A matter of family business
by Mogwai1988

Summary

He had no choice but to run his father's business.
That was the deal after all.

She had big dreams.
Dreams she had to give up too soon.

Notes

This entire fic will be set in a post-reveal scenario and the characters will be aged up for the majority of this fic.
Nothing mature or explicit will be written though.
A deal with the Devil.

If it weren’t for the little, butterfly-ish, creature hovering around her room, she wouldn’t have believed a single thing her partner told her.

“Really?” She arched a brow, never keeping her gaze from the small pin in the palm of his hand. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

The purple Kwami nodded in confirmation.

“I don’t believe you. He wouldn’t just give you his Miraculous.”

“Well…”

The uneasiness in the tone of Adrien’s voice was enough to make the hairs on her neck stand up. Enough to ignite a feeling of uneasiness in the pit of her stomach.

“Well?”

“He did want something in return for it.”

On instinct, Marinette’s gaze moved towards the black cat creature, taking a nap in the middle of a pile of fabric scraps. Not caring much for the conversation between all of them.

“No! Don’t worry. It’s nothing like that Bug.” He assured her once he noticed her gaze. “He doesn’t want my Miraculous. Or yours for that matter.”

It wasn’t enough to calm her mind.

“What does he want then?”

“He wants me to take over the company. His company.”

He watched as her brows furrowed even more. “Is that what you want too?”

“You know it’s not.” He answered back. “I have no interest in running my father’s business.”

“Then you shouldn’t do it. We have your father’s Miraculous now!” Swiftly she grabbed the pin from his palm and held it up for the boy to see. “The source of his power! You don’t have to agree to anything you don’t want to now that we have it.”

“The only reason we have it is because Adrien agreed to his terms.” The butterfly creature, Nooroo she believed it was called, told her with a meek voice.

“If that’s the only thing he wanted, it’s not that bad of a deal.” Tikki agreed.
The blonde boy nodded in agreement.

She took a sharp breath, putting the pin behind her on her desk. “I don’t trust him Adrien. Not one bit.”

“Neither do I Marinette.” He sighed. “But you have to understand. Ever since he found out I’m Chat Noir, and we knew he was Hawkmoth, we’ve been fighting with each other.”

Again Nooroo nodded to confirm this.

“If he wasn’t trying to pull me to his side and betray you, I was yelling at him that what he was doing wasn’t right. It wasn’t...it wasn’t what mom would have wanted. I’m...just so tired of yelling at him Mari. I can’t stand being in that house anymore.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before continuing. “When he proposed the deal, I didn’t think it was that bad. It would be more a win for me than for him.”

“What about your freedom?”

“A small price to pay in exchange for Paris’ safety.” He paused. “For your safety.”

Marinette bit on her lower lip. “I still have a bad feeling about this.”

“So do I Bug. But studying business and management and whatever isn’t the worst thing in the world. Especially since it’s still a few years away.”

Adrien shot her a small smile.
Not a forced once he was used to show many times, but it wasn’t a particular joyful smile either.

That was one thing he loved about her.
About being around her.
He never had to wear a mask.

“Besides, it’s not like I’ll stop being your partner. If anything I think my father is letting me go even more.” He added. “Seeing I’ve been avoiding him for the past weeks and he didn’t really seem to care.”

“You tried.” Tikki told him, giving him small pats on top of his head.

“Your dad is just a jerk!” Plagg added from his sleeping spot. Apparently no longer napping.
“You’re better off without him.”

“One thing we can all agree on I think.” The girl told him with a small smile curled on her lips.

A warm hand moved on top of his own.

“At least I’m not alone.” Adrien sighed, his sad smile widening slightly.

“That’s right.” Marinette’s Kwami agreed. “You have Marinette and the rest of your friends you can rely on!”

“Friends can make for a great family too.” Nooroo added. “We Kwami should know. We’ve seen all
kinds of families over the years.”

“Thank you.”

