In their final year of school, Maribug and Chatdrien grow quite close on both sides of their masks and in all configurations of the square. As their relationships develop, they gradually come to some realizations that can't quite be confirmed until the final face-off with Hawk Moth. Please enjoy a lot of fluff leading up to a final battle with our purple butterfly-obsessed psychopath. No death, but a spa day and a lot of therapy would go down a treat in the end.

Notes

Story written by Freedom Shamrock.
Amazing art created by soundofez
Huge thanks to my betas: Karnival and chatbug-jk

Chapter titles are almost all French idioms (explained in the notes at the end of each chapter). They don't all fit perfectly, but I thought they worked well enough to go with.
See the end of the work for more notes.
Balconies and Kitty Chats

Chapter Summary

Featuring the supportive Marichat friendship and really cool parents.

Marinette heard the light step on the roof and smiled. She was in the middle of fighting with a design that just didn't want to work, so a break was totally in order. She peeked into Tikki's nest, seeing her kwami safely hidden and sleeping, before scrambling up the ladder. She was lifting the skylight just as Chat Noir leaned down to tap on it.

"Hey there Kitty Chat," she said brightly. "Have any snack requests tonight?"

It was strange to see her outgoing and over the top partner shy. But for some reason any time she offered him something, food, help, or companionship, he went oddly meek and polite. "You really don't have to…"

"Nonsense," she cut him off. "You're constantly risking that leather-clad butt of yours for us regular Parisians, and, more importantly, you're my friend."

Nothing shut him up or flustered him faster than acknowledgement of friendship. "Thanks Princess," he said, bowing his head but not before she caught the small pleased smile. "No special requests. Anything you have is fine."

She was worried about how starved for affection and friendship he was. It was a big part of why she'd invited him to stay that first time. Their friendship, or rather Marinette's friendship with Chat Noir had started a little over two years ago when he'd stopped by to check up on her after an akuma attack. He'd rescued her from the balcony of a collapsing building while Tikki was recharging in her purse, and the whole ordeal had shaken them both, for different reasons. She'd been terrified she'd outed herself, and he'd been genuinely concerned for her safety. Hanging out with him as her civilian self had let her really get to know him. She'd always known he was brave and kind, but there was a shy sweetness hidden under his flamboyant charm. He was terrific at video games, had good taste in movies, and clearly needed more friends. So she encouraged him, convincing her parents to do the same, until it had become routine.

"Is it still comfortable out there?" She raised an arm through the window to feel the air. It was that uncertain time of fall where the evenings could be pleasantly crisp or downright cold.

"Yeah. It's a nice night." He nodded.

"Have a seat, I'll be back up in a tick." She slithered down the ladder, hearing his delighted gasp as she went. They had been sharing favorite movies and shows, and recently he'd been on a Voltron kick.

Down in the kitchen she pulled out the tray she'd gotten specifically for these visits. It was the perfect size for late night snacks with a friend, and then there was the design. The surface had art from Kiki's Delivery Service, strongly featuring Jiji, and it made her think of her very special black cat. Also, Kiki was close enough to Tikki, and she liked to tease her kwami about starting up a delivery business with Chat, or just his kwami, once they defeated Hawkmoth.
As she added milk and a plate of chocolate chip cookies and savory buns, she realized she’d probably need to start thinking of moving to tea or cocoa soon. She wasn't sure which he preferred.

"Have a visitor?" Mama asked, wandering into the kitchen in her nightgown.

"Yeah." She added napkins to finish the tray.

"Give him a thank-you hug for me," Mama said, holding her arms out.

Marinette smiled and leaned into her mother's embrace. "What are you thanking him for this time?"

Mama shrugged. "Surely he's rescued you recently, hasn't he? Or fought yet another akuma at your school." She shook her head. "Both of those happen far too often for my liking."

Marinette giggled and stepped back. "How about for his unceasing protection of Paris in general."

Her mother held up an index finger. "Perfect. I love the way you think." She got herself a glass of water. "Try not to stay up too late. And remember, when it gets too cold out on your patio, he's welcome down here, or in your room."

Marinette gasped, and put one hand in front of her mouth, aiming for an excessively scandalized look. "Are you encouraging me to invite a boy over?"

Grinning, Mama shrugged. "You're seventeen. You're responsible. And he's such a sweetheart." She reached out and lightly brushed Marinette's cheek. "He'd make quite a fine son-in-law," she teased with a laugh.

"Mama!" Marinette chastised, though it was more in jest than anything else. There was no harm or real motivation in her mother's words. She shook her head. "I'm too young to get married."

Mama sighed. "Alas. I'll have to stick to dreams of little green-eyed grandbabies, then." She patted Marinette's shoulder. "See you in the morning."

When Marinette returned to her patio, she found her guest lounging in his chair, looking at something on his baton. He'd been stunned speechless when he'd arrived one day this past spring to find a chair in his colors, black with green accents. It had been such a simple thing, yet it made him so happy.
"Are you finding more cat videos to inflict upon me?" she asked, sliding the tray onto the floor before she followed it up.

Chat leapt to his feet to get the tray out of her way. "Oooh. These are fantastic." He pointed to an asiago cheese bun. "You spoil me, Princess."

"You deserve it." She closed the skylight and followed him to their chairs, side by side with a small wooden box for a table between them. Their personal seating was tucked just under her awning. They had watched rainstorms from here over the summer. "Oh, put that down. I'm supposed to give you a thank you hug from Mama."

He laughed as he settled the tray on the box. "What for?" He seemed to think hugs were a limited commodity that had to be earned.

"General appreciation of your hard work in protecting all of Paris from supernatural threats," she announced importantly. She held out her arms and beckoned to him by flapping the fingers on both hands. "Come, come. Mustn't disobey Mama, now."

He'd gotten so tall, it was easiest to just wrap her arms around his ribs while he dropped his arms around her shoulders. She felt him relax into the hug with a sigh, squeezing her back just as tightly
as she squeezed him. She wasn't surprised that her partner was a good hugger; she'd been on the receiving end of his hugs and affection since their first months as partners.

The hug went on longer than most friend hugs did, but that was normal and comfortable for them. After discussion with her parents, when he'd first started showing up, they all tried to give him as much affection as was possible, without being too ridiculous. Pats on the shoulder, hugs, and praise were strongly featured in her parents' repertoire when he'd come to dinner or watched a movie with the family.

Chat gradually let go and stepped back. "Thank your mama for me," he said. "I needed that."

"Hmph. She's not the only one around here who can or will give you hugs if you need them," Marinette muttered.

"Really?" Her words warmed him a little. He should probably stop being surprised by the kindness of the Dupain-Chengs. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

His Princess snorted and shook her head. "Oh god no."

He raised his eyebrows, taking a seat in his chair. He loved that she'd gotten him a chair. It was a tangible sign that she wanted him around, that he belonged there. "So it was a good interruption, then?"

"I have this design I'm working on for a contest." She shook her head and plopped down in her chair with more vigor than he would have dared. "It sucks."

He had to cough to swallow down the laugh. "I doubt that."

She gave him a stern glare. "Of the two of us here, who is the fashion expert?"

Okay, that was a hilarious and difficult question, actually. "Well, since you're bringing it up, I should point out that I am very familiar with that particular industry." Her eyes went huge and round as she gawked at him. "Can't tell you exactly what I do in fashion, but I'm more familiar than you might expect."

"You're not joking, are you." It wasn't even a question. At this point they knew each other well enough to pick up on subtleties of dry delivery. "You… you run around in a catsuit, taking on villains with questionable style sense, and you know fashion."

"Rude," he shot. "I didn't pick the outfit, so no judging, Princess."

"Oh!" Her cheeks went slightly pink with embarrassment. "I'm so sorry, that's… that's not what I meant."

He turned his nose into the air in a mock sniff. "Obviously not. For starters, it's black, and you can't go wrong with black, unless it's spring, at which point florals have a slight edge. Also, leatherish, so it holds up to abuse and doesn't show wear."

"Leatherish?" she asked, poorly squelching her smile. "Is that a fabric?"

He waved his hands. "It's kind of like leather, but there's obviously some magic involved because it has much more flex and better breathability. So leatherish."

She nodded, grinning, and gestured for him to continue.
"It's fitted, and we all know how important it is to have a good tailor."

She burst into giggles, flopping back in her lounge chair and not even trying to hold back her amusement. "Fitted!" She cackled.

"Well it is," he insisted.

When she could finally breathe well enough to talk again, she looked at him. "Yes. You could call it fitted. But that's a bit of an understatement."

He shrugged. "Can I see your recalcitrant design?"

She hesitated, and he knew there was a stage in the process where she usually didn't share her work. "Err."

He shook his head, feeling his Chat hair flop, free of gel or hairspray. "You don't have to. But I'd like to see it if you'd let me. No judging. I may not be able to help you fix it, but I can tell you what I like, and it may turn out that you're just being too hard on yourself."

"I'm guilty of that often enough." She pushed herself up from the chair. "I'll be right back." She ducked down into her room.

He picked up the cheese bun, stuffing half of it in his pocket for Plagg later. His kwami had been surprisingly encouraging of these visits, especially when Adrien was feeling too cooped up or had, had a rough day. And he had to admit, very few people could cheer him up like his Princess. He wanted to make sure Plagg knew he appreciated his leniency on this particular matter.

She returned with an open spiral bound book that she thrust at him. "Here. Have a look."

He directed his attention to the page, catching the various brainstorming doodles down the left side. "What's the theme?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Sport coats."

"Ugh. The bane of my existence," he replied dramatically.

"Really? Why don't you like them?" she asked, leaning forward in interest.

"Being Chat Noir has done some fantastic things to my conditioning." He tapped his biceps and then his abs as if testing for softness. "But jackets sit wrong on my shoulders now." He dragged a thumb from one shoulder to the other. "My fa… boss got all sorts of apoplectic when he realized how badly they fit me a few months back. A whole lot of extra work has to go into a coat for me to wear it well." He returned his gaze to her design. "So what do you dislike about sport coats?"

Her eyes looked up and off to the right as she scowled a bit. "They are so overdone, and frankly, they're boring. Men deserve something other than yet another a stuffy jacket for formal wear. We honestly need to put away the sport coat for fifteen or twenty years, and come back and design it with a whole new mindset after we haven't had to look at it for a while."

"That is a beautiful plan." He sighed and rested one palm on his chest. "If only we could get the fashion world to agree with us." Her design wasn't bad. It looked like a perfectly competent coat. But it was uninspired. "It's not terrible at all, Princess. Many designers would be pleased with this, but I know you can do something much more interesting with it. Maybe you should take tonight as your fifteen year jacket hiatus. You can come back to it tomorrow to tear apart the sport coat to build it better."
"How do you always have such good ideas?" There was no sass in her voice now, just genuine appreciation, and that fuzzy warmth returned to his chest. She took the book back, closed it, and tucked it under her chair.

"I'm always happy to help," he said, basking in the glow of her approval.

"I know you are," She patted his shoulder then took a chocolate chip cookie off the tray. "And I appreciate it. Even when you can't help me, the fact that you try really gives me a boost."

He closed his eyes and imagined a reality where he could stay here. Eventually he'd have to go back to his big empty house. His father had scaled back his monitoring in the last two years. He was still a total control freak without a sense of humor or the ability to show any emotion beyond those that fell in the hostile portion of the spectrum. The freedom was good, because it meant he could escape his cold sterile life more easily, but seeing how things were at his friends' houses also made him realize how bad it was at his own.

Sure he had more clothes, gadgets, and things than he could possibly need, but there was no touch, no encouragement, and no sense of love. He'd found all that with his friends, and doubly with Marinette, since he could come over as two completely different boys. It probably wasn't entirely fair to her, but she was so good at making him happy. And to be fair, he wasn't allowed to reveal his secret identity. She was forgiving, something he'd seen in her parents, and as soon as he could, he'd come clean to all of them. He was pretty sure they'd be able to excuse his subterfuge.
Giving Your Tongue to the Chat

Chapter Summary

Featuring Marinette's friendship with Adrien.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

By the time Marinette reached the library, Adrien and Alya had already laid claim to one end of a table, but they hadn't started work on the project. She slipped her things into the place next to Adrien. "Hey guys, sorry I'm late."

"Where have you been all morning?" Alya asked. "Do you have any idea how hard it is being on a project with you and Adrien? Between model shoots and extracurriculars, his schedule's insane, and you're the amazing vanishing bestie."

"Oh, you know me," Marinette said, smiling weakly. "I overslept." It was a lie, of course. She'd spent most of her morning combatting an akuma on the other side of town.

"You know you're gonna need to fix that habit of yours before you pick up an internship, right?" Alya asked. "Most designers aren't going to be as forgiving as us." She planted her hands on her hips to deliver a stern look.

"Yes maman," Marinette promised. She sure hoped she and Chat could find and neutralize Hawkmoth before Final Bac. She suspected Master Fu had chosen teenagers for the ladybug and black cat simply because their absences would be difficult but not career shattering. She couldn't imagine either of her parents fitting this into their schedules.

"She's just cross because she missed this morning's akuma," Adrien whispered.

"There was an attack this morning?" She'd gotten much better at feigning ignorance and coming up with believable excuses. She'd had plenty of practice, after all.

Adrien nodded, the small polite smile she hated firmly in place. It wasn't quite his model mask, but it usually meant he was subduing himself to stick to the image his father had crafted for him. It showed up a lot at school and in other public places. Fortunately, it tended to be thoroughly tucked away when he was at her house. "I was also out for an emergency shoot." He snorted. It had become a joke that his father's unexpected random photoshoots to capture one last thing, or replace something he found subpar constituted emergencies in Gabriel Agreste's mind.

"Oh dear," Marinette said dramatically. "What was it this time? Did you have a hair out of place?"

Adrien bit his lip and shook his head, clearly trying to restrain his mirth. "Please, I was perfect." He let out a sniff, tipping his nose into the air. "But my jacket looked too snug across my shoulders while managing to look like a frumpy sack around my waist." He rolled his eyes.

"I can't help but feel like neither of you are taking this very seriously," Alya criticized. "This project is a quarter of our final grade."
"I'm so sorry Al," Marinette insisted, throwing babydoll eyes at her best friend. "I'll do better."

"Ugh," Alya said, waving both hands in Marinette's face. "Stop it. You're crazy good at that. And it should not be that effective on a seventeen year old."

She'd developed the skill to combat Chat's devastating kitten eyes, but no one in her civilian life knew that. Grinning, Marinette patted her tablet. "Well I'm here now, and I'm ready to be a focused and productive member of the team." She straightened up proudly. "I even did research last night in preparation."

"Was that during the time you were supposed to be sleeping?" Adrien teased, bumping her shoulder with his.

