting enough sleep?"

"He doesn't have any bags under his eyes," Alya pointed out, as though Adrien wasn't there. "Unless he's covered them up." Nino leaned forward into Adrien's space, squinting at his face. "He knows how to use concealer to hide all flaws."

"True that." Alya gave Adrien another considering look. "So what was it this time? Another sunrise commercial?"

"An early shoot. It wouldn't have been so bad if I weren't still on London time." Adrien yawned, unable to hold it back anymore. "Nathalie gave me tomorrow morning off, though, so I get to sleep in. Well, if Father doesn't insist that I get up early just for appearances."

"Your father's an ass, have I told you that recently?"

Adrien snorted. "You tell me every chance you get."
"Well, it's true and I shouldn't be afraid to say it." Nino glanced over at Adrien as he yawned again. "Maybe we should catch up some more some other day. You're going to end up hitting a wall before the end of the break, and that would suck for you."

"Yeah, that sounds like a plan." Adrien reached for his phone, texting the Gorilla. The response was almost immediate. "It was great seeing you guys again. I'll text you my schedule, and maybe all four of us can get together some evening."

"We can go out and forget about school and wedding planning and moving for an evening," Nino agreed, grinning. "Just relax and hang out, just like old times. The old arcade is open, if you're interested."

"That sounds like a plan!"
I did my best to represent French wedding customs instead of relying on American norms (the civil ceremony on top of the church wedding, the croquembouche tower instead of cake, witnesses instead of bridesmaids/groomsmen). My apologies if I messed up anything important, but I figured that individual couples might have some variation from the "norm". Also Google can only tell me so much.

(RIP my Google search history, honestly. I'm going to be getting ads about weddings for months.)

The next couple of weeks flew by, and then, almost before they knew it, Adrien and Marinette were packing to go back to Paris again for the second time in a month.

"It's going to be torture being next to you at a wedding and not being able to act all mushy," Adrien grumbled as they packed- or rather, as Marinette packed and Adrien alternated between halfhearted packing and studying. He occasionally threw in the occasional bid for Marinette's attention, just to shake things up. He flopped facedown onto their bed and let out a whine, playing up his distress to get a reaction. "It's bad enough not being able to cuddle in public."

Marinette giggled as she packed Adrien's tux into a garment bag and laid it out on the bed. Her dress for the wedding was already in Paris, waiting in her room above the bakery. "I'm sure you can manage."

Adrien jokingly head-butted her side. "But I wanna cuddle you now."

"Clingy kitty." Still, Marinette reached out to thread her fingers through Adrien's hair. "And we can cuddle now, we just can't cuddle at the wedding."

"At the wedding, where there will be all sorts of romantic vibes that I'm just supposed to ignore while my girlfriend and love of my life is wandering around without me?"

"I'll probably stick pretty close to your side. We're both witnesses, remember?"

"Fine. I'm supposed to ignore the romantic vibes of the wedding while my girlfriend and love of my life is right at my side and I can't even snuggle with her or make mushy eyes? That's even worse."

"Dork."

"Your dork."

Plagg made a retching sound in the background. He was ignored.

"You'll be fine," Marinette reassured Adrien again. "I'm sure people will expect us to be close, since we're living, uh, next door to each other-"

Adrien sniggered.
"-so we can probably, like, dance together and hang out a lot without people suspecting too much, but no kissing," Marinette finished. Adrien pretended to pout even more. "At least not in public."

Adrien brightened.

"What, did you really think that I could spend an entire weekend without kissing you when you're right there? Not likely, kitty," Marinette teased. "We'll have to find a corner or two to sneak off to."

"Or three or four or five," Adrien purred, popping back up off the bed and ducking down to press his lips to hers. "Or- mmmm- six or seven-"

Marinette giggled and pushed him back. "We're not going to be there that long and if we go missing all night, people will start wondering."

"Let them wonder. People have been wondering for two and a half years now anyway, no matter if we've given them proper reason to or not."

Marinette gave him a stern look. "It's Alya and Nino's special day. We're not going to distract them."

Adrien flopped back down on the bed, stretching as he rolled back over to where his textbook laid open on the bed. Marinette watched him study for a few moments, then went back to surveying the drawers, trying to figure out what they should bring back to Paris on this trip. They had gotten a good chunk of their things back on other trips, of course, but there was just still so much left to move back to Paris.

Mr. Agreste had sent new clothes back with Adrien almost every time he went home for holidays or photoshoots. Marinette had made new outfits for herself and brought over (or bought) more sewing supplies. They had given each other presents and accumulated mementos from their time in London.

All of that added up to a lot of stuff, and it had taken up a good deal of their suitcase space on their previous trips back. They would have to take more than ever on this trip back if they wanted to make their final trip home as painless as possible.

"We just need a handful of t-shirts and light long-sleeves at this time of the year, right?" Marinette asked. "And maybe just one or two dressy outfits?"

Adrien craned his neck to glance over at her. "Yeah, that sound about right. And maybe one sweater each for any cool days? Those take up a ton of space in our suitcases."

Marinette nodded and tugged out several items from the drawers. They were finally starting to look a little emptier, though not as much as Marinette wanted. Ideally, they would be down almost to the basics at this point.

They were not down to the basics. Not quite.

"Sarah said that I can borrow her giant suitcase this weekend," Marinette told Adrien as she folded a few pieces and tucked them into her suitcase. "I thought I might bring home the rest of my screen-printing stuff and then some of my sewing supplies, with things I have multiples of. That's a lot of bulk but not a lot of weight, which is perfect with everything else that we're carrying."

"At what point are you bringing your sewing machine home?" Adrien asked. His attention had strayed off of his studying again as he watched her. "That's not going to be a final trip sort of thing, is it?"
Marinette blanked. She actually didn't know. She hadn't remembered to take her sewing machine into account when planning what to take back. It would be best to bring it back to Paris during a trip when she wouldn't be carrying much, since it was fairly heavy, but the problem was that there wouldn't be any trips with not much to carry. She would have a full load this time- and boy was it ever going to look funny to go home with a bulging backpack, two large suitcases and a bag when she was only going to be there for a couple days- and the final trip from London to Paris was going to have to have all of the rest of her things.

Maybe there would be someone in the office who was heading to Paris soon who would be willing to carry an extra bag. Or maybe they would have to figure out some other way to get it back, either through very insured shipping or...something else.

Marinette hated moving. It was a pair in the rear.

"I'll have to look at my commissions, I guess," she finally admitted. "Ideally it wouldn't go back in our last trip, since we're going to be carrying a lot. But this is the last trip that we're going to make before going home for good, isn't it? It's now or then."

"And I'm just guessing that it can't go back this weekend," Adrien finished. "We already had too much stuff to carry. We'll figure it out, don't worry about it too much."

"But you know I'm going to."

Adrien pushed his books to the side and snagged Marinette as she headed past him again, pulling her down on the bed next to him. He pressed a kiss to her neck as he nuzzled her hair. "We'll get it figured out. Even if it's not the most efficient way of getting everything home that we could ever think of, we will manage it."

Marinette smiled, relaxing into his side. "I'd be running around like a headless chicken without you here to keep me grounded, you know."

"And a gorgeous headless chicken you would be- wait, that didn't sound as suave as I thought it would be," Adrien interrupted himself, frowning. "Uh- give me a minute here, I'll come up with something-"

Marinette collapsed backwards on the bed, shaking with helpless laughter. "You can't turn everything into a flirt, kitty cat. It doesn't work that way."

"Oh, really? I can still try." Adrien propped his chin on the palm of his hand, his elbow resting on his knee as he puzzled over the problem. Marinette watched him, amusement dancing over her face as Adrien muttered things under his breath and then immediately shook his head, frowning.

"Okay, I'm coming up empty," Adrien admitted after a minute, straightening up. "There's no good way of turning headless chicken into a compliment. So, uh, are we packing or not?"

Marinette snorted. "Oh, very smooth change of topic there," she teased him, pushing herself back up. "Don't think that I don't see what you're doing there, buddy. And you were distracting me."

"Oh, I'm very good at distracting." Still, Adrien pushed himself up, offering Marinette a hand. "But you're right. I can take a study break, and we can get the packing out of the way."
There was barely a minute to spare when Adrien and Marinette arrived back in Paris. There were flowers to pick up and arrange in the church, croquembouche to fill and stack, suits to iron and dresses that needed final tiny tweaks.

And yet, the two of them managed to find the time to meet as superheroes, once all of the errands were done for the day.

"I've been put in charge of Nino and Alya's order," Ladybug told Chat Noir. "Which is fine, I've made plenty of croquembouche before and Maman and Papa have other orders to work on plus the normal work. But I've barely had a spare moment."

"I've been helping them make sure that everything goes smoothly," Chat Noir assured her. "It's involved a lot of driving around and picking stuff up. Or being driven around, I guess. I'm not allowed to drive my father's car, and there's too much to carry for me to take the bus."

"And everything is going well?"

"Yeah. It's just unfortunate that Alya's mom is the one doing the cooking, because she's busy getting everything prepped today. And then you're baking and not there. It's fortunate that Alya isn't a panicky bride." Chat Noir settled down against the roof, leaning back on his hands. The Eiffel Tower had a better view, but since it wasn't a holiday and the two of them didn't want to encourage sightings, they had opted for a nondescript rooftop to meet up on instead.

"I've been texting Alya when I'm between batches," Ladybug told him. "And while waiting for stuff to cool. She seems to have stuff organized pretty well, but I'm sure it helps to have runners."

"She keeps us busy, that's for sure." Chat Noir smiled at her. "And then things start early tomorrow, don't they? The legal stuff at City Hall, and then run over to the church to get all fancied up, and then the ceremony..."

"And we have to fit lunch in there somewhere, without getting anything on our clothes," Ladybug pointed out. "I don't know what Alya and Nino have planned, but I hope it's not remotely messy."

Adrien laughed. "We could use smocks while we eat. I've seen models do that before when their fittings go on forever or it's an avant-garde shoot and their styling takes hours. I can text Nathalie tonight and ask, and she'll probably pick a few up from headquarters on her way to work tomorrow."

"Nathalie is a godsend."

Ladybug leaned against him, resting her head against Chat Noir's shoulder. They watched the city in silence for a bit, just enjoying each other's company and relaxing after their frantic day.

It was nice. It was calm. They had both needed a moment to breathe, and they found that moment together.

"Tomorrow should be fun," Chat Noir said, breaking the silence. "After the craziness, after all the pomp and ceremony... it'll be fun getting to see so many of our school friends again during the reception."

"It will be," Ladybug agreed. "And I'm looking forward to it. We just have to survive until then first."
The morning of the wedding dawned for everyone in the wedding party. There were final touches to put on the croquembouche tower, flowers to be put into place, dresses and other supplies to be brought to the church, a lunch to prepare and pick up...

It was a lot.

"We intended to do the civil ceremony the day before, but we sort of forgot about that bit until pretty last-minute," Alya explained to Marinette with a sheepish grin as they waited for the civil authority to arrive. "My mom was the one who mentioned it, and we were all what? And of course that happened over the weekend, so we had to wait until Monday. And then Monday was some sort of government holiday, so we waited for Tuesday. And then the person we needed to talk to was out, so it wasn't until that Friday that we could talk to them about the civil ceremony. And since we needed to do it before the church ceremony, we only had, like, two choices- either today, or two weeks ago."

"And we thought it would be kind of stupid to have the civil thing so long before our actual wedding," Nino chimed in. "And we wanted an afternoon wedding so that we would have plenty of time to prep, so..." He shrugged. "We crammed everything on the same day."

"And the witnesses thank you for it, really," Adrien said dryly, and Marinette giggled. "As do your families, I'm sure."

Alya groaned. "Oh gosh. Let me tell you, they have let us know exactly what they thought of that. That conversation wasn't fun- oh, there's our guy!"

The civil ceremony took no time at all, and then they were all scrambling over to the church. Time flashed by in a rush of hairspray and bobby pins and lace and makeup and a very, very rushed lunch, and then they were in the church.

Adrien crossed his eyes at Marinette as Nino and Alya recited their vows. It was touching, sure, and very romantic...but it was going on forever, it seemed, especially since they had also attended the civil ceremony that morning. Their own "wedding" almost two years prior had been much shorter, mostly because they had chopped out the prayers and readings in the name of efficiency and not boring themselves to death for the sake of a prank.

Marinette smothered her giggles and gave Adrien as stern of a look as she could manage without catching anyone's attention. He straightened his eyes back out and gave her a tiny shrug, completely unrepentant.

Really, Plagg was a terrible influence on him. Hilarious, sometimes, but terrible.

The minister continued, unaware of their shenanigans. Nino and Alya only had eyes for each other, thankfully, and the audience was focused on them as well. Adrien forced himself to focus as he watched his two friends exchange rings. There was another short blessing, and then the two of them kissed.

(Adrien had to clear his throat loudly to remind them that yes, there were other people around and no, nobody was interested in watching the two of them play tonsil hockey.)

"That was nice," Marinette murmured as she and Adrien followed Alya and Nino back up the aisle towards the door. Their hands brushed each other briefly as they walked. "Nino and Alya did an excellent job of pulling that all together. I didn't know that it would be possible, since they only just
got engaged a few months ago."

"We pulled off a fake wedding in less than twenty-four hours," Adrien pointed out as they left the sanctuary and followed Nino and Alya down the stairs to the reception hall. "It's possible. They had months."

"Correction: Madam Rosalie pulled off a fake wedding ceremony in less than a day," Marinette said with a laugh, bumping Adrien's shoulder with her own. "And it didn't have a reception, or guests, really, or... oh, I don't know, what else. The decorations were really limited to the front, too, so she didn't need to get a whole lot of flowers and ribbons and whatnot."

"And I guess that technically, she had been planning the photoshoot for months," Adrien added. "It was just a matter of moving it forward and re-fitting some of the dresses." He paused, then gave her a thoughtful look. "Does she still have those, by the way?"

Marinette blinked over at him, slightly puzzled. "I... yeah? We keep all original pieces in storage. It's good for inspiration, to be able to walk through the warehouse and pull out old pieces and inspect the fabrics and the sewing and the piecing. Some pieces get sold if someone is really interested in it, but I don't think any of the wedding photoshoot pieces got sold off. Why?"

"Because that dress was gorgeous on you," Adrien told her, grinning when Marinette blushed. "And... I wouldn't mind seeing it again."

The small intake of air from next to him told Adrien that Marinette hadn't missed his meaning. He glanced over and was pleased to see that Marinette didn't look opposed to the idea at all.

Now wasn't the time or the place to really discuss the idea further, especially since they could already see people rushing towards them, clearly eager to talk to them after years of only short, infrequent visits. But the topic was out there between them now, to be discussed later on.

---

Dinner was tasty, as was to be expected. Alya's mother had apparently played a big role in steering Alya and Nino's choices in selecting the reception menu, and she had gotten some of her normal staff to finish cooking it so that she could have the night off.

The only problem with it was that it was dragging on for far too long. Both Adrien and Marinette were starting to get restless, unused to being around each other for so long without being able to exchange at least a few little affectionate touches.

Under the table, Adrien's hand wrapped around Marinette's own, his thumb stroking hers. She unconsciously leaned towards him, enjoying his warmth against the cool evening air coming in from the open windows. She quickly moved back when her father glanced up towards the head table, but the look on his face made her think that she perhaps had not been as subtle as she had hoped to be.

*Drat.* They were so, so close to ending the day without raising any suspicion, but if she kept slipping up then her parents would be onto them and Nino and Alya wouldn't be far behind. Maybe Adrien's father wouldn't be able to do anything now about it, since the last tuition payment was in and they could easily cover the last two months of rent on their own, but now that they had made it this far without anyone (except for her co-workers) having their suspicions confirmed, they really wanted to keep it a secret until they came back for good.
(She hadn't thought that they would get this far with their secret still intact, honestly. But having secret-keeping experience from their time as Ladybug and Chat Noir plus a good deal of distance between them and Paris certainly had helped.)