She leaned forward to wrap her arms around him. Pulling him into a awkward, but comfortable hug.

At that moment he knew that she was always going to be there for him.

Loving.

Caring.

Warm.

Because that was who Marinette was.

And for him, that was enough.
That was all he needed at the moment.
Final Goodbye

Chapter Summary

It is time for Adrien to hold up to his end of the deal. Even if his father is making decisions for him that he doesn't agree with one bit.

“You’re not enjoying yourself are you?”

Her question was barely audible as music played loudly at the party the had dragged himself to. A party organized by Chloé. Nino DJ-ing through the entire evening.

Classmates from the past and present coming together to celebrate their graduation from lyceé before they would inevitably part ways.

It was supposed to be a fun night.

He was supposed to dance, laugh and joke around like any normal seventeen year old would do. Yet here he was, standing on the sidelines with his second helping of spiked punch in hand.

“I’m not.” He admitted.

“Wanna bail this party?”

He nodded at her offer and gulped down the remainder of his drink. Letting the alcohol burn down his throat.

“I’m going to say goodbye to Alya okay?”

He gave another nodded before Marinette left his side.

Her red party dress swaying around her legs as she made her way towards her best friend.

Adrien wasn’t planning on being such a stick in the mud.

He wasn’t planning on a lot of things going wrong that night.

He had hoped his father would listen to him.

Or at the very least had forgotten about the deal they made a couple of years ago.

He hadn’t.
They had yelled to each other.

Argued.

Thrown around insults left and right.

Which wasn’t uncommon between them the older he had gotten. That didn’t make every argument...no every fight...between them easier to deal with unfortunately.

Adrien had left for the party as soon as he could. Carrying his foul mood with him.

A mood that had not completely vanished at trying to have a good time. Or when he noticed how pretty Marinette looked.

Not even the alcohol mixed with fruit punch helped and halfway through the night, a lot of thoughts haunted him. Thoughts that scared him for some reason.

The dark haired girl was quick to return, tapping him on the arm to get his attention and signalling him to follow her.

Blindly he did so and it wasn’t until they were descending down the stairs leading the roof of the Le Grande Paris hotel, that she spoke again.

“What happened?”

“Why do you think something happened?”

“Because I’ve known you longer than today Chaton. Something happened. Something, I’m guessing, is related to your father.”

Adrien sighed heavily. “I’m that predictable.” He tried to joke.

“Actually. Yeah. Yeah you are.” She laughed briefly. “Must be something big if you can’t enjoy a party. I mean...not even Chloé is being that horrible tonight.”

“She’s not that horrible anymore.” He argued.

Marinette shrugged a little. “She still has her moments.”

Adrien couldn’t really argue with her there.

As much as his childhood friend had improved on her behaviour and actually managed to show moments of kindness, her old self still shined through every now and then.

“So...what’s going on Adrien.”

“I’m...just not feeling it tonight. That’s all.”

“Adrien.”
“Just having a bad day Mari.”

“Adrien!”

“Okay. Okay. Fine!”

The boy plopped down on one of the steps, placing his head against his knees so he didn’t have to look directly at her when he would tell her the bad news.

“I had a...argument with father this evening.” He started. “About which schools I want to apply for after the summer.”

He could sense her sitting down next to him.

“Did you tell him? That you want to study culinary arts and be a pastry chef?”

“I did. Then he reminded me of our deal.”

He didn’t need to explain much further since she was well aware what that deal had been and what he had to give up.

“Well we expected that he might not have forgotten it.” She frowned. “You have alternatives right? For business schools.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you tell him about them?”

“Yeah. I did.”

A moment of silence fell between them as she waited for an answer.

An answer he knew she wouldn’t like and one he wasn’t keen on giving her.

“And?” Marinette eventually pressed on.

“He waved off all of them.”

“All of them?! You told me you had like three options!”

“One in Paris, one in England, one in Belgium.”

“And he doesn’t want you to go to any of them?”

