Miraculous: The One-Armed Bandit

by LightOfTriumph

Summary

After an altercation, Ladybug and Cat Noir find out each other's secret. Their identities known, the two try to decide whether or not they really know each other, and whether the partnership can continue. In the mean time, Hawk Moth takes a huge risk with his next Akumatization. A serial killer and gambler with no scruples, and even less sanity.
Prologue: Change of Plan

Chapter Summary

The Management suggests that you play "Wings of a Butterfly" by Him, when appropriate.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This... was not going to work.

Not the current villain, that wasn't going to work either. A Lucky Charm had been summoned, a Cataclysm brought to bear. It was only a matter of time before the Akuma was captured, "de-evilised," as Ladybug loved to put it, and his plans were set back another day. Another week. Another month. They say that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting a different result.

Gabriel Agreste was many things, but he was not insane. That's why he became Hawk Moth.

He had seen the results of heroism, and it cost him the only woman he ever loved. According to the Great Guardian, heroism could not bring her back. Gabriel was an intelligent man, it didn't take him long to realize that villainy [i]could.[/i] So he twisted and corrupted his Miraculous, and began the long game.

One by one, he would seek out a lost soul. Good people at their lowest point and drag them deeper down. Turning rage into hate with a flap of the wings of a butterfly...

And... It wasn't working. It simply wasn't working. Over thirty villains thrown at Ladybug and Cat Noir, all with different powers and abilities, all had failed to capture their Miraculouses. It was time to change up the strategy.

He could only Akumatize one soul at a time. This was unfortunate. Strength in numbers would be the easiest solution to this problem. The issue was the only way he could reliably create an army was if Ladybug ignored an Akuma. And she wouldn't. She made that mistake once, she wouldn't make it again.

No, this was about choosing the right candidate...

Thus far he had taken the desperate. The angry. Without his influence they were perfectly good people. They had one other thing in common, they were either young, or very dim. So what was he looking for? What kind of man did he need?

The answer struck him almost immediately. He didn't need a man.

He needed a monster.

He needed someone to whom rage, and hate were the natural state. Someone he barely needed to
push into supervillainy. The only addition would be the superpowers... There was a problem. That kind of man was abundant, but very hard to control. Evil was like driving. You don't need an instructor if you've been doing it all your life.

But he had to try... The other way simply wasn't working.

He had someone in mind. A gambler with a record so long, and a history so violent that for the first time in forty years France had called for his head. Politicians had used this madman to argue for the re institution of capital punishment. The media circus surrounding this case had finally come to a conclusion a week ago. He would be spending the rest of his life in prison. Of that, he wasn't happy.

"Don't I deserve better?" he kept screaming.

He was angry... Emotional... Desperate, and truly evil. He would do nicely. It was a risk, but it would yield a high reward.

"Natalie" he called to his unwitting personal assistant. "Fit of morbid curiosity. Bring me any information you can find on Jacques Bousquet."

Chapter End Notes

Welp. That was the set up. Let's keep going.
Marinette Dupin-Cheng pondered how she managed to wind up in this situation.

It started a few months ago. An old man had slipped her a pair of earrings that were actually magical items that could transform her into a superhero. Please, bear with us. This was the least bizarre thing that had happened to her over the past few months. Since then, she had faced countless super villains all created by one mastermind. Each one more dangerous than the last. Luckily, she didn't have to face the challenge alone. She had an efficient, if irritating partner.

Together they were the protectors of Paris. The Miraculous Ladybug, and Cat Noir.

She had gotten a few bumps and scrapes on the job, but it was the damage to her personal life that was the hardest to take. She was only sixteen, and her school had noticed frequent absences, and so had her parents. She couldn't tell anyone, she couldn't even tell her best friend Alya, that she was ladybug. As her father pointed out, three people can keep a secret if two of them are dead. Thus she hadn't even told her partner her real name. And that would be a strain on its own...

If dating wasn't impossible as a superhero.

Yes, there was a boy. Adrien Agreste. He was kind, considerate, and a model. An actual model. Alya used to joke that he was created in some secret government lab to make the perfect teen heartthrob. Then her mother made a crack about the French government, then her father went on a fifteen minute rant about the French government. Then Adrien walked into the bakery to order some cupcakes, then Marinette blacked out.

If there weren't things like that happening almost constantly, it was her work as Ladybug that kept getting in the way. It seemed like whenever she would get close to mustering up the courage to speak to him like a human being, Marinette would be called away because she was needed as Ladybug.

Which brought her to tonight.

The villain had called himself "The Incarcerator." The Akuma had given him the power to make impenetrable prisons out of material around him, or lock a door so completely that escape was impossible. He was a prison guard who had been assigned to guard the cell of a nasty lunatic. He was fired for unnecessary roughness getting the man back to his cell. The low emotional state allowed the Akuma into his spirit through his keys.

The fight had landed them in an awkward position. Ladybug and Cat Noir were trapped in an iron cell high atop the Eiffel Tower. Noir had used his "Cataclysm" earlier in the fight to destroy a Cell
containing Mayor Bourgeois. They were trapped in the cell soon after. Ladybug had used her lucky charm to produce a magnet which had brought the keys to them. She broke the keys, releasing the Akuma...

Which promptly flew out of range for her to catch.

Any damage caused by the Akumatized Villain’s powers was reversed when the cursed butterfly was destroyed, but it had to be done quickly. Otherwise things could get... Complicated. Ladybug had the power to do that, but there was another issue. Once Ladybug had used her lucky charm she had five minutes before the spirit that controlled her powers would run out of energy. Transforming her back into Marinette Dupin-Cheng.

She had used her Lucky Charm one minute ago. And while she couldn't get out of the cage, the villain had been neutralized. All that was left was the Akuma.

"It's going to stay on the top of the tower," Cat Noir sighed. "Best vantage point in the city. So at least it's not going anywhere..."

"Good point," Ladybug nodded. "So how do I reach it?"

"Simple," Cat Noir sighed, seemingly resigned to fate. "I use my Cataclysm to break the cage. You deal with the Akuma."

"You've already used..." Ladybug grew a look of horror on her face as she realized what Cat Noir was saying. "No. No no. Absolutely not."

"You have a better idea?" Noir said defensively. "In an hour that thing multiplies, and we are literally trapped in a box together. What else can we do but run the clock out, recharge, and go at it again?"

Ladybug gripped her hair in frustration and slid her hands down her face. "Fine. Fine. I'll turn around."

"You can if you want to," Noir said. "But I won't."

"What?"

"I'm not going to turn around," Cat Noir said flatly. "I'm tired of the runaround. On both our ends."

"This is my private life!" Ladybug said shocked. "You have no right-"

"I have been hypnotized, put through walls, knocked out, beaten down, and just generally had my furry ass handed to me to make sure I had your back," Noir was raising his voice now. "And I don't even know your name."

"So what? Now you don't trust me?" Marinette was starting to raise her voice to match Noir's.

"That's not it, and you know it," Noir shouted.

"Then why-"

"Because it's psychotic!" Noir screamed. "I have gone through these ridiculous cartoon antics to keep this secret which shouldn't even be a secret! It's killing me. And what I need right now, especially after a week like I've had, I need someone I can talk to about this crap! Dammit, I think I've earned it. My Mom's gone, my Dad is an Absentee half the time, and my best friend would probably never want to speak to me again after I've kept a secret this huge. Bottom line? You're all I've got. The
closest thing I have to a best friend, and I need your help."

Ladybug stopped being angry and started being sad. Something had happened to Noir sometime this week. He wasn't... Okay.

"And I get it, alright?" Noir said, forcing a laugh to stop tears of frustration. "Under that mask you are as... spectacular as you are with it on. You're beautiful, vivacious, you've got a social life that puts celebrities to shame. You are someone special."

Cat Noir slumped in the corner of the cage. "I'm not," he said frankly. "I have no problem telling you who I am because to be honest, I am nobody. People look at me and see right through me. Until I put this ring on I had no substance, no energy, no real life. I honestly wish I never had to transform back... I just can't do this. On any other week, maybe I could have held out, but this has been seven days of making me feel as useless as I actually am. So let's just... stop with this. Let me have this one minor stress relief."

Ladybug looked right into Cat Noir's big green eyes, and sighed. He was right about one thing, it was incredibly inconvenient to keep the secret from her partner. And looking at him... he really needed this. Needed something. This was a big step, but it was going to happen sooner or later.

Besides... She had felt that same self doubt for a long time.

Ladybug sat down in the opposite corner of the cage, and began to wait. Three minutes left now.

"Okay," she said softly.

Cat Noir looked right at her. "'Okay?' That's it?"

Ladybug nodded. "You raised some very good points."

"You want me to just tell you?"

"Nope," Ladybug said frankly. "If this is going to happen, neither of us is going to volunteer the information. We run out the clock."

There was an awkward silence.

"You bring food?" Ladybug asked. "For your Kwami?"

"Yeah," Noir sighed, calming down, "What does yours eat?"

"Chocolate chip cookies," Ladybug smiled.

"Seriously?" Noir said in disbelief.

"Yeah," Ladybug smiled. "Why, what does yours eat?"

"Camembert!" Noir protested. "I have to put an airlock on it so I don't smell like a dairy farm!"

They both laughed for a bit then calmed down.

"Don't be disappointed when you see me," Ladybug sighed. "I'm not the glamour girl you take me for. I'm just a shy, awkward, pretty... unimpressive high school girl. Nothing all that spectacular."

"If that's what your class thinks." Noir said sincerely. "Then they don't have eyes..."
Ladybug blushed a little. "I sometimes wonder that about... Never mind."

Noir immediately put the pieces together. "Another man! Oh, milady why must you play these games with my heart!" Noir gripped his chest in mock agony. "Alright, what's this guy like."

"Well," Ladybug sighed. "He's gorgeous. Blonde, tall, constantly in these jeans that-"

"Thank you, I get the picture," Noir raised a hand to stop her. "Guy's probably a moron or a grade-a dickwad."

"Top of his class," Ladybug smiled. "And I've never heard him even raise his voice to anyone."

Noir scoffed and looked up at the sky. "Well, good," Noir sighed. "If this doof is really as perfect as you make him out to be... You deserve him. Best of luck."

Ladybug smiled. "Thank you." Something dawned on her as she was looking right at Noir. "You know, this never occurred to me, but... You actually kind of look like-

And then they ran out of time.

It was an odd experience to have your whole brain do a hard reset as your entire life shifted into a new way of thinking. Everything suddenly made sense, and at the same time nothing did. She was at the same time furious, embarrassed, confused, and despondent all at once. She wasn't sure if she would ever put the suit on again.

As she looked into the eyes of Adrien Agreste, she wondered how the rest of her life would continue.

"Marinette..." Adrien started. "I-"

"Don't say anything," Marinette said, turning around so she wouldn't see him, her voice trembling. "I mean it, don't say anything. Feed your Kwami and let's finish this."

"Listen, we-"

"Do it," Marinette said, as firmly as she could. "Now. Tikki the cookies are in my bag."

The spirit of her Miraculous looked right at her. "Marinette..."

"I know, alright?!" she yelled. "Just eat!"

The next few minutes went by at a snails pace. Adrien fed his Kwami and transformed, getting rid of the cage. This allowed Marinette to transform back and deal with the evil Akuma. Adrien tried to talk to her twice, but she immediately swung away. Unwilling to listen, and unable to think. She wasn't sure how it happened, but she ended up walking home in the rain.

"I can't believe that just happened..." Tikki was in as much shock as Marinette was, by the sound of it. "Do you realize how dangerous that was? What if that was Copycat?"

"Don't yell at me for that, yell at me for what happens next," Marinette said firmly. "I need to talk to Alya."

"What?" Tikki said in a tone of pure horror. "She' the girl who runs a widely read blog dedicated to publishing every little detail about you. Marinette you can't-"

"I can, and I'm going to," Marinette said, not willing to have an argument. "If you want, after we're
finished you can take my miraculous back to the Grand Guardian. But Alya is finding out tonight. Because right now, she is the only person I can trust.'

Tikki looked hurt. "You can trust me."

"Really?" Marinette said. "It took you a year to introduce me to the Grand Guardian, even longer to detail the powers of the other Miraculous. Where do my powers come from? Why were they made? Besides the Ladybug, the Cat, and the Butterfly, how many other Miraculouses are active?"

"Did you know about Adrien being Cat Noir?"

Tikki stood silent, and neither of them said another word until Marinette got home.

Jacques Bousquet sat in his cell and fumed.

This wasn't fair. He deserved better than this. The thing's he had done had set France ablaze all but literally. It made Paris infamous again on a level it hadn't been since the late 1700's. How do they repay him? Locking him in a box to be forgotten. This wasn't fair. He deserved better.

Four years ago, over the span of six months, forty two people were murdered in or around the Brides-des Bairns casino in Paris. Their bodies discovered stripped of all valuable items, the place wiped down. Meanwhile, a high-roller named Jacques Bousquet kept coming in, and nearly losing his shirt. In the end though, he felt like he always came out on top. It was the rush. The spin of the wheel, the thrill of the chase...

The pull of the lever. Oh god, he missed the slots.

Keeping ahead of the law though, that was a gambler's dream. You lived for that kind of danger. That thrill. Somehow, he always managed to beat the odds. It took him nearly a year to get caught and when he did... Well, he didn't come quietly. He must have taken down twenty Gendarmes before they managed to wrestle him down to the ground. Lethal force had been authorized, unfortunately all it cost him was an arm.

He turned his lucky poker chip around and around in his hand. His father had given it to him for the one birthday the drunken lout managed to show up for. The waste of space pulled the thing out of his pocket and handed it to him. Told him it was lucky. That night his son pushed him in front of a train. Bad luck. Jacques decided to hang on to the chip, just in case.

He put it down on the bed next to him, and began to think. He tried so hard to think of a way out of here that he didn't even notice the black butterfly that flew into his cell.

When it landed on the chip, his mind convulsed. He felt someone attempt to strip his willpower away. Eventually, he heard a voice in his head.

*I am Hawk Moth,* the voice said. *And I offer you freedom, and the thrill of the die roll once again.*

Bousquet paused. "You have my attention. Keep talking."

*Since you've been in prison, two super heroes have emerged in Paris. Each of them carries an item called a Miraculous,* Hawk Moth continued. *Retrieve them for me, and you may keep the power I now give you.*

"Power?" Bousquet scoffed. "You're going to make me stronger? Faster? That's not the power I'm interested in..."
Then what is?

Bousquet smiled. "Immortality," he said lovingly. "And you can't give it to me... There's only one way someone lives forever."

*You're quite right,* Hawk Moth continued. *I can't give that to you. I can, however, give you the means to take it for yourself. Make the world remember... The One-Armed Bandit.*

Bousquet stopped and considered his position. He was amazed he was thinking this clearly, with a voice in his head. They called him unhinged, but this was new. But there's an old rule in Poker. Look around the table. If you can't tell who the sucker is, it's you.

Two people at this table. Bousquet wasn't the sucker.

"What the hell?" he smiled. "Let's give it a spin."

With that, he felt every cell in his body percolate.

Chapter End Notes

Logic: .... That was a long four minutes.

Me: Shut up.

Logic: That was also a pretty contrived way to get them to drop the masks...

Me: Shut up.

Logic: And if you tried, I suppose you could make this new villain you came up with less subtle... If you had some kind of megaphone.

SHUT UP.
The prison was very old fashioned. At least Harold thought so. All of the cells had the traditional barred doors, not the steel ones you saw in more modern prisons. Even in solitary, they were still quite literally behind bars. Harold didn't like it. You could see each and every psychopath and lowlife looking back out at you. Every eye in the place was staring at him with a special kind of hatred. The kind that only came to someone you wanted dead. He could hear them too. Muttering, whispering in their sleep. None of them shouted. Not in this wing... Harold really wished they would. It kept feeling like they were trying to make him feel safe to distract from the danger coming up behind him.

He couldn't fool himself any more. He wasn't a guard at a prison. He was the keeper of a zoo.

He made his way through the cell block, keeping his head down. He didn't want to attract any attention. Then something attracted his.

“SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS—aaaaaaah...”

That couldn't have been a good sign. It was even worse when he knew what cell it was coming from. Incarcerated inside was prisoner number 77777. Jacques Bosquet.

He turned quickly to look into the cell. The lights were off. He could only see a silhouette of the maniac inside. But it looked... off somehow. It was definitely him but... He was in the wrong clothes. That was it.

“Don't you just love nights like tonight?” he hissed. “You can almost feel the electricity in the air.”

“Why aren't you in your orange?” Harold said, trying to sound intimidating, and failing.

“I'm going out,” Bousquet hissed. “I'm meeting some important people, so I need to dress nice. You always want to make a good first impression...”

“Very funny,” Harold said shakily. “Get back in the scrubs, and I'll pretend this never happened.”