(Marinette also had a sneaking suspicion that she knew the reason why Adrien was so gung-ho on keeping the secret until then. There was no way of knowing, though, and she wasn't going to ask and spoil the surprise.)

"I can't wait until we move back here and can finally let people know," Marinette murmured to Adrien a few minutes later once her parents' attention had gone elsewhere. She was just barely pouting. "I wish we could cuddle."

Adrien couldn't help but grin. "Funny, I remember someone saying something about how we could make it through one evening without cuddling." When Marinette's pout just got more pronounced, he tried to bite back the grin. "Wanna slip away for a few minutes?"

"Not during dinner," Marinette replied, her voice barely a whisper. "We'll be noticed. But maybe once the dances get going..."

Adrien grinned in anticipation.

Unfortunately, once the dances got going and everyone got up to move around, there were a ton of people that wanted to talk to them. Maybe they should have expected it- they hadn't seen a lot of their friends in person for more than a couple hours here and there for several years- but they couldn't help but be a little put out by the stream of people taking up their attention.

Could they maybe get a ten-minute break, where they could be together for a few moments?

"You have plenty of time to be together later on," Tikki scolded in Marinette's ear during a short break in socializing. "And you were just talking only a couple days ago how much you were looking forward to seeing your old school friends again. You just got so caught up in your idea of sneaking away together that you're letting it distract you and keep you from enjoying the moment."

"You're right, Tikki," Marinette admitted with a sigh, exchanging an abashed look with Adrien. "I haven't been letting it distract me. Let's go mix and mingle. We don't want our friends thinking that we aren't excited to see them."

The two of them split up, to better avoid temptation. Marinette headed over to chat with Ivan and Mylène, while Adrien wandered over to where Nino, Max, and Kim were laughing about something. Mylène lit up when she saw Marinette.

"Marinette! I texted you about my dress, right?"

"That you got to see the sample dress with the right skirt and the Eiffel Tower lace?" Marinette asked, grinning at the memory. She had seen Mylène's excited text and had been thrilled at how happy her friend seemed. "Did all of that get sent off to the dressmakers?"

"It did! But I don't think I sent you any of the pictures that I took." Mylène turned to Ivan, who pulled her phone out of one of his pockets and passed it over. Mylène wasted no time in unlocking it and pulling up one of the photos, with her glancing over her shoulder at the camera with the back of the dress on display.

The lace was thicker in all the right spots, covering the moles but leaving much of Mylène's back bare. There was no mistaking what it was, either. The delicate lace formed a perfect picture, looking light and delicate and airy and still somehow it was functional.
"Oh, that's perfect!" Marinette exclaimed. "Did it feel good?"

"I could barely feel it at all! But I knew it was there, and it made me feel a lot better about the dress. It's perfect now." Mylène clicked out of the pictures and turned her screen off before handing her phone back to Ivan. "I really love it."

"You look gorgeous in it," Marinette assured her. "And once it's on a dress that's fitted perfectly? That will be amazing."

"She won't show me the pictures," Ivan announced gloomily. "Even though it's not the exact dress that she'll be wearing on our wedding day."

Marinette patted his arm, trying not to laugh. "It'll make a bigger impact if you haven't seen any version of the dress."

Across the room, Adrien had been waylaid on his way over to the group of boys by an impish-looking Alix. He looked a bit trapped, and Marinette gave him a sympathetic look before returning her attention to Ivan and Mylène.

Adrien sighed and resigned himself to a round of energetic teasing. Once Alix had finally moved on, then he was snagged by Max, who had moved on from his conversation with Nino. Then Adrien caught up with Rose and Juleka, getting dragged into a couple dances with Rose before they let him go. He supervised a wine-chugging competition between Alix and Kim (a waste of perfectly good wine, but at least they were just seeing who could drink a glass faster and not seeing who could drink, say, an entire bottle faster or how much they could both drink), and then finally, finally managed to get over to Nino.

"You're popular," Nino told him with a laugh as Adrien approached. "Just as much as I am, and I'm the groom. I guess it makes sense, because no one has seen you for any longer than an hour here or there, if that."

"Yeah." Adrien glanced around, spotting a few of his former classmates among the crowd. He had to admit, it had been fun catching up with people properly, and he was definitely glad that Tikki had called him and Marinette out on their nonsense before too much of the evening had passed. They could fulfill their snuggling-at-weddings quota when Ivan and Mylène got married in the fall. "And there's a lot of people that I've only ever seen when I bumped into them on accident, or at the get-togethers before Alya left. At least I'll have plenty of time to see people on a more regular basis once I move back."

Nino nodded. "Yeah! Though I gotta ask- are we talking plenty of time like you'll be free outside of photoshoots and whatnot, or plenty of time like just normal time outside of typical work hours, only you'll be in Paris instead of London?"

"The latter, hopefully. I haven't heard back yet on the positions that I interviewed for in person yet, but I'm not meant to hear either way for another week, I think," Adrien couldn't deny that the delay was making him nervous, but apparently there were candidates with busy enough schedules that they hadn't been able to interview at the same time as the rest of the group and that was causing the holdup. "I'm hoping to get something sorted out soon, though. I won't have much time to find anything else if those positions fall through."

"Summer is coming up sooner and sooner and sooner," Nino agreed, grinning widely. "It's good that you've gotten interviews, though. Do you know what you're going to be doing for housing when you come back? Will you be living with your pops again?"
Adrien shuddered at the thought. Looking back, he had no idea how he had put up with his father for so long. It probably had something to do with him thinking that he had no choice in the matter. "Definitely not. He would just make a nuisance of himself if I did, trying to get me back into modeling and business. I'm moving out."

And moving in with Marinette, but Nino didn't need to know that. Not yet.

"Where are you looking?" Nino wanted to know. "If you're too far away, you'll get all isolated. It's easy to get cut off on your own. You got lucky in London, with Marinette as your neighbor."

"I really did," Adrien agreed happily. And then, just because he could, Adrien added, "Maybe I'll talk to her about splitting a two-bedroom apartment or something, so we can keep hanging out."

"Oh, god, and they were roommates," Nino muttered under his breath, rolling his eyes up to the ceiling. Adrien feigned confusion.

"What was that?"

"Oh, nothing." Nino fixed Adrien with a look that Adrien did his best to ignore. "Is Marinette planning on moving out of her parents' place as well?"

"She said something about how it would probably be hard to live with her parents again after being on her own for several years," Adrien said, which was true. As much as Marinette loved her parents, living at home again would chafe after being independent for several years. But their main hang-up now would be that the two of them wanted to live together, and they wouldn't have quite enough privacy if they were to stay in her old bedroom for an extended period of time. "So I think she wants to move out, too."

"You should definitely ask her," Nino told Adrien earnestly, and Adrien had to try not to laugh at his friend's obvious matchmaking efforts. "You would probably have a ton of fun living together."

Adrien nodded, still trying not to laugh. "Right. I'll ask, then."

"I think you would enjoy coming home to her every day."

Adrien just kept nodding. "Yeah! We would never run out of fresh bread. She's been teaching me how to make all different kinds! And we could play video games together when we get bored."

Nino looked like he would happily whack Adrien over the head.

"She's a really great friend," Adrien added, just for good measure. Much to his delight, Nino groaned.

"I give up with you, I really do. If Alya wants to try to talk some sense into you, she is welcome to it."

"Wait, what?" Adrien called as Nino headed off, doing his best to sound confused. "What do you mean?"

"Figure it out yourself!"

Adrien grinned as he walked away as well, looking around at the shrinking crowd. A number of the assorted relatives had already left, as well as some of their friends. Adrien could see Ivan and Mylène near the door, talking to Alya, and Marinette's parents were talking to Nino's mother over by the remains of the croquembouche tower. Adrien headed over in their direction, because even if
he had had a good deal of pastry already, there was no such thing as too much Dupain-Cheng baking. Marinette caught up to him again as he piled a couple of the pastries onto a napkin.

"You're going to have to hit up the gym in London when we get back," Marinette teased, reaching over to break off a small chunk of pastry from his pile and pop it in her mouth. "Those are really rich."

"Rich and fabulous and definitely worth it."

Marinette just laughed, shaking her head fondly.

(She was definitely right and Adrien knew it, but he didn't have to admit that. Not right away, at least.)

"I know it's late, but do you want to go out later as Ladybug and Chat Noir?" Marinette asked quietly, leaning closer to him so that no one could possibly overhear. "Not for long, since we have to be up at a decent time tomorrow to go back to London, but just to be together for a bit?"

Adrien nodded eagerly. That sounded like a great plan. He was itching for some cuddle time with his Lady, even if they would be back in London and able to cuddle to their hearts' content in their apartment by the end of the next day. "Of course! Text me when you're ready."

It wasn't much longer before the rest of the guests started to filter out. The Dupain-Chengs helped Nino and Alya package up the leftover croquembouche, and Alya's mother did the same with what was left of the meal. Soon they were waving good-bye and going their separate ways. Adrien winked at Marinette as she left, just to see her small, pleased smile.

"Congrats, you two," Adrien told Nino and Alya after he had gotten the text telling him that the Gorilla had arrived to pick him up. "That was a really nice wedding. I bet it'll be nice to not have the planning for that hanging over your shoulders anymore."

"Yeah, now we can focus on finding a new apartment and moving, which shouldn't be stressful at all." Still, Nino grinned. "We'll figure it out. Good luck with your jobs search and moving and- oh, what am I saying? We text literally every day and here I am, talking like I won't hear from you at all for the next couple months."

Adrien had to laugh. "It's the exhaustion talking, I'm sure." He stepped forward to hug both Nino and Alya. "Good night, you guys."

"Bye, Adrien!"

The ride home took nearly no time at all, and then Adrien was bidding the Gorilla good-night before he headed up to his room. Adrien carefully hung his clothes back up in his closet, making sure that there weren't any wrinkles, changed into pajamas, and then settled down at his computer with his phone at his elbow to surf the Internet while waiting for Marinette to text.

It wasn't long at all before Adrien's phone vibrated with a returning text from Marinette. Her parents had gone to bed, and she was free to sneak out.

"I forgot how early they go to bed," Adrien told Plagg as his kwami finished up his snack. "And it's amazing that Marinette didn't turn out to be a morning person, considering both of her parents are."

"Your father is a morning person too," Plagg pointed out. "Was your mom?"

"Not nearly as much, but she didn't sleep in late like Mari and I like to." Adrien opened his window
and waved his ring at Plagg. "Which, fair, but sleeping is fun. Plagg, transform me!"

Plagg zipped into the ring and in a flash of light, Chat Noir replaced Adrien. He shot out the window, bounding towards Marinette's house. He met Ladybug halfway, and they headed for an out-of-sight rooftop. As soon as they were there and settled, Chat Noir pulled Ladybug in for a long kiss.

"That was really nice," Ladybug said once they separated, and it took Chat Noir a moment to realize that she was talking about the wedding and not the kiss, which had also been really nice. "I was worried about what they would be able to accomplish in their time frame, especially since they both had a lot of stuff going on, but they must have been crazy organized. Add in all of the stuff Alya's been trying to get done at work and with her book..."

"Well, we knew that they were done with getting all of the orders for stuff set up two weeks ago," Chat Noir reminded her, thinking back to their group chat from Easter. Marinette had been eager to hang out, of course, but had been worried about an outing to the arcade taking up too much of Nino and Alya's time, since the wedding was so close. Alya had waved her friend's concerns off, informing them that all of the necessary arrangements were already made and she and Nino had plenty of free time, enough that Alya had even gotten started on putting together Marinette's commissions website.

Marinette had not been pleased to hear that her friend was pretty much using her website as an excuse to procrastinate on organizing her superhero research, which had apparently hit a bit of a snag.

"Still." Ladybug leaned against his side. "It's impressive. Alya admitted that some of the stuff they ordered was a bit more expensive because it was kind of a late order, but they still stayed in budget. It probably helped that my parents did the croquembouche tower and her mom's kitchen did the catering."

Chat Noir felt his brow furrow. "Wait, why would it be more expensive? It wasn't, like, the day before or anything"

"It just is. My parents normally do the same thing when someone puts in a big order like that, but they didn't this time because it's Nino and Alya, and then I was the one to do most of the work on the order anyway. I think it has something to do with advance ordering food or making up schedules so that all of the orders fit together nicely." Ladybug shrugged. "It's to encourage people to not wait until last minute, because it makes it harder on businesses if they don't know how busy they're going to be several months out."

That made sense. Chat Noir nodded.

The two of them fell into silence, relaxing as they watched the city around them. It wasn't nearly as good of a vantage point as the Eiffel Tower, but it meant that they could be out and about without having to dodge too many eyes. Chat Noir shifted so that Ladybug could pillow her head in his lap, looking relaxed and gorgeous as she settled down.

"How do you think people will react when we tell them about us?" Chat Noir asked after a few minutes of silence. "I mean, my father will be a grouch like always, but Nino and Alya? Your parents?"

"My parents will be confused but they'll be happy. They like you." Ladybug beamed up at him. "My mom was telling me about everything you guys were talking about when you came to the bakery after your interviews. They didn't pester you too much, did they? I know that they can get a
"No, no, it was adorable," Chat Noir assured her, and then he paused. "Well...mostly. Your dad nearly gave me a heart attack the first day when he came in and greeted me as his son-in-law. Apparently he had just been looking at the prank photos the previous night and decided to have a little fun with me."

Ladybug laughed, loud and clear and free. God, he loved her laugh. "Oh, gosh. What I would have given to see the look on your face. I bet it was precious."

"If you had been there, you would have been just as startled as I had been." Still, Chat Noir couldn't hold back his grin. Mr. Dupain had greeted him in much the same way the second time, and Adrien had just rolled with it, enough that several customers congratulated Mr. Dupain on his daughter's marriage before he could explain that it was a joke (well, for now, at least). "They have a good sense of humor, so they'll understand after a bit. Nino and Alya might take longer to forgive us."

"I think they'll respond kind of like Alix did. She wasn't upset." Ladybug grinned up at him. "I happened to notice that she had you cornered there for a bit."

"She had to get her bit of ribbing in, I think. Nothing too bad." Chat Noir threaded his fingers though Ladybug's hair, grinning at her pleased smile at the sensation. "They're never going to let us forget this, though."

"Of course not. I don't mind, though." Ladybug reached up, returning the gesture as she ran her fingers through the hair at the nape of Chat Noir's neck. "It is funny. And I don't mind what people say. I'm sure everyone we know will find it funny in the end."

"Except for my father, but he doesn't count," Chat Noir agreed. "I can't wait until we get back to Paris. It really can't come soon enough."
Adrien had a problem- and it wasn't one of his homework problems.

(He had those too, admittedly, but they weren't casing him any problems. Or not problems, really, but concern. A great deal of thought and inner reflection.)

A thought had been running around Adrien's head for several weeks, ever since Nino and Alya's wedding and his and Marinette's conversation with Tikki and Plagg beforehand. The kwamis' comments about what being ready for marriage actually meant kept rolling around in his head, over and over.

"I just don't know if we're already ready, or if I'm letting the thought of how funny it would be if we went back engaged when no one knows that we're dating influence me," Adrien admitted to Plagg one afternoon, pushing his book to the side and pulling up the hidden folder of bookmarks on his phone. He clicked one, pulling up a picture of an elegant engagement ring. He had been browsing online lately, looking through the offered styles to try to get an idea for what Marinette might like after it had become apparent that quite a few styles wouldn't work for a designer that regularly worked around easily-snagged fabric. "I don't want to jump the gun or anything since we haven't been dating anywhere close to how long Alya and Nino did, but..."