"The nerve," Marinette shot back with a gasp. Playful Adrien didn't come out nearly often enough, and she was always keen to encourage it. She still liked him, possibly more than she had that first year, but it was the real him this time. She'd been shocked to discover the true Adrien hidden under that image of calm perfection. He was the second silliest person in her life, sometimes running neck and neck with Chat Noir, and probably the most approachable person she knew. He got downright giddy when he could actually do a favor for a friend, and he tended to go over the top on such things. She'd caught a persistent sadness lurking in the background, concealed by fake smiles and finger-guns.

His teasing demanded a response, so she stuck out her tongue at him.

Grinning mischievously, he reached out and caught her tongue between two fingers. "Gotcha."

"Lllll," Marinette objected, squirming out of his gentle hold.
"Could you two stop flirting and focus," Alya demanded, not bothering to cover her smile.

Marinette made a great show of assessing her tongue for damage. "I'll get you back for that," she said, delighted by his lightheartedness this morning. That usually meant things at home were going as well as they could.

"Is that a threat or a promise?" he asked slyly, leaning toward her.

"Dude, we do not use the smoulder at school," Nino said, tossing his things down across from his best friend. "We've talked about this." His tone spoke of long-suffering, but his knowing grin told a different story.

"Awww," Adrien whined, slouching in his chair like a chastised child. "But it works so well."

"True," Nino agreed. "But we are not raising a manipulative jerk here." He gestured with one open hand at Adrien. "You are so much better than some people you're related to. Let's embrace that, shall we." Nino reached into one of the front pockets of his jeans. "Oh, before I forget. I got you a new workout mix."

Adrien's face brightened up, shattering the polite mask he usually wore. "Really?" He cradled the
pen-drive as though it were precious.

"Yes really," Nino insisted. "If your father is going to make you continue with the personal trainer and heavy duty workout program, despite the fact that you're already perfect, you deserve to enjoy the time as much as possible."

Adrien hugged the drive before carefully tucking it into his bag, beaming the whole time. It didn't matter that Nino regularly gave his friends music, Adrien always considered it a special treat.

Adrien burst into history class after lunch with an excess of enthusiasm. He was grinning and bouncing as he made his way to his seat.

"What did you have for lunch, and where can I get some?" Alya asked, leaning forward on the desk she and Marinette shared. They'd returned to their original seating arrangement this year after trying all other configurations in previous years.

"My afternoon shoot was canceled," Adrien said. "I have a whole afternoon off." He collapsed into his chair in a move that looked remarkably like a certain boneless cat-boy. "And father's gone this week, so Nathalie conveniently didn't plug anything else in."

"Aw dude," Nino said, disappointment coloring his voice. "There's nothing I'd like to do more than hang out with you, but I've got a shadowing thing at the radio station today."

"No problem," Adrien insisted. "I can't expect you to drop everything for me."

Nino frowned. "You know I would though, right? If you needed me to."

Adrien's eyes widened and he looked down, the edges of his ears going pink. "Oh. Um. Today isn't a need, but thanks." He glanced at the table behind him. "Alya, Marinette, are either of you available?" His voice sounded oddly strained, hopeful.

Alya sighed. "I'm watching my sisters today, but we could probably join you for a bit at the park."

"I'm free," Marinette said. "We could do the park first, and then go back to my place for gaming and dinner."

The goofy smile was back on his face. "Really? It's been ages since I had dinner with your family. That'd be really cool. Thanks."

At the park, Marinette watched Adrien chase Alya's nine year old twin sisters around the playground equipment. He'd left his bag with her on the bench when he went in pursuit of "the little monkeys." She hadn't asked him out, and had put that whole idea on hold for now. It had less to do with nerves and freaking out, and more to do with reality. The last thing Adrien needed was a girlfriend who ditched him regularly with crappy excuses for her absences. He had more than enough abandonment in his life, and she couldn't bear the thought of adding to it. Until she could be sure she wouldn't have to vanish all the time to deal with Paris' miraculous psychopath, she'd have to settle for being the best friend she could to him. Her resolve didn't prevent her from enjoying watching him move.

"That personal trainer must have him doing some crazy shit to be in this kind of shape," Alya said. "How does he even have time for that?"

Marinette shook her head, critically assessing everything he was doing. The girls were chasing him now, and he turned and dodged far faster than seemed possible. He could have run circles around
Kim. He darted under the swingset, leaping up to catch the support bar. In a move that belonged in an action film or akuma battle, he swung his legs up and over the bar, holding himself fully upside down on extended arms for a moment before dropping down the other side and landing behind Alya's sisters, effectively swapping roles with them again.

"Holy shit Agreste!" Alya shouted. "Don't you be teaching my sisters impossible stuff."

He glanced toward the bench, a wide devilish smile on his lips. "Not impossible," he insisted. "It just requires a working knowledge of physics."

"And a jacked body," she retorted.

"Hey!" The girls swarmed him then. Laughing, he scooped one up in each arm, spinning a bit as he walked back to the bench. "I'll have you know that this body is the result of a lot of hard work." He winked. "And a pretty good hit from the genetic lottery." He set the girls down in front of their sister, where they promptly flopped into the grass laughing. "No artificial colors or preservatives."

He poked at his belly.

Alya made a little motion with her index finger. "Let us have a look at that."

"Alya!" Marinette gasped. "Do you want his father to see a photo of him flashing his abs at us on the front of some tabloid?"

"You're not curious?" Alya demanded in disbelief.

Marinette snorted. "I've already seen it." She grinned up at Adrien. "I mean he had that recent swimsuit campaign, and it was quite flattering."

"I bet he was airbrushed," Alya taunted.

Adrien feigned shock, one hand going to his chest in mock horror. "Airbrushed? Me?!"

"The runway photos supported the evidence in the advertisements," Marinette pointed out. "Don't worry, Adrien. I've got your back. I, personally, believe in your abs."

Adrien sat down beside Marinette, and oh, he was deliciously warm. The air had just enough of a bite to chill her. "I guess that settles that." He stuck his tongue out at Alya and Marinette reached up and pinched it. "Hey!"

Marinette burst into giggles. "Told you I'd get you back."

"That was like two weeks ago," he objected.

"I can be patient."

Alya snorted. "She can be ridiculously patient." She sighed. "Fun though this has been, I've gotta get my monkeys home, and you, " she paused to poke Adrien in the shoulder, "need to get our Maricicle warmed up."

Adrien looked down at Marinette, frowning slightly. "Geeze, Mari. I didn't realize you were so cold. I'm sorry." He stood up and pulled off his jacket, wrapping it around her shoulders.

Though she probably should have refused, her fingers held the jacket closed. "Ooooh," she moaned. "Soooo warm." She tucked her face into the neck as well, subtly catching his scent from it. She unzipped the little pouch she'd taken to wearing on her hip. Scooping Tikki out, she settled the little
being into the snuggly inner pocket of his jacket, feeling the little kwami shiver before relaxing into the added warmth.

"Time to get you home," he said firmly. "I recommend tea and Mecha Strike."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title - "Giving your tongue to the cat" is a French idiom that means being unable to guess. Sometimes people use it in place of the American idiom "the cat has your tongue" but it's not an exact parallel.
Chat Noir savored the autuminal nip in the air as he launched himself over the rooftops of Paris. The crisp chill meant an end to sweltering in his super suit, and his upcoming outdoor shoots should be far less stifling than they'd been of late. The evening was quiet, with the subtle hum of traffic as the dominant sound. A light sense of giddiness filled him as he approached their meeting spot. Seeing his Lady was always a bright point in his weeks, right up there with visits to a certain bakery on Rue Gotlib.

He caught sight of a vibrant red suit pacing across the building, and stepped up his lope to a sprint. Once he was close enough, he launched himself at her in a tremendous pounce. Time seemed to slow as he arced through the air, and he noted two critical things. First, his Bug had not sensed him, which was very odd. He'd yet to truly sneak up on her with one of his Chattacks. And second, she was rubbing her arms to ward off a chill.

On impact, he wrapped his arms around her, flipping them both to ensure he hit the ground first. They'd been playing this game for at least a year, and he didn't want to win unfairly. Also, if she wasn't prepared, as her shriek of outrage suggested, the fall could be pretty unpleasant even with the super suit.

"You okay, Bug?" he asked, loosening his grip and trying to sit up despite her position across him.

She sagged against his body. "Oooh," she whispered. "You're sooo warm."
He rolled forward the rest of the way, gathering her close. "You cold, my Lady? Is the weather getting to you already?" In the last two years he'd seen how hard it was for her to deal with the drop in temperatures. During their weekly training with Master Fu, they'd both learned that they could expect some side-effects particular to their miraculous, more noticeable the longer they had them. He'd developed an extreme fondness for fish, enhanced hearing even in his civilian form, and the ability to smell with his mouth. Her presence made people calm and happy, but a cold snap last January had been particularly rough on her.

She nodded, curling herself tighter into a ball in his lap. "Tikki says it'll be worse this year, but then it should plateau."

"That sucks," he muttered. "Anything I can do?"

"Hmmm. You already are." She tucked her head under his chin.

"So snuggles, then?" he asked. "Such a hardship." Given how little touch he'd had in the last few years, he loved being near other people. He was fortunate that his friends on both sides of the suit were willing to indulge him.

She giggled, and it filled his chest with joy. "She specifically mentioned Chat Noir snuggles as the best treatment."

"Really?" Plagg hadn't mentioned any of this, which was pretty annoying. He liked anticipating her needs. "What's so special about me?"

She hummed against his neck. "You mean aside from the fact that you're my amazing partner and a really sweet guy, to boot?"

Heat filled his face, and while he wanted to respond, his voice had been shut down by her compliments.

"Apparently the black cat compensates for the ladybug," she continued. "Which means you make extra heat for me when it's cold."
"Wait… what?" He'd been plenty warm all summer. "I'm going to produce extra heat for you all fall and winter?"

She nodded. "Early spring, too."

Her arms wrapped around his bicep, the part of him most accessible, given her position, and the action squelched any further complaints he may have voiced.

"I know it's not convenient, Chaton, and I'm sorry that you aren't going to get a respite from the heat." It wasn't just her words, everything about her tone and body language screamed a heartfelt apology.

He sighed and gave her a squeeze. "It's all right, Milady," he insisted. "Even if it's not the most fun for me, we both know that there are costs to our powers, and they're worth it. Besides, you have to put up with the cold practically immobilizing you, and I'm just glad I can help you."

She shuddered a little, but since he couldn't see her face, he couldn't tell what caused it. "I'm so lucky to have you as my Chat Noir. You're one of the most kind and selfless people I've ever met."

"You're making me blush," he teased, though it was true.

"You need better people in your civilian life, Chaton," she muttered. "People who make sure you know how wonderful you are. Because I can tell you, it's not just the suit. The guy behind that mask, he's the one calling the shots, and he's one of a kind, top notch hero material."

"Mercy, Milady," he choked. "You know what you're doing to me. You're going to melt."

She giggled again.

"And you should know that I do have some friends who are trying to..." He paused, trying to recall Nino's wording. "Oh, yeah, rebuild my trash heap of self-esteem. They're almost as relentless as you." To be fair, Marinette was probably her equal, bringing him gifts and personalized treats with the sweetest notes. He'd actually saved all her cards, using them to combat the times when he felt particularly terrible about himself. His friends had thrown him a couple of surprise not-birthday parties as a way around his father's long-standing tradition of refusing to celebrate anything.

"Someday, when we're done with Hawkmoth, I'm going to meet your friends and thank them for taking good care of you," she promised. "I'm going to bake them treats and knit them sweaters."

"Awww. You're so sweet, Bug."

"Then I will team up with them to make sure you really know your worth," she added.

"That sounds vaguely threatening," he said, barely able to swallow the chuckle. "I think I might be scared."

"I've already started making a presentation with all your strong points," she said, twisting to look up at him. "I expect it will be quite long by the time I'm done. I may have to split it up… ooooh. I'll make a series of presentations on what a good person and friend you are, and I'll record them on YouTube so all the world appreciates you better."

He shook his head. "All right. But for now, I need you to head home. Maybe take a nice hot bath, yeah?"
She nodded. "Are we doing shorter training sessions then?"

"Yeah," he agreed. "Not much happens at night, and I don't think we should make you more vulnerable." He tweaked her little button of a nose. "And no more solo training for Miss Bug until it gets warmer." Master Fu told them they'd be more effective as a team, the better they worked together. Their skill sets were complementary, not identical, so they spent some time training together and some on their own. Since they didn't explain the time they spent running around Paris when there was no akuma, people came up with theories. Alya had been a big supporter of the idea that they were patrolling, keeping the city safe. There'd been no real need to correct the misinterpretation.

"But…"

He shook his head. "This is a hard, no, Bug. If I know you're training without your own personal blast furnace, I'll be a mess of worry. Please, don't fight me on this."

She let out a heavy sigh. "But I know you're so busy…"

"We'll figure out a schedule that works." He shrugged. "Remember, Hawkmoth is less active in the cold, too, so we can do this in a way that keeps you safe and healthy, but fulfills our duties without overworking me. Okay?"

"Fine. You win this time," she conceded. "You and your logic. Pfft."

He reluctantly loosened his hold on her. "Are you cold in your civilian form, too?"

She stood, reaching down to help him up, and nodded. "Yeah. It's a little less severe."

He frowned. "Got anyone you can snuggle with, without it being too odd?" His attachment to her hadn't really lessened over the years, but he'd gotten more open to all the options that existed. Being her best friend wasn't less important than being her boyfriend, and she made it quite clear she loved him in her way. He couldn't help but wish he could be her primary snuggle buddy, but that wasn't fair either. He snuggled plenty with Marinette, and a little with Alya and Nino, too. He supposed he was just greedy about cuddles.

"My friends are pretty good about it," she said. "We're all a little odd, so it's okay. They know I'm always cold, and they all pitch in to keep me warm."

"You have great friends." He smiled, thinking of his own friends, who were so good about not judging all his quirks. "Someday I want to meet them."

"They'll totally adopt you," she promised. She pulled her bandalore off her hip. "Later gator."

He watched her fly through the air, smiling as she vanished into the night. It wasn't that late. Perhaps he could squeeze in a visit with Princess.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title - "Rubbing the board with soap" is a French idiom for making life difficult for someone.
Drinking the Broth

Chapter Summary

Featuring Marinette and Ladybug supporting Chat Noir.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Marinette pushed open her skylight a few inches. "Hey Kitty," she said, waving to him. "Come on in. It's way too cold for me out there tonight." She continued down her ladder, not bothering to wait to see if he'd follow. Despite her head start, he managed to touch down on her bedroom floor before her. "Eeep. How do you do that?"