“Why would I want you to do that?” Bousquet said. “I'm enjoying the time we're spending together.”

Then Jacques Bousquet opened his eyes. Normally this would be hard to tell when his face was obscured in shadow, but these weren't normal eyes. They were twice as large as any eye should be, to start with. Oddly enough, that was the first thing he noticed. Not the glowing. The eyes were flashing different colors and messages. As if they were some kind of tacky electronic billboard.

“Are you a gambling man?” he asked.
Harold knew what this was. Akumatization. There was protocol for this. He fumbled around in his pockets for the panic button to lock down the prison. Step one, keep him talking until the backup arrived. “On occasion,” he said, still searching for the button. “I've been known to try my hand at a slot machine...”

“Perfect,” Bousquet hissed. “Here's the bet... You take one spin and it might net you the panic button you're looking for.”

Harold froze.

“Oh I have it,” Bousquet smiled. “I have it, because you want it. So one spin. If you get it, you can call for back up. If not, I have a much easier time getting out of here. Deal?”

Harold couldn't say anything. He was frightened out of his wits.

“Good. Let's take a spin.”

Bousquet grasped a bar of his cell with his one remaining hand. The hand looked inhuman. It was dark gray and seemed to be made of some kind of reflective metal. The fingers were segmented to allow the joints to move. The hand was coming out of the sleeves of a maroon pinstripe suit jacket, and a mustard yellow shirt. That metal hand easily ripped off a two foot length of the bar of his cell.

Then he stepped through the bars via the newly made gap, and Harold let out a yell.

Bousquet's face had twisted. His red hair was gone, now replaced with the dark gray metal skin that covered his hand. He had a small pointed nose that struggled to be noticed between his billboard eyes, and his huge toothy grin. That was the worst of it. His mouth had taken up the entire bottom half of his face, and his teeth had doubled in size.

Across his chest, there were three slot reels. There was no lever to pull them until he slammed the cell bar into the stump of his left arm, which made an unnatural CLANK! as it went in.

“Round and round the reels go,” the monster pulled the makeshift lever. “Where they stop. God only knows...”

The reels spun an one stopped. The icon on it was a picture of a revolver. Then the second. Then the third. With a loud KA-CHING! Bousquet's lower jaw slid unnaturally downward, making his mouth open at a ninety-degree angle. He wretched forward, and from his mouth popped a handle of a gun. Inside his eyes, in a sort of led marquee, scrolled the message 9mm.

He pulled the gun the rest of the way out of his mouth. Staring at the black revolver, he shook his head. “Oooooh, tsk tsk tsk tsk,” he said in mock sympathy. “Not the Panic button.”

He cocked the gun and pointed right at Harold's face. “Now that's just bad luck.”

Alya looked down at the ground and she didn't look up until Marinette had finished her story. Tikki was looking out the window, watching the rain until it stopped. Marinette had let herself cry during explaining it to her, and was calming down.

“I'm sorry,” Marinette said. “I should have told you sooner. I understand if you never wanted to see
“What?” Alya said. “Girl... I get it. I'm not mad you didn't tell me. That had to have been a huge secret to keep, and the Ladyblog couldn't have made it any easier. Even if we are BFFs, you had only known me for a few months. Plus I had already turned into a supervillain once. The fact that you're trusting me with this, even now is moving. So don't worry...”

Alya held Marinette's shoulder. “You are my best friend. Nothing is ever going to change that. I'm just happy I know now. You're not alone in this anymore.”

Marinette gave Alya a soft smile. She needed to hear that.

“That being said...” Alya smacked Marinette on the forehead with a composition book from school. “What the hell were you thinking, leaving him up on that roof?!”


“I have been trying for almost 14 months now to get you two together,” Alya said, pacing around the room and throwing her hands up. “You find out that you've been working closely with him, for months. He turns to you for a shoulder to cry on, and you get so inside your own head you leave him there?! Have you lost your mind?!"

“What the hell was I supposed to do?!” Marinette protested. “I used to think I was in love with Adrien, I don't even know who he is anymore!”

“Yes you do!” Alya shouted. “Now more than ever! You're closer now than anyone in your position could ever hope to be!”

“And getting that close to him, he's kind of a tool.” Marinette couldn't believe she was saying this about Adrien. “I mean, he's funny. Dependable, and yeah he still looks like Adrien, which helps. But not a day goes by when he doesn't annoy me to pieces.”

“So the guy you're head over heels for...” Alya looked up at the sky in mocking thought. “Also drives you up the wall... Hold on. Clinical test.”

Alya walked over to the trapdoor of Marinette's attic bedroom and swung it wide open. “Hey, Mrs. Dupin-Cheng?"

“What are you doing?” Marinette hissed.

Alya raised a hand to calm Marinette down. “Yes, Alya?” Marinette's mother called up.

“You love Mr. Dupin more than anything on earth, right?” Alya asked.

“Of course,” Marinette's mom answered. “Well... Him and Marinette.”

“Uh-huh,” Alya nodded. “And how often does he irritate you to near homicide?”

“On an almost daily basis,” Mrs. Dupin-Cheng answered immediately.

“Almost daily?” Marinette's dad responded. “I must be slipping.”

Alya gestured at Marinette who marched over to her.

“Thanks for the input, Mom!” Marinette slammed the trapdoor. “This is not the same thing.”
“It is exactly the same thing,” Alya shot back. “Here I've been trying to hook you guys up, and it turns out you've been married for the past year.”

“Alya!”

“Look, putting your romantic masochism aside,” Alya continued. “On a human level, that was a really crappy way to treat a friend. He just got through telling you that he saw himself as nothing. He was obviously in a really bad place, as his partner you should have at least tried to make him feel better. Tell him he's more than a mask.”

Marinette was about to retort, but every argument died in her throat. She put her hand on her forehead and tried to arrange her thoughts. “I wonder what was eating him,” Marinette thought out loud. “He seemed fine at school.”

“I don't know,” Alya said, taking out her phone. “But maybe I can find out. The Agrestes are the kind of old money that had to flee the country in the 1790's. If something happened more than normal teenage stuff, it'd be on the internet somewhere. Let's see... Agreste, October.”

Marinette looked at Alya. “Any information.”

Alya's eyes widened. “Did I mean Marie Agreste, October.”

“His mom?” Marinette asked. Then a horrible thought occurred to her. “Oh no... No, no, no... Alya, please don't tell me...”

Alya looked up from the phone like it confirmed Marinette had a terminal disease. “Tomorrow is the twelfth anniversary of her disappearance.”

Marinette flopped facedown on the bed in despair. “Oh my god,” she said muffled into the covers. “I'm a monster!”

“Don't panic, girl!” Alya said reassuringly. “We can still fix this!”

“If he hasn't thrown himself off his roof at this point,” Marinette wailed. “Or given up on love altogether... Oh dear lord, I've turned him into his dad.”

“Hot, and rich with a voice like butter?” Alya shrugged. “You can do wor- Woah...”

“Maybe I should call him,” Marinette said miserably.

“Uh... You can't do that,” Alya said. “You're busy.”

Marinette looked up to see that Alya was at her PC. Streaming a live news report of a Paris street. The ground was littered with gold coins. A crowd was fleeing from something off screen. Every so often a shot would fire, and a passerby would dissolve into coins.

“Where're you all going?!” someone asked gleefully from off screen. “The real show hasn't even started yet!”

Alya looked right at Marinette. “This looks like a job for Ladybug?”

“And Cat Noir,” Marinette nodded. “Adrien, I hope you're watching.”

“Wouldn't surprise me if he was out on patrol already,” Alya nodded, turning back to the computer. “Guys don't do the whole 'Cry over a tub of Rocky Road with your bestie' thing.”
“We can only hope,” Marinette sighed. “Tikki! Spots on!”

“Dude,” Nino laughed as Adrien hit the end of the Rocky Road. “You still don't get it?”

Nino Lahiffe's reaction to finding out his best friend was Cat Noir was simply to nod and say “Called it!” Apparently, Nino had put together certain gaps in his appearances lining up with sightings of Cat Noir. He had put the pieces together two months ago. When Adrien asked why Nino didn't confront him about it, he simply said that it was none of his business. Adrien knew there was a reason they were friends.

A side effect of this, however, was Nino being unable to control his laughter when Adrien told him about Marinette's reaction to his true identity. Adrien didn't see it as mocking, but as if Nino had caught on to something obvious that Adrien just couldn't see.

“What?!! What am I missing?!” he said through a mouthful of stiff ice-cream. He swallowed hard and continued. “We both agree to drop the masks, we've moved past the argument, we both see who we really are, all of the sudden she's all pissed. What did I do wrong?!”

“Okay,” Nino leaned forward. “What were you two talking about right before you switched back to normal.”

Adrien shrugged. “Some guy she had the hots for,” he said. “Like I told you.”

“Did she describe him?” Nino asked.

“What?” Adrien was completely lost. “Yeah... Tall, blonde, top of his class... I think he wears skinny jeans because she almo-” Something clicked in Adrien's brain. “Oh my god.”

Nino broke down laughing.

“No, what?” Adrien felt like someone had just told him he was secretly a martian. “No, no way. What?!!”

“What kills me is the jeans,” Nino breathed. “Like, you wear the damn skinny jeans every day and it doesn't even occur to you that it might be seen as baiting a hook?”

“But Marinette has made no indication to me or anyone else that she was interested,” Adrien said with confidence. “Right? Back me up here.”

“Aren't you serious, dude?” Nino said in disbelief. “Did she have to club you and drag you back to her cave?”

Adrien buried his face in his hands. “So she was both interested, and completely uninterested, all at the same time?” Adrien asked miserably. “Dual identities are bullshit.”

“Sounds like it,” Nino sighed.

“Like I didn't feel like enough of an idiot this week,” Adrien muttered.

'Listen,” Nino said, moving aside. “Forget it for tonight. Just sit down, chill out, we'll take in some TV, alright?”
Adrien thought that sounded like a wonderful idea, so he flopped down on the couch next to Nino. When Nino turned on the television, Adrien sat bolt upright.

If it weren't for the various watermarks and headlines, Adrien would have mistaken the news for a horror movie. A monster with a gunmetal gray skin crazed smile, multicolored eyes, a pinstriped suit and a two foot metal pole for a left arm was standing near a broken shop window, holding the left arm of a mannequin. He slid the plastic arm over the pole, seemingly attaching it to his shoulder. The plastic facsimile began to move like a natural arm, as a pinstripe sleeve grew to cover it. Then he turned to look at the camera. Seemingly right at Adrien.

“You!” he said over the panicking crowd. “With the camera! I need it.”

The cameraman started to back away. The monster rolled his eyes, and took a revolver out of his belt. There was a bang, then a sound like a hard rain as the camera fell to the ground.

The monster picked up the camera in his plastic hand and pointed it right near his grotesque skull-like face. “Is this still working?” he said quietly. “Seems like... Hello, dear Paris! You may remember me from the trial that ended a few days ago! The most high-profile serial killer Paris has ever seen! The one and only Jacques Bousquet! Now, the media never came up with a good nickname for me. 'Casino Killer' was just to generic...”

“I prefer...” He let out a sickening grin. “The One-Armed Bandit.”

He swung the camera to look out over the flaming street and the people desperately fleeing the scene. “Some mess we got here, huh?!” the Bandit asked with sickening glee. “I mean look at all this! Kids searching for their mothers, wives looking through the pile of change that used to be their husbands, it's a madhouse down here. The question on everyone's mind is... Who could save us now?

“Well,” he swung the Camera back into his face. “I have two people in mind... Ladybug, Cat Noir... I hope your watching. See... We need to have a little talk. Something important we both need to take care of...

“And I'd hurry...” His normally high voice was turning into a guttural growl. “Because the question isn't weather or not I'm going to make any of these people cash out before you get here... The question is how many.” He dropped the camera on the sidewalk. The feed showed him walking off, firing more shots into the fleeing crowd. Adrien could still hear him laughing.

Nino's jaw dropped. “I think you should probably...”


Nino's jaw dropped. “I think you should probably...”


The Bandit didn't like to be kept waiting. The worst part of any bet was those split seconds waiting for the die to hit the table. Luckily, he didn't have to wait long. He heard a thud behind him, and he gave another wide smile.

He turned around to face her, pointing the revolver right between her eyes. She looked at him with a special kind of content. He laughed at that. She had no idea what he was up to, but she still hated him for it. She should wait to see what comes later.

The hands have been dealt. Place your bets. There can only be one winner.
“Are you a gambler, little Ladybug?”

Chapter End Notes

Logic: .... Okay, so the villain for this story is a serial killer slot-machine with a prosthetic arm?

Me: Yep.

Logic: Why does the description sound familiar?

Me: He's basically the Big-Head Killer from Dark Horse comics "The Mask" with grey skin instead of green.

Logic: Right... Oh, BTW, good ass coverage on the complaints from the last chapter's comments.

Me: Shut up.
There was something different about this one. Ladybug could tell just by looking at his huge manic grin.

The normal process of Akumatization was a metamorphosis of body and soul. The Moth Miraculous fed on anger and transformed the body of the host to reflect their darkest desires. It also dulled the inhibitions of the host, making them more susceptible to Hawk Moth's suggestion. More willing to act on violent impulse.

With this guy... It felt like the change was just a makeover.

He had the powers, and the twisted appearance. That couldn't have happened without an Akuma, but the way he looked at her... It was like there was no soul to corrupt. Pure evil had seeped into every crag in his mind, but nothing had changed.

“Do your parents know you're out this late?” he said, looking earnestly surprised. “Good god, I called you 'Little Ladybug,' to demean you, but seriously? What are you fifteen?”

“Oh no, didn't you hear,” Alya said dryly over the Bluetooth. “She's over five-thousand years old...”

“No, no, it's cool,” Alya giggled. “'Lady Wifi' was too cool of a name to waste on a villain-of-the-week anyway.”

“While you're having that convo with...” The villain shrugged. “What I can only assume is the mothership, at this point, I would like an answer to my question. Are you a gambler?”

“First answer mine,” Ladybug shot back. “Who are you?”

The villain stared blankly back at her. “You're serious?” he said dryly. “I just did a whole TV thing for your benef- The camera was definitely still working! Did this whole big speech where I-- Screw it. I'm the One-Armed Bandit! Get it?! Because slot machine?!” He pointed to the turning slot reels in his chest.

“One-Armed...” Ladybug was completely lost. “Slot machines?"
“Oh,” Alya said over the Comm. “I actually do get it! That's clever.”

“You kids with your music...” The Bandit straightened his arm and pointed the revolver back at Ladybug's head. “One more time, are you a gambler?”

“Not exactly my scene,” Ladybug shot back.

“Oh, come on,” the Bandit laughed. “Your whole shtick is based off of a symbol for good luck. You do this for a living. Honey, you've gambled a few times, I guarantee it. And not just with money, with your life, the cat's life, and other peoples lives.”

Ladybug and the Bandit had begun to slowly circle each other. Never losing the eye contact. “I risk my own life,” she said, trying to think of a plan of action. “Cat Noir risks his, but we never put civilians at risk.”

“Not directly,” the Bandit admitted. “But here's what you are doing. By facing off with me here on the street, you're betting that I haven't stuck an bomb on some roof somewhere.”

Ladybug stopped dead.

“I've only been like this for about six hours,” the Bandit admitted. “With that little time, it would be hard for me to get my hands on an bomb in that little time, but not impossible...”

Ladybug didn't know what to make of this. Was it a taunt? Was there a bomb? Should she diffuse that first and then deal with the Bandit himself later?”

“The odds of that being the case are... I don't know... 100:1?” the Bandit surmised. “Smart money says stay here and deal with me personally. Because if you leave, I'm just going to keep having fun out here. Here's a bet for you... How long do you think the people who live here can run before I get my aim right?”

Marinette couldn't believe her ears. This wasn't the Akuma talking. This man was insane.

“That's all gambling is,” the Bandit's grin widened. “All life is. Risk versus reward. That's how we make every decision, and how everything we do plays out. You're betting that I don't have something bigger planned somewhere else. Hawk Moth is betting on me liking these powers enough to care about your jewelry, I'm betting on good ol' reliable human hubris. And...” The Bandit pulled the gun back and smiled even wider. “Your partner is betting I didn't see him back there...”

The Bandit whirled around and fired a shot at a hitherto unseen Cat Noir, who nimbly leaped out of the way of the shot. Then the next three. “You'd think with those eyes, you couldn't see anything,” Cat Noir quipped, ducking out of the way of the next shot.

“That ain't my handicap kid!” The Bandit kept firing.

“Really?” Ladybug called out confidently. “Because I'd call you pretty blind!” The struggle with Cat Noir had given her time to wrap her yo-yo around the Bandit's ankles. She pulled the chord hard, making the villain trip over and faceplant into the concrete, his gun skidding away. She ran up to hopefully finish off the Akuma, but she was stopped short by a gunmetal grasp around her throat.