"Okay, I'm going to be properly serious for a few minutes here and give you some advice," Plagg said before shooting a sideways glance at Adrien. "Unless you didn't want my advice and just wanted to moan and mope about?"

"If I didn't care about your advice at all, I wouldn't mope around in your general vicinity," Adrien pointed out. He moved on to the next page, inspecting the design again. He had tended towards rings with small, unraised stones, since he knew from being around designers so much that rings with rough edges tended to snag. Some of the women in his father's sewing room opted to wear their rings on a necklace during the day instead of on their fingers because the diamonds on them snagged so badly.

Adrien wanted for Marinette to not have to take her ring off. Maybe he was just a possessive kitty, but once he slid that ring on, he wanted it to stay on.

"You've moped all the time about your father being an ass around me before, but you always reject me when I offer to shove breakable stuff off of his desk." Plagg perched on the arm of the couch, giving Adrien a sharp look. "Something about how it's not helpful or whatever."

"Yeah, because it wouldn't be. It would just tick him off and then he would take it out on me."

"And those times when you moped about Ladybug not liking you when you were a wee lad, and then told me that you didn't need my advice?"

"It was all cheese-related advice, that was why." Glancing away from Plagg with a sigh, Adrien glanced back down at his phone. He had tried searching websites for advice, but hadn't found much of it helpful. "Gah. I wish I could ask Nino, but he hasn't exactly seen Marinette and I properly together. And he would probably be really confused if I asked him how he knew that he was ready to propose, but-"
"Kid, listen to me." Plagg flew in front of Adrien, cutting his rambling off and blocking the phone's screen, drawing his full attention. "Answer honestly: do you think you and Marinette will still be together at this time next year?"

Adrien didn't even have to think about it. "Of course."

"Can you see yourself settling down with her?"

"Yes, of course. You've heard us talking about what we want in the future and how our plans fit together."

"Do you want to change anything about her? Do you get annoyed with any of her behavior?"

Adrien shook his head. "I don't want to change her. And if there's anything that we do that annoys the other person, we talk about it. We help each other fix our bad habits."

The corners of Plagg's mouth turned up in a toothy smile. "Could you see yourself with anyone else?"

"Never." Adrien had fallen for Ladybug first, and then had been nursing a sizeable crush on Marinette even before he found out that they were one and the same. "She's literally my other half."

"Do you communicate, or sweep problems under the rug?"

Adrien gave that one some proper thought, since Nino had thought that he and Alya communicated well until the whole trip thing came up. "I think we're learning to communicate better. I mean, last year Marinette didn't tell me about being overworked, but now she knows that I'm not going to get upset about her for stuff like that, where it was a mistake that got the better of her. And we've communicated on the little things, like dinner and planning dates and when we're going on trips and what we want for the future."

"I would ask if you've had the money talk, but-" Plagg yawned, wide and toothy- "I've already sat through that. It was boring and dusty and involved a lot of guesswork because only you know what you're going to get paid in the next few months after you get back to Paris. So- any potential sources of conflict?"

"Only outside sources of people being idiots who think that they're entitled to our love lives."

Adrien was sure that they would have little arguments. They had had a couple small disagreements, but always listened to each other and came to an agreement that they were both happy with. They had never let it get out of hand. "I mean, we've talked about both wanting kids. We both want to stay in Paris, or at least close enough nearby that it wouldn't be hard to visit. We want to start with an apartment, and then move to a townhouse before having our first kid." Adrien smiled, remembering the conversations they had had, sometimes a long talk over dinner and sometimes just a short comment about what they had in mind for the future.

It was comfortable, being able to talk about their future. And when Marinette described what she would want in an apartment, Adrien could practically see it in his head.

And boy, did he ever want it.

"And last- do you feel like you're ready, or like you're getting pressured into it by others?"

Adrien snorted. "You mean the five or so people who actually know about Marinette and I? Hardly."
Plagg shrugged. "That, or by Marinette, or just by the fact that your friends are doing it right now."

Adrien shook his head. "I still don't think so. Sure, Nino and Alya just got married and Ivan and Mylène are getting married in the fall, but it's more like... good for them, I guess? I'm glad for them, and it does remind me that people our age are getting married. But I don't feel, like, the need to be next or anything." Adrien worried his bottom lip as he thought about how to describe it. "It's just like- why wait any longer, really? If I know that we work well together and we want to spend our lives together, and we're in a place in our lives where we can do that..."

"Then I think you have your answer." Plagg floated off of Adrien's phone and settled back on the table contentedly, picking up the remainder of his chunk of cheese. "Don't you?"

Adrien grinned and nodded, feeling more sure already. He looked at the ring on his screen again, flipping forward and back. He would have to see them in person before he made a final decision. And he might snatch Tikki for an afternoon to get her opinion, because even as surprisingly helpful as Plagg had been with talking to Adrien and letting him figure out that yes, he was ready to propose to Marinette, that help probably wasn't going to extend to wedding ring shopping. Plagg would just complain that none of them were edible and that really wasn't any help. "Yeah, I know. I'm going to have to start planning how to ask soon." His grin widened. "I can't wait, honestly."

Plagg snorted. "Oh, I know. You're completely obvious to anyone who knows you. Sure, maybe it was a good idea not to rush the relationship early on, when you were transitioning from friends to boyfriend and girlfriend, but it's not rushing anymore." And then Plagg grinned. "Besides, the Ladybug and Black Cat are meant to be worn by soulmates. When both are out at the same time, the holders are meant to be together."

"You couldn't have just started with that?" Adrien asked, utterly exasperated. "Really?"

Plagg only smirked, shooting Adrien a toothy grin as he groomed his tail. "Nope."

"Are we going on an adventure?" Tikki asked curiously as she and Adrien headed across town. Adrien had gotten permission from Marinette to take her kwami out for a bit and while she had clearly been curious about the request, she had agreed. Adrien left Plagg with her- or, rather, with his heated rice-pack and a chunk of cheese in a beam of sun in Marinette's general vicinity- and headed out, sunglasses perched on his nose and hair tucked up in a baseball cap. He had gone for a simple outfit, a button-up and fresh jeans that wouldn't make him stand out at all among the crowds. "Are we getting treats?"

Adrien laughed. Tikki could be almost as bad as Plagg sometimes, even if she wasn't obvious about it. "Not treats. You'll see."

He hopped on a bus, headed for a certain section of the city where he knew there was a jewelry store that carried a wide variety of engagement rings, including some of the styles that he had seen online. Tikki was practically buzzing with curiosity for the entire way, but Adrien didn't want to tell her anything until they reached the store.

And when he did, Tikki didn't disappoint.

"Are you getting something for Marinette?" Tikki asked curiously from inside of his jacket collar as Adrien made his way across the store. "It's not her birthday, though, or Valentine's Day, or
Christmas, or- oh! Are you looking at *engagement rings? OH!*

Adrien hid a grin as Tikki's excitement became so much that she was practically bouncing right out of his jacket. Her enthusiasm was infectious.

"We've talked about our future several times, and about getting married," Adrien told her quietly, trying to look like he wasn't talking to himself. "And I was a little worried that I was thinking about asking just because other people were doing it, or because of the timing, with us going back to Paris, but Plagg talked me through that. He- well, he talked a lot of sense. So I thought I would take a study break and find a ring."

"Oh, this is so exciting!"

Smiling, Adrien continued into the engagement ring section. He had gotten a few ideas from the website of what he thought Marinette would most like and what he wanted to steer clear of. The large stones were pretty, but impractical for designers. He also had a budget that he wanted to stay in, and he couldn't fall in love with any rings that were outside of that.

After all, it wouldn't do to not have any money for rent just because he just *had* to get a certain ring. Both he and Marinette were more practical than that.

As he perused the rows upon rows of sparkling bands, Adrien was glad that he had taken the time to do some research beforehand. If he hadn't he would be overwhelmed.

He was *still* a bit overwhelmed. That was a *lot* of options, and some of the rings looked virtually identical.

"They're all very sparkly," Tikki offered, sounding as overwhelmed as Adrien felt. "Uh..."

"Any that are definite no's?" Adrien asked, glancing around. "You've been with Marinette for the longest, so you know her taste pretty well, right?"

"Hmm." Tikki had the most adorable look of concentration on her face as she scanned the rows of rings. "No big stones! One of the designers on one of the other teams always talks about how they snag."

Adrien nodded. He knew that much. "Anything else?"

"Um..." Tikki thought about it. "Oh! Plain bands are boring. So engraved ones, I guess? Is that what they're called? I don't know the terms like Marinette does."

*That* was progress. Adrien favored more decorative rings himself, but it was nice to know that Marinette thought the same and he wasn't just picking out something that *he* would like but Marinette might not necessarily be so keen on. "Okay! Uh- stones?"

Tikki just shrugged.

"I guess we can just look and see where to go from there," Adrien muttered, looking around. There was no sign that anyone in the room had noticed him or recognized who he was, which was good. He would hate for his surprise to be ruined. "Uh, so... let's start here?"

Tikki and Adrien looked over ring after ring. The few things that they had decided so far- no large, easily snagging stone (or prongs, or general design) and an engraved band- helped narrow the selection down quite a bit, but nothing was feeling right. They were all just glittry bands, common and not *Marinette* enough.
Adrien wasn't sure if he was just being too picky or not. Maybe the perfect ring wasn't at this store, which would be unfortunate. Maybe he was just waiting for an *aha!* moment, when it really wasn't that deep at all.

He kept looking. And looking. And looking.

As it turned out, looking for rings was *frustrating*.

"Oh, those ones are the same color as Marinette's eyes!" Tikki exclaimed right when Adrien was about ready to throw in the towel for the day, and he automatically turned to look to see where she was pointing.

There, filling an entire case at the end of the counter, were sapphire engagement rings, each one glinting with a gorgeous blue stone. The blue stood in sharp, elegant contrast to the silver, rather than just adding colorless sparkle. They *were* the color of Marinette's eyes, and Adrien was immediately drawn to them.

Oh, this was *much* better.

Adrien looked over the rings, crossing some of them off right off the bat because of too-large stones and plain bands. There were still a number of rings left to look at, though, and Adrien gave each one a good look, watching the way that they shone in the light. His eyes slid over stone after stone, and then stopped.

A ring glittered brighter than the rest, it seemed, gorgeous blue set in twisting silver. The stones weren't too big and the band itself was elegant without being overly busy or plain. It was well within Adrien's price range, too.

It was *perfect*.

"Oh, that one is gorgeous!" Tikki squeaked, peering out at the ring. "It's perfect! Marinette would love it."

"That's the one, for sure," Adrien decided, leaning over to get a better look. "I just know it. I was going to sleep on the decision, but honestly? I think I can make my purchase today."

"That's great!" Tikki gave an excited little wriggle. "Look, there's a salesperson! Wave them down and then we can get Marinette's ring! You have everything you need to buy it, right?"

"Of course," Adrien started, and then froze before glancing down at Tikki as he realized one very, *very* important detail that he had forgotten to figure out before leaving the apartment. "...uh, I don't suppose you would happen to know Marinette's ring size, would you?"

Thankfully for Adrien's sanity, most of his finals had been replaced by final projects and presentations instead. He worked on those between classes and before Marinette came home, leaving his evenings mostly free for him to spend with Marinette.

And they spent a *lot* of time together, either just casually hanging out or doing stay-in dates. They played Mecha Strike, mostly as a team after there was a little bit *too* much cheating during one particularly competitive round. They watched movies together, and sometimes Marinette quizzed
Adrien to help him study for the tests that he did have.

"Last test done, and now I just have one presentation left," Adrien told Marinette on his final Wednesday of school as they warmed up leftovers for dinner. "Do you mind being an audience for it tonight? I kind of want to do one last run-through."

"Of course!" Marinette pulled another dish out of the fridge. "I'll probably understand none of it at this point, but I can nod and look interested."

"And give feedback on how fast I'm talking and if I'm gesturing too much," Adrien added. "I'm mostly looking for that, really. I know the content is good, I've already gone over it with Paul."

"You know I'm biased. I think your gesturing is cute." Marinette grinned when she spotted the pink that Adrien could feel creeping up his cheeks. Normally such an innocent comment wouldn't fluster him, but Adrien could remember the last time that Marinette had made the same comment and, well, it definitely had not been in a PG-13 setting.

She knew what she was doing, the little imp.

It didn't take long for dinner to get warmed up, and then they were sitting down at the table. As Adrien glanced around, he couldn't help but mourn at the increasingly bare walls of their apartment. He and Marinette had really made the apartment feel like home, and over the past few months, that hominess had slowly started getting packed away and sent back to Paris.

He couldn't wait to get a more permanent apartment with Marinette back in Paris and get their things all set up again. It was really coming up soon and-

-uh, wow. They probably should have started looking into apartments already. Whoops.

Well, he could start doing that after his last presentation, maybe. He would have to talk with Marinette first and make sure that they were on the same page with what they wanted in their next apartment.

"I've been looking at my commissions, and I've decided that my sewing machine can wait," Marinette said suddenly as she scooped up another bite of food. Adrien blinked, surprised. He knew that they had talked about how they were going to get Marinette's sewing machine back at one point, but he hadn't exactly been expecting her to (temporarily) leave it behind, not when she had (as of yet, at least) been unsuccessful at getting a designer job and would be depending on commissions for at least a little while. "I have a few screen printing things to design and do, and combine that with the fact that we'll be looking for apartments- that'll take me a few weeks."

"That will make things easier," Adrien admitted, reaching over his textbook to grab his checklist of stuff they had left to get back to Paris from a leaning pile of papers. "That's a really bulky item, and heavy-"

"And fragile," Marinette added.

"-and it would have required that you carry a lot less so you could keep it safe," Adrien finished. "And now we can focus on everything else."

Marinette nodded. "And if we can find an apartment we like quickly enough, then maybe I won't even need to bother with getting my sewing machine all set up in my old room again first."

"Yeah." Adrien glanced over at Marinette. "And speaking of finding an apartment- if we can talk about what price range we want to look at and what kind of layouts, I can start looking online to
see what there is. I know we weren't looking earlier because of everything that was going on and since the listings could vanish before we got back, but we should be good now."

"Two bedrooms, for sure," Marinette said immediately. "I'm going to have commissions for at least a bit, and even once I get hired on somewhere I'll want a sewing room at home. A balcony would be good, both for plants and screen printing and for superhero access."

Adrien nodded, writing those down at the bottom of his checklist. Both were things that they had discussed before, but it was good to go over them again to remember and to make sure that their priorities hadn't shifted since their last conversation.

"And I don't want to go any smaller on a kitchen than what we have now," Marinette added. "We tend to cook together a lot, so we need the elbow room, and this is pretty much the bare minimum of counter space that I'm willing to tolerate."

"Noted." Adrien gave the short list that he had scribbled down another look. "I'd say that storage would be another thing to look at, even if we'll have your sewing room. I like the closets we have here. Uh, location in Paris?"

"It's hard for me to have a preference when I don't have a job yet." Marinette worried her lip as she thought about it. "Nothing too far out on the outskirts. Wherever is convenient for your job, I guess."

"Right, of course." Adrien made a mental note to check again on where exactly his internship was, and what neighborhoods were nearby. He had only just gotten confirmation that he had gotten his first-choice placement a week prior, and he was super excited. Hopefully Marinette would end up with a job nearby.

"And- oh! Has to be pet-friendly if we're going to get cats," Marinette added. "Some might just require a larger deposit if we have pets, but some are straight nos."