He grinned, looking quite pleased with himself. It was the same kind of grin that Adrien used right before telling his worst jokes. "I excel at Chatrobatics."

"Ha!" The laugh burst past her lips before she could do anything to prevent it. She covered her mouth with one hand, but it was too late.

"Yes!" He bounced around in a circle, his arms up in victory. "Made you laugh."

"That was awful," she said, still giggling. "But somehow funny. How is that even pawssible?"

"Awww. Princess." He clasped his hands together under his chin and beamed at her like some demented ray of sunshine. "You punned for me."

She rolled her eyes. "It's not a new thing. I've done it before." It was pretty routine, actually.

"I know." He nodded and let out a heavy breath. "I remember each time, and they are all special memories for me."

"Silly Kitty." She reached out and tapped the bell at his neck, and it let out a clear 'ding.' "I'm going to get cocoa. You want some?"

He gasped and his eyes somehow got larger than they'd been only moments before. Sweet merciful meringue, he was hitting her with the kitten eyes. "You'd get me... cocoa? Your very special Mama Cheng secret recipe cocoa?"

She covered his face with both hands. "Stop that! I offered, didn't I? There's no need to beg or... ugh!"

He caught her wrists, pulling her hands away and leaning toward her, blinking slowly. "What did I do to deserve Princess' very special cocoa?" he asked quietly.
With a quick twist of both wrists and jerk back, a move directly out of her alter ego's playbook, she freed her hands. Spinning on the ball of one foot, she dashed down the stairs. "Aaaaaah! Mama, Baba! Save me from Chat Noir's kitten eyes!" She felt him coming after her, not making nearly as much noise as he should have.

Her mother was at the stove, already fixing cocoa, and her father was at the table with a laptop. He was running through the business accounts for the usual end of month bills and receipts.

"Good evening, Chat," her father said, looking up as the two of them charged into the room. "You're overdue for family dinner and game night."

"Oh…" Chat paused mid-step. "You're right. I think… maybe Wednesday. Let me check and get back to Princess."

Her father got that stupidly smug grin that he always got when Chat used a nickname for her. "Purrfect."

"Now what's this about you using your kitten eyes against my precious daughter?" Sabine asked firmly, though the smile on her face made it clear he wasn't actually in any trouble.
"I couldn't help it." Chat Noir shrugged. "She mentioned your magical cocoa. I never get cocoa at home. I'd never even had it before Princess made me some and I think it's spoiled me for all other cocoas."

Her mother nodded sagely. "That's a fair point. Our family recipe is significantly better than any you'll get at the cafes."

Chat Noir nodded. "Exactly. I've tried and it was… disappointing." He shuddered. "So you can see that the very thought of Mama Cheng's cocoa was just too much. I'll try to do better, and reserve the kitten eyes for times of true need."

Marinette peeked out from behind her mother where she had taken refuge. "Sure you will."

"I didn't say I'd succeed, Princess." He winked.

Shaking her head, Marinette scooped two mugs of cocoa out of the pot. "Back upstairs you silly Kitty. We need to let Baba work, and I need your help."

"Oooh." He reached out to take his mug from her. "What can I help you with?" He was always so eager to be useful; it was kind of ridiculous.

"An obscure physics problem that I can't quite manage, and a sport coat design I want your feedback on." She led the way more calmly back to her room.

"Ooooh. I can definitely help with those," he promised.

Ladybug dropped down in the eerily quiet street, her eyes darting about for her partner. She took a slow breath and closed her eyes, feeling for the magic all around her. There was the akuma, three blocks over, obnoxiously purple and potent in her mind. Another breath. This was a new skill Master Fu had them working on, as it helped them find each other in a bind. Ah! There he was. Her Chaton was near, his magical signature vibrantly green.

She opened her eyes and her vision immediately landed on him, huddled in the shadows behind the corner of a building, cradling his right arm. Without wasting another moment, she dashed to him, compelled to help him while she still could. That akuma would be catching up soon.

"Are you okay?" she whispered urgently, catching his right shoulder.

He gasped, pressing his back to the wall as he winced and his breathing shuddered.

"That's a solid nope," she muttered, horrified by just how hurt he was. There was no way he was going to be able to focus enough to fight. Hell, standing looked like it would be an issue, and she couldn't risk him that way.

"Cats do not always land on their feet," he gritted through clenched teeth. "That's a myth."

"Oh, Chaton…" She caught his face in both hands. "You did enough. I need you to stay back and rest."

"You're cold and slow," he argued. Okay, so he could apparently focus on something, and her safety was at the fore, as always.

She shook her head. "I'm too angry to be cold right now." She rubbed her fingertips over his scalp. "She hurt my Chaton, and now I have my rage to warm me."
He chuckled, cutting off with another wince. "You get sloppy when you're mad. Please let me help." He sucked in a breath and gazed at her with his damned kitten eyes.

"Ack, stop it!" She covered his eyes with both hands. "This is no time for insane heroics, Chat. I need to know you're safe."

"And I will never forgive myself if you get hurt because I wasn't there for you," he replied, holding still under her palms. "I need to be there, Milady. Let me serve as a distraction."

She lifted her hands only to press them back against his face a moment later. He was still doing it. "Chaaaat," she began.

"Don't leave me, Ladybug." His voice was a soft plea, somehow more sincere and devastating than his kitten eyes. This had come up before in akuma battles and discussion. She wondered if he'd been orphaned as a child or if, in his formative years, his family tended to just ditch him places without the assurance they'd return. She'd never asked as Marinette or Ladybug, and he'd never volunteered more than he had to on his home life.

"I would never leave you Chaton." She uncovered his eyes and pulled his head down so she could kiss his forehead. "I might have you wait for me somewhere, or meet me somewhere, but I would never leave you. Not if I have any control over it."

He sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm being stupid."

"You're not stupid," she corrected. "Crazy sometimes, yes. Ridiculously caring, also a solid yes. But you are never stupid." She stepped back and tossed her yo-yo straight up. "Lucky Charm!"

The red and black package opened to reveal a heavy duty sling, the type that strapped the arm against the chest, and it appeared to be exactly his size. She nodded. "All right Chaton. Lucky Charm agrees that I need you. Let's get this on, so you have one functional arm, okay."

He nodded. "Thank you, Milady."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title - To drink the broth (sometimes to drink the cup) is a French idiom for swallowing water while you're swimming.
"Hey, Marinette," Adrien called as his petite friend entered the classroom well before the bell. "I've got hot jasmine tea for you." They both had literature final period, and had partnered up early in the year. He'd had a mid-afternoon shoot, and managed to swing by the coffee shop before returning to school.

"Oh thank you, thank you," she murmured, wrapping her hands around the hot cardboard cup with a sigh. "Oh god this is perfect."

She'd been a lot of fun to work with, but she'd seemed so sleepy the last couple of weeks, and it worried him. He wasn't quite sure if his concern was independent of, or partially fuelled by his similar worry for Ladybug. "I've got something else to warm you up, too," he said with a grin. Last year, Alya told him that she suspected Mari had seasonal affective disorder or some form of anemia. That had been the start of their group's warm-up-Mari efforts, and he had to admit, he liked the close contact. Taking care of her in both his forms made him so happy and it gave him all sorts of ideas for how to best help Ladybug.

"What?" she asked, sliding into her seat beside him.

He shrugged off the coat he'd been wearing, but didn't need. "Here you go. Pre-warmed."

Her eyes went huge, and for a brief moment he was reminded of their early interactions, when she couldn't seem to string three words together around him. "I love you," she blurted, snatching the jacket out of his hands and shoving her arms into the sleeves. "Ooooh," she moaned, hugging the fabric to her. "Sooo warm."

He couldn't hold back the chuckle, and didn't want to anyway. "I run a little hot."

"A little?" she teased.

Shaking his head, he continued. "It's my high metabolism or something, and I'm happy to share." He reached out and zipped the front for her, allowing her keep her fingers tucked in the over-long sleeves as long as possible. "Better?"

"Much. Thank you." Her smile made his chest feel tight, not with sorrow or hurt, but so full of happiness it was stretching.

"Alya said you've entered something in my father's latest contest," he said, nudging her with an elbow. To be more accurate, he'd asked Alya about it so he could claim to have talked to her about it. Chat was fully in the know, though he'd unfortunately not been able to stop by to see the finished piece before she turned it in. The photos she'd taken were good, but he suspected they paled compared to her vision.
Marinette nodded. "Yeah." She glanced up at him and grinned. "I kinda took the suit coat theme to an extreme." She'd included elements of Victorian men's tailcoats, corset lacing, and angel sleeves for something incredibly striking, yet adjustable.

"Yeah, why did my father pick suit coats?" he asked, shaking his head. "They're a freaking plague in my closet."

"We hates them, my precious," Marinette said, pulling off a pretty passable Gollum imitation before switching back to her regular voice. "The official word is that he wants to see what we can do with something we see every day. How do we embrace the mundane?" she said dramatically.

"I personally prefer to embrace them with a torch," Adrien suggested. "Foom! Bye bye poly-blend."

"Oh my god Adrien." She reached out and rested a hand on his arm, her face concerned. "Who is dressing you in poly-blends? You can tell me." Her sleeve-covered hand patted him gently. "What they're doing is wrong, and I can help you."

He let out a strangled giggle. "You going to protect me from my father, then, are you?"

She sat up straighter, suddenly radiating a fierceness that should not have fit in the tiny sweet package known as Marinette Dupain-Cheng. "If that's what you need, then yes." The look she gave him was suddenly far too serious and pointed for the joking they'd started with.

He looked down at her hand on his arm, her fingertips just peeking out of the oversize jacket. "Thanks Mari."

Her hand gave him one little squeeze before withdrawing so she could pull out her tablet. "Anytime Adrien."

"Can you tell me about your design?" he asked. "You've got me all curious now."

"You hate suit coats," she pointed out. Her eyes went wide. "Oh no! You're going to have to model the winning design... and you hate them." She sighed. "I hope I lose."

"Why?" he demanded, surprised. "I'm going to have to model one anyway."

"I don't want you tortured by my design," she said. "Do you think I can pull out of the contest?"

Adrien shook his head. "No. And even if you could, I wouldn't want you to." She'd taken first place in five of the last seven contests, only being beaten by university students enrolled in design programs. He was hoping she could bump the odds up a bit more with this one. He liked what he'd seen of her design, practically designed with him in mind, and he really wanted the opportunity to wear it.

"But..."

"No, Mari," he said firmly. "I have to wear one anyway. It may as well be yours. After all, at least it won't be a poly-blend." He grinned and settled back in his chair. "Tell me about it?" Their teacher walked in and the bell rang.

"If you have time after school, why don't you stop over," she suggested. "I've got photos and fabric swatches."
"Princess?" Chat leaned down and tapped on Marinette's skylight. It was odd for her to not be in at this time of evening, and he couldn't help the stupid alarm bells going off in the back of his head. He was probably over-reacting. She was probably with Alya. But it couldn't hurt to check, right? The skylight lifted easily, always a sign that he was welcome, and he dropped into her darkened room.

He listened for a moment before descending the stairs. He'd nearly been caught early on when he was still stupidly excited to be so welcome and Marinette or her parents had company. He picked up Tom and Sabine's voices, and the obvious sounds of food preparation.

"Evening Chat," Tom said, waving from the kitchen, where he stood over a deep silver kettle. "Did you bring Maricake back?"

Chat shook his head. "She wasn't in, and..." he caught himself before he could confess his stupid groundless fear. "There was something I wanted to talk to her about." He didn't like the frown that appeared on Tom's face. "Umm. Where is she?"

"She went to the library directly after school," Sabine said, pulling out her cell phone.

He didn't remember her saying she needed to go study, but then, he'd noticed she tended to not tell him what her plans were when he was scheduled for fencing and Mandarin, because he'd just miss out. "Which one did she go to?"

"François-Mitterrand," Sabine said, holding the phone to her ear. She waited a moment, then shook her head. "She's not picking up."

Chat felt the rush of adrenaline, as her words seemed to reinforce the strange feeling he'd gotten that something was wrong.

"She might just be unable to pick up," Tom cautioned, though his voice was tight.

"Yeah," Chat said with a nod. "But I'm not going to bank on that." He pulled out his baton. He flipped up the communicator and scrolled to Tom and Sabine's contacts, sending them each a message so they could reach him easily. "I'm going to go find her. Message me if you hear from her."

"We will," Sabine promised, her eyes on her phone. "I'm going to check in with her other friends in case any of them have seen her."

"Good plan. Text me what you learn." He didn't even wait for a response, and just darted up the steps to her room.

François-Mitterrand was far enough that she would have taken the train. He ducked in and out of the stop near her house, before taking to the rooftops to get there faster. He forced himself to check the train station near the library before heading to the main desk. As a well-known superhero, he was greeted with enthusiasm and immediate support from the library staff. Each floor and section was quickly checked by librarians and clerks who reported their findings to the head of security while Chat watched the surveillance footage for the main entrance. The clerk from the textile and fashion collection called in to report that three books had been checked out by Miss Marinette Dupain-Cheng forty minutes earlier. Chat forwarded the video to times closer to that record.

"Ah!" He pointed, pausing the playback. "There she is."

The head of security tapped the corner of the monitor. "Twenty-two minutes ago." He resumed the video. "And she headed south-east."

Chat scowled at the screen. That was the wrong direction for her to catch the train. "Thank you so
much for the help." He lurched to his feet and dashed from the room. When he got to the sidewalk on Avenue de France, he pulled out his communicator and tapped Sabine's contact info.

"Hello, Chat?" she answered.

"Yeah," he replied. "She left the library about twenty-five minutes ago."

"I just got a text from her," Sabine said quickly. "She said she was cold, so she went to L'Arobase Cafe on Rue du Chevaleret, and she'd be leaving any minute."

Chat closed his eyes and let out a sigh as his concern was abruptly abated. It wasn't completely gone, but he could breathe now. His focus was suddenly less narrow and frantic. "She couldn't have gone to one of the three cafes on the library campus?" he wanted to know.

Sabine chuckled. "Apparently they all have less than stellar reviews for a reason."

"I'm going to go meet her," he said. "I'm already here and…" Would he sound controlling and creepy if he mentioned he was still worried?

"I was going to ask you to," Sabine said happily. "She's been having so much trouble with the cold this year, we can't help but worry," she admitted. "And if it fits into your schedule, we'd love to have you stay for dinner."

His fingers slid over the screen to glance at his schedule. "Yeah. That would be great." He never turned down the opportunity to feel like he was part of a family.

Once he'd hung up, he took the quick route to the cafe. He was getting close when his extra sensitive ears caught the sound of a mighty pissed off Princess.