Marinette committed the next few seconds to memory, as they were the first sign of the danger that would hound her for the next few nights.

The Bandit looked at Ladybug's face. Over and over, as if he was taking notes. Then he moved his false hand to her ear. He caressed her Miraculous... Then he looked her squarely in the eye, and
winked.

“Ladybug!” Cat Noir called out, rushing towards the villain. The Bandit tossed Ladybug, one handed, into her partner. They both fell back hard onto the concrete.

“Oh, come on!” the Bandit laughed as he retrieved his revolver. “I know you guys can do better than that. You have some... I dunno... powers? Use them! A fistfight with teenagers I a waste of my talent!”

“What do you think, milady?” Noir whispered. “Maybe whipping out the Powers isn't a bad idea...”

“Not yet,” Ladybug replied. “He had the perfect chance to grab my Miraculous and bail. He didn't take it. He's stalling...”

“Stalling?” Noir asked. “That doesn't make any sense. Aren't the Miraculouses the endgame? Once you collect the two of them you get absolute power or... whatever?”

“Power over creation and destruction,” Ladybug nodded. “The Power to-”

“Play god,” the Bandit said. “You guys aren't as quiet as you think.”

Noir and Ladybug looked at eachother, worried. “Alright then,” Noir started. “So why doesn't Hawk Moth want you to get our Miraculouses?”

“Oh, he does,” the Bandit said frankly. “I don't.”

“What?” Ladybug couldn't comprehend it. “You're not--?”

He was. At that moment, around his eyes, shone the neon pink outline of a stylized butterfly. Hawk Moth was communicating with his Akuma.

“S'cuse me kids,” the Bandit burst into a wide grin. “I have to take this...”

Hawk Moth couldn't believe what he had just seen. Bousquet couldn't be so mad as to think to trifle with him. The man who made him the monster he so longed to be! This wouldn't stand.

“What do you thing you're doing?!” Hawk Moth screamed. “You had her! Seize her Miraculous!”

“Yeah...” Bousquet shook his head. “Not interested. As for what I'm doing... I'm screwing you over.”

“Are you really?” Hawk Moth sighed. He reached out mentally and took a grip over the Bandit's heart. They always stepped in line after this. From his observation room, he watched the Bandit grip his chest, then drop to his knees.

And then the Bandit began to laugh. It sounded like fistfuls of coins dropping into a steel bucket.

“Finish it!” the Bandit cackled. “Hold up your end of the bargain! Do it! Squeeze my heart until it bursts! Not the way I wanted it to go down, but I'll settle! Being the fist villain so dangerous that the heroes had to put him down?! That's a legacy! That.. is immortality!!”

Hawk Moth's eyes widened. What was this lunatic talking about?

“I kept telling you,” the Bandit wheezed. “There's only one way to live forever. That way is to die. Die in a place where everyone can see. Everyone can be amazed at how you went out! I wanted
them to drop the blade on my neck. But no... France has evolved. We don't do that anymore... So we're just going to put you away in some dark box... Asinine. I'm the most dangerous man in all of France! I'm the Casino Killer! I'm the man who's become synonymous with blood and murder! And you people lock me in a room to think about what I've done?"

“I deserved better! I deserved to die!”

Hawk Moth could feel himself losing his grip. This man's evil was more attractive to the Akuma than his own. The moth was being drawn to a brighter flame.

“I was truly... utterly defeated...” The Bandit slowly made his way to his feet. Getting stronger with every word. “And then you showed up. Offering me the chance to make my mark in the biggest way in exchange for nothing but my word. Card sharks can only dream of having a mark that dumb.”

Hawk Moth did everything he could to tighten his grip on Bousquet's heart, but to no avail. He was losing control.

“And my God,” the Bandit said under his mechanical laugh. “You are easier to read then a goddamn road sign. You're one of those schmucks who believes that the end justifies the means, not realizing that both are unjustifiable. After everything you've done, to all these innocent people you still think you're the good guy?! Hell, at least I'm honest about being scum. You aren't even a little ashamed of everything you've done?

“What would, and I'm just guessing here...” The Bandit gave a mocking shrug. “She' think of everything you've done?”

That tore it. He had to die. The insolent little troll had to die. Hawk Moth tightened his grip on the villain's heart, causing him to nearly buckle over. But he just kept laughing. Hawk Moth simply wasn't able to finish him.

“Touched a nerve, did I?” Bousquet cackled. “It's always a girl... How did you get her killed? You do it yourself? You the kind of guy who gets off-"

“Silence,” Hawk Moth said quietly, wrenching on the Bandit's heart once again.

“Nah,” the Bandit winced. “Not your style. If you had that kind of power when you lost her you wouldn't be doing this... So more likely you couldn't do anything about it.”

“I said be quiet.” Hawk Moth had to keep calm. He had to keep control of himself if he hoped to keep control of the Akuma.

“You could see it coming,” the Bandit continued relentlessly. “You wanted to stop it, but you couldn't. All you could do is sit there, and wait for her to get slaughtered. Did she even see it coming?! Did you try to warn her, or were you too dumbstruck to even--"

“SHUT UP!!” Hawk Moth screamed. Without thinking he released the grip on the madman's heart. He could see Bousquet straighten up. Confident in his victory.

“First rule of poker,” the Bandit sighed. “Leave emotion at the door. You start overreacting, you show your hand too early, that's money out the door. You don't know what to do when the other guy looks across the table and says..."

“Call.”

Things had never gone out of hand so quickly in anything Gabriel Agreste had ever attempted in his
life. With one little push from Bousquet the Akuma was no longer his to control. He couldn't see through the Bandit's eyes anymore.

He stood in the barely lit room, for the first time, completely in the dark.

Marinette and Adrien looked on in awe at the conversation the One-Armed Bandit seemed to be having with the air. They knew he was talking with Hawk Moth, but the inherent madness of seeing a one sided conversation that came close to killing the only visible participant was... unnerving.

It finally came to an end when the neon butterfly around the Bandit's face turned black and shattered.

“Like I was saying before,” the Bandit panted. “Risk versus reward. For example, I just risked having my heart crushed like a berry by an evil mastermind... But the reward was well worth the risk.”

He looked straight at the pair. His billboard eyes now displaying the words “FREE PLAY.”

“You see,” the Bandit hissed lovingly. “I just became a free agent.”

Chapter End Notes

Logic: Had your OC villain make the Big Bad of the show look like a chode? I dunno man, you could piss a lot of fans off that way...

Me: Not my first fanfic. I know what I'm doing. If he didn't break free of Hawk Moth's control, it would just be another villain-of-the-week. While I see nothing wrong with the formula, you don't need me for that. I wanted to try something a little different. But TRUST ME, I haven't forgotten who's party this is.

Logic: Alright. I wonder how many people actually put on the songs you recommend for the chapter?

Me: Realistically? Probably no one.
Marinette slowly stood, never once taking her eye of the grinning villain. The Bandit looked at her back. Never breaking eye-contact until he went to check his watch. “Well!” he said brightly. “Look at the time. Listen, I gotta run. You two kids have fun without me, okay? And remember, there's a place and time for everything, and it's called 'Senior Prom!' Toodles!”

“No,” the Bandit laughed. “You're going to be stupid and try to charge me.”

“Damn right!” Noir said, vaulting over his extendable quarterstaff and flying at the villain for a high kick. With one swift motion the Bandit caught Noir's foot and moved it down to the ground, he then caught him by the throat and slammed him down to the hard concrete.

“Fine with me,” The Bandit shrugged. “Needed to take care of this anyway...”

“Cat Noir!” Ladybug ran up to assist but had to dodge revolver shots slowing her down.

“Blonde hair,” the Bandit muttered. “Average sized nose. Perfect teeth and complexion. Sheesh, you should know kid, the brace-laden acne-riddled nerds at your school? They hate your breathing guts. Even the ones you're nice to... Scratch that, especially the ones you're nice to.” He stood up and kicked Cat Noir away. He looked up just in time to see Ladybug's yo-yo connect with his face.

“I'm fine,” Noir said, rubbing his neck. “What the hell was he even talking about? Why was he describing my face? I'm not that pretty.”

I always thought you were, Marinette almost said out loud. Knowing Noir's identity was going to complicate things. “We need to find out where his Akuma is,” Ladybug said confidently. “If this psycho is off Hawk Moth's leash, he's more dangerous than anyone else we've personally faced...”

“Oww,” the Bandit said, rubbing his nose. “Watch where you're swinging that thing! You could take somebodies eye out.”

“What do you want?” Noir shouted back at the villain.

“You kids need to pay more attention when adults are talking...” The Bandit pinched the bridge of his nose. “I am a low-functioning psychopath with both homicidal, and suicidal tendencies. I just told that to Madame Butterfly back there.”
“Alright, so you want to die in a blaze of glory,” Ladybug said, trying to think of a plan. “Jump off the top of the Eiffel Tower.”

“Been done,” the Bandit sighed as he examined his gun. “Who else is bored of this gun? Let’s see if we can get something a little more fun.” He popped off his fake arm and tucked it under his real one. He then pulled down on the metal rod that was attached to the stump. The reels on his chest spun rapidly. “Hey Ladybug? Remember that 100:1 chance of me planting a bomb somewhere?”

Ladybug started to panic. “Oh no…”

“Always bet on the longshots, kid,” the Bandit grinned. The reels each stopped on something that looked like a bike handle. The words “DEAD MAN’S SWITCH” scrolled across his eyes. His jaw flipped open with a loud KA-CHING! and he spat out what, on closer inspection, appeared to be a detonator, and caught it with his real hand.

“Ooh, tsk tsk tsk tsk…” The Bandit flipped up the cover and pressed down the switch. “Now that's just bad luck.”

Ladybug and Cat Noir looked around frantically for the explosion. It took Cat Noir to ask the question. “Where's the kaboom?”

“It's a Dead Man's Switch, idiot!” the Bandit shouted. “The Kaboom comes when I take my thumb off the button.”

“If you let go of that button,” Ladybug panted. “Thousands of innocent people will…”

“Oh, don’t exaggerate,” the Bandit said, rolling his eyes. “More like dozens. The bomb's under the street and it has to have been well evacuated by now.”

“Under this street?!” Cat Noir’s eyes widened.

“So why don't you just set it off?” Marinette dared the villain. “You're the one who wanted to go out in a blaze of glory.”

“A bigger blaze than that, sheesh,” the Bandit scoffed. “One street with a bunch of C4? I can do better than that. I'm a proper supervillain now. I need to get me some henchmen, come up with a scheme, then when it comes down to it, build a great big Doomsday Device right in the middle of town. The whole nine yards.”

“I don't know, gambling man,” Noir said. “It sounds to me like you're bluffing.”

“Maybe I am,” the Bandit shrugged. “Either of you got the guts to call it?”

Ladybug and Cat Noir froze. Unable to move, neither one willing to risk the civilians.

“Risk and reward, little Ladybug,” the Bandit sneered. “The switch has got a five mile range, as far as you know. I don't think the smart money is on following me. Oh, rest assured, we will cross paths again. I just have to get some stuff together.”

“We're going to stop you,” Cat Noir said defiantly. “We're going to find you, and stop you. And when we do, we are going to shove you right back in that little dark box to be forgotten all over again.”

“Kitty Cat,” the Bandit stood at the base of a tall building, his back to the heroes. “If there was no risk of losing, there'd be no point in the bet.”
He leaped over the building, across the rooftops, and out of sight.

Cat Noir moved forward to pursue. “No,” Ladybug sighed. “We can't risk the civilians, and besides... my bet is at this point we'll never catch up to him.”

Noir kicked the dust. “Dammit!” he shouted. “What the hell just happened?!”

“I don't know.” Ladybug admitted. “Is it really possible he broke free of Hawk Moth's control? Could that even happen?”

“Seems like it!” Noir exclaimed. “And apparently, that's all it takes to pate the both of us! Now we've got a superpowered lunatic on the loose, and the worse part is, he's actively suicidal. What do you hold against someone like that?!”

Noir deflated a little after ranting. Marinette thought he still must be having a rough week. And what she did back on the rooftop couldn't have made it easier. She put her hand on his shoulder. “Hey,” she said quietly. “We'll find him. Like you said, we'll stop him and shove him back in his dark hole.”

Noir gave Ladybug a weak smile. “Why is it when you say it, I believe it?”

“Because I'm always right,” Ladybug joked. “You know that.”

Noir stepped back and nodded. Obviously feeling a little better.

“I'm sorry I bailed on you back there,” Ladybug sighed. “That wasn't cool... It was just the shock...”

“No, I-I get it,” Noir said nervously. “I mean, if I... I get it...”

Ladybug looked into Noir's eyes. Adrien's eyes. A thousand thoughts ran through her mind at once. It finally occurred to her that she didn't care who was the real Adrien, and who was the mask. Someone she cared about was in a bad place. Her feelings, whatever they were at this point, could wait. “I just want you to know,” she started. “I never saw you as-”

“Ladybug?!” came a call from the bluetooth. “Come in! LB, are you alright?”

“Alya?!” Ladybug had completely forgotten she was supposed to be on comms. “What the hell, girl? Where have you been?!”

“Doing your chores!” Alya said irritably. “Never ask me to cover for you again! I just did a bunch of unpaid grunt work for a Paris Bakery. The only thing I got out of it was a recipe for Meringue...”

“Is that Alya?” Noir asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Is that Adrien?” Alya shouted. “Put him on!”

“I'm not going to put him on,” Ladybug said, pinching her nose. She turned back to Noir. “I told her tonight, I had to talk to someone, it was driving me nuts.

“It's fine,” Noir raised a dismissive hand. “Nino apparently figured out months ago.”

Ladybug rolled her eyes. “Wifi, listen,” she said. “There might be a bomb...”

“I heard the whole thing,” Alya interjected. “I'm looking over the street camera footage.”

“You hacked into the street cameras?!” Ladybug said, shocked. “How did-”
“We'll talk about it later,” Alya said quickly. “The point is, the guy came in from off the street. He didn't even touch the sewers or the subway.”

“He was bluffing,” she told Cat Noir. “What do we do next? Can you... I don't know... Find him with the street cams?”

“I'd need a satellite uplink. That would take at least an hour,” Alya replied.

“Satellite uplink?” Ladybug replied. “Since when did you become this master hacker?”

“I said we'll talk about this later!” Alya snapped. Ladybug knew that tone of voice. For some reason, Alya was scared. “Look... I will need to talk to you about this, but not tonight. For now just come home. Tomorrow we'll regroup. All three of us. I'll do as much research as I can on this Bousquet guy.”

“Okay,” she turned back to Noir. “She wants the three of us to meet up tomorrow to work out a plan.”

“Make it four,” Noir added. “Nino won't want to miss this.”

“We could use him,” Alya responded, Ladybug nodded to Noir. “We'll need every example of Akumatization we can get to understand why this is different. My experience might not be typical. Tomorrow morning, outside of school. Be early.”

Ladybug repeated the information to Noir. “Does that sound alright?”

“Great idea,” Noir said. “Now, I need to get home before dad realizes I'm gone.”

He was about to vault away, but Marinette stopped him. “Adrien...” Cat Noir turned to face him. “About tomorrow... If you need to talk about anything. I'll be there.”

Cat Noir gave her a very sad smile. He knew what she meant. “Thank you,” he said softly. “But I'll be fine.”

Noir vaulted off, leaving Ladybug to look up from the street.

The Bandit had dropped the dummy trigger the minute he had leaped away from the heroes. They were going to have to take more risks if this was going to get interesting.

He landed hard on a rooftop, and looked out over the dimly lit autumn night. He took a deep breath in through his pointed nose. He pondered the panic in the streets at the sight of him. The red and blue lights of the police cars. The gunfire that did nothing. The look of panic and shock on the Hawk Moth's face when he realized he wasn't holding all the cards anymore.

What a beautiful night to be alive.

He had told the heroes that he needed a scheme. This wasn't true. He already had one. A damn good one. One that could make the Legion of Doom hide their faces away in shame. He was really getting into the whole “Supervillain” shtick.

The plan came in a five tasks. The first was already in motion. Research. He was still awaiting trial when the Bug and the Cat debuted. He needed to research every point of their history as heroes, and what their soft targets were. It's good to know the guy across the table. And he would, in every sense of the word.
The second task? Recruitment. Long story short, he needed bodies to throw at the two of them to keep them busy. And something to persuade them to come along. That shouldn't be a problem. There was an element in Paris, even if the government hated to admit it. A nice dark underbelly on the city of lights.

Third task. Location. He'd need a big, obvious place. Somewhere everyone could see. Where all eyes could be on him. Someplace that hadn't been done to death, though. A great big Paris landmark that everybody knew, but was under-appreciated.