"Okay. And how much are we willing to pay?" Adrien asked, trying not to grin at the idea of getting a cat. He had always wanted one, for as long as he could remember, and they were so close. "Keeping in mind that I'll have an internship and we don't know where you'll be yet or what kind of salary you'll get once you get a job. I do have pretty good savings from modeling, but..."

"We don't want to dip into that too much," Marinette finished when Adrien trailed off. "Or into my savings from commissions from the past few years. Uh..."

"Maybe I can look stuff up first and see what different places cost before we completely lock ourselves in price," Adrien suggested. "We should probably have an upper budget set, though, so we don't see and fall in love with something completely out if our price range."

Marinette nodded. "That's a really good plan. Uh..." she floundered for a bit. "Maybe we should use our apartment here for reference? I'd be willing to pay a bit above what we pay for this place. And we should probably expect two-bedroom apartments to cost more than this."

"Yeah, they will." Adrien absentmindedly twirled his pencil between his fingers as he considered his list. He wasn't sure how much more a two-bedroom place would cost, and he didn't want to make their cut-off too low. They didn't want to live in some cramped apartment with rusty pipes and poor lighting when they could afford better, after all. "I'll see what I can find just based off of this, and then we can go from there."

Marinette nodded. "That sounds good. And we can always ask around, too, to see how much our
friends spend on their places. The ones that have moved out from their parents' places, I mean."

"Right, of course." Adrien grinned as he remembered his conversation with Nino only a few weeks prior. "Oh, you'll get a kick out of this, I can't believe that I forgot to tell you about it. So I was talking to Nino at the reception, and he was totally trying to set us up. Like, he wasn't subtle at all."

Marinette was already giggling. "Oh? And what did you do?"

"Played dumb, of course. I acted like I didn't understand what he was getting at." Adrien grinned. "I mentioned something about enjoying having you as a, ah, neighbor, and Nino suggested that we share an apartment. I thought it would be a great idea to agree with him and talk about how great it would be great to come home and hang out with such a great friend."

"Oh, gosh. I bet his face was priceless." Marinette was properly laughing now, and Tikki had started giggling as well. "He was probably steaming! Imagine their faces if we told them that we were looking for a two bedroom apartment so that we could keep being neighbors."

Adrien's face lit up. Their friends would absolutely explode. "Oh, we gotta tell them that now. I'm gonna see if I can work it in somehow. Like, I can ask how much two-bedroom apartments cost, and of course Nino is gonna ask why I'm looking for two bedrooms instead of one."

"And then you tell him you and your really good friend want to split an apartment!" Tikki piped up. Adrien laughed and reached over to pat Tikki's head.

"That might be a little too heavy-handed. It would tip him off. But I would probably say something about how we decided to take their advice and continue being neighbors, only this time in the same apartment. And then we can be roommates," Adrien sing-songed. "And have sleepovers, and have pillow fights and do each other's hair and-"

Marinette groaned. "Adrien."

"Isn't that what people do at sleepovers?" Adrien asked innocently. "And obviously we wouldn't get up to anything inappropriate, because we're just roommates. I mean, we might get a little spicy with one of those truth-or-dare games."

Marinette's expression turned devious. "What kinds of spicy truths and dares can you come up with? I think we should play that game tonight. It sounds fascinating."

Adrien swallowed hard, thoroughly distracted by that expression. "I- I, uh-"

"I thought you were practicing Adrien's presentation tonight," Plagg said loudly before Adrien could start thinking up what kinds of things he might ask Marinette. "And not being gooey and gross."

"We can do both," Adrien said cheerfully. "Presentation first, and then truth or dare afterwards."

Plagg groaned. "I do not get enough cheese to deal with this."

Adrien's last presentation went by in a flash, no thanks to his run-through with Marinette the previous night. He had to do his best to focus on his words and not think about the very fun game
that he and Marinette had played after he had finished his presentation.

He finished up without turning too pink, and then sat down and listened to his classmates do their bits. They finished up just in time, and then Adrien's last class of undergrad was officially done.

"Well, I gotta be productive now," Adrien commented as he and Plagg headed back to their building. "I promised Marinette that I would at least glance at apartment openings. I can text Nino, too. He's off this afternoon, so I could even call."

Plagg snickered. "You just want to frustrate him by pretending that you and Marinette are still oblivious to your feelings when you're actually about to be engaged."

Adrien froze mid-step. "Oh! Right! Thanks for reminding me, Plagg. I need to go talk to Madam Rosalie today and see if she can help me with my plan."

Plagg let out a long-suffering sigh. "You need to check the weather forecast for Saturday, too."

"Oh, I should have done that on the bus." Still, Adrien stepped to the side of the sidewalk so that he wouldn't be in anyone's way while he checked his phone. It seemed clear, so he put the phone away and headed for Marinette's workplace. It was a familiar route at this point, and no one blinked an eye as Adrien trotted up the stairs. He steered away from Marinette's group's area for the time being, heading up to Madam Rosalie's office first.

Where he had a very productive meeting with her. She waved him on his way, grinning as he left her office. Adrien waved as he headed downstairs, so he could say hi to Marinette before going home. She was headed for a meeting when he stuck his head in, so he simply stole a kiss before heading back to the apartment.

After a late lunch and a few minutes of apartment hunting, Adrien called up Nino.

"Dude, aren't you coming home in a week and a half?" Nino asked, sounding a bit exasperated. "Why didn't you look before?"

"We were busy!" Adrien protested. "And I can always spend a bit of time living in my old room or something. But I know you said something about how apartments go pretty fast, and I kind of want to be able to look at places in person before committing this time."

"Okay, that's fair," Nino said grudgingly. "Right, so why were you calling me? For suggestions? I mean, the apartment building that Alya and I were in was decent enough. Cramped, sure, but that was with two people. I'm sure you would be fine."

"Actually, I was looking for a two-bedroom apartment," Adrien said cheerfully. He grinned at Plagg. "And wanting to know what I should expect those to cost."

There was a pause on the other end, and then Nino spoke up again. "Uh- two bedroom apartment? Why? Like, I can understand you wanting more space since you grew up to that big-ass bedroom, but it's not like you can combine the two rooms or anything. It won't work in the way you're thinking it will."

Adrien laughed. "Oh, no, no, that's not why we're looking for two bedrooms. Do you remember when we were talking at the wedding, and you said that I got lucky having Marinette as a neighbor? And that it would be a great idea for us to split a two-bedroom apartment so that we could keep hanging out? We talked and decided to look into doing that."

There was a longer pause, and then Nino groaned. "Dude. I was not serious. Are you kidding me?"
Adrien put on his best confused voice. "What do you mean? It's a really good idea! Splitting a two-bedroom place is gonna be less than getting two separate one-bedroom apartments, right? And we can share meals, so that stuff doesn't go bad just because we can't use it in time."

"I- I just-" There was a frustrated noise on the other end of the phone and then a sound on the other end let Adrien know that Alya had no doubt come home and Nino had put the phone on speakerphone. "You two drive me up the wall, you really do. Like, isn't there any other reason for you two wanting to live together other than cost and sharing meals? Like, dude, c'mon."

Adrien kicked the confusion up a couple notches. "Aren't those good reasons, though? It's responsible! And I like hanging out with Marinette! She's such a great friend!"

There was a high-pitched noise of what could only be utter frustration from Alya, and Adrien grinned. From his place on the table, Plagg sniggered.

"And we can hang out and play video games!" Adrien continued, just because he could. "And she's been trying to teach me how to do the fancy decorations on cakes, and how am I supposed to keep learning if we live across the city from each other?"

"How- you-" Nino seemed properly speechless now. "That's it? That is all of your reasoning? I seriously can't tell if you're messing with me, dude."

Adrien exchanged a gleeful look with his kwami. Plagg seemed to be enjoying the whole conversation as much as he was. "What do you mean? Why would I mess with you? I thought you said that it would be a good idea for Marinette and I to be roommates!"

"I- well, yeah, but-" Nino was spluttering. "I didn't mean- I thought-"

There was a hiss of "Don't give it away!" from Alya, followed by some hastily-muffled conversation. Finally Nino came back on the line.

"Right, so apartments," Nino said, and Adrien tried not to snicker. "Yeah, I can tell you what I know about pricing on the two bedroom ones. D'you know where in Paris you wanna be? Have you and Marinette talked about that?"

"Yeah, we want to be close to my internship for now," Adrien told him. "Since there still haven't been any good postings for designer positions in Paris, not for positions that Marinette would be qualified for and interested in. We mostly want to know what we should be expecting for cost, so that we don't just go in and fall in love with an apartment that's way out of our budget."

"I can think of someone you could fall in love with," Nino muttered, and then raised his voice again. "Okay. So, yeah. I can tell you what Alya and I's budget was when we went shopping around for a two-bedroom apartment. So, we didn't care too much about the size of the second room, but you two will want them pretty much the same size-"

They talked for a good half an hour, and then Adrien finally had to say good-bye to his friend so that Nino could go help Alya with getting dinner ready. He hung up with a grin, setting his cell phone aside with a grin.

Nino had made one more none-to-subtle attempt to push Adrien towards Marinette before the call ended and the frustration obvious even over the phone had been hilarious.

Oh, their reactions when he and Marinette got back to Paris and could finally could share their secret were going to be great.
"You know," Adrien told Plagg with a laugh, pushing himself to his feet. "Maybe it makes me a bad person, but honestly? Getting those reactions out of the two of them makes all of the secrecy entirely worth it."

Chapter End Notes

So hopefully updates will get more regular now that the holidays have passed and my computer has gone through the repair shop (again. For the third time in a year. Computer, behave.).

There are three more chapters plus three Outtakes left! Woo-hoo home stretch!
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

In which a number of things happen :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Adrien's second graduation from undergrad was very similar to his first, all things considered. There were the speeches that he only half-listened to, the unfortunate soul one row back who had gotten sick and was sniffling periodically, the too-bright lights and a feeling that he really, really should have tried to smuggle his water bottle in with him.

And, of course, his father wasn't present this time, either, but Adrien had expected that. Marinette had been meant to go into work for a bit later in the day to make sure some deadlines got met but had taken the morning off to come, and Ben had come along with her. They would no doubt provide more enthusiastic support than Nathalie had when she had attended Adrien's graduation from the business program his father had forced him into.

(Bystanders reported that she had sat motionless until he crossed the stage, and then she had clapped three times before proceeding to sit like a statue until the end of the ceremony. Adrien suspected that that was an exaggeration, but only just.)

Nino and Alya had also sent their congratulations, but hadn't been able to leave Paris. Nino's DJing job had asked him to take some weekend hours, and Alya was still drowning in her piles of research. Adrien was maybe a little disappointed, but ultimately it didn't really matter.

Graduation was just a couple hours of sitting in a crowded auditorium before spending a couple seconds crossing a stage to get a piece of paper. If his friends couldn't make it, then they couldn't make it. It wasn't a big deal.

"It's going to be really strange not getting to see you on a regular basis," Paul told Adrien as the graduating class headed outside afterwards. "But I guess there was never a chance of you settling in London permanently, was there?"

Adrien shook his head. "Not a chance. I have too many ties to Paris, and I miss speaking my own language all of the time."

"And Marinette is going back."

"That's true," Adrien acknowledged. "And all of my other friends live there. It's my home, and as much as I enjoyed London..."

Paul nodded. "Yeah, I'd feel the same way if I had gone somewhere else for school. At least there's the Eurostar. It wouldn't take that much time to visit, really."

Adrien nodded.

The next few minutes were a whirlwind as Adrien waved good-bye to some of his classmates that he had gotten to know over the years. They weren't close friends like Paul or Ben, but he had enjoyed talking to them before classes and occasionally studying with them as well. Adrien
doubted that he would see them again—some were moving to other cities around the UK, most heading back to their hometowns—and he had only exchanged phone numbers with a couple. But since they weren't close, Adrien suspected that he wouldn't even notice their absence.

"Hey, we finally found him!"

Adrien spun around to see Marinette and Ben headed towards him, grins on their faces. He waved back, feeling a bit like an overgrown bat next to Marinette's stylish and flattering shirt and skirt combo. She gave him a quick sideways hug before letting go and stepping back. Adrien grinned at her.

They had done it. He had finished his degree and graduated, and he had gotten a job back in Paris. His father's control over his life was lower than ever now, and would just drop even more now that he had an actual adult job and was making his own money, completely apart from his work as a model. Soon he and Marinette would be returning home and could be public with their relationship. It would be fabulous.

"Paul! Paul, over here!"

"Oops, that's my mom," Paul said, glancing towards the call and taking a step away from the group. "She'll be with the rest of my family, so I better go. Unless you want another run-in with my sister before you get out of London."

Adrien made a face at the thought. "I think I'll be all right without, thanks."

"I figured that you would say that," Paul said, taking a half-step backwards to head towards his family. "And I'll get to see you again before you leave London, right? Or do you take off right away?"

"I'll be here for a week yet," Adrien assured him, waving his friend off. His eyes flicked over the crowd as Paul's mom called for him again, and he spotted Paul's sister in the crowd, glancing around at the milling graduates. "We have to pack up our apartments, after all. I'll text you and we can figure out a time to hang out before I leave."

Paul nodded again, then turned to follow his family, intercepting and herding his sister away from Adrien and Marinette before she could spot them. It wasn't long before he vanished in the crowd of excited graduates and their families.

"I should probably go as well," Ben admitted. "I have a cousin graduating later today, all the way on the other side of London. But maybe we can get together for dinner or something before you leave."

Adrien nodded, reaching out to shake his friend's hand. "Yeah, of course! And we'll have to stay in touch. Maybe you can come visit Paris sometime."

Ben grinned. "Yeah, it would be good to go over now that there aren't supervillains running all over the place. It's a nice city, really. And you can come visit London again, though I'm sure you've seen everything there is to see at this point. So I'll see you two later, I guess?"

"Of course! See you later, Ben!"

And then they were two.

"Do you have more people you want to say goodbye to?" Marinette asked, glancing around.
"Because, ah..."

"You have to get back to work too, don't you?" Adrien asked, and she nodded. He gave it a second's thought and then shook his head. "No, I don't think so. I talked to pretty much everyone that I would want to talk to before the ceremony. We can go back and then I can get started on getting things cleaned."

"You can leave some stuff for me to deal with, you know," Marinette pointed out. "We could just clean in the evenings when I'm there, so you don't have to do all of it."

Adrien just shook his head, placing a single hand on the small of Marinette's back to guide her through the crowd ahead of him. "I'm just going to be floating around aimlessly during the day anyway, so I might as well clean and pack. I don't mind, really. And I can pick up some boxes from the post office for us to pack our blankets in to ship them home, too. You just worry about getting stuff wrapped up at work."

"Only if you're sure."

"I'm sure." Adrien had to resist the urge to duck down and press a kiss to Marinette's cheek. He contented himself by giving her side a gentle squeeze. "Give me five minutes to change out of my bat gown and then we can leave, okay?"

Adrien let out a triumphant little huff as he finally got the last of the dishes out of the top cupboard. They were large plates that he and Marinette only rarely used, and as such, there was a thin layer of dust both on them and on the shelf. He shoved the plates in the dishwasher, then hopped back up on the chair he had dragged into the kitchen to wipe out the shelf.

"I doubt the landlady is really going to look there," Plagg drawled, floating into the kitchen. "You're just being picky now."

"Maybe so, but I know if I were moving in next, I would want the place to be good as new." Adrien rolled up on his tip-toes to reach the very back of the shelf, then came back down as he worked towards the front. "And it's not that much extra work. I'm not doing the dishes by hand or anything. And what else would I do with my time?"

He shouldn't have asked, really. But Plagg perked up, leaping at the opportunity.