Adrien shook his head. “It gets worse.”

Her frown deepened. “Worse how?”

“Worse as in I got a hard lesson in what a large amount of money can actually buy.”

“You’re dancing around your answers.” His partner noticed.
He wasn’t surprised by her observation. She had always been the most observant one of them both.

“For good reason I assure you.”

“Just tell me. What did that man do.”

“He...he ensured my entry into a school of his choice. I didn’t have to apply. He just...bought my way in without me knowing.”

“If anyone finds out…”

“Yeah. I’ll be branded as the little rich kid who doesn’t have to study because daddy buys him good grades.” He shrugged. “Or something. But that’s not what I’m worried about. Anyone can think whatever they want of me.”

“What are you worried about then?”

“It’s.....The school is...in New York.”

He tried his best to lower his voice as much as he could, yet from the shock on her face he knew that she had heard him.

“New York? America New York?”

Another nod from him.

“Shit.”

“Yep.”

“That’s...that’s a long way from here. Visiting you will be hard. Really hard.”

“He wants me to stay there until I’m done with my studies.”

“What about coming home during the holidays? Summer break?”

“Father...wants me to intern at Gabriel’s New York branch in the periods I don’t have school. To...get a feel for the company? Or something like that. I wasn’t really listening anymore at that point.”

“Adrien…”

“He’s thought of everything Mari.” He swallowed, trying his best to hold back a sob. “Everything to keep me there for the next four years. A...A lot can happen in that time. Such a long distance....I’m...I’m not sure if all my friendships will be intact when I come back.”

“That’s what you’re afraid off aren’t you? That you’ll lose your friends because of this?”

“That I’ll lose you.”

Carefully she placed a hand on his knee.
Her warmth seeping through his jeans.

Marinette’s voice was strong, filled with certainty and confidence.
Such a stark contrast compared to his own voice.

“That won’t happen.”

“Mari…”

“We’ve survived so many Akuma’s. Your father being Hawkmoth. Other smaller supervillains.” She started. “Four years apart isn’t going to change that Chaton. We can still speak to each other thanks to the wonders of technology and video calling.”

Adrien let out a small chuckle. “You sound like Plagg.”

“Plagg is very wise. Lazy. But wise.”

At mention of his name, the little Kwami wriggled slightly in Adrien’s pocket.

“So are you my Lady. The wise part of course, not the lazy part.”

“I can be pretty lazy.” She smiled.

A smile that managed to melt away a bit of his worries.

“At least...at least we’ll make sure you’re going to enjoy your summer break before you have to go.”

“Hmmm?”

“Our trip to Italy. Remember? With Nino and Alya. We planned it a couple of months ago? That trip?”

“O-Oh! Yeah. That trip.”

He turned his gaze away from her once again.

“You don’t seem to be excited about it? If you’re worried about that man, don’t be. I’ll kidnap you myself just to go with us.” She ensured him with a playful tone in her voice. “It’s going to be great Chaton! We’ll eat lots of yummy things. Go to a real beach and see the ocean. Travel to Rome and Venice.”

“Yeah. That sounds amazing.”

“We’ll have so much fun Adrien.” She scooted closer to him. “And when you get back from America, we’ll go somewhere else. The four of us.”

“The. Four of us.”

“Adrien? You...you are coming with us aren’t you?”

“Why are you asking that?”
“Because you have that look.”

“Look?”

“That look that tells me there still is something you aren’t telling me.”

“It’s about the trip.” He sighed.

“You’re not going with us. Are you?”

“No.”

“I told you. If that man doesn’t allow you to go, I’ll come kidnap you myself.”

The playful tone in her voice had vanished at this point. The frown returning on her face.

“It’s not like he isn’t allowing me to go. He...He’s sending me to New York before our trip begins. Before summer vacation begins.”

“What?! How soon?”

Adrien breathed in deeply and held it in. Not wanting to answer that question. He knew it would set her off. Make her angry at his father.