"I have already declined, and I'm not sure why you're having such a hard time understanding that I've said no," Marinette snapped. "Are you stupid?"

Chat really disliked the sound of that, but he slowed his movements to creep up on the situation from above. Marinette stood on the sidewalk a few doors down from the cafe. A young man with light brown hair and a red jacket stood directly in her path.

"I just can't help but feel like we have a connection," he said, his tone wheedling and reasonable, though his words and body language were anything but. "If you give me a chance, I'm sure you'll feel it too."

Chat couldn't quite see her glare, given the angle, but he knew it was there and he grinned. Mari wasn't someone to mess with, and could definitely handle herself in normal conditions. It would only irritate her if he interfered. He'd have no qualms jumping in if she needed it, and given her problems with the cold, it seemed sensible to be ready to intervene.

"The only thing I feel right now," Marinette said, "is a strong urge to bust your kneecaps and kick in your teeth."

"See, I knew you were feisty," the man said, as if this justified his earlier argument. He reached out to touch her chin. "You're beautiful when you play at being dominant, princess."

The growl hadn't even left Chat's throat when she reacted, and she was wicked fast. In mere seconds, the man's hand was twisted up between his shoulder blades while his face was pressed into the nearby brick wall. It was a move his Lady was partial to, and she was probably the only person he'd ever seen do it faster.
"Only one person is allowed to call me Princess," she snarled. "And **you** are **not** him."

That sounded as good as any entrance cue. "While it looks like you have this well under control," he said, slowly twirling down his staff. "Is there any chance I could lend a paw?"

She beamed up at him. "Chat Noir, what a delightful surprise. It's fabulous how you're always
"exactly where you're needed."

"Aww, shucks." Her praise felt genuine so of course his cheeks went hot. "Just doing my job." He embraced the opportunity to look at his communicator for police dispatch, hoping the blush would fade before she noticed. "Hello, this is Chat Noir. I'm at Rue du Chevaleret near L'Arobase Cafe, and we have a harasser for you to pick up."

"It wasn't like that," the man objected, his voice muffled a bit by the wall.

"Hmm," Chat growled. "It looked rather a lot like that, actually. I was watching for a bit, you see. I recognize that some ladies are quite prepared to handle men like you." He allowed his disgust to feed into the last three words. The nerve of the guy. How dare he touch Princess without her consent, and after she'd told him to back off? "And miss, may I congratulate you on your very fine skills? My Lady is fond of that particular defense." Did he imagine that her eyes went wide at that statement? The sudden pink tinge to her cheeks had nothing to do with the weather.

"Oh!" She turned away, seeming quite focused on checking her hand placement, which was still perfect. "Yeah. I've... uh seen Ladybug use it in videos, and I really liked it. So I've practiced it with a friend of mine."

Chat nodded. Had she tried it out on Alya or Nino, or someone else entirely? "Smart of you and your friend."

He stayed with Marinette until the police arrived, and added his witness report to the record, knowing it would hold enough weight that she wouldn't have to be bothered with this mess again. As the young man was being tucked into the back of the car, he approached the door. "A moment, please." He leaned in, leveling the man with a glare that had been quite effective on others. "I realize things didn't go as planned, and you're probably quite upset just now. But I advise against making friends with any purple butterflies, because I will not feel inclined to restrain myself if I have to fight you in akuma form. And Ladybug's miraculous cure doesn't entirely fix those injuries."

Marinette was looking at him oddly when he rejoined her at the sidewalk. "Chat," she said quietly. "Did you threaten that man?"

He shot her low-level kitten eyes, the ones he used to imply innocence that didn't exist. "Why Princess, I would never." He shook his head. "I just recommended against getting akumatized over this incident."

Her lips twitched as she tried not to smile. "Oh. That would be inconvenient."

He nodded. "I've been invited to dinner, and I'd hate to miss it." He held out a hand. "Might I escort you home? Your parents were worried about you."

"Just my parents?" she asked as she slipped her much smaller hand into his.

He shrugged. "My Princess can take care of herself," he noted. "But I don't like it when you have to." He pulled her close to his side, the way he preferred to carry passengers for optimal mobility and safety. "Um... I'm pretty sure you would’ve told me by now, but watching you deal with that jerk just makes me want to be clear on something."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Is it okay that I call you Princess?" He'd hate to give up the nickname, it had come to mean so much more than the word itself. But if it made her uncomfortable, he wouldn't hesitate to stop.
Well, try to stop. It would probably take a few weeks to retrain himself if necessary.

"You heard what I said, right?" she asked, leaning forward to look into his face. "I was talking about you. Only you get to call me that."

He spontaneously hugged her, something he didn't usually do. "Thank you Princess." Why did this make him so ridiculously happy? "Let's get you home. Mama Cheng has dinner ready.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title - "Making a whole cheese" is a French idiom equivalent to "tempest in a teacup."
Ladybug scooped dazed supermodel Adrien Agreste over her shoulder and swung out of the danger zone of the emotionally vulnerable victim of the day. She wanted to hyperventilate, or completely freak out, but she was in her super suit right now, and had to shove her civilian concerns aside so she could focus.

She alighted on the rooftop patio of Le Grand Paris, maintaining her momentum as she jogged...
toward the doors. He was more disoriented than injured, and it was clear he'd be out of it until she cleansed the akuma, which meant he needed to be somewhere safe. If her suspicions were accurate, and at this point she didn't really harbor any doubt, Chat Noir wouldn't be able to help her today. All the more reason to be sure Adrien was out of the cold and in the hands of someone who cared about him.

"Chloe Bourgeois!" she called. "Miss Bourgeois, are you here?"

"What on earth?" the familiar voice with a hint of a whine replied. "Who do you think you are, barging in here..." She came out and saw her hero and the young man she still called her best friend. "Oh, Adrien!" She gasped, looking at Ladybug with naked fear in her eyes. "What happened? Is is he okay?"

Ladybug nodded. "He's going to be confused until I... we take care of the akuma." She gestured toward the windows. "I couldn't leave him out in the cold like this."

Chloe smiled smugly. "You like him."

That was unexpected. "Uh... what?"

"Ha!" She caught Ladybug's free arm and and drew her into a guest bedroom. "You like Adrien, in a more than friendly way." Her tone was statement, without any hint of question. She pulled back the blankets, then moved to untie his shoes. "I don't blame you. He's quite the catch." She shrugged. "Not my type though."

Ladybug eased him onto the bed, gently brushing the hair out of his eyes.

"Awww," Chloe squealed. "You should totally ask him out. I know for a fact that he likes you, too. Probably even more than I do." Her smile was smug. "I would even be willing to shelve my jealous nature."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea..." Ladybug shook her head. "It's not safe to be seen with me too often."

Chloe tilted her head to the side a bit. "You may not realize this, but he's alone a lot. He's the only one home in that stupid trap he calls home, most evenings. It'd be perfectly safe for you to visit him." The level of anger in her voice surpassed anything the blonde had ever used in school. "You could probably justify stopping by tonight, you know. Just to make sure he's okay after this." She gestured to the young man who was gazing up at them dazedly.

"Adrien?" Ladybug asked, leaning forward. "Are you okay?"


"It's okay." She caressed his cheek. "You're safe. Chloe is going to take care of you while I go handle the akuma."

"Take me," he suggested. "I can help."

"As if," Chloe said with a laugh. "Adrien, you're a mess. You can't even stand. You're staying here. I'll call down for popcorn and we can watch that trashy figure skating anime you love so much."

"S'not trashy," he objected, frowning.
"I agree with Miss. Bourgeois," Ladybug said. "About the staying, that is. I can't comment on the anime." She winked at him. "I'll have you feeling back to normal as soon as I can." She leaned in and kissed him on the forehead before turning and darting from the room. She needed to take care of this akuma before he said anything he shouldn't, though after her brief exchange with Chloe, she suspected she really didn't need to worry even if he blurted out something incriminating. As if she needed more revelations right now.

Adrien stared down at his homework with a scowl. After this afternoon's akuma had been dealt with, and he'd returned to his usual state of mind, he'd gone through several emotional upheavals in quick succession. It was a good thing his father was out, as usual, given his feelings about emotions. There'd been embarrassment over the whole situation. Chloe had been nice about it, but he had a feeling he'd babbled his head off about all sorts of things that were best kept to himself. Plagg assured him he hadn't blown his cover with his long-time friend, but he wasn't convinced.

Once he'd had the chance to see Alya's footage of the Harry Potter-inspired akuma, the guilt kicked in. His Lady had been on her own dealing with someone who had all the standard wizarding curses down. The sight of green light indicative of a killing curse, shooting at Ladybug during the fight left him queasy and shaking. He'd come far too close to losing the best things in his life. Self-loathing had been quick to follow that realization. He was pretty sure he wouldn't be sleeping tonight, or possibly ever.

He stared at the chemistry homework he was supposed to hand in tomorrow, knowing it was unlikely to get done. He just couldn't focus. His mind kept going back to the footage of the fight, and Ladybug narrowly dodging curses.

A light tapping at his window made him straighten up with a start. Standing on the ledge, which he knew for a fact was slippery, stood Ladybug. She flashed him a bright smile and waved. Jumping to his feet, he dashed across the room and opened a nearby window. "Ladybug?" He wanted to hug her. To thank her. To prove to himself she was okay. But right now, he was Adrien, and while he had every reason to believe he knew who she was, she didn't want him to know. How was he supposed to talk to her?

"Hey, is it okay… can I come in for a minute?" She seemed unusually flustered, and he was forcibly reminded that Chloe insisted Ladybug was in love with him.

He stepped out of the way, but held out a hand to assist her if needed. "Yes. Please. I'd like to thank you properly for your help today."

Her hand slid into his, feeling so familiar despite his missing leather gloves. "I was really worried about you," she said, stepping into the room, and keeping her hold on him. She reached over to close the window. "Are you okay?" She peered into his face, clearly concerned.

He shrugged. "I'm sorry you had to waste time taking care of me." It was suddenly hard to breathe. He felt like such terrible partner. He wondered, and not for the first time today, if he should give up his ring for someone better suited to it.

Ladybug let go of his hand and pulled him into a tight hug. "Don't be sorry," she said, either failing to hide her irritation, or not even bothering to try. "You are never a waste of my time."

"You had to work so hard today," he said, trying to help her see his point. "That akuma was awful."

"It was," she agreed, still holding herself close to him.
"And you had to face it alone." He shook his head. "You need a better partner." The last bit came out as a half-voiced after-thought.

Ladybug loosened her hold to lean back and look up at him. "There isn't anyone better. Chat Noir is the perfect partner."

Her words stunned him into silence.

"I would never want someone else as my Chat Noir." Her voice managed to be firm but sweet at the same time, like she was determined to get her point across, but was afraid she'd hurt his feelings.

"Oh." He looked to the side as that familiar heat filled his cheeks. "Uhm. Your Chat Noir?"

She nodded, her shy smile completely familiar, though he'd never seen it on Ladybug's face. "He's my miraculous other half. My perfect partner. Just as I'm his." She shrugged. "I was pretty sure he wasn't going to be able to make it to the fight."

"Oh." It came out as a sigh. There was no reason for her to think such a thing, unless she knew he'd been hit. "D-do you know who he is?" It was a stupid question. She was so smart; of course she knew.

"There are two parts of being a superhero that are really hard," she said. "Lying to my friends and family, is one. The other... the one that I've found is actually much worse, is not being allowed to share identities with my partner." She let go of him, taking both his hands in hers. "He's my best friend, Adrien. And we're not allowed to tell each other who we are under the masks, not yet." She met his eyes for a long moment. "I have... a kind of magical advisor, and she's told me I can't. It's a matter of safety, not trust. And even if I knew who was under that mask, I couldn't tell him. I wouldn't risk him, because he means too much to me. His safety is so important to me."

A strange sense of calm filled him, and he looked down into her amazing blue eyes, searching for a moment. "I understand." She knew who he was. She probably suspected he knew who she was, but her kwami... Tikki had forbidden acknowledging it. At least for now. "I agree."

She beamed at him. "Now, are you okay? I was really worried about you."

"I wasn't... okay, that is," he admitted. "But... I think I'm fine now. You... your words really helped."

She let out a sigh. "I'm glad." She glanced over at his desk. "You should probably finish that up. Uh, if it's for school tomorrow. I have not found science teachers to be very forgiving of my excuses."

He laughed. "Yeah. Me either." He was probably going to be able to concentrate now.

"And if you need a hand, you should maybe check in with a classmate before it gets too late." She smirked, releasing his hands and stepping toward the window. "Someone is sure to still be up."

"Good plan. Thank you." He stepped in quickly and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "For everything."

Chapter End Notes
Chapter title - "To call a cat a cat" is a French idiom for calling something what it is, to say things as they are.
Adrien grinned as his driver pulled up in front of the Tom & Sabine Boulangerie Patisserie. "We'll be back in a minute. Thanks." He shoved his door open and hopped out, quickly moving for the entrance.

The bells chimed over-head and Sabine called, "Oh, good morning Adrien."

"Is Mari up yet?" he asked, carefully navigating through the morning rush crowd on his way through the bakery.

Sabine let out a little laugh. "She should be, but you know Marinette."

Adrien nodded. "She helped me with chemistry last night, so I thought I should return the favor and make sure she got to school on time."

"Thank you, and have a wonderful day," Sabine said, handing a bag over to a customer before turning back to him. "Aren't you usually helping her with science?"

He shook his head. "Only if it's physics. She's the chem wiz between the two of us." He pointed over his shoulder with one thumb. "Is it all right if I go up and help her get moving? I'll text her a warning first."

Sabine reached over and patted his cheek. "You're such a sweet friend, Adrien. Go on up."

He took the steps in twos, pausing outside the apartment's door to send the text he'd already prepared on the ride over. He opened the door and listened before walking in. Being Chat Noir gave him enhanced hearing and low-light vision even when he wasn't transformed, though it was much stronger in his superhero form. She wasn't downstairs, and from the silence, she probably wasn't up at all.

On the stairs to her room, he reached up and tapped on her trap door. "Mari, are you awake up there?" he called. There was no answer. He carefully pushed against the door, glad to find it unlocked. He was already prepared to bribe Plagg with cheese if he needed the bolt slipped from the other side, but it was nice not to have to resort to that. He tilted his head, smiling at the sound of relaxed breathing. Pushing the door the rest of the way up, he crept into her room.

"Maricakes," he called in a light sing-song. "It's time to wake up."

"Hnngh," Marinette grumbled, and her covers rustled as she turned over. "Five more minutes, Baba."