"You could go to the cheese market! Or- ooh, there's a farmer's market tomorrow nearby, I bet that there would be some cheese stalls there-"

"Forget I asked." Adrien moved down to the next shelf, emptying it into the dishwasher and wiping it clean. "And I have plans tomorrow, remember?"

Plagg gave him a puzzled look. Adrien sighed and leveled a Look at his kwami.

"The ring?"

"Oh! Right!"

Rolling his eyes, Adrien went back to work. When the dishwasher was properly full, he got it going
and then headed out of the kitchen and towards the hall closet to do a bit of cleaning there. He and Marinette both still had a couple light coats left in the closet- a rain jacket and zip-up hoodie each. After some deliberation, Adrien decided to get the hoodies packed and leave the rain jackets, just in case. From there he moved on to the row of shelves on the other side of the hallway, opening all of the doors along the section and seeing what they had left there.

It...wasn't too bad. There were a couple sweaters that hadn't made it into earlier trips back, but they were light enough that they wouldn't take up too much space. Marinette had several pairs of shoes still tucked away, and Adrien knew enough about both Marinette an fashion to know that there was no way that Marinette would consider leaving the shoes behind. The only other thing left was a couple sets of spare sheets- both he and Marinette had had two sets for their beds, so now they had four between them- and a few blankets that they had deemed too heavy to be on their bed now that it was summer.

Maybe they could narrow down their collection of sheets a bit and donate a set or two along with their towels instead of trying to bring them back. The blankets they would keep- after all, Marinette had either made them or added embroidery or other decoration, and so they couldn't just be replaced with a run to the store.

Adrien hummed to himself as he moved everything that needed to be packed to the couch, making sure that things were folded neatly. The sheets went in a separate pile, so Adrien could ask Marinette about them later.

At last, their apartment was starting to look more bare, like they were actually ready to move out instead of barely making a move towards it.

(Adrien didn't like it. It was starting to feel too impersonal, not like a home. It wasn't bad when Marinette was there and they were hanging out together, but when it was only him and Plagg? It felt like just another place, not personal at all.)

Their suitcases were filling up, and it felt good. Adrien scrubbed and cleaned, then went back to the kitchen to get the cleaned dishes out of the dishwasher.

He was guessing that the two of them might not want to have to bother with doing all of the fiddly cleaning later in the week, so it had to get done now.

By the time Marinette got home late in the afternoon, every last dish in the kitchen had been cleaned and the hallway closets were clear. Adrien had vacuumed the living room as well, getting up all of the discarded threads and fuzz from Marinette's commissions. Her sewing machine had been taken down and packed away the night before, even if it wasn't going to go back to Paris right away, so Adrien didn't need to worry about knocking into it at all.

"We can get this over to Abbey's apartment tonight, I think," Marinette said, knocking on the sewing table. "She's wanted to replace the one she has, so sooner rather than later. And then we can feel like we made even more progress."

"Empty closets are good closets," Adrien agreed. "And empty corners."

"And empty fridges are also good," Plagg said loudly, zipping around the corner. "And look, I can volunteer to help you empty it!"

Adrien grinned. "Great! There's some leftover broccoli in the fridge that I've been wonder what to do with. I'll go grab that for you really fast."
The affronted look on Plagg's face made the rest of them all laugh.

Marinette woke up on her last Sunday in London to breakfast in bed and a cuddly boyfriend. It was the perfect way to start a morning, in her opinion.

And they would be spending the entire day with each other, focused on being together instead of each being wrapped up in their own projects or studying. Adrien had persuaded her to set the packing aside for a day to go explore some flower gardens, since it was spring and things were really blooming.

It would be the most date-like thing they had ever done outside of their apartment, which meant they could easily get seen by Adrien's fans and thrown right back into the tabloids. But it was nearly time for them to go home anyway and any stories about them didn't really matter anymore, so Marinette agreed to go along with the trip. Besides, it made Adrien happy, and she so loved seeing his smile.

"They have some lovely ornamental shrubs," Adrien told Marinette as they took the bus to the gardens. "And sculptures, and fountains. But the flowers are the main attraction at this time of the year."

Marinette nodded. She had been to several gardens before, and they were always gorgeous. Part of her was always seriously curious about the amount of time it took to keep the grounds up and looking so pristine. Her own balcony plants were a weak substitute for a garden, and while they were pretty, seeing them bloom was nowhere near as gorgeous as seeing an entire garden covered in greens and yellows and pinks and all of the other colors of flowers in bloom.

"It's the perfect day for a trip," Marinette said, glancing out the window. There were only a few wispy clouds in the sky, and it was warm but not overly hot. "I'm glad you suggested it."

"And I'm glad that you agreed." Adrien reached over just enough to brush the tips of his fingers over the back of her hand. "It wouldn't be nearly as much fun to go on my own."

It wasn't a long bus ride, and then they were at the gardens. After a brief play-argument over who was paying, Adrien bought their passes and led her into the gardens.

And then they explored, and explored, and explored.

"I haven't been here since our prank," Marinette told Adrien as they admired a fountain. "You would think that I might have, since it's a great setting for a photoshoot, but nope. We've used different settings."

"You've said. Big Ben, the London Eye, the Globe Theater..."

"I think Madam Rosalie likes playing up the London-based thing," Marinette admitted. "But I do know that the group that does formalwear and wedding outfits comes here pretty often. I've just never really joined them since."

Adrien smiled and nodded, the tips of his fingers brushing over the back of her hand. Marinette smiled over at him, endlessly smitten.
How had she gotten so lucky as to get Adrien as her partner and boyfriend? They were made for each other in pretty much every way.

They wandered through a garden of tree sculptures, admiring the trimmed bushes and twisted branches. Tikki tugged on Marinette's sleeve and alerted the to the presence of a likeness of a woman hidden among the branches of one old tree.

"It's fun to find them," Tikki told them. "Traditionally, in- oh, I think are traditional in Japanese gardens, but I might be wrong- they just occur naturally, and gardeners delighted in finding them. I think some nowadays might have some help in forming when a gardener really wants them for aesthetic reasons, but it's hard to know. It could have just formed like that."

"Very cool." Adrien craned his neck to look at the figure again. It would be really, really hard to see from any other angles, simply blending into the tree, but at this angle there was no mistaking what it was.

"Do you mind if we sit for a little bit?" Marinette asked, glancing around. "It's just- everything is so gorgeous, and I want to sketch a few ideas I just had down before I forget them."

"Of course!" Adrien led the way to an empty bench. "Sketch away. I was just thinking that it would be nice to get off of my feet for a bit. We've been walking around a lot."

Marinette beamed, settling down immediately and pulling her tablet out. Adrien watched over her shoulder as two flowery summer dresses took shape, followed by a pair of flared pants. An enlarged section showed intricate beading around the neckline of one of the dresses, and the other had trailing embroidering.

"Oh, this is a lovely spot for inspiration," Marinette said happily, her pen flying. "And- oh, I just had this idea for fringed pants. They would be a little out there, but so much fun if I can get the proportions right."

Adrien grinned. "Oh, that does sound like fun. Especially to spin around in."

The next garden had a lot of flowers, color everywhere. There were flowers nestled in the junctures of branches and vines twining up the trees and over trellises. It was gorgeous now, but probably wouldn't be very popular in a few weeks, once the flowers dropped their pedals and the garden turned mostly green.

"It's amazing how they've arranged these so that all of the plants get enough sun for good flowers," Marinette said, glancing around the gardens. There were hardly any bare patches, or areas with plants that weren't flowering. It seemed that they had really come at just the right time. "And then- Adrien, look here! They have some plants with really decorative leaves, too. This is so pretty!"

They found a tucked-away bench in one of the back gardens to sit on while they ate the lunch they had brought. There were plenty of cookies- Marinette had had a little too much cookie dough squirreled away in the freezer and had ended up baking up most of it in one large batch.

Tikki had been thrilled. Adrien had been equally excited and had sampled a few too many cookies the previous night. It seemed to have only slightly deterred his appetite for them now, so it was good that Marinette had packed a lot of them.

"There's only a few more sections that we haven't visited," Marinette commented as she perused the pamphlet that she had picked up at the entrance. "There's a sculpture garden back a bit farther. That would be fun! And I kind of want to peek in on that garden where we had that photoshoot and
see what it looks like now, since the last time we were in there it was fall."

Adrien grinned and nodded. "Yeah! That would be fun." He packed up the remains of their lunch and gave her a hand to pull her to her feet. "Come on, my Lady. We still have garden to explore."

Adrien was having more than a little trouble staying focused as he and Marinette wandered through the gardens, exploring a few more sections as they worked their way towards what had been their photoshoot garden, where he had decided to propose. He shouldn't be this nervous, really - he and Marinette had talked about getting married, after all, and Tikki had helped him pick out a ring they were sure Marinette would like. The ring wasn't ridiculously fancy or anything, though, which was starting to worry him a little. It was a carved band with a pretty pattern, and the gems inlaid in the band were a bit on the small side and mostly served to add a little extra sparkle.

Still, it was gorgeous and Tikki was positive that Marinette would absolutely love it.

"I can't believe we haven't been here since the photoshoot," Marinette said as she bent down to sniff some flowers. "It's absolutely gorgeous! And this is probably the best time of the year for it, too."

Adrien grinned. It seemed that Tikki (and Madam Rosalie) hadn't led him wrong with the location for asking Marinette to marry him.

"Oh, the private gardens area is open!" Marinette exclaimed as they got further down the path. "Do you think we can go in? I'm curious about what it would look like in the spring."

"I'm sure it'll be fine if you do," Adrien said, knowing full well that those gardens were normally closed off to keep them looking nice for events. He had asked Madam Rosalie to ask the garden owner if she could leave the gate open for them so he could propose in the same place they had originally gotten "married".

Plagg, who had initially come up with the idea, thought it would be funny. Adrien thought it would be romantic.

Marinette nervously edged forward, glancing around as if she was worried that she was going to be yelled at. She vanished into the garden, and Adrien followed.

As soon as Marinette got into the garden, all of her attention was on the flowers there. It was a mishmash of absolutely gorgeous flowers on the ground and in the trees, bordered by decorative vines and plants with particularly pretty leaves. Adrien followed her, vaguely aware of Plagg zipping out of his pocket with the camera he had brought. He wanted engagement photos, but he wouldn't feel comfortable with having any other people there. Plagg and Tikki were going to be with them no matter what, so they might as well help.

Tikki, who had abandoned Marinette's jacket for Adrien's under the pretense that Adrien's pockets were larger, was staying in his pocket for moral support because Plagg sucked at moral support, unless he was in a certain helpful sort of mood.

"Ooh, this is gorgeous," Marinette breathed, reaching out to brush her fingers across some petals. "This was such a good idea to come out here, Adrien. And we picked the perfect day for it, too!"
Tikki pressed the ring box into Adrien's hand. Adrien's knees started to shake.

Marinette continued around the garden, oohing and ahhing at the flowers. Adrien's legs got more and more shaky as Marinette approached the lattice arch that they had gotten "married" under. He couldn't for the life of him think of what he could say to get Marinette's attention once they got to the exact place where he wanted to propose, he couldn't remember what he wanted to say, and he was possibly going to trip over his feet and fall on his face.

Tikki nudged harder. Adrien tried not to flinch.

Okay, maybe Plagg would have been better for moral support after all. Tikki just wanted him to hurry up and propose.

"Ooh, look at the arch!" Marinette gasped, abandoning the small purple flowers she had been admiring to inspect the vines trailing up the trellis. "That's really pretty! I wonder how much time they spend maintaining these gardens. It's absolutely impeccable."

"Well, they do have to keep them nice for events and such," Adrien managed. Marinette was right under the arch now, right where he wanted her. Tikki's pushing had become so insistent that Adrien was having a hard time keeping his hand in his pocket. Taking a deep breath, Adrien wobbled down onto one knee, pulled out the ring box and opened it. The ring sparked in the sunlight. "So it, uh, looks good in pictures."

"Yeah, I guess so-" Marinette started, turning around. She blinked at the empty air above Adrien, clearly taken aback for a moment when she didn't see him right away. Her gaze dropped down and her eyes flew wide open before her hands clapped over her mouth. "Oh."

Adrien's smile got a little more confident. That sounded like a good oh. A nudge on his side reminded him that he actually had to say something, not just hold up the ring. He cleared his throat and tried to find his words.

"Marinette," Adrien started and miraculously, his voice didn't squeak. "My Lady. My partner in everything. Love of my life. I can't ever imagine not having you in my life and by my side. So- will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Oh my god yes," Marinette breathed. A smile was spreading across her face, replacing the surprise. "Oh my god yes."

She said yes. She said yes!

"Great," Adrien managed, then shook himself. Great? What kind of response was that? "I love you, bugaboo," he added, slipping the ring onto her finger and straightening to press a light kiss to her lips.

Marinette returned the kiss, smiling the entire time. She grinned at him as they briefly parted. "I'm never going to get you to let go of that nickname, am I?"

"Nope," Adrien proclaimed grandly, pulling Marinette into a dip and kissing her again. They stayed there for several long seconds, enjoying the moment before Adrien pulled them both back up. He gave her another quick peck on the lips. "Love you."

Marinette giggled and kissed him back. "Love you too." She raised her hand, inspecting the ring. "This is gorgeous, Adrien. Wow."

Adrien did a small fist pump, making Marinette giggle again.
"I helped!" Tikki said, phasing straight out of Adrien's pocket with a cheer and zipping in circles around Marinette. "I told him you would love it! Congratulations, you two!"

Adrien grinned as he watched Marinette cuddle Tikki. She was absolutely glowing, and the ring looked absolutely perfect on her finger.

"We wanted to make sure it would be a good ring for you when sewing," Tikki was telling Marinette. "Is it?"

Adrien glanced over at Marinette—his fiancée, how exciting—suddenly anxious. He could remember the fancy stones on his own mother's rings, significantly larger than the ones on Marinette's ring. Of course, his mom hadn't been a designer—she was an actress and occasional model, and of course her ring had to come off when she was pulling the designer clothes on and off. To his relief, Marinette was beaming.

"It's perfect," Marinette assured them. She twisted her hand, making the ring sparkle. "If they were any bigger, they would probably snag. And these are perfect for this ring. It's really gorgeous, Adrien," she added, letting go of Tikki to pull Adrien close again. She tugged him down to pull him into a deep kiss, one that probably bordered on inappropriate considering that they were technically out in public. "I love you."

Adrien grinned down at her, unable to resist dipping down to steal another kiss from his fiancée. His fiancée. It felt so, so right to be able to say that. "I love you, too."

Chapter End Notes

The chapter that could easily be titled 'A Patchwork Of Important Events" lol

The next update will be an Outtakes chapter that was originally part of the main story and then didn't quite end up fitting very well... but I didn't want to get rid of it, because I really liked one of the scenes in it.
Their last week in London flew by in a flash, full of packing and cleaning and slightly teary good-byes. They had shared the news of their engagement with Marinette's team (and, of course, Madam Rosalie had already known) and with Paul and Ben, and they had even had a bit of an engagement party rolled into the good-bye party that Marinette's team had thrown at the end of the week. It had been great to share their news with people who had been absolutely thrilled for them, no questions asked.

Adrien and Marinette both hoped that they would get similar reactions once they were back home.

"Let's stop by your parents' place first," Adrien suggested as their train drew closer to Paris. The sky was getting darker, which meant that the bakery would be closing soon and they could talk to both Tom and Sabine at the same time. "They're more likely to be understanding."

"They won't understand why we didn't tell them," Marinette sighed. "And all I can tell them is that I thought they would be really likely to tell Alya."

"They would probably think that you would tell Alya right away," Adrien agreed. "So it's not like you're coming completely out of left field."

Marinette could only shrug.