But he needed to do this. He promised a while ago and as a almost adult he would be damned if he would let his father get the better of him and he would pull out of their deal. Only for the man to probably go back to hunting for their Miraculous. Even without powers of his own.

Money could do a lot of things. Not just buy him a free pass into any school his father wanted him to attend.

“How soon Adrien?”

He breathed out. “Two days. I’m...being put on a plane in two days.”

“I’m going to kill him.”

“Mari no.”

“Mari yes!”

“Murder isn’t a option and you know it.”
“He’s being just as bad now as he was when he was Hawkmoth.”

“Worse I’d say.” Adrien argued.

“We’re keeping our mouths shut. He should have been in jail by now.”

“I’d be without a father if we did that.”

“He’s not much of a father now either.”

“It’s too late now anyway. Nobody will believe us if we turned him in.”

Another moment of heavy silence fell between them.

“You’re really going through with this aren’t you? Doing all of this against your will.”

“Yeah. It seems like the best option.”

“It doesn’t make you happy.”

“Neither would seeing you or any of my friends hurt.”

“You...make a compelling argument Mister Agreste.”

“Four years Miss Dupain-Cheng. Not a day longer.”

Marinette nodded, letting her head rest against his shoulder. “I’ll wait for you.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking, I’m offering. I’m not letting you go through this alone. So...I’ll be here. In Paris. When you get back. To welcome you with open arms, hot chocolate and fresh pastries.”

“Sounds delightful actually.”

“Better than sitting on the stairs for the rest of the night. Do you want to have a run on the rooftops and then watch some movies and stuff our faces at my place?”

“That, my Lady, sounds even more delightful.”

When Adrien woke up, he was greeted with the buttery and heavenly smell of fresh bread and croissants. Along with a pleasant warmth hugging his side.

A warmth that slightly moved against him. Murmuring words he couldn’t understand.

At that moment, he wouldn’t trade that feeling for anything else in the world.
Most cuddle sessions with Marinette felt like that. It was part of why he loved her. Why he fell in love with her.

Even if she didn’t know it yet.

He had planned to tell her during their trip to Italy. Take her somewhere romantic. Confess his feelings to her.

And if she would reject him, he was sure that at the very least, they would remain friends.

He was confident that their friendship was strong enough to push through something like that. Compared to the fragile state their relationship had been in after they found out about their alter egos.

So very fragile.

There was no way a confession of love wouldn’t have rolled things into a unrepairable state.

Something he didn’t want.

Losing her was the last thing he wanted.

At least that was one thing after all these years that remained the same.

“Stay.”

Her soft whispers pulled him a little out of his sleepy daze. The pink of her bedroom greeting her when he opened his eyes.

“Hmmm?”

“Stay. Don’t go. Just...don’t. We’ll deal with your father and what he’ll do afterwards.”

“I promised.”

“Screw that.”

Marinette hugged his waist a little tighter.

“We talked about this Princess.”

“Can’t remember.”

“Last night. Before we played tag on the roofs and stuffed our faces with cupcakes.”

“Good cupcakes.”

“Yeah they were good.”

For a few moments she didn’t reply or say anything else. Adrien assumed that she had fallen back to sleep and he was pretty convinced at this point that he
had a conversation with a girl who wasn’t even half awake.

“Stay.” She repeated suddenly. “For today.”

“My plane leaves tomorrow Mari. I have things to pack.”

“Do you really want to spend your last day packing?”

“N-No. Of course not. But father sprung it on me last night. I haven’t had time to pack yet.”

She lifted her head.

“Last night? No wonder you were so upset. I thought he told you a while back.”

“No. He told me just before the party. Didn’t I tell that?”

“Jerk.” Plagg muttered from somewhere in the room.

“Super-jerk.” Marinette agreed. “Just...let one of your father’s people pack for you.”

“You mean Nathalie.”