He chuckled. Poor Princess was too out of it to realize he sounded nothing like Tom. "Sorry, but
I'm not your Baba, and it's time to get up." He stepped onto the second rung of the ladder and looked at her, snugly burrowed in her blankets. Winter was so hard on her, and he wondered if it was because of the temperature or the reduced sunlight. He didn't remember her ever trying a full spectrum or sun lamp. It might not do anything, but it seemed worth a try. He smirked, deciding to send her one as an anonymous gift. He slipped the fingers of one hand into her tangled mess of blue-black hair. He loved the feeling of her fingertips against his scalp, and he'd always assumed it was a cat thing. This was as good a time as any to test the theory.

Marinette smiled and pushed her head more firmly into his hand. Purrrhaps it was an affection thing. He loved her hair. She'd started wearing it down a year ago, about the same time Ladybug switched to a single bun. Maybe she'd let him brush it this morning, to help her get ready, of course. "C'mon Mari." He leaned his head onto her pillow beside her. "It's time for school."

Her eyes fluttered open and she gazed at him in confusion. "Drien? Wha' you doing in my room?"

He smiled, working his fingers toward the back of her head. "You helped me with my chem homework last night, remember?"

She nodded, adorably groggy.

"Since I kept you up late, I thought I should help you get to school on time." He withdrew his hand, grinning when she let out a whine of complaint. "Come on. Get dressed and I'll brush your hair. You can eat in the car."

"Car?" She finally pushed herself to sit up.

Adrien nodded. "You're on my way," he pointed out. "I'm sorry it's taken so long to realize I could be picking you up. It'll keep you warmer." Without breaking eye contact, he stepped down off the ladder.

"Really?" She leaned toward him, seeming to follow without really meaning to. "I get a ride?"

"Every day I can manage it," he pointed out. "Which is most days." He caught her as she leaned a little too far and lost her balance. "Oops. Careful there Mari." She was wearing thick fleece and flannel pajamas, black with green accents. "Umm. Nice PJs. Where can I get some?"

He watched her eyes go wide and pink filled her cheeks. She was definitely awake now. "Oh… Uhhm." She looked around frantically.

"It's good to see Chat Noir get some support," he said, setting her gently on her feet.

"He deserves it," she said as she stepped back.

"I kinda have a thing for Ladybug, myself," he said. He rolled his eyes. "I know, me and half of Paris."

Marinette's giggle broke the awkward silence. "I saw she rescued you yesterday. You didn't mention that when we were on the phone."

He shrugged, wondering if his cheeks were as flushed as hers now. "Yeah. That wasn't at all embarrassing."

"It's okay." She reached out and rubbed his arm. "Chat Noir has rescued me… uhm… more times than I can put a number to right now."
"You're supposed to run away from the akuma," he said, teasingly aghast. "I thought you knew that by now."

Marinette shrugged. "Bad luck. Also, when you're friends with Alya, sometimes common sense gets tossed in the shredder."

"Get dressed and meet me downstairs. I'll grab some breakfast for you."

"Thanks Adrien." She caught his hand, squeezing it gently. "Chat Noir's amazing, but right now, you're my hero."

Bringing Marinette to and from school quickly became routine. He was reasonably sure his bodyguard hadn't told his father, and he wondered if Marinette's frequent thank you treats to him were part of that incentive. Of course, the thirteenth ride to school was interrupted by an akuma, and he puzzled over whether it was bad luck or good luck in disguise. They had both just gotten buckled up when all three phones buzzed with the Akuma alert.

Marinette glanced at her phone, her expression frantic for a moment, before being replaced by her stoic calm. "Oh wait!" she called suddenly. "I forgot my new sketchbook inside." She'd been vacillating between bringing it and leaving it home, and he was pretty sure she'd decided to leave it. But he may not have been paying the best attention because he'd been gently working through her tangled bedhead at the time. It could have been entirely an excuse, too.

Adrien met his bodyguard's eyes through the rearview mirror. "We'd be safer inside, right? Maybe we should just all..." He cut off when the large man nodded once. He scrambled after Marinette, out her door and back into the bakery.

"The akuma alert's just gone off," Marinette announced as she barged into the bakery. "Please follow me into the stairwell."

His chest swelled with pride at how good she was at organizing people and keeping them calm. He darted after her through the crowd.

"Adrien," she said, catching his hand. "Can you wait for me in my room?"

"But what about..." He gestured to her, feeling obligated to at least pretend.

"I'll help my parents settle our customers, and then I'll lock the doors and pull the blinds," she answered quickly. "I'll worry if I don't know you're safe, and I promise to come up as soon as I can."

She was so smart. He pulled her into a quick hug. "Good luck. See you soon." He'd already been naturally graceful before having that trait enhanced by Plagg, and he was able to move quickly through the crowd in the stairwell, politely encouraging them to take up seats on the stairs before dashing up to the top floor and the roof access.

Unsurprisingly, his Lady was just starting to engage the akuma when he arrived. He bounded over her, spinning his staff overhead to block the branches that were flying through the air. As he landed in front of her, he pivoted to bat away the limb the burly tree creature swung down at them.

"Doth Burnam Wood come to Dunsinane?" He flipped to dodge another swing.

"If that's their destination, they've taken a mighty wrong turn," she said with a laugh in her voice. Her bandalore zipped past him, taking small divots out of the bark as she tested the akuma's
strengths and abilities.

The magical string wrapped around him and yanked him out of the path of a swinging branch the size of his bodyguard.

"Uh uh," she chastised. "Mustn't be so hasty."

"Huhrooom roolum," Chat said. "Hrooom."

The akuma froze like a robot whose power had been cut.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of red as Ladybug darted around the back of the creature. "Hrooooom?" He held out both hands as if questioning the akuma. "Do... you... speak... Entish?" he asked, his voice overly loud and exaggeratedly slow, the way American tourists tended to speak to shopkeepers.

There was a distinctive crack, and the akuma melted away to become a willowy young man with shaggy brown hair and a Save the Trees t-shirt.

When Adrien finally escorted Marinette into class, well into second period, he was able to honestly tell Ms. Bustier that they'd both been trapped at the bakery until the all clear was officially sounded. Their teachers were all aware of his father's protocol regarding his safety during akuma attacks, and he pointed out that he'd been driving Marinette to school. The soft grateful smile she gave him when she didn't need to come up with an excuse, was his new favorite thing.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title - "To switch dairy shops" is a French idiom for taking your business elsewhere.
Removing a Thorn from the Chat's Paw

Chapter Summary

Helping Chat with his Adrien issues.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Marinette heard Chat pacing around on her balcony in the snow for several minutes before she set down her project and climbed up the ladder to peek out at him. "Hey there," she said, surprised to have been able to startle him. "You wanna come in, or do you need to work something out in your head a bit more first?"

His eyes were round and wide, not quite kittenish, and they drooped a bit as he registered her words and relaxed. "I'm sorry. Was I making too much noise?"

Oh. Something was definitely wrong. Her Kitty was never this subdued unless he was unhappy. She shook her head. "You're not bothering me," she said firmly. "But I worry about you pacing out here in the cold when you could be inside with me."

That brought a faint smile to his face. "That's a fair point, Princess."

"If you need a bit more time, that's fine," she said. "But feel free to come in when you're ready. I'm just going to pop down to the kitchen for snacks."

She chewed her lip in thought as she strode through her room and down the stairs. She didn't like it when he was unhappy. Nobody had any business hurting her Kitty, and if she had to bet on it, she was pretty sure his father was the problem. How had such a bitter cold prune ended up with such a sweet and caring son? By all rights he should be a mess, and to be honest, he probably needed therapy. Her parents came up from finishing their evening cleaning in the bakery as she was starting hot cocoa.

"Uh oh," her father said, leaning on the table. "I see pensive face. What's wrong Maricake?"

Her mother peered into the pot. "Ahh. Chat's here."

"He's pacing on the roof," Marinette said, scowling at the water, cocoa, and sugar mixture in the pot. "In the snow."

"He doesn't mind the cold, sweetheart," her mother said, rubbing her back. "But I imagine that's really not the issue, is it."

She shook her head. "I'm sure he'll be down eventually... I just..." She let out a huff.

"He's normally pure joy, and it's hard to see him not like that," Baba said.

"Yeah. She looked up at her dad. "And I know I can't really fix it."

"But you wish you could," Mama added sympathetically, giving her a one-armed hug. "It's a tough
situation, sweetheart. But for now, just be there when he needs you. Eventually things will change."

"He's welcome to stay as long as he can," Baba said before stepping away from the table. He walked over and looked up the stairs. "Ah, good to see you Chat. Care to join me in some Ultimate Mecha Strike while you wait for cocoa?"

Chat scrambled down the stairs. "Mecha Strike and cocoa? Sign me up." His smile was just a touch smaller and more fragile than usual.

"I've got some new combos to try on you cat boy," Baba teased.

"New combos?" Chat asked. "Bring it."

Tom shook his head. "Chat style's not going to be enough to beat me this time."

Marinette felt her mom nudge her from the side. "I'll watch this. Can you get me the vanilla, or are you too distracted?"

"Huh? No, I got it." She looked away from Baba settling in with the leatherish-clad superhero and looked in the spice cabinet. When her gaze landed on them again, she froze for a moment, catching the subtle ways Baba treated him as a son, and the hints that it was exactly what her Kitty needed. It had been so long since he'd really had a family.

"Hey Mama, why don't you go sit with them?" she suggested in a whisper that she was sure not even Chat Noir's enhanced hearing could pick up. She reached for the wooden spoon.

"Are you sure? You know I don't enjoy those games as much as you do," her mom said, not quite letting go of the spoon.

Marinette nodded. "Yeah, but… I think he needs you and Baba more than me right now."

"Oh," Mama said softly. She nodded and handed over the spoon and left the kitchen without another word. After a moment, she had settled herself on the couch next to Chat Noir.

Marinette turned down the burner's heat, letting the cocoa take longer than necessary so she wouldn't interrupt the moment too soon. After a tough round where her Kitty was just barely able to pull out a win over her dad's slick new combos, her mother rubbed a hand down his back and he beamed at the smaller woman. Yes. This was exactly what he needed.

When the game finally ended, her father had managed to just squeak by with a win. She turned off the cocoa and went to join them, intentionally coming up beside her father. "That was fantastic," she said, pushing a few pillows out of the way. It was going to be a tight fit, but having everyone on the couch at one time seemed right in this moment. "Now Baba, prepare to be schooled by the Ultimate Mecha Strike master."

"Ohhhh," her dad said, grinning at her cheeky trash talk.

"Time for some Princess style," Chat crowed, reaching over to hand her his controller.

After another half hour of family gaming, Marinette took her Kitty to her room while her parents went to bed. "Come on. It's movie time," she said, tossing her laptop gently up onto her bed.

"Are you sure?" he asked, a little of his earlier melancholy seeping through his cheered up demeanor. "I don't want to be a bother."
She grabbed his shoulder, turning him toward her. "You are never a bother." Her hug was almost more of a tackle, but he managed to keep them upright. "I don't like seeing you sad, or hurt, but I know that's sometimes just how you're going to feel, and I really don't want you to think you have to hide it." She relaxed as his arms tightened around her. "I can't fix what's wrong, probably, but I can be here for you."

"Thanks Princess," he murmured.

She let go and climbed up into her bed. "Come on up. I've got The Cat Returns all ready to go."

"Studio Ghibli plus cats?" he asked, following her quickly. "You sure know how to cheer me up."

Ladybug scooted closer to Chat Noir on the bench just inside the martial arts studio he'd gotten a key for. It allowed them to continue their evening training without her turning into a Bugcycle. As much as she wanted the specifics of that arrangement, it was safest not to ask. She would just be grateful to him for his resourcefulness, and she'd added it to the lengthy list of things she wanted to specifically thank him for when this was all over.

"Well I'd say you're better at blocks than you were three months ago," he said.

Evasion had always been her go-to defense for hand to hand combat. But Master Fu wanted her to strengthen her ability to block and deflect strikes without her bandalore. "I feel a lot more comfortable about them," she agreed. "And your joint locks are as good as mine." That had been his area of focus. "Nice control, by the way. I love that you can practice those at full speed without dislocating anything." Half of their training focused on fighting skills while the other half familiarized them with their advanced magic, spells and abilities they'd unlocked as they'd grown into their powers.

He grinned, but she could see it was pure reaction. Her Kitty was still unhappy. "I guess we can get new assignments when we see Master Fu later this week."

She nodded. "Are you okay?" she asked, not bothering to wait for a good segue. "You seem… really down, and…"

He tilted his head forward, hiding his face from view. "Yeah. It's okay. Just… the usual."

"I worry about you." She rested her hand in the middle of his back, really wanting to play with his hair, but knowing that was something Marinette did, not Ladybug. She felt oddly compelled to maintain some semblance of difference between her selves though she was sure it wasn't fooling him.

He leaned against her. "I know. And I appreciate it." He glanced at her through a tangle of golden bangs and sighed. "Christmas is coming up and…" He shrugged. "I'm going to be alone. Again."

The warmth of training had worn off a bit, but her anger had her flushing with heat. "That's not okay. That's ridiculous, and horrible."

He shrugged. "It is what it is, Bug."

She had to fight her urge to truly speak her mind. "We need to rehome you."

He let out a half-hearted chuckle. "Yeah?"

She sighed. She could work with this. "Do you have friends who will be in town for the holidays? Anyone you can stay with?" When he didn't answer, she went on. "You're a wonderful person,
and I'm sure you're just as sweet on the other side of the mask. I know one of your friends would want you to stay with her… uh, their family." Knowing better than to wait for him to approach her, she was going to extend an invitation to Adrien tomorrow at school.

"They'd be willing, yeah, but…" His shoulders drooped. "I wouldn't want to intrude on family time and alter those… dynamics."

She reached out and tipped his chin up, forcing his brilliant eyes to meet hers. "I can't see your presence ever being an intrusion. If anything, you would blend right in." She gave him a shy smile. "Families are like borg. Good ones will absorb you and make you one of their own."

He burst into laughter. As he'd done a lot lately, he slipped his arms around her, pulling her onto his lap. His excuse to both Ladybug and Marinette, had been that he wanted to keep her warm. She had no objections, and hoped there was more to it than shared body heat.

"And… what about… the bad… ones?" he asked, trying to fight back his amusement.

"They try to bend you to their will, unconcerned if they break you in the process." Ugh. That was all too accurate and totally fit. "I wonder how hard it is to transfer from one borg cube to another."

Despite the darker tone, he was still chuckling. "I'm not sure there's evidence that transfer requests are recognized."

She poked him gently in the ribs. "Fine. I'm going back to cat metaphors regarding your living situation. We're finding you a new forever home as soon as we take down Hawkmoth. I'll start the paperwork immediately."