No one was there to meet them at the train station, which they had planned. If they had told anyone exact details, the Gorilla might have come with Gabriel and they would have to explain why they returned to Paris on the same day. They would get completely interrogated by Alya and Nino if they called their friends, and Marinette had thought that her parents would probably still be in the middle of cleaning up the bakery when their train pulled in.

So they hopped on a bus instead.

"I'm so glad we brought some stuff back for the wedding," Adrien grunted as he lifted his suitcase onto the bus. It felt like he had stuffed it full of rocks. "And that we shipped the rest, except for the stuff that you left with Abbey and Sarah. I wouldn't want to be dealing with carrying more than what we have now."

"It's good that our apartments were furnished," Marinette added. "I wouldn't want to have to haul pots and pans and silverware and-"

Adrien groaned again as they paid their fare and headed for the seats. "Oh, that would suck."

"What's going to suck is telling your dad," Marinette said. "I'm not looking forward to that."

"Me either." Adrien let out a long sigh and slumped into the seat next to Marinette. Even with the heads-up that he had given Nathalie at the start of the week- she was currently the only person in Paris to know about their engagement- there was only so much preemptive damage control that she could be expected to do. "Nathalie said she did something that might help, but she couldn't elaborate. She just said to give her a heads-up before we go to the mansion so that she could prepare."
"Mysterious." Marinette let herself lean against Adrien's side, lightly enough that it wouldn't be immediately obvious to the other people on the bus. Not that it mattered anymore, not really. By the time anything went to print, they already would have broken the news to their families. "Are you staying in your old room until we can find an apartment, or do you think you'll be staying in my old room?"

"I'd like to stay in your room, if your parents are okay with that." They had briefly discussed it once or twice while they were in London, but they had been so focused on trying to find jobs in Paris and looking at possible apartments that they hadn't really fully finalized their immediate plans. "They might not be. I'd understand if they don't want to deal with having another adult in the house, even if we don't plan on being there for long."

"They adore you, you know that."

Adrien gave her a small smile. "Adoring having me as a guest and adoring having me stay there in your room for an indeterminate amount of time are two different things, especially considering that we're dropping a surprise engagement on them." He slid his hand into Marinette's, turning it so he could see the ring glittering on her finger. He had heard stories online where the glitter and sheen of an engagement ring wore off and people regretted buying the ring they did over another one, but that hadn't happened yet at all. Marinette clearly adored her ring, and they had already seen that the finest silks could be brushed past the ring and not snag at all. It wasn't too plain, and yet would be able to fit well with any outfit Marinette chose to wear.

And it was a sign that she had agreed to marry him. The possessive cat in Adrien purred.

The bus rumbled forward, and soon enough the familiar storefronts of their neighborhood came into sight. Adrien felt the smile on his face grow- they were home- and he could see Marinette grinning, too.

"Well, we're back for good," Adrien said cheerfully, standing and tugging on the bell to get the driver to pull over at their stop. "Are you ready, my Lady?"

"With you at my side? Always."

Tom and Sabine had just finished putting things away in the back kitchen and were coming out to wipe down the front counters when movement on the sidewalk caught their eye. They paused, then scrambled to hide behind the display case closest to the counter.

Because out on the sidewalk, looking very cozy with each other, were Marinette and Adrien.

"I knew they were going to get together soon," Sabine said happily as they watched their daughter relax into Adrien's arms. She rested her head against Adrien's chest and Adrien dropped a kiss on the top of her head. Marinette glanced up at him at that, and they shared a tender smile.

"Ooh, that back rub goes to me," Sabine said gleefully, elbowing her husband. "I told you something was going to happen between the wedding and when they got back, and I was right."

"They still might be in denial," Tom said, sounding hopeful. "We don't know that something happened."
Sabine huffed. "You're just being a sore loser. Just look at them staring into each other's eyes like that, they're- oh! Look, look!" The pair on the sidewalk had started leaning in towards each other. Sabine whipped out her phone as they drew closer, poised to kiss. "Oh, they're so cute. Just think of the green-eyed grandbabies!"

"I think it's a little soon to be talking about that," Tom said, even as he held up his own phone to capture a photo of the two kissing. Despite his earlier protest, he looked eager as he watched Adrien and Marinette draw closer, closer-

Only to give each other a chaste little kiss on the lips.

"Oh come on," Tom and Sabine both groaned, disappointed when Adrien and Marinette stepped apart with no further kissing.

"That wasn't even picture-worthy," Tom grumbled as the duo on the sidewalk linked arms and headed for the side door. "Lame. If I was going to lose the bet anyway, they could have at least broken the news in a more dramatic way."

Sabine elbowed him as they straightened up out of their hiding places and headed for the side door to meet Adrien and Marinette. "Don't say that to their faces. Besides, they might not be fans of PDA. Making out on a public sidewalk could get them in trouble."

"Ugh."

The doorbell rang, and they rushed to answer it.

"Act normal," Tom hissed, hand on the doorknob. "Don't make them suspect that we saw anything."

"I should be saying that to you," Sabine hissed back. "Just act normal. Don't greet them by offering to bake them a wedding cake or anything like that."

"I wouldn't do that!"

"You're home!" Sabine exclaimed, opening the door and beaming at the two of them rather arguing the point with her husband, because he knew perfectly well that she was right. Tom just didn't want to admit it. "Come in, come in. Do you guys want something to eat?"

"That would be great, Mama," Marinette chirped, pressing a kiss to her mother's cheek. "Is there anything we can do to help you guys clean up first?"

"The cleaning can wait." Sabine ushered them in, noticing with interest that Adrien had his luggage still with him. Apparently they hadn't stopped at the Agreste Mansion yet, even though it was closer to the train station, or maybe Adrien was intending to stay in Marinette's room now that they were back in Paris.

If it was the second option, that would mean that Adrien and Marinette were serious in their dating, even though they presumably had only recently gotten together. Even though she had wanted Adrien as a son-in-law for years, she might have to have a talk with Marinette about the wisdom of them having their own separate spaces until they had been together for a bit longer.

"We have a whole variety of things you can choose from," Tom announced as he helped Adrien and Marinette get the last of their things in. "Croissants, tarts, macrons, cookies, muffins, wedd- er, cakes-"
Sabine sighed and leveled a look at him. Clearly she shouldn't have mentioned wedding cakes earlier, because now he had the idea in his head and it was more likely to slip out.

"I'll have a croissant or two," Adrien said, grinning and hugging Sabine and Tom. "It's great to see you guys again."

"We're glad to see you kiss- er, kids- as well," Tom said cheerfully, cringing slightly at his slip-up and hoping no one noticed. He quickly grabbed a plate and two croissants plus a cookie before heading back over to where the group was standing. Sabine had her face buried in her hands while both Adrien and Mariette looked somewhat amused.

...apparently they hadn't missed his mistake after all. Bugger.

"So did your last few weeks in London go well?" Sabine asked as Adrien practically inhaled the first croissant and Tom fetched a muffin for Marinette to eat. "Busy?"

Adrien and Marinette exchanged a look that was a little too full of grins. "Yeah," Adrien finally said after a pause. "Pretty busy. We had to figure out how to get everything home, and then there was the graduation ceremony, and Marinette had projects to finish up for Madam Rosalie plus the commissions she got independently. It was a lot to do."

"And cleaning up the apartment took forever," Marinette added. "After being there for so long, we just had stuff all over, and then we had to clean while we were still living there... it was an actual pain."

"Yes, it is easier when you have a bit of a time overlap between a new place and an old one," Sabine agreed. "Tom's mother always complained about that whenever she moved to a completely different area."

"Which she does often," Tom grumbled. "You would think that she would settle down now, but no."

Sabine tried not to grin. She was pretty certain that Tom's mother simply picked the smallest, cheapest apartment in whatever area she chose to live in just so she would have somewhere to store her things while she jetted off (or motorcycled off) to wherever she wanted to explore next.

Tom was still anxiously jiggling as he watched Adrien and Marinette eat their snacks. Sabine stepped back to watch the two of them, and noticed their entwined hands, hidden by their bodies. Aha. So that was why Adrien was eating with his left hand instead of the right. She had wondered.

Standing with her hand wrapped in Adrien's, Marinette was getting more and more nervous. Her parents had clearly noticed their little show on the sidewalk, and it was clearly only a matter of time before they brought it up.

And now her mother had clearly caught sight of their hands, and she was nudging her dad and pointing. Marinette purposefully took another bite of her muffin, taking her time to enjoy it just to see how long her parents lasted before they cracked and started interrogating her and Adrien.

It didn't take long.

"So for how long have you been dating, then?" Tom asked as soon as Marinette had polished the last crumbs of her snack. "Curious minds want to know. A couple days, a few weeks, a month...?"

"Over a year," Marinette admitted sheepishly, grinning at her parents' startled expressions. "Nearly
two, at this point."

All of them jumped when Tom let out a triumphant shout, apparently having recovered quickly from his surprise. "HAH! So this isn't a recent development, then. It happened way before Alya and Nino's wedding."

Marinette and Adrien exchanged a puzzled look. That...was not the reaction they had been expecting. "...yes?"

"So I won the bet, then!" Tom turned to his wife with a wide grin. "The back rub is mine!"

Sabine spluttered, clearly taken aback. "But- but- no, but they're dating."

"But it didn't just happen, so it doesn't count. You specifically said that you would win if something happened between the wedding and now. It happened well before, so technically-"

"I hate technicalities," Sabine grumbled.

"Hang on," Marinette said as she slowly caught on. "You're saying you bet on us?"

Her parents didn't look even remotely abashed. "Of course," Tom said cheerfully, beaming at them. "You two were so close at Alya and Nino's wedding, but since you hadn't said anything we assumed that the two of you hadn't figured out your feelings for each other yet. It was just for fun, dear," Tom added when he saw the look on Marinette's face. "And if you still hadn't sorted yourselves out by the time you got back, your mother and I were going to do some hardcore matchmaking."

Suddenly Marinette was feeling much, much less guilty about having hidden their relationship from her parents. Still, she groaned and buried her flaming face in her hands. Adrien, who wasn't doing a whole lot better, patted her shoulder comfortably and tugged her snugly into his side. Even though they were dating- engaged, his mind reminded him helpfully- it was still strange to have his girlfriend's- er, fiancée's- parents talking about their plans to set the two of them up.

Tom and Sabine would probably get along fantastically with Madam Rosalie, maybe a little too well. Adrien briefly wondered if he and Marinette should maybe rethink their plan to invite Madam Rosalie to their wedding before deciding that no, it wasn't as though she would possibly be able to scheme with Marinette's parents that much. He and Marinette were already together, after all. In theory, they shouldn't be embarrassed by others mentioning how cute they were together. In reality...

Well, it was just a bit embarrassing. But he was sure that they would get used to it eventually.

"And you didn't tell anyone?" Sabine asked, clearly attempting to distract them from the bet that she and Tom had had going on. "Why not?"

"We just wanted to be super-careful about keeping it secret so that Mr. Agreste wouldn't stop helping Adrien with tuition and rent," Marinette explained, trying for a sheepish grin. "Since he tried to ban Adrien from dating and all. And we weren't sure if you guys and Alya and Nino would be able to resist telling someone else, and what if you told someone that didn't understand why we had to keep it a secret and it got out? We just decided it was safer to not tell anyone."

"Well, I can't say I fully understand," Tom said, patting the two of them on the shoulder. "But if you're happy, that's what matters- hold on, is that a ring?!"
Saying that Marinette's parents were shocked was the understatement of the century. They were thrilled, of course, and had practically started planning the croquembouche tower for the wedding already, Marinette could see it in their eyes, but they hadn't been expecting Adrien and Marinette to actually be engaged, even after hearing that the two of them had been dating for two years.

"And this is for real this time?" Tom checked with Adrien as Sabine exclaimed over Marinette's ring. At Adrien's nod, he grinned. "Good boy. Do you have a wedding date set yet?"

"We only just got engaged last weekend," Adrien said with a laugh as he glanced over at Marinette. He couldn't stop the smile that slid across his face as he watched his fiancée. "I need to get settled in at my new job, we don't know where we're going to be living yet- well, we have a few, and Marinette is still looking for a position that would suit her that would be in the city. We figured we should probably get that figured out first before getting into wedding planning." He grimaced. "...and we figured that we should also probably focus on actually surviving telling Alya and my father about the engagement. No point in getting ahead of ourselves."

Tom laughed. "Ah, I'm sure Alya will forgive the two of you eventually. She'll probably be too happy about it to cause too much damage." He didn't say anything about surviving Mr. Agreste, Adrien noticed. That was probably smart. Even he wasn't sure what to expect from his father. "So, are you kids going to tell us about the proposal? And details? When did you ask?"

"We have pictures," Adrien told Tom, pulling out his phone. He had uploaded the pictures that Plagg had taken onto his computer, then emailed them to himself so he could have them on his phone. He noticed that Sabine and Marinette had stopped their conversation and had returned their attention to him. He held up his phone with the best of the proposal photos, and both Tom and Sabine clustered in close to see it. "I proposed last weekend, in the same garden where we got fake-married." He grinned, and both Tom and Sabine awwed. "Right under the trellis, too. Madam Rosalie pulled some strings so that we could get into that part of the garden, since it's a private part and normally it's locked up so it doesn't get messed up."

"It was so gorgeous, Mom," Marinette gushed, grinning widely. "There were all these flowers, and it was lovely outside, and there was no one else in that part of the garden, so we had it all to ourselves."

"It does look gorgeous," Tom agreed as he and Sabine flipped through the photos on Adrien's phone. "Good job with the proposal, son. I mean, it might have been nice to know about it ahead of time, but eh. Not a big deal in the long run. And it's pretty funny, I have to admit." He clapped Adrien on the shoulder. "Welcome to the family, son. Want another cookie? Some cake? We can bake your wedding tower, right?"

"We wouldn't dream of getting it from anyone else," Adrien assured him. Tom grinned widely.

"Great! So do you have preferences on flavor, or style of sugar work, or fillings-"

"Tom!" Sabine interrupted, laughing. "They have plenty of time to decide on stuff like that later. Don't harass the poor boy." She handed Adrien's phone back to him. "Those were very sweet pictures, Adrien. Fantastic job on the proposal."

"Not pictured is how incredibly nervous I was," Adrien joked, accepting his phone back. "I thought I was going to forget French completely or something."
Tom laughed. "Oh, that's common," he told Adrien. "Even if you're 95% certain that you know what the lady is going to say. I was a ball of nerves before I asked Sabine. I kept thinking of all of the worst-case scenarios and absolutely *everything* that could possibly go wrong- and a couple things that couldn't go wrong, but I was still worried anyway."

"So did you have one of your London friends take the pictures?" Sabine asked. "You must have, or word would have gotten out about your engagement before you even got home."

Marinette nodded, looking happy as her parents hugged her again. "Yeah! We hadn't wanted anyone to know, so that it wouldn't accidentally get out, but it was hard to avoid keeping it a complete secret. Abbey moved into my old apartment last summer so she could forward all of my mail to Adrien's apartment, so she found out. And I found out at the same time that everyone on my team already suspected that we were dating, so we *did* end up confirming it with them."

"And yet you didn't trust your parents," Tom sniffed, then grinned when Marinette gave him an utterly exasperated look. "I'm joking, cupcake. I'm sure it felt easier to control who knew when they were people you saw every day. And I can't deny that your mother and I might have gotten a *bit* excited if we had known, though we would have tried our best to be careful."

"But enough about that." Sabine beamed at them, happy tears in her eyes. "You have to get settled! Will you be staying here while you look for apartments? We'd be happy to have you for as long as you need."

Marinette threw herself at her mom to hug her tightly. "I was hoping you would say that! That would be *great.*"

"I'll help with the bags," Tom volunteered, leading the way towards the stairs. "It's times like now when I wish that we didn't have *quite* so many floors, but oh well. We're in shape, right, Adrien?"