Fourth task. Procurement. He could only manipulate his reels so much. To hit the jackpot he had to rely on good old Lady Luck. He gave the lever another pull to see what he got. Nothing. This was going to take some time.

Final Task. Punishment. He was going to kill the kid heroes. That much was obvious. But the first thing he wanted to do was break them. Utterly and completely break them. Make them regret the day they ever decided to get into the heroics game. Only after the light of their last hope left their eyes would he finally end them. Because that's how you do it. If you have to just kill indiscriminately you're not having any fun with your work. Crush the mind. Tear the soul. Only then should you break the body.

He looked out over the city, fully prepared to secure his legacy. All of the great comic villains had a tag line... He had already written his.


Chapter End Notes

Logic: Huh. Over 250 hits. How many of those are you?

Me: Oh, at least 50, considering how AO3's hit system works. Now shut up and let me start the next chapter.

Logic: Already?! You're not going to give yourself a night?

Me: Nope. Chapter after next is a big one and I want it out before the 14th.

Logic: You mean before season 2 drops and annihilates your worldbuilding?

Me: Yep.
What He Left Behind

Chapter Summary

The Management doesn't have a song for you to use this time, but boy howdy will he have one next time. weirdly enough the song that was playing in his head was "The Night they Drove Old Dixie Down" as performed by Joan Baez, but that doesn't quite fit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Midnight. This would make twelve years.

Twelve years since Gabriel Agreste stood in front of a great evil, prepared to give his life, only to discover to his horror that his wife would do it for him. Before she went, she begged him to take care of her son.

She was the only one on earth who made him feel like he was anything other than a bank account. She didn't just make him feel alive, she made life worth living. She was the first one to not let him get away with murder simply because of who his parents were. She saw him as a human being, and he would always thank her for that.

She objected to the portrait, at first. She joked it was a little too stuck-up, even for Gabe. Gabriel insisted, however. He wanted the world to see her as he did. An angel in white framed in gold. He looked up at her from the stair on which he was sitting.

“Marie,” he sighed. “What am I going to do? I never suspected that...”

He trailed off. He should have suspected. After all, it was people like Bousquet that took her from him in the first place. The kind of pure, insipid evil that tainted this world. He was the thing that made the world uninhabitable for perfection such as her.

The kind of evil that the Agrestes were once tasked to fight. Being the kind of woman that she was, she was willing and able to do it. For a few wonderful, all-to-brief years, he joined her. They both stood together against those who would strike fear into the hearts of men...

And when the time came to face it head on... They lost. He was told that they had won the day, but this was not what victory felt like. Victory wasn't finding yourself on your knees, wondering how life continued from that point. Questioning if you could even go home and face the child you brought into the world because he just looked so... so much like her.

This world wasn't good enough for her. So he resolved to fix it.

But now with this... This monster of his creation on this blind, senseless rampage... He wasn't sure he could fulfill that promise. He felt lower than he had in some time.

His head shot up when he heard Natalie enter the room. “Sir?” she asked gently. “Mr. Agreste, you should be asleep. Your blood pressure.”

He gave her a grim snort. “Forgive me, Natalie. I'm just...” He looked up at her portrait again.
“Wallowing.”

Natalie moved closer to the staircase and leaned against the railing. “Tomorrow makes...” She looked up and counted in her head. “Twelve years since we lost her.”

“Natalie, at this moment it is...” Gabriel checked his wristwatch. “12:21 am. Today, makes twelve years since we lost her.”

“If I may be so blunt, Mr. Agreste...” Natalie looked up at the portrait. “I miss her too.”

“It’s not just a matter of missing her, Natalie,” Gabriel sighed. “I do. Good lord, I do, but that isn’t everything. She is... She was the only reason I ever thought I could ever be worth anything. You know, she asked me to do one thing before she left. One thing. And I can’t even do that right. Every day this week me and Adrien have been in some sort of fight... I just... I just feel so utterly useless.”

Natalie looked at the floor. “Sir,” she started shakily. “I know it’s not my place.”

“I just unloaded my emotional baggage on to you,” Gabriel smiled. “You have permission to speak freely.”

Natalie took off her glasses and looked right at Gabriel. “I knew Marie for longer than you did,” she said frankly. “We went to middle school together. Marie Aberjonois didn’t waste her time with useless. She fell in love with you because you did have something to offer. Something real. Quite frankly, sir, I don’t think you give yourself enough credit. I think the reason why you and Adrien have butted heads so often is because he’s like his mother. He sees it in you too.”

Gabriel stood up and faced the portrait of his wife. “Do you think I can fix the mistakes I’ve made?”

“You were her husband, sir,” Natalie said softly. “You could remake the world, if you needed to.”

A grin spread across his face. She was right. Self-pity was beneath him. Beneath Marie. He would right his mistakes. He would remake the world. More than anything else, he would see her again.

Priority one was making sure that Bousquet knew why no one crossed the Hawk Moth.

“I’ll be going out tomorrow,” he said calmly. “Have the car ready.”

Natalie nodded and left Gabriel alone in the room.

“I swear, it will all be worth it,” Gabriel said to his wife. “My sweet Honeybee.”

Marinette had made it to the agreed meeting place. Behind the schoolhouse, sixty minutes early for class. She was the second to arrive, just behind Alya, who was fishing something out of her bag. Looking the worse for wear.

“Tell me you got some sleep,” Marinette called to her.

“Nope,” Alya answered quickly.

“Me neither,” she sighed, placing her bookbag down. “I could almost swear I heard him laughing outside of my window last night. Who knew that clanging chage could be so scary?”

“Uh,” Alya looked up and considered the question. “Rod Serling.”
“Who?” Marinette asked.

“Okay, classic Twilight Zone,” Alya nodded. “Making a note for next Girl's Night.”

“Girl's night would mean I’d have to skip it,” a voice called up from the hill. “I mean, I know I'm gorgeous, but this is all man.”

They turned round to see Nino Lahiffe walking up to the meeting place from the small grassy hill. Alya strode right up to him and smacked him upside his head. “Where the hell have you been?!” she hissed at him. “I told you to be here over fifteen minutes ago!”

“Ow!” Nino protested. “Be lucky I got here at all, Alya! I had to wrench my dad out of bed to get me here, and with me coming home late last night I think he's starting to think I'm dealing.”

“Sorry, I'm a bit on edge,” Alya sighed. “Listen, where's Adrien.”

Nino shrugged. “I'unno.”

“What do you mean 'I'unno!” Alya shouted. “He didn't come with you?”

“We live two different lives, and in two very different places,” Nino clarified. “I don't know where he is. He said he'd meet up with us here. Be patient.”

It didn't take long for Adrien to arrive. He kept looking back to where he came from very confused. “What the hell was that about?”

“What's up, man?” Nino asked.

“My dad,” Adrien answered. “He... like... talked to me. Like a normal person for once. He let me talk about Mom, and ask questions... He even gave me advice on w...” he trailed off when he caught sight of Marinette. “It's just.. It's not like him.”

“Maybe he's lightening up,” Nino mused. “I mean, of ever a dude needed it,”

Adrien nodded incredulously, then turned back towards the group. “Alright, we're all here,” he said calmly. “What have you found out?”

Alya whipped out her smartphone. “I know this will come as a shock to you, but,” she said calmly. “This guy is a serious psycho. Jacques Edouard Bousquet, born January 14th, 1985, to, you guessed it, a broken home. Abusive father...”

“Oh...” Marinette said with a note of sympathy.

“For the six years he was around,” Alya finished. “Before it is believed a young Bousquet pushed him in front of a subway train.”

“Oh...” Marinette said with a note of horror.

“Yeah,” Alya nodded. “It turfs out on you like that. Every time you think it might stop being horrible... Look, here's another one. He married a Las Vegas Blackjack dealer...”

“And lived happily ever after, now leaving his dark past behind him?” Marinette said hopefully.

“After gambling away the small inheritance given to her by her elderly grandmother...”

“Oh lord,” Adrien sighed.
“He then proceeded to tie her to a log and feed her to a freaking sawmill?!” Nino guessed.

“Shot her through the head in a Paris hotel,” Alya finished. “Dressing the scene to look like a suicide. She was the first victim in the string of murders that finally led to his capture.”

Marinette was pinching the bridge of her nose. “At least they caught him.”

“Forty-one bodies later,” Alya nodded.

“Okay,” said Adrien, trying to regain his bearings. “The guy is an almost comically sadistic creep. We knew that. How does this help?”

“Sadistic doesn't even begin to cover it,” Alya stepped forward a little to press the point home. “There's a reason he bailed last night. He wants to hurt you both. This guy won't be satisfied until he's taken everything from you, and crushed your spirit. He's a cat, Adrien. He want's to play with you, then kill you.”

“Hey!” came a small voice from inside Adrien's bookbag. “I resemble that remark!”

Marinette had never seen Adrien's Kwami close up before, and by the looks of things neither had Nino.

“Ah!” Nino screamed. “Cat demon!!” He swatted at the catlike imp a couple of times. Each time the Kwami ducked out of the way of being squashed. Eventually, Adrien caught the creature by the scruff of the neck.

“Plagg, this is everyone,” Adrien sighed. “Everyone, Plagg.”

At the mention of the Kwami's name there was a violent shaking from Marinette's purse. She could hear muffled shouts coming from the inside. She decided it was best to not let Tikki out for the time being. Plagg was enough to explain.

“What the hell, dude?!” Nino asked, still terrified of the little black cat.

“A Kwami, like Plagg here, is the spirit of a Miraculous gem,” Adrien explained.

“More like the Miraculous were made to contact us,” Plagg clarified.

“He's the source of my powers,” Adrien continued. “Imagine if the Akuma ate old cheese, and never shut the hell up.”

“I met Marinette's,” Alya added. “Is she here?”

“Tikki?” Marinette asked nervously, trying to ignore more violent, angry shaking from the handbag. “No... No she's back at home. She'll be here when I need her.” There was something about the way Tikki desperately wanted out of that bag that made Marinette hesitate over bringing her out. She would apologize later.

“Speaking of the Akuma,” she said, desperately trying to change the subject before Tikki chewed a hol in her bag. “Nino, Alya, you both were Akumatized... Didn't you ever try to break free from Hawk Moth's control?”

Nino and Alya looked down and away from Marinette. This was still very uncomfortable to talk about. “I need you to imagine the biggest funk you've ever been in,” Nino started. “The most depressed, or angry, or bitter you've ever felt about anything.”
Marinette put herself back to any position she was ever in that involved Chloe Bourgeois.

“Now take that bitter feeling you've got in your stomach,” Nino explained. “Make it your whole world, and then...”

“Turn all of it into hate,” Alya finished. “Nothing else matters except revenge. You just want to cause someone pain. Hurt them like you've been hurt. Your willpower, your good qualities, your sense of self? All of it buried under a ten mile mound of your very worst qualities. And that's not even the wort part.”

Marinette put her hand on her friend's shoulder.

“It doesn't leave all the way,” Alya was starting to tear up. “It leaves a... residue. You start getting angry more easily. Long nights can make you irritable. You start noticing...” Alya trailed off.

“That you could do things after the transformation that you couldn't do before,” Marinette guessed. “Like... Hack into a Paris street camera?”

Alya looked right at Marinette. Tears streaming down her face. “Marinette, I was the internet for twelve hours,” she sobbed. “Ever since I came out of it I can just... understand computers. Practically talk to them. Every time I log in it feels like I'm going to revert. It's been scaring the hell out of me, Marinette...”

“Hey,” Marinette wrapped Alya in a tight hug. “Alya, you are one of the smartest, nicest people I know. There is a reason Hawk Moth had to crush your will to make you a supervillain. You are not evil. You're going to help me prove that, okay.”

Alya nodded, calming down. “Rebelling didn't feel like an option,” she explained quietly. “It was like he was standing right over my shoulder. I got to know him in that time. If I ever passed him on the street I think...”

“You'd know,” Nino finished. “You've never met him in person, but if you saw Hawk Moth you'd know it was him.” He looked up to meet everyone's gaze. “I'm just rambling. Ignore me.”

A pall had fallen over the meeting. Marinette begged for something to break the tension so they could move on.

Luckily, at that moment Marinette's purse broke open. “PLAGG!” Tikki shrieked. “You mangy, two-timing creep!!”

“Tikki!” Marinette said, in shock. “What's gotten into you!”

“Wait a minute,” Alya held up a hand. “Two-Timing?”

“Tikki!” Plagg said awkwardly as he hid behind Adrien. “Been a while.”

“I swore that if I ever saw your furry face again I'd force feed you your own whiskers,” Tikki growled.

“What did you do?!” Adrien asked his Kwami.


“What did he do?!” Tikki squeaked at Adrien. “I turn my back for one minute, and I find him cheating on me with that preening peacock bimbo!!”
“Wait,” Marinette asked, confused. “You two were a thing?”

“Peacock Bimbo?” Adrien tried to get some clarification.

“Cat's don't do monogamy, Tikki!” Plagg shot back. “You knew that when we got together.”

“Oh!” Tikki squeaked indignantly, turning her back on Plagg in a huff.. “Men are all alike. I don't know why Marinette bothers.”

“Oh my god,” Alya said. “This is the most adorable thing I've ever seen...”

“It's like a soap opera with Plushies,” Nino added.

“Plagg! Tikki!” came another small, but stern voice from behind them. “You both know better than to let your personal affairs interfere with your duties.”

They all turned to meet the eyes of a third Kwami. A green one with yellow eyes and a shell on it's back. Marinette recognized it.

“Master Wayzz!” Tikki and Plagg said simultaneously, before they both gave the creature a deep bow.

“Wayzz, why do you have to interrupt when it gets interesting?” came a wizened old voice from behind the Kwami. Wayzz turned and bowed, and Marinette quickly followed suit.

The Grand Guardian looked rather unassuming. An elderly balding Chinese man with a wispy beard. He wasn't very tall, he had a kind face, and he seemed to walk with a pronounced limp. But appearances could be deceiving.

“Now,” said Master Fu. “I understand you kids are having your troubles.

The man who called himself Martin was shocked when he entered the bar. He kicked the door open, both hands being occupied. One with a large burlap sack, and one with a Smartphone.

“What the hell,” he said through a huge toothy grin. “Are you idiots doing in a gin joint at ten in the morning?!”

The ruffians in the bar backed off. They knew not to mess with supers when they came calling.

“You should find something more productive to do with your time!” He held up the smartphone. “See, me? I've been reading this blog! Fascinating stuff! This girl has got a head on her shoulders! With enough hard work and determination she too can become a worthless talking head on BBC worldwide.”

He slung the sack over his shoulder. “You learn some things!” he smiled. “In fact, this one post... Well, long story short I need to break into a highschool. So...”

He poured out the contents of the sack onto the ground. Gold coins. Practically the size of hubcaps. They tinkled and spilled out all over the floor. “Who wants to be a faceless goon?”

Without hesitation, the goons leaped on the money. Taking bits of it and cramming it into their pockets. Martin picked up one coin and examined it incredulously. He peered out from behind his sunglasses. “Should we ask where you got this kind of money?”

“Oh him?” the Bandit answered. “He lent me the phone.”
Chapter End Notes

Logic: Bandit is moving into PARODY at this point.

Me: Eh, Bandit was always kinda parody. He literally started out as me taking a shot at the Pegi rating system for putting the kibosh on Pokemon's Game Corner, deciding to make slot machines as dangerous as the EU seemed to think they were. Sun and Moon had very implicitly implied CHILD ABUSE, but it's the casino is what pushes it to Pegi 12?

Logic: Hey, stop that. Who's Logic here?

Me: Sorry
The Management literally cannot imagine anything after the point where Alya's phone starts ringing without Kanye West's "All of the Lights" playing in the background.

Something to keep in mind

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After listening to his intentions, the Bandit's new top man Martin suggested not attacking the school directly. Apparently, he recognized that history textbook from his kid's homework. He had access to what the Bandit needed. It was boring, but practical. He didn't want to cause too much of a fuss. Not until he got the machine to pay out.

He gave it another spin. Nothing.

He rolled the pen around in his hand, surrounded by his new gang. He had a gang now. Thirty of the biggest low-lives in Paris were now willing to die for him because he could pay them right. He laughed in his throat. He was obviously insane. Obviously unstable... And he obviously had plenty of money to burn. Risk and reward.

Martin soon walked in the door, package in his hand. He laid in on the table in front of the Bandit. The Bandit smiled and opened up the manila envelope...

And pulled out the yearbook.

"Why exactly did you need a highschool yearbook?" Martin asked.

The Bandit simply smiled. "Martin, do you know why a domino mask works?"

"I'm sorry?" Martin asked.

"A domino mask," the Bandit repeated, slowly leafing through the yearbook. "Those little masks that only cover your eyes."