“Sure. As long as you can spend your last day doing whatever you want to do.”

What did he actually want to do?

It almost felt like this day was more the last day of his old life, than the last day he would spend in Paris.

“I want to spend my last day here with you. Just...I don’t know...doing what we always do.”

“Play games. Be superheroes. Bake muffins. Right?”

Adrien gave a short nod. “Cuddle. Watch a movie. Cuddle some more.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’m sure. I just…want to enjoy your company for one last day.”

“You make it sound like I’m never going to see you again.”

“It feels like that.” He let out a short chuckle.

“Well then…” His partner moved away from his side, only to let her upper body plop down on his chest. Bright blue eyes looking at him in a sleepy, yet endearing way. “We should pretend I’m never going to see you again and make this day amazing. Hangover or not.”

“I don’t have one.” He smiled. “You?”

“Little one. But nothing a good breakfast and some painkillers can’t cure.”

“I’m glad.”
The hero raised his hand to brush away a strand of hair from her face. “I’m so going to miss this. Sleeping over. Waking up next to you.”

“Don’t think about such things for now Chaton.” Her own hand moved up to let her fingers run through his own hair.

He loved it.

Being petted like that had always been one of his favorite things.

Perhaps it was the ‘cat’ in him that made him grow so fond of it.

Perhaps it was just her mere touch that he couldn’t get enough off.

Either way, he felt at ease and relaxed every time her fingers would brush against his scalp.

“Ready to start the day?” She asked softly.

“Almost.”

Marinette smiled. “I’ll give you another half hour, if you’re not out of bed by the time I’m done with my shower…”

“I know. I know. You’ll kick me out yourself. Right?”

She booped his nose. “Right. Now...don’t move. I’m going to climb over you and get out.”

Before she could move however, he wrapped his arms around her waist and turned both of them over.

Earning a small shriek from Marinette as he did so in one swift motion, landing them both on their side, blue orbs meeting green ones.

The girl pouted. “You’re horrible.”

“Just helping you out Bugaboo.” Adrien grinned.

“Absolutely horrible.”

“You’re welcome by the way.”

Marinette pushed herself up from the bed and threw her hands up in frustration. Yet the mischievous tone in her voice was enough to tell him she was only joking around.

“The worst!”

“How grateful you are my Lady. Are you sure you want me to spend the day with you?”

“I’m beginning to doubt that decision.”

“Oh woe is me! My dear Princess is casting me out! Woe is me!”
A grin curled up on his face as he made dramatic gestures with his arms.

Her laughter filling the room.

“You dork.” He felt something poke exposed skin on his waist. “Take your time to wake up okay. I’ll be back in a couple minutes.”

“No rush Marinette. I’m not going anywhere today.”

She didn’t reply, merely gave him a small nod before moving down from the platform her bed was on and disappeared down the trap door to the living room.

“I should stop complaining and just...enjoy today.” He muttered, more to himself than anyone else.

“Nothing wrong with complaining Adrien.” Another voice told him.

Tikki’s, he recognized.

“Good Morning Tikki.”

“Good morning!” She cheerfully greeted. “I hope you’ve slept well.”

“I always sleep well here.” Adrien smiled.

Tikki had the voice of reason both Adrien and Marinette needed sometimes. She reminded him of a mother.

Always ready with good advice.

Better advice than what Plagg had given him over the years.

He was sure he was going to miss her too.

“I overheard your conversation last night.” The Kwami continued. “I’m sorry your father is being so difficult. There was no reason he should send you away like that.”

“It’s for my own good. That’s what he always says.” The boy sighed. “I’m sure there’s another reason and that he's not telling me.”

“Will you be okay? On your own I mean?”

“Not sure. But it’s not like I have much choice but to roll with the punches. Do you think...Marinette will be okay? Without me?”

“I don’t know. But I can tell she doesn’t want you to leave.”

“I don’t want to leave either.” The blonde turned towards the small creature. “I suppose you don’t have any words of wisdom or maybe a plan to get me out of this mess?”