"If you say so."

Tom laughed.

Once the last of the suitcases and bags were settled in Marinette's room, Tom and Sabine had to head back down to the bakery to finish tidying up for the night.

"And we have to go duck out for a bit, too," Marinette reminded Adrien, who looked like he would much rather curl up on her lounge chair and relax for a bit. "To let your father know that you're home, and pass on the news."

Adrien groaned loudly but followed Marinette back down the stairs.

"Time to face the beast," Adrien jokingly called into the bakery as they headed out the door, only half-kidding. "...you'll call the police if we vanish, right?"

Tom chuckled. "Oh, now you're being dramatic," he said. "Your father has to understand that you're an adult now and don't need his permission to do things."

"Yeah, I know. But try telling *him* that."
Chapter Three

Nathalie greeted them at the door when they arrived at the Agreste Mansion, taking note of their lack of luggage with a single raised eyebrow before leading them into the foyer.

"Your father will be expecting you," she informed Adrien. "It might work better if you go in by yourself first, and then introduce Miss Dupain-Cheng afterwards." She managed a small smile at the two of them. "Congratulations on your engagement, by the way. As unorthodox as it might have been."

The Gorilla, who had just entered from the dining room, blinked and looked a bit startled. His gaze jumped between Nathalie, Adrien, and Marinette, finally settling on the ring on Marinette's finger. His eyebrows shot up, but as usual, he didn't comment.

Feeling nervous, Adrien knocked on his father's office door and stepped inside. His father glanced up from where he seemed to be arranging photos of models into their runway order. He set the photo in his hand down, then half-rose. "Adrien."

"Father," Adrien responded, feeling awkward. His father's distant greeting stood in such stark contrast to the Dupain-Cheng's welcoming hugs. "It's good to see you."

"I'm glad you're home," Gabriel responded, sitting back down in his chair again. "I've had your room freshened up for your arrival, and Nathalie will get a schedule to you for modeling. Do let her know if you need something changed for a job interview or something. And, there was one other thing that I needed to talk to you about."

"Oh?" Adrien managed, stomach churning. Clearly his father was expecting things to go back to practically the same as they had been before he left for London. Having to break the news he had would be hard.

...and clearly his father had either forgotten or not been listening when Adrien told him that he had already gotten a decent entry-level intern position in a lab with a research group. Perhaps he should just remind Nathalie, as she was more likely to actually remember.

Gabriel nodded. "Yes. After some deliberation, I have decided that it would be beneficial for you to get a girlfriend. Nathalie has alerted me to the fact that you're old enough that some might see it as strange that you haven't been on any dates before. Nathalie will provide you with a list of eligible women, I believe. Or perhaps she was waiting to consult with you first, so she can take your taste in women into account."

...Adrien wasn't sure what Nathalie had done (and he wasn't sure that he would ever find out, either), but clearly he needed to thank her.

"Ah, funny you mention that, actually," Adrien started, hoping that his grin wasn't too awkward. He glanced towards the door, where he could see Nathalie peering through the slightly open door. She nodded encouragingly, and Adrien steeled himself and continued. "There's, ah, someone I want to introduce you to."

Gabriel glanced back up (because of course his attention had gone back to his work as soon as he was done issuing instructions to his son). "Huh?"

The door swung a little further open and Marinette darted through to join Adrien. Her hand curled around his tightly. She was clearly as nervous about this as he was, though she was doing a good job of keeping a fairly neutral expression on her face. Gabriel's gaze darted to her and then back to Adrien, clearly puzzled.
"Father, I wanted you to meet my fiancée, Marinette."

Gabriel dropped back into his chair and stared at the two of them, wide-eyed. "Your- I- I'm sorry, what?"

...well, he wasn't yelling, at least. Yet.

"This is my fiancée, Marinette Dupain-Cheng," Adrien repeated, letting go of Marinette's hand so he could wrap his arm around her waist. "You've met her a few times before, remember?"

"Your fiancée," Gabriel repeated, still clearly shocked. "I- what- your-" He shook himself and focused his still-shocked gaze on Adrien. "For real this time?"

"For real," Adrien confirmed. "I get the feeling that we're going to get that question a lot," he added to Marinette. He grinned, though it was a little strained. "I can't imagine why."

Marinette groaned and elbowed him.

"That is...a surprise," Gabriel choked out. "I, ah... are you sure?"

"Yep," Adrien confirmed, though he wasn't sure if his father was asking him if he was sure about the relationship or sure about the engagement not being a prank. Either worked. "I asked last week. We were waiting until we got home to say anything to anyone."

Gabriel gave himself a little shake and then his expression settled back to impassive coldness, just like before. That was an impressive recovery, actually, but Adrien far preferred the Dupain-Cheng's open-armed welcomes and congratulations. "I don't recall ever lifting my ban on dating while you were in London-"

"I am an adult, Father," Adrien reminded him, trying not to grit his teeth. He was so, so glad now that the Dupain-Chengs had been willing to host both him and Marinette, because at least they treated him like an adult rather than a child to order around and that meant that he would actually be happy to go home, instead of dreading it like he would if he had gone back to living with his father. "I don't need your permission to have a relationship. I am perfectly capable of making my own decisions. I kept our relationship out of the tabloids and that was all that you cared about, right?"

Gabriel's jaw worked wordlessly for a moment as he tried to find his words. Clearly he hadn't been expecting Adrien to push back. "I- I mean, I suppose that- yes, perhaps- but-"

"And we kept it a complete secret while we were in London," Adrien continued, figuring that it wasn't too much of a stretch. Very few people had learned about their relationship. "So anything they printed was entirely conjecture and based on the behavior of two friends."

"Somehow I doubt that," Gabriel muttered. He cleared his throat and steepled his fingers, directing a glare at Marinette. "So will you be moving to London permanently, then?"

Adrien blinked, taken aback. "I- what? No, we're going to be living in Paris. Why would we be moving to London?"

"Miss Dupain-Cheng has a job in London, does she not? A job that she's been working at for three years now?"

Marinette frowned, clearly feeling as confused as Adrien felt. "No, that was just a temporary internship. I just got it extended for two years longer than it was meant to be originally, since
Adrien was going to still be in London."

"Well, why didn't you ever say so?" Mr. Agreste half-exploded at Adrien. "Then it would have been fine for you to date, no need for secrecy at all."

Adrien blinked, taken aback. He could feel Plagg's I-told-you-so quiver in his pocket, but... "I told you that she was just interning at Madam Rosalie's ages ago, though!"

"Yes. Well. I forgot," Gabriel returned stiffly, as though it wasn't entirely his fault that Adrien had had to keep his relationship under wraps for two years, just because he never listened to anything that Adrien ever said. "I cannot be expected to remember what all of your friends are or are not up to."

*Clearly, since you can't even remember what your son is up to,* Adrien wanted to say, but it was probably best not to aggravate his father further.

"At any rate, it was nice to meet you again, Miss Dupain-Cheng," Gabriel continued, casting a rather disdainful look in her direction. "Congratulations on your engagement. Adrien, I want you to give a full update of your job search to Nathalie at breakfast tomorrow morning, so she can get a better idea of what your schedule will be like-"

Adrien had had enough. "I already have a job lined up, which I already told you about a month ago when I got it. I'll be starting in two days. And I'm not going to be staying here. I'll be staying with Marinette in her room. Her parents have already invited us to stay for as long as we need to find our own apartment."

"That's not appropriate," his father stated immediately. "I must insist-"

"We are engaged," Adrien cut across again. "And also not teenagers or children. And we've been sharing an apartment for over a year. It is perfectly appropriate for us to share Marinette's old room. And speaking of which, I believe it's time for us to head back, since Marinette's parents will be expecting us for dinner. Good night."

With that, Adrien turned and marched out, ushering Marinette ahead of him.

---

"That didn't go nearly as badly as it could have," Marinette said later. "I mean, he did accept our relationship. Eventually."

"I liked telling your parents better."

---

Even with their parents clued in to their relationship, there were still two more people who deserved to get the news in person. Adrien texted Nino asking if he could come over and talk to him before Alya got home from the newspaper, and Nino agreed.

"So you said you had news?" Nino asked in lieu of greeting as soon as he opened the door for
Adrien. "What is it? Don't tell me you're going to move to London permanently. I'd die of loneliness without my best bro."

"You seem to have made it this far without seeing my gorgeous face every day," Adrien joked as he gave Nino a hug. "But no, I'm not moving to London."

"Models and their egos," Nino sighed as he led Adrien inside. "Okay, so you aren't moving to London. Where are you moving to, then?"

Adrien had to snort at that. "Why do you keep assuming that I'm moving?"

"Because you sounded so serious when you told me that you had news you had to tell me in person and that's exactly what you said before you told me that you were going to be taking off to London for three years," Nino retorted. Then he paused. "...so wait. You aren't moving?"

"I'm moving back to Paris, but everyone already knew that." Adrien looked a little nervous. "This is something else."

"You're making me nervous, dude," Nino said warily, eying him. "Are you sick or something?"

Adrien looked somewhat puzzled. "Uh...no? Do I look sick? Why do you keep assuming the worst?"

"Because you're being strangely mysterious and serious about something!"

Adrien laughed. "It's not bad news, I promise. It's just..." He shook himself and let out a breath. It did not make sense to be this nervous. This was Nino. "Okay. Marinette and I are engaged."

Nino stared at him like a statue for a full thirty seconds, then turned and banged his head hard once against the wall, nearly making Adrien drop his phone in surprise. Then he turned back to Adrien and, in a scarily calm voice said, "I'm sorry. I think I must have misheard you. What was that again?"

Adrien stared at him, startled. "What did you do for?"

"Because I must have misheard you, because I thought you said that you and Marinette are engaged."

"We are!"

"Dude. Okay, I knew you were a bit socially incompetent, but this goes beyond a little misinformed," Nino groaned after several more seconds of staring yielded nothing besides a sincere-yet-slightly-puzzled-looking Adrien. Nino rubbed his forehead, looking exasperated. "I can't believe I have to tell you this, bro, but most people date before they up and get married."

"I'm engaged, not married," Adrien pointed out helpfully.

"Yeah, well, most people date before they get engaged, too!"

"Uh..."

"But do you do either? No, of course not!" Nino was pacing now, hands running through his hair. "You would think that Marinette would be a little more reasonable, but she said yes? When you hadn't even been dating? How? I can't even. You guys are ridiculous."

"Actually, we were dating," Adrien said helpfully before Nino could start banging his head against
the wall again. As fun as it was to watch his friend work himself up into an exasperated frenzy, he didn't exactly want to have to be the one to explain to Alya why there was a Nino-head-shaped dent in their living room wall, or how Nino had gotten a concussion. "We just figured that it would be a good idea to tell as few people as possible since we didn't want the reporters or my father hearing about it and making a fuss."

Nino fixed him with a _look_. "And you didn't trust Alya or I not to say anything?"

Adrien had to good grace to look sheepish. He had to admit that now, in retrospect, he and Marinette probably _could_ have found _some_ way to tell their friends and just make it very, very clear that the news _was not_ to be shared. There probably had been no need to keep their dating as closely guarded of a secret as their secret identities but, well, old habits were hard to break. Besides, _it was_ pretty funny. "We were worried that someone might overhear you talking about it in public, or that Alya wouldn't be able to resist telling Rose or Mylène and then they would tell someone else."

"Fair enough, I suppose." Nino still looked fairly exasperated. "Still, we could have been careful, and you _could_ have told us, like, a couple months before you came back. We could've kept a secret that long, at the very least."

Adrien raised a single eyebrow.

"...or maybe not," Nino admitted after a moment of consideration. "Alya probably would have been very loud about you two finally getting together. She _will_ be very loud as soon as she finds out."

"Yeah, Marinette's insisted that I come with her when she talks to Alya to act as a bit of a shield," Adrien admitted. "So, uh, can we stop by later to break the news? Just act surprised."

Nino snorted. "Oh, I knew there was an ulterior motive for you coming and telling me first. If my wife wants to attack you and your _fiancée_, I'm not gonna stop her, just a heads-up."


"Yeah, yeah. Congratulations and all that, I guess, but _dude_. Seriously. You. Are. _Ridiculous._"

---

Alya, as expected, was thrilled to see them again. And Alya, as expected, picked up on their squirmy behavior within minutes.

"So, you two look incredibly serious over there," Alya said suspiciously as she backed up a couple steps, eyeing them up and down. "Why, I can't for the life of me guess. Care to enlighten- _is that a ring on your finger?_"

"We're engaged," Adrien confirmed with a grin.

And Alya _screamed._

Nino, Adrien, and Marinette all flinched away, clapping their hands over their ears. Alya could be _incredibly_ loud when she wanted to be. Alya screamed for a full thirty seconds before she ran out of breath. She took a deep breath, and all of them cringed, preparing for another round of deafening screaming.
Instead, Alya visibly composed herself and then turned a suspicious look on Adrien and Marinette.

"Okay. Right. Ha ha very funny, you two. Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me. I'm not falling for that again." Alya crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes further. "Whose ring did you borrow this time?"

"It's mine," Marinette said indignantly. "Why is it that no one believes us?"

"Your parents did," Adrien pointed out helpfully. "But then again, we told them about the dating thing first."

"That's true."

"That would have been a better lead-in," Nino pointed out helpfully. "And then we could be ticked at you for not telling us that first, and then you could freak everyone out again with the sudden engagement."

Alya spun on him. "You knew?"

"No no, definitely not!" Nino said hastily, putting his hands up in defense. "Your screaming just blew all of my freak-out out of my head and I was just, y'know, suggesting what they should have done given that they just said there had been a dating thing."

Alya lit up again. "They did. She turned on Adrien and Marinette. "Explain. Now."

"We couldn't risk letting it get out to the press at all," Adrien said quickly, before the threat in Alya's eyes could manifest any further. "Not until I had finished university and Marinette had finished her job. And if you had said anything about it in public and someone overheard, or if any of our other friends heard and didn't realize that we didn't want people knowing, the press could have sunk their claws in quickly."

Alya did not look happy. "I could have kept a secret."

Nino snorted. "Babe-"

She whirled on him. "What?"

Nino held his hands up in defense. "Admit it, you would have at least told Mylène and Ivan, and probably Rose and Juleka as well, and maybe even Alix, just so you could gloat about being right-"

"I would not have!" A pause. "Okay, maybe I would have."

Adrien stifled a snort.

"But you still could have told us sooner!" Alya insisted, wheeling back to face them again. "You could have told us that you were dating at the wedding, and then broke the engagement news later!"

"You would have started squealing in joy and then everyone who was there would've wanted to know why," Marinette said dryly. "And then everyone there would have found out, and then Adrien and I would have been hounded for our last couple months. The press in London was already breathing down Adrien's neck and jumping on us for looking close, they would have had a field day if they heard that we were actually dating."
Nino snorted. "Oh, like they aren't going to have a field day with your surprise engagement? I wish I was in contact with some of your friends back there, just so I could ask them to pick up a copy of all of the magazines and read *every. single. last. article.* to you guys."

"You wouldn't make it, The articles would melt your brain with their stupidity before you even got halfway through." Adrien grinned. "But you're in luck, in case you *did* want to melt your brain. Sarah swore that she was going to hunt down every article and news report that they do on us and give it to us as our wedding present."

Nino cheered.

Alya still hadn't forgiven them, clearly. She was still giving them a bit of an evil eye, though it seemed a bit teasing. "*Ugh. Models and their flairs for the dramatic, honestly.*"

Adrien spluttered indignantly. "I- *what?* Why am I being singled out for this?"

"Because you're the only model we really know and therefore we feel more comfortable with generalizing the whole lot of you?" Nino suggested helpfully. Alya shook her head, eyes narrowed at Marinette.