Martin stood silent.

"Because it makes no sense, right?" The Bandit continued leafing through the yearbook, not in any rush to get to the right page. "You see it in movies and you're like 'Sheesh, they're so easily recognizable in those little masks... But they're not. Human facial recognition focuses on the eyes, specifically the muscles around them, and how they move. So covering that area is a very good way to cover your identity. It changes how your whole face is framed. Most people get thrown off."

Martin nodded.

"You wanna know why I'm not most people?" the Bandit asked, as he arrived at the right page. He clicked the pen and began to scan the portraits.
“Why?” Martin asked.

He circled one portrait, then another, before finally looking up at Martin. “I play poker.” He snapped the yearbook shut and made for the exit. “Take the boys, and secure the location. I want to be ready to start in a week. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

“It’s not going to be easy to-”

“I have faith that you won’t screw up,” the Bandit smiled. “If you do, there is more where you came from.” The first task was nearly complete. He had managed to find out everything to about the other players at he table, and he was just a few easy-to-get numbers away from winning the hand. Finding people in Paris was next to impossible, but it became much easier when they had faces and names.

Adrien Agreste, and Marinette Dupin-Cheng.

“Master Fu!” Marinette was panicking, she hadn't warned the Grand Guardian about the fact that she told her friends her identity. “I can explain. I--”

“You told them,” Master Fu finished. “It's all right.”

Marinette was thrown off. “It is?”

“I wanted you both to wait until you were older,” Fu continued as he headed to the middle of the group. “The people you know at sixteen you won't necessarily want in your life when you're twenty. When you reveal that secret to them, they become permanent fixtures in your life. So you better be sure these are going to be your lifelong friends. Otherwise...”

She looked at Alya, Nino, and then Adrien. “I'm sure,” she said, not taking her eyes off Adrien.

“I believe you.” Master Fu looked around to see the other three teens looking at him like he was a space alien. “Ah... You didn't tell them about me.”

“I was getting there,” Marinette said awkwardly.


“Shenqi?” Alya asked.

“The Chinese word for 'Miraculous,’” his Kwami clarified.

“The stick-in-the-mud is my Kwami, Wayzz.” Fu continued.

Nino snapped his fingers. “I get it!” He pointed his finger right at Fu. “You're the Mr. Miyagi!”

“Nino!” Alya slapped his hand. “Insensitive!”

Fu seemed to ponder the suggestion. “He was Japanese,” Fu replied. “And not mystic enough. Think more Egg Shen.”

Nino nodded, understanding immediately.

“You're the guy who gave me my Miraculous,” Adrien said, seemingly looking through Fu. “I've been wondering what your deal was... Or if you were even real.”
“Oh, I'm real,” Fu assured them. “And I'm aware of the current situation. It's partially my fault... All of your problems have been...”

“What do you mean, Teacher?” Marinette asked. “It was Hawk Moth...”

“Ladybug,” Fu sighed. “Hawk Moth exists because I failed. I choose who receives a Miraculous. If one falls into the wrong hands, that is my responsibility.”

“I think the responsibility lies with the idiot who created the mind control jewel that turns people into monsters,” Nino added. “Who thought that was a good guy power?”

“It was never meant to control,” Fu sighed. “It was meant to inspire. Yes, it found you at your lowest, but it pulled you out of that darkness. It never buried you in it. It reminded you that you still had power when you felt powerless, and it brought it out of you. It was traditionally given to someone who could inspire the weak to act. The kind of hero who made the common man realize that sometimes, they could save themselves.

“And he could,” Fu continued. “He could inspire. He was a man you wanted to follow. Because he had a way of making sure you knew that there was a light at the end of every tunnel. You just had to keep moving forward.”

“Forgive me, sir,” Alya said quietly. “But... What happened?”

Fu seemed to look at Adrien, then look down. “He lost someone,” he said sadly. “The woman who pulled him out of his own darkness. He blamed me... In a way it is my fault. There should have been a better solution... But I let the team down. After that... We just fell apart.”

“Team?” Adrien asked.

Fu nodded. “Turtle, Fox, Bee, Peacock, Moth,” he gestured to Adrien and Marinette. “Ladybug and Black Cat. Seven jewels for seven warriors brought together to stop a great evil. Created by the Emperor's personal Mage.”

“What great evil?” Adrien asked.

“Pray you never find out,” Wayzz commented. Plagg and Tikki were visibly shaken by the memory of it.

“This is the first generation where the seven have been separated,” Fu clarified. “I still have mine. The Ladybug and Black Cat are here with us now. We know where the Moth is. The Fox is complicated. The Peacock was taken by it's owner to pass on to her daughter, but she died before she could. And the Bee...” He looked up toward the gloomy sky. “We may never see the Bee again.”

There was a moment of silence, seemingly taken for a lost hero. Marinette had never noticed how sad the Grand Guardian's eyes looked until now.

“Listen,” Adrien said, finally breaking the long silence. “Hawk Moth, I can't believe I'm saying this, is not our primary concern here. Master, has an Akumatized person ever broken away from the Moth Miraculous before?

“Not for quite some time,” the Grand Guardian answered. “The rules, however. Haven't changed. Purify the Akuma, and you put an end to the powers. The Akuma puts itself in something of great sentimental value.”

“So...,” he started. “What? The gun? The suit?”
“The gun was a product of his powers,” Marinette thought out loud. “And I don't think the suit is prison garb.”

“Plus, I categorically refuse to strip him,” Adrien added.

“I may have a lead on that,” Alya chimed in. ‘Listen to this. 'At the defendants request, the warden allowed him to keep his father's lucky poker chip while incarcerated. Bousquet took the keepsake with him as a-”

Marinette stopped her. “Don't say it,” she sighed. “Lucky charm...”

“'Good luck charm,' it says here,” Alya corrected. “Point is, I think we have a winner. He kept it in his pocket whenever he gambled.”

“So all we have to do is pickpocket a serial killer,” Nino said dryly. “Piece of cake.”

“I've never seen this chip,” Marinette thought aloud. “I mean, if I had something like that I'd be fidgeting with it constantly.”

Alya snapped his fingers. “That's got to be his tell!”

“His what?” Nino asked.

“Very good, Alya,” Fu responded. “I was thinking the same thing.”

Alya grew a little self-satisfied smile. “All gamblers have a tell,” she explained. “Something they absentmindedly do when they're nervous about a bet. It's how poker players are able to sniff out bluffs or misdirects.”

“But he bluffed us last night,” Adrien remembered. “And his hand didn't move near his pocket...”

“You can train yourself out of doing it every time you bluff,” Fu explained. “But never entirely. When things get too heated, and you get too nervous, you will drop your tell. I learned that the hard way.”

“Staring down a bad guy?” Nino asked.

“Mahjong tournament,” Fu clarified. “I lost my car.”

“So all we have to do is make him nervous,” Adrien said. “Put him in a position where he's not sure he's in control.”

“Then go at him when he fidgets with the chip,” Marinette finished. “Alright we have a plan.”

There was a brief moment of confidence that came to a crashing halt when Alya's phone went off. “News update,” she said. Her eyes widened. “What the hell?!”

“What?” Marinette asked. “Alya what is it?”

Alya handed the phone to Marinette, and Marinette's jaw nearly hit the floor. The Arc de Triomphe, a French national landmark, an almost fifty meter high stone archway, was missing. Seemingly covered by a huge neon dome that cascaded down different colors. On the front of it read the message “GRAND OPENING.” Under it there was a countdown. It seemed to have started from 180 hours.

Marinette passed the phone around. Each of them looking at the dome with confusion. “A bomb?”
Adrien guessed.

“I don't think so,” Alya answered. “Grand Opening sounds like he'll put on more of a spectacle than that. Remember, this guy wants to put himself on a stage where people can see him torment die. Like a guillotine platform. If it is a bomb, I am willing to bet that's not a detonation timer. He'll want to preen first.”

“You guys told me that he was also leaning into the comic villain thing,” Nino remembered. “‘Big Doomsday Device right in the middle of town,’ he said? He's probably building it under there.”

Marinette nodded, then turned to Master Fu and bowed. “I'm sorry, Teacher,” she said. “But I need to—”

“Duty calls,” Fu said, waving a dismissive hand. “Don't worry about me.”

“Thank you.” Marinette stood in position. “You ready Adrien?”

“Whenever you are, Milady,” Adrien responded.

“Tikki, spots—”

And then Alya's phone rang.

“Yes?” Alya answered. “Mrs. Dupin-Cheng? I... Yeah, she's here... Okay I'll hand you over...” Alya held the phone out to Marinette. “It's your Mom, she sounds really weird.”

Marinette took the phone. “Mom?”

“He's in the house,” Marinette's mother said in a horrified whisper. “I think I smell gas.”

She kept her on the phone for as long as she could, but eventually she had been cut off. Marinette had assured her that it would be alright. That she had sent Ladybug off to save them both. She could only hope that Ladybug could do it. She was shaking the whole way.

It had started to rain by the time she made it to the house. What she saw there would etch itself into her mind forever.

The bakery where she had lived her entire life, that her parents had built from the ground up, was now covered in flames. Every inch of it, on fire. Her mother was backing away from the wreckage, a look of pure terror on her face.

When she saw Ladybug land, she ran up to her. “Please, you've got to help us!” she coughed. “He has my husband!”

Ladybug made to sprint into the burning building, when something emerged from it.

Tom Dupin was not a small man. He was a good six-four, and had played rugby in his youth. So him being dragged, bloody and unconscious, out of a burning building by his collar would be jarring to anyone. To his daughter, who had always seen her Daddy as invincible, it was traumatizing.

She looked at the monster responsible, knowing true hatred for the first time.

“Ladybug, Ladybug,” the Bandit called out. “Fly away home.”
Logic: O_o Okay. A few things. First off, what did we learn from last time?

Me: People have better things to do on a Saturday night than read a Fanfic by an idiot. Publish early, and don't freak out so much.

Logic: Good. Second, Master Fu just showed up, exposited about the Miraculous, then didn't matter?

Me: Hey! Just like the show, amirite? In all seriousness, he had a reason for coming, but it was interrupted. I'll make it clear later.

Logic: Third, no one is going to get the Egg Shen joke.

Me: Not my fault they didn't get the joke. Their fault for not seeing Big Trouble in Little China.

Logic: Fair enough. Fourth, that dome is going to lead to something ridiculous, isn't it?

Me: LUDICROUS is more like it. This is the most daffy villain scheme I have ever come up with. It's over-the-top, and a little silly, but I'm proud of it.

Logic: Finally, and this is a BIG one, you are taking a HUGE risk here. You better hope you're as good a writer as you think you are, because burning down Marinette's HOUSE might piss some people off! You've essentially murdered a primary show location.

Me: I know. TRUST ME, I know. But I stand by my decision. Because the entire fic spiraled out of this scene. Originally, it was going to be Hawk Moth, but it was, in my opinion, far too sadistic for him. He's a planner, and he doesn't do things just out of spite. This is what I thought he'd do if Hawk Moth found out Marinette's identity, but the action seemed out of character. Then I bemoaned the fact that all the villains were shackled to Hawk Moth, and I asked why he didn't use a hardened criminal for Akumatization. It was addressing both of those issues that led to the creation of the One-Armed Bandit. The idea of revealing identities appealed to me so much, that I decided this is also how I'd write the identity reveal from our heroes. I had to keep the scene in, because there would be no fic without it.

If you are offended by this scene, as a fan of the show, I understand. If you are simply worried, I just need you to trust me. I swear, I know what I'm doing.
The Management recommends playing "Wolf in Sheep's Clothing" by Set it Off at the appropriate time.

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Bandit looked right at her. Not in a menacing or threatening way, more like he was surprised to see her on the subway. Brushing off what he just did as if it was nothing. The flames were glittering off of his huge teeth, still twisted into a manic smile. Over his shoulder was lung a sledgehammer that Marinette soon pieced together was used to beat her father bloody. His mannequin hand now seemed longer, and thinner. A result of melting from the heat of the flames.

His billboard eyes were constantly displaying the message “WELCOME MARINETTE!!”

He let go of Marinette's father with his now heat-warped plastic hand. “Now, I'm going to have to get a new one,” he grumbled, looking at the melting arm. “Maybe I can pop one out later.”

Marinette couldn't speak. She was so angry she could barely move.

“My powers are pretty damn cool, actually,” the Bandit laughed as he stepped hard on Marinette' father's chest. “I can literally make anything I want. Well, to a point. I can't just kill you by pinning the reels, I need to think of a knife or something and do the work myself. But if I wanted to make something completely new up, like... some kind of machine that edits a national monument to make it look how I want, I can totally do that! Martin called them 'Nanites,' I call them 'Vegas Architechts.'”

“You... despicable... bastard,” Marinette said shakily.

“You right, I'm being rude,” the Bandit waved his hand in mock apology. “I mean I come to your house and...” He turned and faced the burning wreckage. “Whoo... I just make a mess of the place. I don't even take the time to greet the hostess. Marinette, right?”

Marinette looked back at her mother, then back to the Bandit. Wanting to rip the snide tongue out of his head.

“That's your mom, Sabine,” he gestured to Marinette's mother, and kicked her father hard. “This is your dad, Tom. You own, live, and work out of a bakery that your parents started the year you were born. I've seen your website! I've gotta try some of those Macarons, they look superb!” He looked back at the burning wreckage. “You know, eventually.”

Marinette made to lunge at the villain, but the Bandit casually touched the sledgehammer to her father's head. “Tsk, tsk, tsk,” he said smugly. “Now, now, Marinette, we'll get to that in a minute, but let me say my piece first. Because right now? Your dad will be fine. He'll recover from his injuries. Keep that in mind while I have this sledgehammer this close to a close relative of yours.”

Marinette stopped dead. Still shaking with anger.
“So anyway,” the Bandit continued, slinging the hammer over his shoulder again. “You're probably wondering why I did this to you. Well, other than the obvious... You know? The bad guy thing? I could have gone after Adrien, but his house is guarded like a fort, and I didn't feel like working. I could have gone after Alya and her family, but I could barely make myself care about torturing your sidekick. No, no. I wanted you. Because there's something about you I just can't stand.”

“I'm different,” Marinette said through gritted teeth. “I can't stand anything about you.”

The Bandit let out a sharp laugh. “You're bluffing,” he said with a sneer. “Not just here and now, but all the time. Every time you put on that damn mask. The cat is too, but the way you do it is so... Damned... Obvious. You're a scared little girl who got into her mother's dresser and tried on her outfits, but you try to pass yourself off as this hero that everyone can put their faith in. And the worst part is, everyone buys it. Everyone is convinced that no matter how things get, you will save them. I'm calling that bluff.

“Right now,” he looked at his wristwatch. “The cat's trying his little 'Death Touch' thing on the wall of Nanites that are surrounding the Arc, discovering that he can only destroy a fistful at a time before they replicate. It will do nothing. And the best part is, Paris will watch it do nothing. And none of them will understand why.

“Your parents are in a better position than most,” he continued. “When their daughter signed up to be a superhero, they had to know something like this could happen. So... I...” He took a look at Marinette’s mother, and the shocked expression on her face.

“No...” He said with mocking glee. “You're kidding...” He began to laugh his mechanical laugh and moved away from Marinette's father. “They didn't know?! You didn't tell your parents?!” He doubled over, laughing. “Oh my god! I mean--” He kept laughing. “Woo, I did not see that coming, okay. Ladybug that is cold. I mean, for god's sake, what if this ends up killing you! You're gonna be dead, and your parents won't know why! They should have been the first people to know! Let me fix that...”

“Son of a...” She waited for the right moment to strike, to furious to even think.

“Mei,” he gestured over to Marinette's mom. “You might want to tell Henri when he wakes up. I'd like to introduce you. Meet miss Marinette Dupin-Cheng.” He pointed the sledgehammer right at Marinette. “The Miraculous Ladybug!”

That was the moment. Ladybug lunged at the Bandit and hit him squarely in the gut. Causing him to drop the sledgehammer.

The Bandit coughed and a few gold coins fell out of his mouth. “Well,” he said popping off his fake arm. “That struck a nerve.” He threw the plastic arm in the burning wreckage and pulled on the metal pole attached to his shoulder. The reels in his chest spun and landed on three images of what appeared to be a knife. His billboard eyes displayed the message “CUTLASS.” His jaw flipped open and he pulled a long sword from his mouth with his remaining hand. “So that's what a pirate sword is called,” he shrugged. “Learn something new every day.” He began to slice at Ladybug.

Ladybug managed to duck and weave several swings while still managing to stay in close proximity to her attacker. Eventually she got close enough to pick up the sledgehammer, and block the next swing. “Mom!” she called, holding back the Bandit as he pushed the sword against the hammer. “Get Dad out of here and wait for the police.”