"I'd like that," he said quietly.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title - "To remove a thorn from someone's foot" is a French idiom meaning to take a weight off someone's shoulders.
Adrien wondered how Marinette always managed to seem so calm when Chat Noir stopped by out of the blue. It wasn't like his visits were scheduled. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that her parents were aware of his stops and had encouraged the friendship. Actually. That probably had a lot to do with it. He could drop in to visit any of them, as Adrien or Chat, and they welcomed him as family. There was no pressure and no obvious stress.

The same definitely could not be said for Ladybug's visits to Adrien's house. Despite the fact that no one ever came into his room unannounced, there were plenty of places to hide, and the mansion was essentially empty, he was constantly paranoid that someone would come in and find him sharing a bowl of popcorn while watching Cardcaptor Sakura with the superhero.

"Relax kid," Plagg said, hovering over the hastily assembled blanket fort that shielded the couch and wall mounted television. "The only people in the house are you and your bodyguard. The chef left half an hour ago. Your boss and minder aren't due back for a week.” Over the summer, the tiny black cat had given Adrien's father and Nathalie nicknames consistent with how they treated his charge. Adrien had quickly given up on trying to get him to use their names. After all, Plagg had an excellent understanding of the relationships involved.

"I know," Adrien said, flopping onto his bed. "The logic is all on your side, which I've gotta say is a weirdly swapped situation. But I just… can't help it."

Plagg nuzzled Adrien's neck. "It'll get easier with practice. I promise."

Adrien sighed. "It's been two and a half months, Plagg." Ladybug had been visiting once a week, on pre-scheduled evenings, ever since Adrien had been confunded by an angry Harry Potter fan. "I don't think it's gotten any easier.” He looked around his room. "But it's probably because I'm inviting her into this place." He waved his hand at his room, large enough to contain most of Marinette's family apartment. "Marinette welcomes me to her home. It's just… different."

"You're not wrong," Plagg agreed. "If it helps any, I'll hang out in the hallway, and I'll disrupt the electricity, briefly this time, if someone's coming."

Adrien rubbed the kwami behind the ears. "Thanks Plagg. I'll have extra cheese for you later."

For once, Plagg's timing was perfect. The moment he phased through the bedroom wall, there was a tap at the window.

Adrien scurried over and let in his guest and best friend. "Hi!" He waved up to her, then held out a hand to help her down. "I'm glad you were able to make it."
She smiled, and suddenly his room didn't feel nearly so cold and empty. "I would have texted if something came up."

He nodded. "I know," he said quickly, wanting to correct her misperception before it could take hold. "It's just… it sometimes doesn't feel real that we do this. Not until you're here. And I just realized that makes me sound like I have problems with the difference between reality and fantasy, and ohmygod I'm going to shut up." He covered his mouth with one hand.

Her giggle made him so happy. He loved that sound. "Are you okay with me being here?"

"Yes," he said quickly, worried she'd leave, and no irrational fear was worth that.

"You seem kind of… nervous. Is everything all right?"

He nodded and gestured to the blanket fort. "Yeah. Peachy. It was just a long day. Intense photo shoot. Minor diva moments. Interns breaking down in tears. The usual."

"That sounds exhausting," she said, cringing before ducking into the tent. "Oooh. Nice place you have here." She flopped happily onto the pillows.

"I thought it would be more cozy," he said, shrugging as he settled in with her. He already felt better and he wondered how much of that was just being around her. Plagg had mentioned something about past Ladybugs and their ability to soothe and calm others.

"Now back to your ghastly day with all the drama," she suggested.

"We don't have to," he started, but she was shaking her head.

"This is what friends do," she reminded him. "Vent a bit. Decompress. Then we can set it aside to fully enjoy the movie."

She knew him so well; it was really nice. "Not all fashion houses are like this," he said. "But my father's… it tends to run pretty high strung. A lot like my father, actually." He took a seat beside her. "I would never recommend a friend of mine seek an internship at Gabriel."

Ladybug stared intently at him for a moment. "Really?"

He nodded. "Interns are treated as disposable commodities." It was something he'd recognized as problematic even when he was homeschooled and friendless. "But because there are so many people who think that completing an internship at Gabriel will give them a leg up, there are always others to take their place. It's completely fucked up." He'd tried to get his father to see what that could do to the company's reputation, since that was pretty much the only thing he cared about. "My father is warped enough that he thinks it makes the company seem more attractive. It's not just the standards of beauty that are unattainable, it's everything about the company and its designs."


"Yeah." He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. "I've got this friend named Marinette who's an amazing designer even though she's entirely self-taught. She's thinking about internships, and I know she's always wanted to study with my father, but… interns don't get to do that at Gabriel. Even the really good ones. And so many of them leave the industry completely after their time with us." He snorted. His father considered it weeding out the chaff, those who didn't have what it took.

"Yikes. It must be pretty horrible if it makes people give up their artistic dreams." She looked horrified.
"I would never want one of my friends to work there in any capacity." Marinette had what it took to land a spot, and she had the talent and skill to make it in the business, but he couldn't stand the idea of her enduring Gabriel's standard abuse, of her getting jaded and bitter.

"Even if it meant you got to see them at work?" she asked.

Adrien shook his head. "I absolutely don't want anyone I know picking up a job at Gabriel because of me." He shrugged. "I'm planning on bailing at my earliest opportunity." Plagg was the only one who knew about that plan, and he'd encouraged it.

Ladybug stared at him in wide-eyed shock. "You... you're leaving modeling?" her words came out in a raspy whisper.

"Can't imagine me as anything other than a model?" he teased.

"Oh. No, that's not it at all," she assured him, one hand reaching out to land lightly on his shoulder. "You're brilliant. I can imagine you doing all sorts of things."

He felt his sly Chat grin on his face. "Really?" He drew the word out and leaned forward, suggestively arching his eyebrows.

"Not those kinds of things!" she squeaked.

He chuckled, thinking and hoping the pink in her cheeks told a different story. "Seriously, though," he went on before he could dig himself into too deep a hole. "I'm not leaving modeling entirely, at least not at first. It's not like I hate it. It makes good money, and I'm decent at it."

"Decent?!" she demanded. "That's like saying Chat and I are okay at defeating akuma."

He grinned, but continued his train of thought. "But modeling isn't a realistic life career, so I need to work out a plan for when I no longer have the look companies are aiming for." He shrugged. "I don't want to model for Gabriel anymore, and I want control over my schedule."

Ladybug nodded. "That all sounds fair, and probably past time." He'd shown her his crazy schedule when they first started trying to arrange times for her to stop by. "Have you decided what that plan will include?"

"Decided, not really, but I've obsessed over the possibilities," he admitted. His dream of freedom was relatively near, and he'd spent many of his free hours and breaks between activities thinking about his options and identifying what he really wanted in his life. A lot of his dreams were long range hopes for a warm family environment. Some were vague and nebulous because he'd had so little opportunity to explore his own interests. The few that were specific and detailed were too personal to share just yet, even with Plagg.

"If you need anything, you know you can ask your friends, right?" she asked.

He nodded. "My friends are amazing, and I hope I'm half as good to them as they are to me."

"You are," she insisted.

He unfolded the paper he'd pulled out earlier. "I'm making a list for Marinette." He flattened it on the table. "These are fashion houses that have good reputations for how they treat their interns, staff, and models."

Ladybug glanced down at the paper and froze, her mouth dropped open into an adorable O of
"Those are my contacts, most work in talent acquisition, and they've offered to look at her portfolio."
It wasn't a tiny list, and he was very much aware that the details were not publicly available. He'd used his well-honed schmoozing skills in talking up the staff he ran into during various fashion events.

"How long have you been working on this?" she asked, wonder clear in her voice.

"Oh… a while, I guess." He shrugged. "Probably since April. That's when I realized I needed to get Mari some options other than Gabriel, while I was still in favor."

"You think that'll change?" she asked. "That people won't want you when you… um… go rogue?"

He grinned. It was such perfect phrasing. "Hard to say. Some won't care, even if my father makes a scene and throws bad publicity my way." He rolled his eyes. "Some would probably prefer it if things get really ugly, so they can claim to have poached me from their rival."

"You've transposed your numbers," Chat said gently, tapping the scratch paper where Ladybug was working through a physics problem on refraction.

"Hmmm… oh… yeah," she said groggily, striking out the mistake and rewriting the problem.

"Why are you so tired tonight, Bug?" he asked, catching the edge of the blanket that tried to slip off her shoulder. Snuggle studies had somehow ended up being part of their post-workout routine, so they were huddled together under a blanket on the floor of the dojo they'd been using all winter. Late February saw some warmer temperatures, but it wasn't nearly enough for his partner.

"Designing," she muttered. Then, as if realizing this version of her wasn't supposed to be telling this version of him about her personal life, she scrambled to cover. "Uh… you know, planning how I want my gap year to go. Figuring out what I need to do, to be where I need to, at the end."

"I can completely relate," he admitted, hoping to ease her mind. He'd been doing a lot of planning and researching as well. "I'm hoping to make a lot of changes during my gap year, and… they're taking more time to work out than I expected."

"But, you know you don't have to do it all now, right?" he asked. "That's part of what the gap year is for. Figuring things out." He pushed her paper out of the way before straightening up and scooping her into the nest made by his folded legs.

"Yeah," she agreed. "But I'm a planner, you know that. I feel better if I have some idea or road map, even if it's going to change."

He adjusted the blanket to make sure she was fully covered. "I know." It was part of what made her such a great hero and them such a perfect team. She planned in advance, while he did it on the fly, and she was flexible enough to modify as needed. "But maybe you should just put down the basics for your plan now, and figure out the details after Final Bac." It was surprisingly sound advice from Plagg when he'd been stressing out over it. Though to be fair, his kwami had been much more helpful to his personal plights in the last eight months.

She snorted. "Tikki told me something a lot like that too."
"I get that you have big plans, L.B." He tightened his hold on her for a moment. "I really do. And yeah, there are things you'll need to do to get there, but you can't do it all at once. You'll burn yourself out. And where would that leave me?"

She let out a little laugh. "Fine. I'll try to balance things better."

"That's all I can ask, Bug," he said. "But it will cut down on my worrying." He looked at her homework. She still had a few problems to go, but she had time tomorrow. "How about we call it a night, and you go straight to bed. You've said you have afternoon science, so you can hit those problems during your break."

"Okay," she agreed, making no move to get up.

"You want me to take you home?" He felt oddly breathless. Knowing who she was, without confirmation, was one thing. A full-on reveal was something else.

She shook her head against his side, instantly snuffing out the brushfire in his brain. "Can't tell you who I am; you know that."

"It's not safe," he said, unsure if it really mattered at this point.

She nodded. "But I want to." It was the first time she'd frankly admitted that to him.

"You… you do?" he asked, warmth of happiness suffusing him.

"Course I do," she insisted, hugging him tightly. "You are my most favorite person, ever."

"You're mine, too," he said softly.

"And as soon as it's safe, we're doing a whole reveal and hanging out, and everything," she promised. "Sound okay?"

He let out a sigh. "Sounds purrfect."

"Great. Now, two minute power snuggle before I have to go out in the cold." She tugged the blanket over her head before wrapping her arms around him in her cocoon.

He chuckled and pulled out his baton to set an alarm. He wasn't as tired, but falling asleep seemed very possible given his current comfort level and the happy buzz filtering through his head.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Title - "Not knowing how to do anything with all ten of your fingers" is a French idiom for being or feeling completely useless.
Braving the predawn chill, Ladybug balanced on the window ledge and knocked on the glass. Adrien looked up from tying his shoes, his vibrant eyes going wide. She smiled and held up the large cardboard cup of coffee, heavy on the caramel and with a splash of cream.

He scooped up the window’s remote as he dashed over. "Oh my god. You are my personal hero right now. How did you know?"

She handed him the warm cup and hopped down into his room. "You mentioned this absurdly early photoshoot last week." She reached out and lightly brushed the dark bags under his eyes. "And you've seemed a little tired lately. I thought you might need a pick-me-up." His father had been utterly ridiculous with his schedule of late. He’d fallen asleep in class twice yesterday.

He took a cautious sip, closing his eyes and letting out a contented hum. "This is perfect."

"You're such a sucker for sweet things," she teased.

"And people," he said, as if agreeing and adding to her claim. He tapped her lightly on the nose, in a move that was far more suited to his interactions with Marinette or Chat Noir's interactions with Ladybug. The lines were a lot more blurry when he was exhausted.

Today was a full line shoot, so he'd be under lights and in supermodel mode for most of the day. It was a lot more draining than people realized, and he was starting out tired.

"Good luck today," she said, wishing there was more to say.

His smile went mischievous. "I was thinking I was going to need all the luck I could get, but with your visit, that seems guaranteed. Thank you."

She giggled.

"Do you have big plans for today?" he asked, seeming like he was trying to keep her there as long as he could possibly justify it.

"Definitely!" She nodded eagerly. "I've got a friend who has to work all day… family business, you know. And they have a really big event going on, so I'm going to sneak into his… uh office and deliver treats to help him get through the day."

"Wow," he whispered, staring at her in awe. "You're really amazing. Like, so amazing."

She shrugged. "After that I'm taking a lunch nap, and I can hardly wait." She laughed, hoping to bring the seriousness down a notch. She hated that it was still a surprise to him that people wanted to
do nice things for him without any gross side goals. "There was an akuma that ran late last night, so sleep is my primary interest today."

"That's an excellent plan," he said wistfully. "Mind if I copy you?"

"It's an open source idea." She shrugged. "You may take the idea and modify it to suit your needs."

"I will," he promised.

"Please do." She wasn't sure if or how he'd manage it, but she hoped he took whatever opportunities he could for resting. She'd should leave a blanket along with the treats she smuggled into his changing tent when she headed over before school.

The familiar red and black banner of an akuma alert scrolled across the top of Marinette's tablet in the middle of French literature. Something about her Ladybug luck resulted in the alerts coming up on her tablet well ahead of anyone else's. The akuma had been spotted in the 15th arrondissement. Unless it was in the ten percent of attacks with a large range, school was unlikely to be disrupted, which meant she was going to have to sneak out, maybe during the upcoming independent study time. But she wasn't the only one who needed to get away.

"Oh!" she said loudly. "Adrien, don't you have a photo shoot over in Saint-Lambert Park Square in half an hour?" She made sure her voice was raised enough to be heard by their teacher.

He glanced at her, blinking in confusion. "I do?"

Marinette nodded. "Yeah. Nathalie added it super last minute. It's a test run of your father's experimental black leather collection." Experimental fashion lines didn't always make the cut, even if they got as far as prototype and photography.

He stared a moment longer before nodding. "Oh! Oh, yeah." He hastily gathered up his things. "Thanks for the reminder. I'll catch you later."