"No, no, we can't let Marinette off of the hook," she told Nino. "They're both crazy dramatic people. Perfect for each other, really."

"I think there was approval somewhere in there," Adrien told Marinette. "Somewhere, buried deep."

Alya finally laughed at that. "No, I'm really happy for you guys," she admitted. "*Crazy* happy. It's about time, really. I was just *really* surprised. And that's pretty funny, really, when you think about it. How did your dad take it?"

"Better than expected, still not as well as he *could* have," Adrien said cheerfully, exchanging a smile with Marinette. "I don't know if he's any closer to properly accepting it today, though, because I didn't go back over. But never mind that. Do you want to help us write a Facebook post announcing our engagement?"

Alya lit up. "Are you *kidding?* I'd love to!" She grinned widely at them, grabbing her laptop from the dining room table and shoving it at Adrien. "Go ahead and log in. Oh, I *cannot* wait to see people's reactions to this."

Chapter End Notes

WOOOOOO back in Paris!!!! And no one killed them for keeping things secret! :D

There'll be two outtakes after this, then the final chapter, which will be an epilogue. I hope you've enjoyed reading the story as much as I enjoyed writing it!
Adrien grinned as he glanced around the garden, all set up with chairs and flowers and other decorations. It had taken a little bit of searching to find a suitable garden in Paris that hosted private weddings and that had an opening on the date that they wanted, but he had to say that it had been well worth the effort. Chairs were set up neatly in rows to hold all of their guests, and evenly spaced poles pushed into the ground held up elegantly draped fabric and ribbons. There were a few flower arrangements here and there just for the extra pop, but for the most part the flowers already in the garden were enough.

"Quite the setup here," Chris said cheerfully from beside Adrien. The English pastor had been eager enough to come officiate for the when they asked, after Adrien remembered the pastor's joke about actually officiating Adrien and Marinette's wedding when they had had the prank photoshoot. Thankfully he did know French- that had been their main concern- and he had been planning on being in the area anyway for a pastor conference of some sort, so he had refused to let them pay for his plane tickets to and from Paris. "I take it you had a little more time to plan this time around?"

"Just a little," Adrien confirmed with a laugh. "Over a year instead of just a couple hours. Much more reasonable of a timetable."

On his other side, Nino rolled his eyes, unamused. Next to Nino, Ben was grinning in amusement. While he had been surprised by the news of Adrien's engagement to the woman that Adrien had sworn up and down that he wasn't dating, he had found the whole thing far funnier than Nino did. (Or, rather, Ben found it funnier than Nino pretended to find it, because Nino was still pretending to be exasperated by the whole thing. Adrien knew full well that he was amused, but Nino was just trying to hide it and pretend that he was actually disapproving.)

Paul, who had been even more amused by the whole fiasco, hadn't been able to make it to the wedding at all. He had had to use up his vacation time off for a family emergency back in February and it was still early enough in the year that he wasn't comfortable using up any of his remaining sick days in order to be able to make it to Paris. He had jokingly offered to have his sister come in his stead, but Adrien had declined the offer.

He really wasn't interested in dealing with Paul's sister again, not until she learned some serious boundaries.

Paul wasn't the only one of Adrien's friends not to make it to the wedding. Adrien and Marinette had agreed early on that it would be a better idea to not invite Chloe, even though she had been Adrien's oldest friend. They hadn't really been friends for years and in fact, Adrien had actually been avoiding her ever since his return. The one time he had spotted her, shortly after returning to Paris, she had tried to drape herself all over him and press a messy kiss to his cheek. He had told her off for it, because it was really uncomfortable and she was attracting stares, but she had simply waved his scolding off and latched onto his arm, tugging on it and trying to insist that they go on a date 'like old times'. Adrien had responded to that with a raised eyebrow and somewhat briskly informed Chloe that they had never dated and besides, he was engaged now.

(He supposed that he couldn't entirely blame her for not knowing yet; after all, news hadn't actually
gotten out about Adrien and Marinette even though they had already gone out on several highly visible dates since their return. Part of it was that Paris' tabloids really didn't care about him, the other part was probably the fact that Adrien and Marinette really didn't do PDA and therefore people weren't as likely to pay attention to him. Still, Chloe should have known better than to invade his personal space like that.)

Chloe had had a meltdown at the news. They had been lucky that they were near the Grand Paris and Chloe's father could drag her off before she attracted too much attention from passerbys. Adrien had dashed off as Mr. Bourgeois and a handful of hotel staff restrained the screeching Chloe, and he had had to unfriend and block Chloe online (and after a stream of ticked-off texts had flooded his phone, he blocked her there, too. Marinette had done the same).

Mr. Bourgeois had offered Adrien his congratulations later (though he looked a little strained; Adrien suspected that he still had to hear Chloe complaining about how unfair it all was every day) and then had shuffled Chloe off on a cruise that would run over Adrien and Marinette's wedding date, partly to distract her and partly so she wouldn't try to interrupt the wedding. Chloe had apparently resisted a bit, until she was told that there would be all sorts of young, rich, single actors and businesspeople on the cruise. Then she had been thrilled to go.

Adrien suspected that she was going to try to send him all sorts of selfies of herself with the assorted men she met, in an attempt to try to make him jealous. He still hadn't unblocked her number, though, and he wasn't sure how long it would take for her to catch on to that.

"Adrien, the guests are going to be arriving soon," Nathalie informed him, appearing suddenly at his side. "It's time to get back to the prep room. Everything is ready out here."

With one last glance around, Adrien followed her, with Chris and Nino and Ben close behind him. He spotted Mr. Dupain chatting with one of the garden workers near the building where Marinette was currently getting ready and where Adrien was meant to be freshening up in a separate room. His own father also stood nearby, looking somewhat irritated.

Adrien suspected that it was probably because he had run off to check on how the set-up in the garden was doing. He knew that he should have trusted the staff and the decorators to do their job, but, well...

He wanted everything to be perfect for his Lady, so sue him.

The exasperated look that Mr. Agreste sent his son confirmed Adrien's suspicions, and Adrien gave his father an only slightly sheepish shrug before following Chris and his friends back into their assigned room. The three of them sat down, but Adrien couldn't keep still. He fidgeted and fiddled with his Miraculous as he tried not to pace.

(He knew that it was ridiculous to be anxious- it wasn't as though Marinette was suddenly going to change her mind about marrying him and that was the most important part of the whole thing, and being married was really more of a legal thing than an all-altering day in their relationship (and they had already done the civil ceremony two days prior), but still. Try telling that to his nerves. He was still worried that something would go wrong- that fangirls would crash the wedding, that clouds would appear out of nowhere and rain out the wedding, that Alya or Nathalie would try to kill him at the reception since Alix was going to play a compilation of the recordings that she had made them take of the reactions to their engagement announcement.

Adrien was especially worried about that last bit. Alix had promised to behave and Marinette had sworn that she would listen to it before it was played so that nothing offensive slipped in, but still.)
As he finally gave in and started pacing, Adrien thought back over the year since he and Marinette had returned to Paris. He had settled into his job at the lab quickly enough, and *boy* was it ever nice to be able to do Physics in French again. Marinette had continued looking for designer positions, but there hadn't been any openings at any of the studios she was interested in. Instead of applying to a company temporarily until she could find a better fit, she had focused full-time on commissions for a couple months until Nino had recommended her for a position as costume designer for a movie that he was doing the soundtrack for. She had enjoyed it, and once again her amazing creativity had shown through as she produced absolutely spectacular pieces. She was still trying to get a normal designer position, though, because it would be more constant work and a regular paycheck.

Adrien didn't blame her. Still, watching the costumes come to life in the second bedroom (turned into Marinette's design space and sewing room) in their apartment had been amazing. Each outfit had taken several entire days to make, a couple taking over a week, and the level of detail was breathtaking.

"The guests are arriving," Nino reported from where he was standing by the window. "Oh, those people must be from London. I don't recognize them."

Adrien glanced over, pulled out of his own thoughts. "I thought you met the London crew last night at dinner?"

"That was just Marinette's witnesses- and you, of course," Nino added to Ben and Chris. "And Madam Rosalie, too. Were there any others you invited?"

Adrien had to think about it for a second, and then it clicked. "Oh, right! There were a few more of Marinette's coworkers, and then a couple past coworkers as well. That was it."

"Did you invite the entire company?"

Adrien had to laugh. "No, mostly just Marinette's team, for the most part. And then there were a couple people that she worked with outside of her team that she invited, but I don't think they could make it. But we *were* there for three years, you know. We made a lot of connections."

The look Nino gave him told Adrien that *yes*, Nino remembered that very well. Adrien grinned.

"So, has this dweeb here remembered to tell you guys anything about the city?" Nino asked, turning to Ben and Chris. "Have you been here before?"

"I visited back when there was a supervillain problem," Ben volunteered. "That was pretty scary, but pretty cool at the same time. My parents wanted to go somewhere else in France, since we still wanted to visit but they thought it would be dangerous. But we finally decided to just pop into Paris for a couple days, to hit up the tourist spots and then move on."

As Ben tried to describe the akumas he had seen to Nino and a puzzled Chris, Adrien had to grin as he thought back to the reaction Alya had had when she realized that Ladybug and Chat Noir were back in Paris. They hadn't gone out at first, of course- they had waited nearly a month after returning for good before venturing out and doing a *very* visible run around the city. Their runs had been almost daily for a bit as they relished in the feeling of being able to flip and fly and be *visible* again, then had settled down to every other day.

(The superhero exercise had made it *very* easy for him and Marinette to get right back into shape again, which was lovely. Adrien hadn't even known that he had missed the lean muscles he had developed as a superhero until they started reappearing again.)
Alya had been thrilled. She had "managed" to wave them down (not very difficult, really, once Adrien and Marinette heard about her efforts from Nino and shifted their "patrol" route to go right past Nino and Alya's apartment several times in a row) and tell them a bit more about what she had learned on her trip.

Adrien was pretty sure that they had made her day by telling her that yes, they had watched every one of her vlogs. They had made her day even more when, several months later, they decided to announce their engagement as superheroes via a photo submitted through the Ladyblog.

(They had used a ring that Adrien had "borrowed" during one of his last photoshoots so that no one would recognize it as Marinette's, just to be safe.)

Adrien grinned to himself as he thought about what Alya's reaction would be to knowing that she was in Ladybug's wedding. It had been the talk of the city ever since their engagement announcement, and Alya had even brought the topic up during slow periods in their wedding planning. She wondered if there would be any nods to them being Ladybug and Chat Noir in their wedding, as a kind of inside joke for them and any of their family and friends who might know their secret.

(Adrien and Marinette had decided on some very vague references in their vows and decided to keep it at that. There was no point in being too obvious and risking letting Alya in on the secret mid-ceremony. She hadn't killed them for keeping their dating and engagement a secret, but it was very, very likely that she would make an attempt on their lives if she figured out their secret identities.)

"There's actually a decent number of guests," Nino said with some measure of surprise, pulling Adrien out of his thoughts. "I would have thought that people wouldn't trust you enough to come, after the stunts you pulled."

Adrien couldn't help the snort that escaped. Nino really wasn't far off with the whole trust thing- a solid third of the RSVPs that he and Marinette had gotten back had had variations of "this better not be a joke this time you jerks" scribbled on them, and they had spent a fair bit of time right after their engagement and after invites went out responding to calls and messages from their friends, wanting to know if it was real this time.

It was pretty funny, really, and was a good bit of comic relief when Adrien had still been trying to persuade his father that yes, he was done with the modeling now and when he and Marinette had been spending all of their free time trying to turn their new apartment into a proper home.

"So what are you guys doing after the wedding?" Ben asked, curious. "I mean, does anything really change? I'm just wondering, because you're the first people I know that are my age to get married and you already live together and whatnot."

"More bling on the fingers," Nino offered. "And they're actually having their honeymoon right away, so there's that."

Adrien laughed at that. "Honestly? Not much. But once we get back from their honeymoon, we'll be going right to an animal shelter near us to pick up a cat that we've had our eyes on. They agreed to hold her for us, because we didn't want to pick her up and get her settled at home only to have to find someone to cat-sit while we're gone." They had planned to get a cat as soon as they were settled into their new apartment, but then there had been too much going on for them to spend the time house-training a cat or making their apartment cat-safe. Marinette had teased him about wanting a dog instead, until Adrien and Plagg's combined kitten eyes made her give up, giggling all the while.
She didn't really want a dog, he knew. But Marinette rarely let an opportunity to tease him go to waste.

"They're going to turn into the weird cat people," Nino told Ben with a long-suffering sigh. "Alya and I had to talk them down from starting out with two cats. Neither of them have ever had a pet before."

Chris laughed. "Oh, boy. Two kittens at once? You'd be buried."

"We're planning on adopting one younger cat and one older one," Adrien explained. "We figured it would make sense to stagger them, so we don't have old cat vet bills for two cats at once. And we're going to have the one cat for a month or two before going to pick out a second one."

"So he does have some sense." Nino clapped him on his shoulder. "I was starting to think that you were just going a bit crazy with the freedom from your father and somehow dragged Marinette down with you."

"The staggered ages thing was her idea," Adrien grudgingly admitted. "I would have been fine with two tiny kittens using me as a climbing pole."

"It's time for you guys to head out, Adrien!" Nathalie called, and Adrien turned to see her standing there, one eye on her watch. "Marinette will be out shortly."

Adrien was out the door in a flash, leaving Ben and Nino chuckling behind him. Adrien tried to slow his walk up the aisle down a little so that he wasn't speedwalking, but he wasn't sure that he had actually succeeded.

So maybe he was a little eager. But Adrien had a gorgeous woman waiting for him, and honestly? He didn't want to wait another minute.

The music started, and Adrien took a moment to reflect on how similar yet different this wedding was to their fake one. The gardens were very similar (though perhaps a botanist would disagree), but this time there were rows of chairs filled with their family and friends. Their wedding party was wearing similar outfits, though this time it was their friends wearing them, not people who were pretty much strangers to Adrien. Pastor Chris and Sarah and Abby (and Madam Rosalie) were there again, but this time they had their Paris friends present as well.

And Marinette might have been styled practically the same as the first time around, Adrien noted as she appeared at the back of the garden, but this time, she was practically glowing as she floated up the aisle in her gorgeous blue dress towards him with her father escorting her. Tom handed her off to Adrien with a grin, and Adrien grinned back before turning to Marinette with a softer smile.

He was so, so in love with this woman, and it didn't matter if some people thought that he was being too obvious about it. As long as Marinette knew, that was what mattered.

Marinette squeezed his hand and Adrien grinned at her, and then they turned as one to Pastor Chris. He beamed at them, and then started the ceremony.

And this time around, it was undeniably different. Adrien wasn't a frustrated just-barely-an-adult trying to pull a prank on his father and so, so nervous that it would backfire on him. Marinette wasn't just a really good friend that had agreed to go along with his prank. The photographs that were being taken were candid, rather than carefully crafted to make things look realistic. He could see Tikki peeking out of Marinette's bouquet, beaming as they recited their vows, and Adrien knew that Plagg was alert in his own suit, watching proudly even if he tried to deny it. Most importantly
of all, there was a distinct energy running through the air that hadn't been there during the prank, hard to describe but weighty, making the whole event feel more important and significant.

And of course, when Adrien dipped Marinette for their first kiss as husband and wife- well, this time, he gave into the temptation to introduce a little tongue.

_Fin._

Chapter End Notes

Holy crud, it's finally the end! One year, three months, and some-odd days after posting the first chapter (though I was working on the story for about a year before that, so it's been ages for me!).

Thank you so much for reading & reviewing!

Please _drop by the archive and comment_ to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!