“Gonna take'em a bit, Sabine!” the Bandit shouted. “They're held up across town!”
“What about you?” Marinette’s mother called back.

“I’ll be fine!” she lied. “Just go!”

Marinette’s mother ran up and collected her father, then moved out of sight.

“Oh good,” the Bandit strained. “We’re alone. We can talk.” He kicked Marinette in the gut and sent her flying down the street.

She held her gut, wincing in pain, looking up at the Bandit who towered over her.

“The Man Who Killed Paris,” the Bandit growled. “Some tagline, huh? I made it myself... But then I thought... That was way too small.”

Ladybug swung her leg into the Bandit's ankles, causing him to fall hard to the concrete. She crouched over him, stepping on his wrist, pinning it to the ground. She put one elbow on his throat, and raised the other fist to pound his face into the concrete. “How about 'The Man With the Broken Face’?”

“Really?” the Bandit coughed. “That's the best quip you got?”

“I am going to make you regret ever crawling out of your hole,” Ladybug growled.

“Good god, you're bad at this,” the Bandit wheezed through Ladybug's elbow. “I keep telling you...” Ladybug was struck in the back by the Bandit's knee. It didn't hurt much, but it caused her to lose the pin she had on the Bandit's arm. She had to backflip away from another swipe from the cutlass. “Leave emotion at the door,” he panted as he got up and rubbed his neck.

Marinette tried to think of a plan. She could use the Lucky Charm, but that was a one shot deal. If it failed, she was vulnerable. She also heavily doubted that the bandit would let her find out how the Lucky Charm was meant to be used.

“Listen,” the Bandit raised his hand to stop Ladybug. “I don't want to fight. Not now. I've got big plans in the work, and I want you to share them with me. In eight days, I'm going to put on a little show. You're invited. So is Adrien. The only problem is, I'm missing a prop...

“Like I said,” he grabbed onto the makeshift lever attached to his shoulder. “I can control what I make with my powers to a point. But the one thing I need most in order for me to get what I want? That's three sevens. And for that, I've got to rely on good old Lady Luck.” He pulled down on the rod, and the reels began to spin. “Let's see if I can make this pay out.”

Seven... Seven... Seven.

At that moment, sounds came from nowhere. Bells, beeps, cascading coin. The Bandit's billboard eyes flashed brighter than ever before. The word displayed: JACKPOT.

The Bandit let out a huge grin. “You've got to be kidding,” he said gleefully. “Damn, I'm on a roll.”

He lurched forward, as if about to vomit. Then he did it again. And again. Each time making a sickening gag. Ladybug feared what was going to come out of him. She even wondered if he was sick.

With one final heave, a massive lump moved into his throat. His jaw flipped downwards with the familiar KA-CHING. Soon the opening seemed to barely fit a large spherical object. He soon spat it out, and barely caught it with his hand.
The object was the same shape as a soccer ball, but twice the size. It looked like it was made of copper, with each hexagonal segment on its surface glittering like a newly minted Centime. Each of them surrounded by thick black lines that separated the segments.

“Oh my god,” the Bandit said gleefully. “This... has to be my birthday.”

“What?” Marinette slowly rose to her feet. “Mom never let you go out for football as a kid?”

“Oh, attack me while I'm holding this,” the Bandit sneered. “I'm begging you...”

Marinette hesitated.

The Bandit let out another hacking, mechanical laugh. “You don't even know what it is!” he said with a note of mocking disbelief. “This could be a massive gumball for all you know, and you're going to let me walk, because you don't know what this is! One of these days, Ladybug, you're going to have to stop folding and call.”

Ladybug couldn't move. She had never felt so useless.

“I'll put your mind, somewhat at ease,” the Bandit said, examining the object. “This ain't no Gumball. Not sure if you can set it off by me dropping it, but I wouldn't risk it. Not going to tell you what it is, I'm going to let you figure it out on your own...”

Ladybug's ears perked up as sirens began to faintly waft over the crackling of the fire and the drumming of the rain.

“That,” the Bandit smiled. “Is my exit cue. Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me, by the way with me. It stays between the two of us.

“Actually, looking at you now, I think I might be the only person who does know who you are.”

He cackled like a madman as he leaped off into the city.

The only reason Ladybug didn’t follow was because she knew people on her street, and she didn't know where her mother was. Or Adrien. She was ashamed to admit it, but the way she was feeling right now, she couldn't care less about the normal civilians.

The weight of the past few minutes hit her all at once, and she collapsed to her hands and knees onto the rain-soaked street. She couldn't tell how much of what was washing down her face was the rain, and how much was simply her crying. Without thinking, she began to pound the concrete in frustration. Over and over again, not caring if she scratched up her hand in the process.

Before she could inure her hand, someone caught her wrist.

“Get up, Ladybug,” said Cat Noir. “We're not licked yet.”

Her mother was wrapped in a blanket sitting on the tailgate of an ambulance. Marinette decided to talk to her as herself, and not Ladybug. Although the lines between the two of them had gotten muddier over the past few days.

“Your father's going to be fine,” Sabine Cheng started. “A few cuts and bruises. Nothing he
shouldn't recover from.” She reached out and held her daughter's hand. “Honey, are you okay?”

Marinette couldn't believe it. She just found out her daughter has been lying to her for months, and her first response was “are you okay?” “Yeah...,” Marinette started. “Listen, Mom...”

“Sit down,” Sabine said quietly. “Listen to me, you don't have to explain anything.”

“Yes I do,” Marinette sighed. “This is my fault. If I'd have told you...”

“I would have been a little less confused and just as terrified,” Sabine finished for her. “That's not the reason I'd want to know. The reason I'd want to know is actually something that he brought up. What if something happened to you and I didn't know?”

“I know, I just... I never thought...” Marinette buried her face in her hands.

“Hey, look at me,” Mei took hold of both of her daughter's hands. “You, me and your father are going to have to talk about this, but it's okay. Whether I like it or not, this city needs you. So we'll talk when this whole mess with the Bandit is over. In the meantime...” She brought her daughter in for a hug. “Get some sleep, you look exhausted.”

“Wait, what?” Adrien said into his cell phone. “No, Dad, of course I'm not objecting... You just caught me off guard... You'll meet us there? Dad, are you feeling alright? Okay... Yeah, I'll tell them... Love you... too? Bye.” He hung up the phone and looked as confused as a man can get.

“That was your dad?” Marinette asked.

“I don't know,” Adrien said. “It sounded like him, but I think he may have been replaced by an alien pod...”

“What do you mean?” Marinette was looking concerned.

“Mrs. Dupin-Cheng,” he started, with a note of disbelief. “You and your daughter are invited to stay at our house, as our guests until your husband recovers.”

“What?!” Marinette said, shocked. “Adrien, you didn't...”

“No, I didn't,” he said defensively. “This was dad's idea. I called him up, and I wanted him to book you into a hotel, but he insisted on us taking you guys in.”

“Adrien,” Sabine started. “I couldn't...”

“I am to 'brook no argument' to quote my father,” Adrien interrupted. “It's the least I can do for a friend. Please.”

Sabine seemed like she was going to protest again, but eventually gave up and nodded. “Thank you.”

“It's nothing,” Adrien smiled.

Marinette was starting to remember why she liked Adrien. He would have done what he just did for any friend in trouble. She put her hand on his shoulder. “Really, Adrien,” she said softly. “Thank you.”

“Wait, you're staying at Adrien's place?!” Alya asked.
“Just for a little while,” Marinette explained over the phone. “It's closer to the hospital than most of the good hotels. Adrien's dad really helped us out here.”

“Yeah, but you shouldn't-” Alya stopped herself. She was wrong. She had to be wrong. “Okay, just... Take care of yourself. Call me when you get there.”

“No, listen, I need you to meet me there,” Marinette continued. “Ten O'clock tonight. I need to know about this thing the Bandit got from the last spin.”

“Come over? Girl, I can't...”

“Alya, listen, I've got to get off, my phone is nearly dead,” Marinette interrupted. “Ten tonight. I'll see you.”

“Marinette I-” Too late. Marinette had hung up. Alya wanted to strangle her sometimes. She moved her hands under her eyes, and sighed heavily. It was a huge old house. It looked like something out of a horror movie, or 1984. It was huge, gray, and scary looking.

That was the only reason she was filled with a nameless dread when she entered a ten yard radius of the Agrestes mansion.

“You should go.” Alya had completely forgotten Nino was there, or the argument they were having. “For as long as you can.”

“I'm not talking about this,” Alya said immediately.

“It gives you some time to look around,” Nino continued.

“I said, I'm not talking about this,” Alya insisted.

“Just to see if we can catch him out.” Nino persisted.

“God dammit, Nino!” Alya shouted.

“Alya!” Nino shouted back. “You know I'm right! You feel the same way as I do whenever you pass that damn house! It's not the haunted vibe, it's _deja vu._ Some part of our brain looks at that place like we've lived there for years. You talked about the Akuma leaving something behind, like a... Post-Akuma residue.”

“I was talking about the fact that I am a super hacker now, and you haven't gotten below an A- a chem test since you got hit,” Alya shot back.

“That's not what I meant and you know it,” Nino sighed.

“I really don't think that-”

“Alya!” Nino grabbed her by the shoulders. “He was inside both of our heads, are you telling me that you don't remember that voice?”

Alya fell silent.

“Gabriel Agreste is Hawk Moth,” Nino said. “And we have a chance to prove it.”
Chapter End Notes

Logic: ..... WHAT?! Okay, first off, did I hear NANITES mentioned?!

Me: Yep. He can make self-replicating Nanites. Part of the powerset.

Logic: And that jackpot couldn't have been....

Me: Ah, ah, ah, please don't spoil. The non-mechanically inclined won't recognize what I just described and the others may think I described it badly.

Logic: You either have ZERO idea what you are doing, or you are building to the most Apeshi-

Me: I know what I'm doing.

Logic: Oh, and way to have the bad guy win yet ANOTHER confrontation. You are moving dangerously close to Gary Stu territory.

Me: The next altercation with the One Armed Bandit will be the last. And look at my username, if you're afraid I'm going to bitch you out.

Logic: Way to spoil.

Me: I've still got a few surprises up my sleeve. Oh, and in actual author's note stuff, the next chapter is probably going to be pretty long, and kind of convoluted to write, so it may take a little longer.

EDIT: Okay, ummm... I'm an idiot. I forgot that Marinette's parents actually HAVE names. Tom and Sabine, I have tried to rectify my mistakes, but I may have missed some. I am so sorry, and I should have been more careful with my research. I legitimately did not know they had canon names. I am sorry.
Alya got to the house about five minutes late. Still troubled by the discussion she had with Nino.

She looked up at the house and wanted to turn away. Ever since her brief stint as the Akumatized villain Lady Wifi, there was something about that house she just didn't like. Being around it felt... familiar, in the worst kind of way. Like she had been there before, and something horrible had happened to her. Like revisiting the sight of your own murder. Like standing at the foot of your own grave.

She took a deep breath and called at the gate.

“Yes?” a woman said through the intercom.

“It's Alya Cesaire,” she said timidly. “My friend told me to meet her here.”

“Oh, you must be Marinette's friend,” the woman replied. “She is expecting you. Come right in.”

The gate opened slowly. Alya swallowed hard and went inside.

She found Marinette in the foyer, huddled out of sight talking to Tikki. She ran up and hugged her friend. “Girl, I was so worried,” she said quietly. “Are you alright?”

“I'm fine,” Marinette said quietly. “The house should be fixed when we've purified the Akuma, but I don't know how safe we are here.” Her voice was shaking. She was trying to convince herself that it would be alright, even though she had seen her house go up in flames.

“If the Bandit knows who you are,” Tikki squeaked. “We can't be sure he won't broadcast that information.”

“He won't,” Marinette said bitterly. “He wants to lord it over me. 'Our little secret,' he said.”

“How could he have found out?” Alya asked.

“I don't know,” Marinette sighed. “Maybe my face is to exposed in the outfit. Better mask?”

“I'd say different hair,” Alya suggested. “Let it down when you suit up. It could look kind of cute.”

Marinette giggled, despite of everything. “Worth thinking about,” she smiled. “Anyway, we need to talk.”
“Right,” Alya nodded. “Bousquet's 'Jackpot'.”

“I was expecting, I dunno, a tank or something,” Marinette replied. “But no... It looked like one of those weird dice you see in those roleplaying games. But huge... Like the size of a beach ball.”

Alya frowned. “It sounds familiar...” She looked back into her mind. “Something they taught us in physics... I'll look into it. Now listen, about the dome.”

“He said something about Nanites,” Marinette added. “What are Nanites?”

“Really tiny robots,” Alya explained. “Microscopic machines meant to do work faster. Scientists want to use them for medical practice. Things that used to require surgery can now be taken care of by an injection, or even a deep breath.”

“Sounds great,” Marinette said. “Why isn't it commonplace yet?”

“Because the tech isn't perfect,” Alya answered. “People are rightly afraid that if you program Nanites to fix people, or build things, or destroy things, and then set them on auto they won't stop. Eventually consuming the planet, because they keep replicating. It's called the 'Grey Goo' theory.

“Is that what he's planning?” Marinette asked horrified. “Wash over the world with tiny robots?”

“No,” Alya shook her head. “There is a tech firm in Japan who thought of a solution to the Grey Goo problem. What they did was make it... I guess analog controlled is the best word. The Nanomass is connected to a device that links in to someone's brain. You're controlling it the whole way, and they won't act without your orders. The project is still in development, but a prototype has been made. I think that's what he's got here.”

“Maybe it works like the Lucky Charm!” Tikki chipped in. “It can only create things that exist in the real world.”

“So if he's not going to go all... Grey Goo on us,” Marinette said, scratching her chin. “What is the plan, then?”

“I don't know,” Alya added. “I'll try to find out more about the jackpot in the meantime.”

Tikki hid herself out of sight when the three of them heard someone coming. They looked up the stairs to see Adrien and his Father talking with Marinette’s mother.

“I will ask you not to go into the attic room,” Gabriel continued. “I'm working on many sensitive projects in there. Other than that, the house, and all of its amenities are open to you. Please feel free to stay as long as you like.”

“Thank you, Mr. Agreste,” Sabine said quietly. “It really is too kind of you.”

“What's happened to you is unfair, and unjust,” Gabriel said kindly. “I see it as my duty to help.”

Alya looked at Gabriel Agreste. When Hawk Moth had entered her mind, she had a glimpse of him in her mind. A tall, imposing figure, who's face was obscured by a silver mask. But that voice was unmistakable. It belonged to Gabriel Agreste. Seeing him here felt all too familiar, just like being in the house itself.

“Mr. Agreste?” Alya asked. “May I ask a favor?”

Gabriel looked concerned. “Yes, Alya?”
“May I spend tonight here?” Alya said sweetly. “Marinette is pretty shaken up, and I'd like to keep her company.”

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. “As long as you ask your parents, I'm sure it will be fine...” He gave Alya one more suspicious look, and headed back upstairs.

“Alya,” Adrien said. “Why-?”

“I want to keep Marinette safe,” she replied. She marched over to Adrien and whispered low. “And you. The Bandit knows who you two are, so I'm sticking to you like glue.”

“Alya,” Marinette marched up to the two. “You aren’t a superhero. What can you do?”

“Nothing,” Alya answered honestly. “But if he knows who you are...”

“He might know who you are,” Marinette finished. “Okay, You stick as close to us as you need to.”

“The house is built like a fortress,” Adrien said. “You should be safe here.”

“Thank you,” Alya nodded. “Let me call my parents.”

Alya walked off on her own to call her parents, and then to call Nino. She was allowed in the house, and Nino wasn't. This was good. She had had her suspicions for a long time, and if she was going to investigate, she needed a contact on the outside. She needed someone to relay information to as she found it.

Someone to know what happened if Hawk Moth didn't let her come home.

149:00:00

It was 9am on the cold October Saturday as Marinette looked across the roof to the Nanite dome with the huge ominous timer on it. Slowly counting down to zero hour. She had worked out that whatever was going to happen was going to happen at 10pm next Friday. The problem was, she didn't know what that was going to be. People were starting to worry.

The Government had talked about evacuating Paris, but to Mayor Bourgeois credit, he refused to leave. Saying that while they should consider evacuating the civilians, he wouldn't run at the sight of a lunatic like the Bandit. It was a shameless election ploy, but hell, it worked on Marinette. The next election happened in two years. She'd be of legal voting age by then. Bourgeois had her vote.

The city stood firm with the Mayor. They had faith in Ladybug.

Now if only Ladybug had faith in herself.

She looked up at the ticking clock, and came to a decision. She wasn't just going to wait out the countdown. Not after what that Monster did to her father, and her home. She had to do something proactive.