She smiled as he fled the room. The door had only just shut when the alert popped up and beeped a simultaneous notification on the other tablets and phones in the class.

Marinette scrambled into history just as the bell rang. "I'm so sorry, Madame," she said, nodding to the teacher as she moved to her seat. "I had to run a delivery for my parents over lunch and my train back got held up by the akuma attack on that side of town."


Marinette glanced at Adrien's empty seat as she took out her tablet and stylus, ready to have notes suitable for sharing. Ten minutes into the lecture, the door opened, and Adrien quietly crept in. It was so routine for him to leave early and arrive late that it was rarely even commented on. The teachers and students all knew about his crazy schedule and business-obsessed father. As long as his grades stayed at the top of the class, there was no point in addressing the issue.

He was impossibly quiet, fishing out his tablet. Marinette rotated hers slightly so he could see what they were working on. He pointed to her tablet and then his own, a standard sign between the two of them.

She added a personal note to the bottom and copied the document to him. While he was reading her message, she set a plastic container on the bench between them, gently nudging it in his direction.
She let out a contented sigh as a genuine smile crept onto his face when he reached over to rest one hand on top of the container. Her standard "post model shoot snack" included a cream cheese danish and a small round of brie today. She’d gotten good at having something on hand for him to eat between classes and other random times. Their friends thought it was terribly sweet and made jokes about model diets and routes to a man's heart. She played along, claiming her mama was concerned about his weight in a recent ad, and usually followed up with an invite to dinner. If his schedule was clear this afternoon, maybe she could get him to take a nap while she studied.

Giddy with a sudden idea, Marinette discretely pulled up her e-mail and sent off a message to Nathalie, blind copying Adrien. Claiming to have a new men's design that wasn't working out, she asked if it would be all right for him to help her out after school. Winning the recent sportcoat contest lent credibility to the claim that she was branching out for her portfolio.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title - "To drown the fish" is a French idiom for burying an issue.
"Thank you, and have a fantastic day," Marinette said, handing change back to the customer she was helping. The phone in her pocket buzzed in a series of long and short vibrations. Adrien had thought he was so witty plugging in a morse code setting for emergencies, and to be fair, he only triggered it when it was truly urgent.

"I have to take this, Mama," she said, tapping her pocket.

Her mother let out a little sigh, glancing at the busy bakery before nodding. "Do what you need to, but try to be quick about it."

Ducking into the hall, she slipped out the phone and unlocked it just as the SOS vibrated to alert her of another message.

AA : You were right. I should've listened.

AA : I'm so sorry, Princess.

No puns. No emojis or emoticons. He'd flat out dropped his identity in that last one.

Gasping against the sudden fear clutching at her chest, she staggered into the railing, dropping to the bottom step as she stared at the two messages, desperately waiting for more. What had she been right about? When hadn't he believed her? No. When hadn't Chat believed Ladybug… or rather, when had he not wanted to listen? There were plenty of times they disagreed or butted heads. It could be anything, but this was probably something important. Something memorable.

"C'mon Chaton," she whispered. "I need more than that to go on."

"What's the matter Marinette?" Tikki asked, peeking out of her nest in Marinette's hip pouch.

She turned the screen to her kwamii as she sent a reply.

MDC : Please tell me you're okay. You're freaking me out.

Her phone rang, Adrien's goofy gaming photo popping up on her screen. "Adrien? Are you…"

"Listen here, Ladybug," a man barked at her. She knew that voice. "I have your precious Chat Noir, and I must say, he's much more fragile without his tacky kitten suit."

She covered her mouth with one hand to hold back the urge to scream. Even if he was lying, which she very much doubted, she couldn't let him hear how much his words worried her.
Hawkmoth continued. "If you ever want to see him alive, and without any missing pieces, you need to bring me those charming stones in your ears."

Hawkmoth had Adrien. He had Chat's ring. She felt like throwing up. Tikki flew up and brushed one tiny paw against Marinette's cheek, and it was enough for her to pull herself together despite the fact that she wasn't currently Ladybug. "Your word is worthless, Hawkmoth," she snapped. "I need proof that you have my cat."

"Having his phone and his ring aren't enough?" the man taunted.

"Having his phone and claiming to have his ring aren't enough," she corrected. "Let me talk to him."

"I don't think he's in a talking mood," Hawkmoth drawled.

"You want my earrings?" she asked with a casualness that surprised her. "Then you damn well better let me talk to my cat."

There was a rustle and a clatter. Then came a groan that she was too familiar with. Chat Noir only made that sound when he was hurt and couldn't shake it off.

Hawkmoth's voice was a little distant now, as he must have been holding the phone away from himself. "Talk some sense into that girl you care so much about."

"Why… would I do that?" Adrien demanded, his voice strained and wheezy.

"You used to be so biddable, so eager to please," Hawkmoth snarled, disappointment clear in his voice. There was a slap, and Marinette flinched, even though she didn't hear Adrien react. "If you want me to show her any kind of mercy, you will talk to her. Now."

She was strangely proud of her Kitty for getting so thoroughly under Hawkmoth's skin even without his powers. She hadn't even registered that her vision had gone blurry, that her eyes were leaking heavy tears until they dripped onto her phone.

"Hey Princess," Adrien said quietly. She could practically see his ears drooping with his low tone. "I'm so sorry, Bug."

"How badly hurt are you, Kitty?" she asked. Apologies and forgiveness could come later. Right now she needed to focus on anything that got him back to her.

"Physically or mentally?" he asked playfully, making her want to reach through the phone and shake him.

"Both."

"My right hand is very much broken, and I have a lovely array of bruises that will require significant makeup for tomorrow's photoshoot," he said. "Though with the split lip and black eye, I'm thinking we're rescheduling that."

His emphasis on his modeling seemed a strange disconnect in the situation, which meant he was probably giving her clues.

"I miss Plagg," he said softly, his voice catching a little. "And I don't like being part of a collection."

There was a sudden fumbling of the phone and Hawkmoth spoke again. "You've spoken with your
"skinned cat," he said brusquely. "Are you prepared to discuss terms?"

"Are you prepared to turn Chat Noir over to me?" she asked, knowing she couldn't trust anything he said, but hoping to pick up on any additional information that would help her. Whatever came next was sure to be the hardest part of her entire superhero career.

"Hmmm. I get the feeling you need to think about this before you'll be truly willing to negotiate," Hawkmoth said, the disgusting smugness he'd displayed during Stoneheart in full force.

"I assure you, I'm ready now," Marinette promised.

"I've watched your career, Mademoiselle Dupain-Cheng," he said. "It is highly unlikely that you're in the right mindset for this. You need to stew a bit in uncertainty. I'll be in touch. In that time, you should consider that I am now the master of both the butterfly and the black cat. You can not hope to defeat me." There was a click followed by silence.

Marinette met Tikki's eyes. "He knows who I am."

Tikki's little paws came up to cover her mouth.

Quickly wiping her face with both hands, Marinette stood up. "I'm not going to be able to focus if everyone I love is in danger." She shot off a text to the class group, telling everyone to get out of town. She was glad they'd covered evacuation recently in social studies. Between regular terrorism and akumas, it was a new component of the national curriculum. Hopefully they all took her message seriously. "We'll move my parents to safety, then I can focus on rescuing Chat Noir and Plagg." She followed up with a separate message to Alya and Nino, adding Chloe in a last minute decision, letting them know that Adrien was a hostage, but not an akuma.

Tikki nodded once in encouragement.

"Spots on."

Adrien focused on the throbbing in his hand while he picked at the knotted silk tie holding his left foot to the chair. He stopped when a soft whooshing noise alerted him of his father's approach. When this was all over, if his Lady managed to save him, he was going to have a nice breakdown, complete with screaming and smashing things. How had he not seen that his own father was Hawkmoth? Why had he so foolishly pushed aside Ladybug's theory? To be fair, it seemed even Plagg was taken by surprise when Hawkmoth jumped him this morning, fresh out of the shower. In retrospect, it would have been really useful to know miraculous bearers could be akumatized.

"Your former kwami is a savage without manners," Hawkmoth announced, stepping into the low light. Yep. His father knew a lot about imagery and setting a scene. His purple suit had more black now. Looking completely out of place, Chat Noir's ears perched atop his gray helmet and a belted tail flicked agitatedly around his knees.

Adrien smirked at his own lap, wiping the look away when he raised his head. "I wonder why."

Sure, the black cat of destruction was bound to whoever had the ring, but he didn't have to cooperate in the way his father was accustomed from his long-imprisoned kwami. "You didn't hurt him, did you?"

Gabriel's eyes narrowed slightly as if he was trying to get a joke. "They are indestructible, Adrien. Surely you knew that."

Adrien shook his head. "Oh they're tough, but they can get sick, hurt, or even die."
Gabriel let out a delicate sniff. "You need to have a firm hand with these creatures. You've clearly been coddling it."

Adrien shrugged. "Plagg has a very sensitive digestion. If you don't want to be picking destruction demigod hairballs out of your slippers and hair every morning, you should be sure to observe his diet very carefully." He looked away, wondering how long it would be before Ladybug found him and if he'd be any help to her at all. "Why haven't you turned me into one of your pet monsters?"

Hawkmoth narrowed his eyes. "You are not in the right frame of mind to accept a butterfly." It seemed that annoyed him. Perhaps he'd been banking on turning his son against Ladybug.

"Okay. And why do you have me tied up again?" He held up his bound wrists. Seeing his hand made him vaguely queasy; it looked more like a plump glove designed by a five year-old who wasn't sure which way fingers were supposed to point. "I mean, after slamming my hand in the fire door, I'm not exactly on my game."

"I've watched you fight, Adrien," Hawkmoth bluntly stated. "A broken hand is hardly a handicap."

"When I'm Chat Noir, sure," he agreed. "But as Adrien…" He shook his head. "I'm not used to this level of shock, and nothing's helping me with the pain, so my head's a mess."

Hawkmoth straightened up. "You are an expert fighter and tactician. Those skills are merely enhanced, not created, by the suit." His pleased smile was smug and creepy. "I'll be proud to have such a bright son and heir in the future."

Adrien stared at the man, strangely chilled. "You'll be proud in the future, but not now?" he asked. "That's messed up, Hawkdad."

"Everything around me in this moment is temporary, including you."

"Isn't that always the case?" Adrien asked, pretty sure this wasn't a philosophical discussion.

Hawkmoth glared at him. "You aren't real. No one in this reality is," he explained. "Once I have Ladybug's miraculous, I will be able to rewrite the last four years, so it frankly doesn't matter what happens to this version of anyone, including you." He crossed his arms over his chest. "The real Adrien Agreste will not have your rebellious streak; he will have never had the ring. Everything will be restored to the way it was supposed to be."

In this morning's unexpected assault, Adrien had abandoned any hope that there was something good left in his father. His delusional explanation, his ease in writing off others as not real made it clear just how dangerous his father really was. There was nothing worth salvaging in Gabriel Agreste, and he found himself considering fatal attack options that he'd avoided in the past. Though Adrien was not currently in possession of the ring, he was still Chat Noir, and he was going to do whatever he had to, to help his Lady.

"You're sure?" Ladybug asked Master Fu as she helped him gather his tea service.

"They will be safe here with me," the old man promised. "Wayzz keeps this place shielded and hidden. Kwami magic is such that others can not be compelled to guide him here."

She nodded. "Thank you."

"It is a pleasure to aid you in your darkest hour, Ladybug." He bowed. "Do you have a plan?"
Ladybug nodded. "I have a backpack full of cookies and cheese. Interfering with his use of the ring is my first step. Even if I just get out with Plagg and Adrien, that will be enough of a victory. We know who he is, so we can go back and take him down later."

Master Fu nodded. "That's a reasonable starting point."

"If we get a chance to reclaim the butterfly today, we'll do that, too, because ultimately, we're under siege until that's done." She was calm now, her superhero side letting her tuck her nearly debilitating fear into a box to unpack at a later time. "But I am willing to retreat with Chat Noir if needed."

Master Fu smiled, clearly proud of her. "You are one of the most remarkable people to ever wear the earrings, my dear. It has never been more clear that I chose right with you."

"Thank you, Master." She bowed and followed him into a back room where her parents, Alya and Nino were sitting on cushions. Too concerned about Marinette and Adrien, they'd refused to leave Paris, so Ladybug brought them here. She'd offered Chloe refuge as well, but the mayor's daughter had elected to work with her father, covertly assembling emergency response teams throughout the city.

"Ladybug," her mother said, standing up when she slid the tray onto the low table. "Where's Chat Noir?" Her fingers were knotted tightly together. "Why isn't he here?"

Ladybug bit her lip. "He's gathering intelligence. He's the only reason I'm going to be able to go after Hawkmoth before he chooses to summon me." It wasn't a lie. It had only taken a few minutes of puzzling over the clues with Tikki before she realized that Gabriel Agreste, once known as The Collector akuma, was Hawkmoth. He'd hurt his own son to get the ring, which he'd probably known was the black cat miraculous for years. "I'm hoping it'll be enough of an advantage."

"When you see him, could you please give him a hug from me?" her mother asked. "He's like a son to us."

"He and Adrien, both," her father added.

Ladybug nodded. "You know…" Was this the right time to lay the groundwork? "When this is over, Adrien is going to need all the love and support he can get." She'd told them about Gabriel, compelled to give them that much of the truth.

"He's always welcome in our home," her father said, a faint smile appearing on his face.

"Our daughter adores him, too." Her mother smirked.

"Whatever happens," Nino said, "we've got his back. Make sure he knows that. And we don't care about whatever baggage he's gonna have, or what the press has to say about him. We're here for him. Anytime."

Feeling her heart warm with the support and love for her partner, Ladybug smiled, suddenly more confident that she could do this.

"Be safe, Ladybug," her mother said.

While Gabriel could have taken Adrien anywhere in the city, she suspected they were still in the ostentatious cold mansion. Her ability to locate and track magic had a limited range, and it made sense to start there. Taking the familiar route she used for her weekly visits, evading the security cameras, she landed lightly on Adrien's window ledge. Her preferred entry was slightly ajar, and she mentally thanked her Kitty for the foresight. Shoving her fingers between the panes, she forced it the
rest of the way open.

Adrien's room was a mess. Clearly this was where his father had attacked him, probably already suited up, since it was the only way she could see Gabriel having a physical advantage over his son. Taking a slow breath, Ladybug closed her eyes and felt for the magical signatures. She was surprised to find three. One was pale and nearly undetectable. Did Gabriel have another miraculous in the house? If he wasn't using it, she needed to grab it to keep it out of the fight. The strongest signature was a muddy with swirls of purple and green, clearly Hawkmoth. She was surprised to find a pale green magic not far from Hawkmoth. Adrien didn't have his ring, but as the true Chat Noir, his power still clung to him.