Her Kwami appeared from her bag. “Like I told you,” she squeaked. “The Lucky Charm gives you the item you need to solve your current problem, after that it's up to you to figure out how to use it. You also only have about five minutes before you change back.”

“My current problem,” Marinette repeated. “What if I have several?”
“Well then, pick the first one,” Tikki replied.

“You mean the most important?” Marinette wondered.

“No,” Tikki shook her head. “The one that comes first. Say you were lost in the desert. That seems like one problem, but it’s really several. Your biggest problem would probably be getting out of the desert, but that isn’t the priority. So you’d want to use it to get yourself some water. Either a bottle of it, or a map to it.”

“Why can’t I try to solve all the problems at once?” Marinette replied. “Like... I dunno, a teleporter to warp me to a hotel in Maui.”

“Because you have no idea how to use a teleporter,” Tikki squeaked. “And you wouldn’t have thought to bring it before you went into the desert. It depends on you. If you somehow had all of the information as to what would be going on, where it would be happening, and who would be involved, what would you have thought to bring.”

Marinette thought for a moment. It made sense from what had happened to her in past battles with Akumatized villains.

“Think, Marinette,” Tikki said. “What do you need right now?”

Marinette thought for a moment. “Information,” she said finally. “I need to know what he’s planning under that dome. If I need to stop it now, or if it would be better to wait. I need something to get me some information.”

“Well?” Tikki squeaked. “What are you waiting for?”

Marinette nodded. “Tikki! Spots on!”

The transformation took hold, and Ladybug stood on the roof. She thought her problem through. Information. What she needed was some information about what was going on inside the Nanite Dome. She closed her eyes, focused, and spun her Yo-Yo.

“Lucky Charm!”

The energy spun out from the weapon and coalesced above her. Coming together to produce...

What couldn’t have been more than a 20 euro flip phone.

Marinette was nearly infuriated. As if the phone was telling her that if she wanted information, she should call 00 and ask for it. Not knowing what else to do, she opened the phone. There was only one option available. Contacts.

She opened the menu, and found one number listed. 00 42 95 66 84. The contact was listed as “Information.”

She called the number, and the phone rang.

And then it rang again.

And again.

On the fourth ring, someone picked up. “My caller ID lists you as Ladybug...” The man spoke with an accent. He had learned French very early on in his life, but he was from America, or Canada. “That means you are either the Boss being funny, or somehow, a Superheroine got the number for
this burner phone. I'm leaning toward B, because I don't have anyone named 'Ladybug' listed in my phone.”

“What if I was Ladybug?” Ladybug asked.

“You are Ladybug,” he sighed. “The Bandit is many things but he's no impressionist... Besides, he's still in his little office.”

Ladybug's eyes widened. She was talking to one of the Bandit's subordinates. She was talking to someone under the dome.

“Interesting,” the man continued, seemingly amused. “Ironic, and not altogether inconvenient. I needed a contact on the outside and you'll do as well as anyone.”

“If you have information for me, start talking fast,” she said quickly. “This phone won't exist for much longer.”

“I see,” the man said knowingly. “For now, at least, you can call me Martin.”

148:45:22

Alya sat on a Park bench, computer open on her lap. She was as far away from the Agrestes house as she could walk. She was waiting. Waiting for her nerves to settle, waiting for the Ladyblog to produce results, and finally, waiting for her contact.

The park was eerily quiet. While Paris hadn't evacuated, the Nanite swarm had spooked people. They were mostly staying inside on what was a lovely autumn morning.

She felt someone sit on the Bench next to her. “Yo,” her contact said cheerfully. “How have you been?”

“Nino, I just spent the night in a house that reminds me of when I was mind controlled,” Alya sniped. “I haven't slept.”

Nino exhaled. “Look, if you don't want to-”

“No, it's fine,” Alya sighed. “Marinette is going to be staying there for a while. I don't want to leave her there alone just in case you're right.”

“You find out anything?” Nino asked.

“I found out that if Gabriel Agreste is Hawk Moth, he doesn't keep evidence around his house,” Alya responded. “I combed the place from top to bottom last night looking for evidence and found nothing. There are a couple of places I couldn't check. A wall safe and an attic room.”

“Attic room?” Nino turned to face Alya. “An observation room? With a big round window?

“The thought had occurred to me, but it's a genetic lock,” Alya explained. “You need DNA sample open it.”

“You've got to spit on it?” Nino asked, disgusted.

“Breathe on it,” Alya corrected. “Sophisticated tech. It picks up on your genetic material to open the lock. Only an Agreste is getting in that room.”

Nino flopped back in defeat. “Well, if you're staying, see what else you can find,” Nino sighed. “If it
weren't for Hawk Moth-"

“We wouldn't be in this situation, I know,” Alya sighed. “Would you just come on already?!”

“What?!” Nino shot up. “What did I do?!"

“Sorry, that wasn't at you,” Alya said, burying her face in her hands for a moment. “I gave the Ladyblog a description of Bousquet's 'Jackpot.'

“The copper soccer ball thing?” Nino raised an eyebrow. “What have you gotten so far?”

“Four 'Sorry, no ideas,'” Alya said miserably. “Three people who think it's a highschool soccer trophy, a few people who say it sounds like a ten sided die, and one guy who just wrote the word 'Pork' three hundred times in the comment box.”

“I'm honestly wishing it would turn out to be pork now,” Nino said, trying to cheer Alya up.

She gave a week smile. “I'm relying on internet comments to save my city,” she said with a note of gallows humor. “Paris is doomed.”

“Keep trying. Eventually-” Nino was cut off by the website making a sound. “Heck, maybe now, something will come up.”

“That's a notification,” Alya sighed. “May as well check it out.” She refreshed the page with low hopes. They raised a little when they saw the comment. “Hey! It's a paragraph!” She said lightly. “Made of multiple different words and everything!”

“Good sign,” Nino leaned in to read the comment.

“Let's see...” Alya began to read aloud. “I think I know what you've got here. Cousin of mine used to work for Lockheed and he described something similar. I think what you've got your hands... on...”

The rest of the comment was read in a horrified silence.

“Alya, I need you to tell me I'm reading that wrong,” Nino asked darkly.


“Honestly, we should have seen this coming,” Nino said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “The guy's basically Snidely Whiplash in a tacky suit.”

Alya shot up from the bench, stowing her Laptop in her bag. “Taxi!”

“I'm coming with you,” Nino insisted.

“No you're not,” Alya said firmly. “You're going to my house to get some things. I'll text you a list later. Then make you're way over to the house. I'll make excuses to Natalie and Agreste if they see you. But you need to get over there. From now on, we're full-time hero support.

“If Bousquet has his hands on a nuke...” Alya started. “Do I even need to finish?"
Logic: You have... ZERO idea how to write the Lucky Charm, do you?

Me: Not even a little, gotta be honest. It's a hard power to write around, gotta be honest. It's always the damn I Win button in the show, so I had to squiff it a little here to both keep the tension, and not nerf the thing. Not sure if I succeeded.

Logic: Fair enough. Nice job giving that Martin guy a point.

Me: Yep! He'll be a part of the next few chapters. Usually off-screen.

Logic: What's with the Number?

Me: That's how the French do phone numbers according to Google.

Logic: Oh. That's why it's all weird... Wait a minute... OH COME ON!!

Me: Why yes. There is an explanation as to why he's ratting on the Bandit. No, I'm not telling you what it is. Wait and see.

Logic: Also, seriously? A nuke? You made a nuke look like something random, just to throw people off?

Me: No, I didn't. This is a real thing, and I will talk about it next chapter.
Chapter Summary

The Management recommends "Counting Stars" by One Republic be listened to while reading.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

145:55:51

Alya couldn't hail a cab and so she had to hoof it across Paris on foot. It took her two and a half hours to get back to the Agreste's house. Running the whole way.

She found Marinette in the sitting room talking excitedly with Adrien, in better spirits than she had been in weeks. Normally she would have skinned herself alive before interrupting anything that would have led to the two finally getting together, but desperate times.

"We're screwed," Alya said, out of breath.

"We're saved!" Marinette said at the same time.

"What?!" they said simultaneously.

"Bousquet's 'Jackpot'," Alya started, catching her breath. "It's a nuke."

"You're kidding," Adrien said dryly.

"A nuclear trigger, specifically," Alya explained. "Sixteen to twenty-four small explosives around a uranium core. If one of them goes off on it's own, the bomb is useless, but if all of them go off at once..."

"We're at the end of Dr. Strangelove," Adrien sighed. "Or the beginning of Southland Tales... Or the end of Big Trouble. I've seen way too many American movies..."

"You said something about good news?" Alya asked Marinette.

"Yeah," Marinette smiled. "We have an inside man!"

"We what?!" Alya asked, stunned.

"I used the Lucky Charm, and what it gave me was a phone and a number," Marinette explained. "It linked me to one of the Bandit's goons. He wanted to talk."

"Did he have anything interesting to say?" Alya asked.

"Plenty," Adrien said. "Apparently, the Nanite dome itself is dangerous to anyone who isn't Martin or the Bandit."

"Martin?" Alya asked.
“Our snitch,” Marinette clarified. “They’re building something out of the Arc. The Nanites swarming around the thing constantly are like Razor wire. Martin is doing the physical construction of the... whatever it is... so he’s safe.

“The control device,” Alya pieced together. “It’s connected to his brain, so he’s protected. He’ll subconsciously not let the Nanites hurt him.”

“A glove,” Marinette nodded. “Bandit has been telling him what to do in order to, and I quote, ‘Get ready for the big show-stopper midnight on Friday.’”

They both looked at Alya expectantly. She couldn’t understand why until she did some math in her head. “Wait a minute...”

“There it is,” Adrien sighed. “Took me a second, too.”

“That’s two hours off!” Alya realized. “The Countdown goes up to ten Friday night! If that isn’t the show-stopper, what is it counting down to?”

“The Nanite Dome dropping,” Marinette sighed. “Whatever he’s making will be finished two hours early.”

“So why doesn’t he just-” Alya stopped herself, realizing what the answer to her question was. “It’s another gamble. He’s giving you a chance to stop him.”

“That’s what we thought, too. Yeah,” Adrien said.

“The gambling thing is seriously grating on me at this point,” Alya was starting to raise her voice as she paced around the room. “How the hell are we supposed to out think a guy who will take every stupid risk possible for no other reason than ‘it’s fun?!’”

“Simple,” came a cool voice behind them. “Learn to gamble.” They all shot around to meet the figure.

Alya had never taken a good look at Gabriel Agreste’s personal assistant before now. She gave off the impression that she could be very beautiful, but chose not to show it because that would be unprofessional. She wore a smug smile, something that seemed unlike her, and in her right hand she held a pack of cards.

“You kids really should keep your voices down,” Natalie continued. “This is an old house, and there’s a fairly decent echo. So strong, in fact, that it might give the impression to some poor working woman that her employer’s son has gone insane and is talking to an imaginary cheese eating cat. Then convince herself she’s gone insane when she hears the cat talk back.”

As Natalie sat down on the couch across the small glass coffee table that sat in the room, Alya could see Adrien pinch the bridge of his nose. Seemingly wishing he could beat himself up for being so stupid. Marinette seemed to be caught in the middle of being impressed, panicked, and amused by the situation.

“This is, of course, all hypothetical,” Natalie continued slyly, as she began to shuffle the deck. “If I had heard such a thing, I might come to the conclusion that you, Adrien, were recklessly risking your life on some sort of ego trip to play superhero. A course of action I would have to oppose, and immediately inform your father of the situation. Because if I were to be supporting, or much worse aiding these activities, I would lose my job.” She looked straight at Adrien. “I’m sure you understand me.”
It took everyone a moment to pick up what Natalie was laying down. Adrien sat down across from her. “Loud and clear,” he said cautiously. “You were talking about... Sorry... You definitely weren't talking about learning to gamble?

Natalie slid the deck across the table to Adrien. “Deal four cards,” she said. “Two for me, two for you. Keep yours face down.”

Adrien did. Natalie flipped hers over to reveal a three and a seven. “Now what?”


“Stay,” Natalie replied. “Flip your cards over.”

Adrien complied. “Ten and a nine,” he said observing his cards.

“Dealer has nineteen,” Natalie responded. “Player has twenty. I win. Keep going, put those cards to the side and keep playing until I tell you we're done.”

Adrien was confused but did as she asked. Dealing out the next hand.

“Hit me. The thing about gamblers is that the best ones are thinkers. Stay.” Natalie continued playing the game. Giving the advice without losing her focus on the cards. “Twenty, dealer has nineteen. I win. They have to calculate the odds in their head quickly enough to keep the game going. Blackjack. It's much harder than it sounds. Hit me. There's a lot of things to consider, and things keep changing constantly. Stay. Eighteen. Dealer has twelve. Draw a card. Twenty-Two. Bust. To beat a gambler one must think like a gambler, and know the right way to--”

“Hang on!” Alya piped in. “You haven't lost a hand yet! How is that possible? You can't be that lucky!”

Natalie gave Alya a little grin. “You must know the right way,” she finished. “To cheat.”

Adrien's jaw dropped. “Cheat?”

“What I just did was called 'Counting Cards,” Natatlie explained. “Using the past deals, and a little math, I was able to tell what card was coming up next within one number. The first two times, I got lucky. The next few it was all skill and memory.”

“I'm a little confused,” Marinette stroked her chin. “What do we-”

“You've fought this man twice,” Natalie interrupted as she packed up the cards. “You know him. So out think him. What has his pattern been, and what will it be. What card comes next.”

Marinette seemed to think for a moment. “He's making us wait to sweat us out,” she said finally. “He wants us to panic. So that's the one thing we can't do. We have to keep our cool, and let him try to sweat us out.”

“Once we get there, we have to remember that he's not planning on making it out alive,” Adrien said. “Remember what he said about 'living forever through a public death.' He's going to want to torch us, the city, and himself in one big flash.”

“Whatever he's turning the arc into is going to be big, ridiculous, and gaudy,” Alya added.
“Something to attract as much attention as possible to what he's doing. We can try to use that...”

“Adrien, do you have a whiteboard?” Marinette asked.

Natalie got up and began to leave. “I'll leave you to it, then.”

“Natalie!” Adrien called as she was leaving. “Thank you...”

“For what?” she smiled softly. “I wasn't even here.”

And for the next three days, they tried to think of every strategy.

068:30:41

“We've been working through every plan,” Adrien said quietly to her. “Every single thing we can think that he would do, we're writing down. Whether the bomb is on the top or bottom of the Arc, whether or not he'll sick the Nanites on us... The information that this 'Martin' guy is giving us has been invaluable. Every day we learn what he might be doing. We've got it all planned out.”

“Except the bomb...”

“We're teenagers, and they're asking us to disarm a nuke, and we've thought of a way to do it... There's only one way to disarm it permanently. The Nanites will repair any damage done to the bomb... But they can't make Uranium out of thin air. Eventually I thought of a way to do it... But it's risky.

“I'm not going to lie... I'm a little scared. The Miraculous should protect me, but... I just...”

“I wish you were here Mom,” Adrien said, looking up at the portrait of his mother. “I really wish I could talk to you and have you talk back.”

Adrien looked down on the ground, feeling silly about talking to a wall.

“Do you talk to her often?” came a voice from behind Adrien. He whirled around to meet Marinette, his face turned beet red with embarrassment, and then he laughed it off.

“How did she...,” Marinette started. “I'm sorry, I shouldn't ask that...”

Adrien smiled. “It's alright,” he said quietly. “She was an Archaeologist. She was studying a Tibetan ruin called 'The Temple of the Bai Zhei'. Something happened and the temple collapsed. My dad got out one way my Mom...” He exhaled. “My mom apparently didn't.”

There was a small silence in the room. “I'm so sorry,” Marinette said.

“No need to be,” Adrien sighed. “ Heck, maybe Dad is right. Maybe she's still alive somewhere. I've seen things that I would have called impossible. I've done things that I can be proud of so... So if it doesn't work like we think, I'll at least have that.”

“That's it,” Marinette said. “I'm not letting you do this.”

“Not a matter of letting me,” Adrien shot back. “It's the best plan we've got “

“We'll think of another one,” Marinette said frankly. “I'm not going to let you risk your life-”
“I won’t be risking much,” Adrien joked.

“Don’t say that,” Marinette said. “You *don’t* say that. Your life is *worth* something.”

“You say that as if it should be obvious,” Adrien laughed. “I am the very definition of ‘idle rich.’ I sponge off of my Dad’s money, and I’m popular in school simply because I’m a fashion model. Where is the worth in that? And to who?

“To *me*, alright!” Marinette screamed. “Every second you’re around is worth a lot to *me*!”

Adrien looked at her, awestruck.

“I’ve been thinking about what you told me, before we unmasked,” Marinette said quietly. “You said you saw yourself as nothing and... that *baffles* me. I looked across the room at you every day and you were all I could see. And I don’t know if... I don’t know if I was actually in love with you. I’m only sixteen, but I had to get to know you. Because every time I saw you, there was nothing else.

“How can you be nothing?” Marinette finished. “You were the only thing in the room.”

Adrien pondered that for a moment, and came to a question. “Why?” he said finally. “What was so impressive?”

“You are one of the kindest people I know,” Marinette explained. “You have never looked down on anyone, you’ve never put yourself on a pedestal, you’re not stuck up. You try your hardest to be friends with everyone, and the kicker is, you *don’t have to*. Look at this house! Check your wallet. You don’t have to work a day in your life, but you do. You work yourself insane just trying to be a good person, expecting nothing in return! You’re the kind of person who—” Marinette seemed to trip over her words, and then restart. “You’re the kind of person who, when presented with a chance to help people, in the most insane and suicidal way, takes it without question.”

“I...” Adrien needed a moment to compose himself. “I was barely there... I barely said anything... Nothing real... I just... I was a ghost. Didn't you notice that I barely broke an octave?”

“I thought you were just sad,” Marinette answered. “Was I wrong?”

Adrien closed his eyes, leaned back, and smiled. “That may be the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

Marinette gave him a soft smile back. “Hey, I’m the one who should be having this self confidence crisis,” she joked. “Did I have to come to school naked in order for you to notice?”

“Skin tight red jumpsuit would have helped...” Adrien was proud that he got her to laugh at that. “In all seriousness, it’s not that I didn’t notice... I guess... I guess I just thought I had more of a chance with Ladybug. After all... She doesn’t know who I am.”

Marinette looked down at the floor, blushing a little.

“Look,” Adrien said, preparing to put himself out there. “I don’t know if you want to give... this a shot. Give *us* a shot. If not, I completely understand but... You are a person I need in my life. Marinette, Ladybug, doesn’t matter. Either one of them managed to make my day a little brighter. You are the one person that makes me feel alive. So I need you there. As a friend, as a partner... Something. I don't care how you show up, but my future won't be nearly as bright without you in it.”

Marinette looked right into Adrien’s soul. “Don’t worry,” she said softly. “I’ll be there. I promise.”
Adrien smiled, and turned back to the portrait of his mother as Marinette began to leave the room.

“What if I did?” Marinette said, turning to face Adrien.

“Sorry?” Adrien asked, turning around.

“What if I did want to give this a shot?” Marinette asked. “What if I wanted to see if we could get through at least a few cups of coffee without driving each other insane, then see how things go from there?”

Adrien couldn't believe it. It took him a minute to think of something to say... And then another minute. Adrien vainly begged for his brain to reboot as he stared, slackjawed at his crush. Finally he came out with: “You're sure?” Adrien stood a little straighter trying to regain his lost dignity. “Even though that kind, sad, compassionate guy you were talking about is also kind of a smug, wisecracking idiot sometimes?”

“Depends,” she answered. “Do you mind if that fiery, impressive superhero you were crushing on is also a shy, unsure, klutz of a girl sometimes?”

Adrien shook his head immediately.

“Coffee on Saturday,” Marinette said. “After this is over.” She started to walk away. “So you better come back from this alive, got it?”

Adrien nodded, and Marinette left the room. Which was good, because now he could have the ten mile grin on his face. He was on top of the world, nothing could touch him.

And then something did.

“No,” came a familiar female voice from upstairs.

“Alya,” responded a familiar male one.

“Nino, this stops! Right now, this stops,” Alya responded.

Adrien was confused. Why did Nino show up without telling him? Was he just there to flirt with Alya? Why was Alya shooting him down so hard.

“We have to tell Adrien,” Nino insisted. “He might be in danger! What if he knows--?”

“He doesn't, or it wouldn't have taken four days in this house to make a move,” Alya responded. “Besides, we still aren't sure you're right.”

“We can't be,” Nino hissed bitterly. “Not until we get Adrien to open up that attic room.”

“That isn't happening,” Alya said.

“Why not?!” Nino hissed. “If I'm wrong, what's the harm?!”

“You might be right!” Alya sharply hissed back. “And if you are, Adrien doesn't need that on his head when he's dealing with disarming a nuke!”

Adrien listened carefully. What were they talking about? They wanted to get him to open up his father's private attic room. He was able to, but not allowed to. Alya and Nino thought that whatever was inside could cause him so much stress that it might distract him from the fight with the Bandit.
He could feel another shoe waiting to drop.

“He could murder them in their sleep!” Nino said.

“I don't think so,” Alya replied. “He hasn't been here. He left pretty much the same time Marinette's family arrived. Sabine's been spending most of her time at the hospital, so really, the only adult here has been Natalie.”

They were talking about his dad. For some reason they suspected his dad of something... But he couldn't think why.

And then he started to.

A book that just happened to be in his dad's safe. His frequent absences from home and from work. How obsessed he was that they would see his mother again. How he swore that nothing would stop him from achieving any goal.

The fondness his father used to have for butterflies.

He closed his eyes, and prayed for them not to say it.

“Just... Let's drop it for now. This city has got the Sword of Damocles hanging over it,” Alya said. “Adrien has got enough to worry about without his dad being a supervillain.”

Chapter End Notes

Logic: What took two weeks?

Me: OH MY GOD, THERE IS NOT ENOUGH TIME ON THE PLANET TO EXPLAIN.

Logic: Alright, sorry. Three day time skip is going to annoy people.

Me: The countdown is a week long, dude. I wasn't going to give every second. There were going to be a few jumps.

Logic: Fair enough. Anything to say to the people?

Me: Next chapter probably won't be for a bit, going to take a break for the holidays, and speaking of which, Happy Holidays everyone!
The management would highly recommend playing "Skyfall" by Adele while reading.

048:41:10

The Bandit looked at his work, and smiled.

He only took a break when the boys needed to sleep. He hadn't slept in days. That suited him fine, though. He was too excited. It was like waiting for Christmas.

The Arc, at this point, had been completely transformed. It resembled its former self only in frame. What had taken shape was a monstrous, gaudy, terrifying masterpiece, just like its creator. Lots of parts of it were lethal enough to be entertaining, but not so lethal as to actually _stop_ the Ladybug. Slowly but surely she would make her way up to the top... And then the fun really begins.

The Nanite shield opened up behind him, and Martin stepped in. Martin had proven invaluable over the past week. He kept making raids on the outside, so that the boys stayed fed. Sneaking in and out of the dome getting as much food as possible before heading back. He informed him of the state of the city. Talking about the nice quiet panic. More than anything else...

He provided the Nanites to make the dome in the first place. The Bandit didn't ask where he got them.

“Where the hell have you been?” the Bandit said to his lieutenant. “I mean come on, man! We've got a party to plan!”

“I have a life outside of you,” Martin joked. “I was taking care of a few things. Personal affairs.”

The Bandit raised an eyebrow, then shrugged it off. At this point it didn't matter. “The project's finally taking shape!” the Bandit said gleefully. “I guess now you know what it is!”

“Not quite,” Martin frowned. “Of course, if you were to tell me...?”

“Where the hell is the fun in that?” the Bandit chuckled. “Come on, buddy, give it a shot!”

Martin looked at the transformed Arc. “With the large blade, I could make one guess,” Martin said. “But with all of these attachments...”

“Those are for lil' miss Ladybug,” the Bandit smiled. “Just something to keep the climb interesting. I'll be waiting on the top for her. A great big soundstage for a big final showdown. Right where everyone can see...”

“What about Cat Noir?” Martin asked.
“He'll try to diffuse the bomb,” the Bandit smiled. “At the bottom. He'll fail, of course, thanks to those Nanites of yours. Where did you even get those?”

“I know people,” Martin shrugged. “I assume you'll want the men in position somewhere?”

“Stall the Cat,” the Bandit explained. “All of you, around the bomb. Keep him busy. Or, you could just beat him to death. I'm good either way.”

Martin nodded. “Understood.”

“Two more days, Martin,” the Bandit said happily. “Then we make history.”

“One more question, before we start,” Martin said. “How sure are you that this is going to work.”

“As sure as I'd like to be,” the Bandit shrugged. “After all, if we couldn't lose, there'd be no point in trying... But I'm fairly confident we'll be fine. I've read my opponents pretty well so far. I think I have too much to worry about.”

Martin stifled a chuckle. “Good to see you so confident, sir”

030:13:27

Natalie had gotten very quiet in the middle of Adrien laying out his theory. Everything he thought about his father, and everything he thought she might know. About his frequent absences from work. About his callous attitude toward his friends. About his very recognizable voice...

And about the echoes in the house.

When he got to what she may have heard, Natalie took off her glasses and sighed.

“Now,” Adrien said quietly. “That is what I think is going on... I want you... I need you to tell me that I'm wrong.”

Natalie gave a weak smile. “It's worth mentioning that I can't be sure,” she sighed. “I can never clearly make out what he's saying, I have never had any direct evidence... But it would surprise me very much if you turned out to be wrong.”

The next couple of seconds were a blur. Adrien remembers cursing, but not putting his now throbbing fist through the plaster wall. He took a couple of deep breaths and finally convinced himself that he only imagined killing Natalie.

“Why...?” Adrien finally said after a bit. “You had to suspect something was wrong, you had to know that the absences weren't like him, he's your friend... Why didn't you stop him?”

Natalie gave a sad laugh. “I'm not your mother, Adrien...”

“What does that have to do with anything?!” Adrien snapped. “Just because you aren't family-”

“Dammit, that is not what I mean!” Natalie shouted. “I know what kind of person I am, and I know what I'm capable of! Seeing a friend in such a dire mental state as to resort to actions so reprehensible as to be classified as supervillainy, watching a good and dear friend succumb to madness, is not something I am able to fix! I can't pull someone out of the darkness like that! I can't save souls! I'm not your Mother, Adrien.”

Adrien had never seen Natalie raise her voice to anyone. She was always stern, but very calm. This was a new side to her. One that Adrien hoped not to be on the wrong end of.
She sat down and exhaled. “Look at me now,” she said putting her glasses back on. “I'm a consummate professional. I'm confident, I'm strong, and I am organized. In high school I was... I was frightened. Glasses as thick as coke bottles, twenty pounds overweight, and barely able to get a word out of my mouth without tripping over it. A shell so thick that only a miracle could get me out of it.

“Marie was a miracle... She could see the best in the worst people. She saved me. And your father.”

Adrien stared at the wall, trying to summon up every memory of his mother he had... Very little came up.

“And I know this will sound terrible... But I prefer him like he is now than what he was before he met her,” Natalie continued. “You will never find a more lazy, spoiled, selfish brat than Gabriel Agreste age sixteen. I don't think anyone had ever managed to tell him 'no,' before Marie. And that... That intrigued him. She was the first thing he ever wanted that he had to work for. She let him keep on going, and I don't know why she was wasting her time... And then... And then I did see it in him.

“He didn't change who he was,” Natalie clarified. “That isn't what happened. He took everything commendable about himself, his intelligence, his resourcefulness, and mixed that in with traits he never knew he had. Kindness, compassion, and frightening determination. He found passion in things and he did not stop until he succeeded. Your family has been rich since the late 1850's, but no one who knows your father could say that he didn't work for every penny he had.”

Adrien gave a dismal laugh. “So my mom comes along, makes my brat of a dad a better person,” he said grimly. “Then he loses her, and he becomes a Supervillain. Fate's a funny thing, isn't it.”

“Adrien...” Natalie put her glasses. “You are upset. So I won't be upset with you. But 'fate' is not a thing I will allow you to accept. I won't have it mentioned.

“What?” Adrien said confused. “I don't-”

“Everything that has happened,” Natalie said, now standing up. “Everything that will happen, from your mother's death, to your father's activities to your night job has been the result of choices. Choices we made. You are Cat Noir, not because you were destined to be, but because you choose to be. That is why you are who you are, that is why you win.”

“That and way too much dumb luck,” Adrien continued.

“The wonderful thing about dumb luck,” Natalie said solemnly. “Is that we make our own. No one has decided it for us. And that comforts me.”

“To know that we're floating?” Adrien asked. “No direction, no sense of purpose.”

“To know that I'm not stuck,” Natalie replied.

Adrien paused for a moment, unsure of what to say next. “Natalie, what am I going to do about my dad?” he asked.

Natalie gave a sad look. “I'm sorry Adrien. I just don't know.”

012:00:00

Gabriel Agreste looked up at the blue morning sky. Running through his plan in his mind. Everything was set... Soon this would all be over. Soon he could make sure a lesson was taught to the traitor Bousquet, and, if all went to plan, he would have the Miraculouses of creation and destruction.
And then the real fight began.

He had only saw him once. A figure made of white fire that rose out of the temple, bringing the building down with him. The most terrifying sight he'd ever seen. And when the dust had settled, he was suddenly a widower. Unable to even bury his wife.

And after that, Paris always seemed so...small.

This world was one of many. It sat to close to another one. One of Gods and Monsters. One of oppression and terror. One where every action was dictated by cruel fate.

This world was where the Kwamii called home. Nooroo had told him horror stories about what it is like to live there. Under it's rule. The terrifying reality of knowing what tomorrow would bring. Knowing there was no hope of escape. Knowing that your future was carefully planned to be an insignificant cog in a much larger machine.

He wondered if that's all Marie was to that thing... Just another predetermined life to be snuffed out when the time called for it.

No more. That thing would see what human choice could do. It would see how a man's actions could turn the tide if need be. He would show it just what it felt like to have a plan and then watch it collapse to pieces in front of him.

And he had to act fast. He had felt it for a long time now. The sickening fear in the pit of his stomach. He had felt it only once before... The day his wife died.

Somewhere, in a world of Gods and Monsters, a sleeping lion was beginning to stir.

000:05:36

It was nearly time. Only a few short minutes until the countdown was up.

They had spent the last few hours going through the plan... Bit by bit they cobbled it together. Natalie had more and more become a part of the proceedings. She acted as moderator for a lot of the discussion. This was needed in a room full of teenagers, though she could tell that things had gotten icier between her and Adrien over the last day.

Martin had given them all of the information they could get. The bomb would be placed on the bottom, whereas the Bandit would be placed on the top. The bomb would be guarded by a dozen men armed with truncheons and the climb up the Arc would be treacherous. Ladybug would climb the tower to face off the Bandit and Noir would stay on the ground and, hopefully, disarm with the bomb.

But more than anything else, Marinette had to surprise the Bandit. Make it so he didn't have control of the situation. Throw a wild card on the table to change the entire game up. Then he would drop his tell, reach into his pocket, and grab the chip.

No battle plan survives contact with the enemy... But this was at least a good start.

Marinette looked in the mirror, and contemplated her position. If there was a tomorrow, it would likely be a very good day. She would be flush with victory off of defeating a villain, she would have her house back, she would even be getting coffee with a boy she wanted to know better. Tomorrow should be a good day.

She nodded, and walked out. Her friends were gathered around the television, as tense as she had
ever seen any one of them. She stood in the back of the room and spoke up. “What have you all got planned for tomorrow?”

They all looked at her like she was a space alien.

“I’m serious,” Marinette said. “Go around the room. What do you have planned for tomorrow? Nino.”

“Uh...” Nino tried to get his brain on track. “It’ll be Saturday so... Netflix and chill?”

“Perfect way to spend an afternoon,” Marinette smiled. “Natalie?”

“I will have to have a long overdue talk with Mr. Agreste...” Natalie and Adrien shared a look. “I feel it is for the best.”

“Always good to stand up to your boss,” Marinette nodded. “Adrien?”

“I have to work up the courage to tell someone something they deserve to know,” Adrien sighed.

Marinette gave him a sympathetic look. “You’ll get there... Alya?”

Alya gave a little laugh. “Update the Ladyblog,” she smiled. “Tell them that, out of respect for a superheroine, I will no longer be attempting to figure out Ladybug’s identity.”

“See... Right there,” Marinette said, as she pointed at Alya. “Alya said she would do something. And when Alya says she’s going to do something, I know for a fact it is going to be done... But there’s this guy on the TV who says that there will be no tomorrow. Not for any of us. That would make Alya wrong, which is highly unlikely. So... How do I resolve this in my head?

“Simple. The man on the TV is wrong.

“We don’t let him hurt anyone,” she continued. “We don’t let him get away with the things he’s done. We don’t let the city of lights go dark. You all have plans, and I have a hot date.” She and Adrien shared a smile. The room seemed to ease.

“Well,” Nino said. “Let’s make like a cable news viewer and watch someone be wrong.”

000:00:05

4...

3...

2...

1...

“Ladies and gentlemen!” came the booming voice of the Bandit. “It's showtime!”

The nanite dome began to drop.
Logic: Dude! It's been like... Four months! Where have you even been?

Me: My mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. Haven't had much time for Fanfiction.

Logic: ... Oh...

Me: Yeah.

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