She let out a little line on her bandalore and spun in a tight circle. "Lucky Streak," she whispered. She and Chat had kept their newer powers hidden from the press, practicing them during training and using them sparingly in battles. This one gave her a good luck advantage for five minutes.

Creeping out of Adrien's room, she moved quickly through the quiet and seemingly empty house, following the signal of the dormant miraculous. She slipped into Gabriel's office, a place she'd visited twice before. The magic was coming from a golden painting… no. From behind the painting. She had a sudden urge to tug at the lower left corner, and she'd worked with magic enough to know that it was helping her. The picture swung out to reveal a wall safe.

"Tikki, spots off." As the sparkles of her transformation faded, she was already digging in her day pack for a cookie. "Can you get in?"

Tikki beamed up at her holder. "Between Lucky Streak and my own natural luck, no problem." She took a bite of the cookie and then phased through the safe while she was still chewing. After a moment, the door popped loose.

Marinette opened the door to find her kwami cradling a peacock brooch. "That's the other miraculous missing from Master Fu's set." Even without her fully enhanced super abilities, she could feel the magic. She took it gently in hand. "I'll tuck it into my pack for safe keeping."

"You don't want to wear it?" Tikki asked.

Marinette shook her head. "I'm not its chosen, Tikki. I couldn't do that." Master Fu had spoken of the pain a kwami endured when claimed by someone ill suited.

"Spoken like a true Ladybug," Tikki said proudly. "We still have about two minutes of Lucky Streak left. Spots on?"

Marinette nodded. "While I can feel the entrance to Hawkmoth's hideout right behind me, I don't want to give him that much warning." She smiled, gathering her courage. They could do this. "Tikki, spots on."

Adrien tuned out Gabriel's pacing and random self-talk, focusing instead on the sudden laxity in the ties around his ankles. He drooped forward, feigning exhaustion and picked cautiously at the knots. In his time as Chat Noir, he'd come to recognize that chance was really just another form of magic, and he wasn't going to let it slip away. It was slow work, using just one hand, but his fingers made steady progress.

He'd gotten both ankles free when he looked up, just in time to see Ladybug crash through the
leaded windows of Gabriel's ostentatious lair. The glass shattered and flew everywhere. He jumped to his feet, bracing himself for the inevitable need to run through the shards. Any harm he took to prevent damage to her would be worth it. It always was.

Ladybug landed in a crouch, her bandalore shooting out in Hawkmoth's direction. "Lucky Break!" she called, pulling back on her string.

Adrien's eyes went wide, and he felt a genuine smile on his face, the first since he'd been jumped in the bathroom. When they'd first learned about their failsafes, they'd tested them out on each other. It had been quite unpleasant to be on the receiving end of Lucky Break, not unlike having your soul sucked out through your hand. He was in a good position to make that judgement, since he'd been through both experiences.

Hawkmoth doubled over, letting out a shrill scream as a Faraday cage of magic flared around him. Ladybug ducked close enough to catch the black kwami as he spiraled out of range of the reaction. Then she was in front of Adrien, freeing his wrists and returning Plagg to his unbroken cupped hand.

She grinned at him, but it was grim. "That evens the odds a bit."

Plagg would be out until he'd been fed, so now she just had Hawkmoth, an enraged and wounded madman to deal with. "He's completely delusional," Adrien said quickly. "He considers anything other than himself to be not real. He has no qualms about killing me."

Her eyes went wide. She'd probably hoped to appeal to his love for his son, and Adrien didn't want her wasting her time on that. Her earrings beeped. Hitting the black cat's failsafe was a huge energy drain on both sides. Her kwami would need a recharge soon, and without superpowers they didn't stand a chance.

"I love you." He was pretty sure she knew that, but didn't want to risk leaving it unsaid.

She sighed, her shoulders drooping. "You're going to do something stupid, aren't you."

He shrugged. "Probably." He handed Plagg back, offering her his best charming Chat Noir smile. "You need a diversion, Mi'lady. Feed Tikki, and prepare to save my ass."

"Spots off."

She moved behind the chair, swinging a daypack off her shoulders. "I intend to save everything attached to your very fine ass," she commented without even looking up.

The moment the magical feedback collapsed, Adrien dropped his left shoulder and charged Hawkmoth. He sent their long-time adversary sprawling across the glass-littered floor, then pounced on him, much as he would if he were fully Chat Noir. He was able to keep the upper hand for a few moments, grabbing Hawkmoth's neck and holding him down.

Years of working out and moonlighting as a hero made him stronger than average, but Adrien was still very much human outside of his Chat Noir suit. It wasn't long before he was sliding across the floor, glass snagging on his shirt and slicing into his back. He was just able to roll backward and up to his feet before Hawkmoth pulled an epee out of his walking stick.

"You've fulfilled your purpose," Hawkmoth snapped. He plunged the tip of the blade into Adrien's chest, just below his shoulder.

He heard Marinette gasp across the room. His shoulder was on fire and he couldn't move his arm. "I'm not an insect for you to pin to your board as part of your collection," Adrien growled, trying to focus on his gasping breaths rather than the pain. He had to keep Hawkmoth distracted. Just a little
"You're a feral stray that needs to be put down." Hawkmoth sneered at him. "My prize bug is watching. I think I'll give her a show." He moved to pull back the sword, but Adrien's hand shot out and grasped the grip between Hawkmoth's hand and the subtle lower guard.

"She's not. *Your* Bug," Adrien spat. "And that perfect son you want, in that reality you think you're going to create? He doesn't exist. No matter how many times you rewrite me, I am Chat Noir. With or without the ring." While Hawkmoth stared at him, his jaw open in shock, Adrien moved his hand to wrap his fingers around the ring in question. "It was drawn to me because I am naturally chaos and destruction." His knee came up and his foot shot out twice in quick succession, the first catching Hawkmoth in the groin and the second in the chest and throwing him backward.

He barely managed to keep hold of the ring as the sword was yanked out of his body. He let out a scream and fell to his knees, pushing aside the awareness of wet warmth over his chest as he moved the miraculous to his teeth to fumble it onto his left hand.

"Claws out, Kitty," Ladybug called, her bandalore zipping past him to knock aside Hawkmoth's blade.

A freshly fed Plagg flew out of Ladybug's hand to the ring as she ran to join her partner. The suit would stop the bleeding, it would buffer him from the pain, but they needed to wrap this up.

"Cat's Claw!" Chat Noir shouted, surging to his feet. His right hand was encased in something resembling a boxing glove with large silver spikes. His left slashed out, cutting through Hawkmoth's sword as easily as if it were Marinette's father's mocha mousse.

Hawkmoth took several steps back, his wide eyes showing more white than blue. "What... how are you doing that?"

Chat Noir smirked. "Only a real black cat can call on the special pawers. Even when you had the ring, they wouldn't have worked for you."

While Hawkmoth was distracted by Chat Noir's partial lie, Ladybug tossed out her bandalore, twisting her wrist just so. The red and black disk spiraled around Hawkmoth, binding his hands down to his sides.

Chat raised one claw-tipped finger, pressing it lightly to Hawkmoth's neck. The man flinched uncomfortably. "Want to see how well your suit holds up to my amped up mojo? Are you willing to risk seeing if My Lady's healing powers can fix the mess I can make with this?"

"Don't play with your food, Kitty," Ladybug chided lightly, more for show than anything. Adrien deserved to terrorize his father. She reached out and tapped the butterfly at the center of the villain's neck. Raising her hand quickly, she slapped Hawkmoth under the chin, knocking his head back. Heroes didn't beat the crap out of people, even if they could fix all the damage, and she was finding it necessary to remind herself not to break all of Gabriel's teeth. "Would you like to do the honors, Chaton?"

"I'm a cat, My Lady," he said, as if reminding her. "I love bringing you gifts. Mice. Birds." He curled his claw under Hawkmoth's collar. "Moths." He gave a tug, ripping the fabric of the suit a little as he yanked the brooch free. A wave of purple light washed over Hawkmoth, revealing a very
sullen and disheveled Gabriel Agreste.

Chat Noir bowed to her, holding out the miraculous. "Please accept this shiny bauble as a token of my affection."

She smiled at him. "You're such a thoughtful Kitty."

"Is there anything else I can get you?" he asked. "I'd offer you my father's heart on a platter, but," he shrugged. "He hasn't got one."

She shook her head slowly. "As delightful as that sounds, I have places to be. A very dear friend of mine has had a terrible day, and now he has to move. But I obviously can't just leave."

"Would you like some police?" Chat Noir asked brightly, as his ring let out a beep.

"If it's not too much trouble."

"Gift wrapped or…"

"Unboxed, please, Chaton." She grinned at him. "Convenience, you know."

"Plagg, claws in." He gasped and his breathing went fast and shallow. "Oh fuck…" he muttered, hunching over.

"You gonna be okay, kid?" Plagg's slightly nasal voice asked.

"Yeah." It came out as more exhalation than voice. "But I'm looking forward to suiting back up like never before." He closed his eyes as if that would help block out the pain.

"Buggy showed me where the cheese was," Plagg pointed out. "I'll just help myself."

"Good plan," Adrien agreed.

Ladybug tugged on her line, tightening Gabriel's bindings until he let out an undignified squawk. "You okay, Kitty?" she asked. He'd lost more blood in other battles, been more seriously hurt even. But he didn't generally have to unsuit in those cases. "You're doing great, you know. I'm so proud of you. Mama and Baba are going to be so proud of you, too."

He tilted his head to look up at her, a pained grimace on his face. "How do you always know what to say?"

"I know you," she said.

"All right kid," Plagg said as he floated over, holding Marinette's cell phone. "We're going to take a few pics of you to give to the police as evidence of what happened to you."

"What?" Ladybug demanded. "Is that really necessary?"

"You want him held above reproach, and unless you plan to unmask yourselves to Paris, you'll need evidence once the cure fixes all of this." Plagg fiddled with the screen a moment. "A'right. Straighten up as best you can. I want a good angle on that bloody mess."

So used to complying with photographers, Adrien moved as his kwami asked. Holding out his broken hand, now a phenomenal deep purple. He swore a few more times as he tried to lift his shirt to show the scoring from the glass shards.
"Perfect." Plagg handed the phone to Ladybug. "Now say the words, Kid. You need high level pain support."

Adrien muttered the magic phrase. "Plagg, claws out." He let out a sigh as the transformation dulled the pain. He grabbed his baton and tapped the paw for the communicator. Once the police were notified, he escorted Ladybug and his trussed up father out of the secret hideaway and to the front door. They bound Gabriel with the same silk ties he'd used on Adrien so Ladybug could call the miraculous cure.

"Hey," she said, nudging his arm with hers as they stood at the bottom of the grand staircase. "You wanna go pack a suitcase?"

He stared blankly at her for a moment.

"I was fully serious about rehoming you," she said, offering a tentative smile. "My… uh, my parents sort of invited you to move in with them when I… uh… Ladybug put them in hiding." She shrugged. "I didn't have a chance to tell you that earlier."

"I can move in with you?" he asked, his eyes going soft and kittenish.

"I mean, we'd understand if you want to stay here…"

"Oh hell no," Chat Noir said, putting two fingers over her lips. "You sure you won't need Chat?"

"Chat Noir is delivering the miraculous to the proper authority," she said primly. "And I will be escorting Adrien Agreste to a home with less painful memories."

"I only have happy memories at your house," he pointed out. "I'm going to pack. I'll be back as soon as I can."

While she waited, Ladybug called on her last special ability. "Lucky Star," she whispered, opening the compact and pointing it at Gabriel Agreste.

"What was that?" he demanded after the pink light faded.

"I suspect you'll see eventually," she said. It was a special spell that bound the knowledge of miraculous magic. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't reveal his own son as Chat Noir. If anything, it would compel him to protect their secrets through misdirection.

Chief Raincomprix and several of his officers had just pulled up when Adrien charged back down the stairs, wearing a backpack and dragging a large suitcase. He dropped his luggage and darted into his father's office. He must have done something with the security system because the gate swung open.

Handing Gabriel over was easy. After four years of working with superheroes, the Paris police force trusted the duo completely. They scheduled a meeting for Ladybug and Chat Noir to debrief with them the next day, and sent detectives to investigate the secret chamber and gather evidence. They let Adrien leave without hesitation after Ladybug assured them she had proof of his mistreatment at Gabriel's hands.

"I'm really glad Plagg suggested the pictures," Ladybug said, leading Adrien through a dark alley. With a quick look in each direction, she dropped her transformation, letting Tikki join Plagg in the daypack of snacks. She turned toward Adrien, one hand on his arm. "This doesn't feel real yet."

He shot her a small smile. "It doesn't," he agreed.
"When it does, I'm probably going to completely lose it."

He wrapped his arms around her. "Yeah. Me too," he murmured.

"I'm texting your parents," Tikki called from inside the pack. "Go straight home. Let them take care of you."

"I have two miraculouses to return to Master Fu," Marinette said, trying to force the responsibility to override her drive to just go home."

"He'll meet you there," Plagg said. "Along with Nino and Alya."

"Two?" Adrien asked, worry and confusion creeping into his voice.

"The peacock was in your… Gabriel's safe." She let herself listen to his heartbeat for a moment. "We need to return it along with the butterfly." She felt him relax against her.

"You've been through a lot today," Tikki added. "You need rest and comfort."

Marinette gave Adrien a tight squeeze before loosening her grip and stepping back. "C'mon Kitty. I know a great place to get brunch. They have amazing cocoa."

"I love your family's cocoa," he moaned.

"As a bonus, it comes with a new family." She took his hand, giving a little tug to get them moving again.

"Where do I sign?"

"You haven't asked what the catch is," she pointed out.

He grinned. "You're the catch."

"I walked right into that, didn't I," she said with a giggle.

"Mmm hmmm." He took a slow breath, exhaling with a sigh. "Hey Mari?"

"Yeah?"

"I know some of what comes next is going to suck. And I may not always seem to appreciate you and everything you've done for me," he said. "But I'm so glad you're here with me. I wouldn't want anyone else to be my Bug."

"Yeah. Well, I wouldn't want anyone else to be my Kitty." She gently bumped him with her shoulder. "And we'll get through this like we always do. Together."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title - "To roll someone in flour" is a French idiom equivalent to "pulling the wool over someone's eyes" or to fool or trick someone.
I'd not done a project like this before, and it was pretty fun. It's really only in the last two months that I got the hang of Discord (dinosaurs can learn!), and it was great to see the camaraderie there.

I love comments, so please feel free to leave some. I'm also over on with a multi-fandom geek blog, if that's of interest to you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!