The little bug shook her head. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay. Thanks anyway Tikki.”
“I’m going to miss you too you know. You might not be my chosen, but...but...” She started to sniffle.

Adrien pushed himself in a sitting position on the bed. Cupping both hands underneath the red creature. “Tikki. I’m going to miss you too.”

“J-Just promise me you’ll take care of Plagg for me.”

“I can take care of myself!” The cat called out from his hiding.

He chose to ignore him.

“Of course. Take care of Marinette for me?”

The red Kwami nodded and gave him a big smile. “Don’t I always.”

He was about to give a witty comment back when the creaking sound of Marinette’s trap door opening interrupted them. The hero peered around the corner to see Tom Dupain sticking his head through the opening. Tikki zooming away as quickly as she could.

The large man shot the boy a warm smile the moment he noticed him.

“Good morning Adrien.”

“Good morning Monsieur Dupain.”

“Marinette just told us you stayed the night. I don’t suppose you want some breakfast?”

“I’d love some! Thank you!”

Adrien crawled over the bed to the same stairway Marinette had descended on a couple minutes prior.

“Did you two have fun at the party?”

“Oh. Eh....” Right. The party. Did he even have fun? Most of the previous night was a blur at this point so he wasn’t sure. “Yeah it was fun for a while. Marinette suggested we’d hang out in her room halfway through and watch movies. Oh...and we ate some of those leftover cupcakes from the bakkery. I hope that was okay.”

The man let out a chuckle. “That is absolutely okay dear boy. I’m glad to hear you’ve enjoyed yourself.”

The moment he reached the hatch, Tom ducked back down and walked down to the living room. Adrien following suit.

Sabine, Marinette’s mother, was already busy setting the table and she looked ready to tackle another day of work.
He could imagine that both adults had been up for a good couple of hours now. Marinette did tell him once that they needed to get up before sunrise and get the bakkery ready and start baking.

“Good morning dear.”

“Good morning madame Cheng. Anything I can help with?”

He had just finished his sentence before she pressed a stack of plates in his hands. “Would you set these on the dining table for me?”

“Sure. No problem.”

“Thank you Adrien. You’re such a dear.”

“I’ll be down in the bakkery if you need me Sabine.” Tom told his wife before giving her a quick peck on the cheek.

“I’ll come down to help you after breakfast Tom. Give a shout if you need me for anything before that alright.”

He gave his wife another peck on her cheek. “Will do darling.”

Adrien felt a smile curling up his lips.

Tom and Sabine had always been what he imagined two loving parents would be like. They were what he aspired to be if he was ever going to be a father.

And he had long since concluded that they were also a big part of why Marinette’s house felt more like a home than his own house.

Plates collided with the wooden dining table as he set them down and Marinette’s father took his leave.

“Did you sleep well Adrien?”

“Yes. Very well actually.”

“No headache? Marinette briefly complained about one before rushing into the shower.”

He shook his head. “I feel fine madame. A little peckish, but otherwise fine.”

“When was your last meal?”

She sounded slightly worried.

“Yesterday afternoon. Not counting all the cupcakes I had last night.”

The dark haired woman shot him a warm smile. “An extra croissant for you today then.”

His own smile widened.
Leave it to Marinette’s mother to make sure he had enough to eat. She often made sure he was well fed and cared for whenever he visited.

He supposed that’s what mothers just did.

Though by now it had been too long ago since his own disappeared to remember if that was the case with his own mother.

“Make that two extra for me please maman!” Marinette blurted out as she walked into the living room.

A towel wrapped around her head to dry her hair. Wearing a Jagged Stone t-shirt he had given her for her birthday and some jeans shorts. Looking comfortable and ready for an easy day filled with hugs, laughs and cuddles.

He couldn’t wait!

“Are you sure Marinette?” Her mother asked her. “I’ve never seen you eat more than two.”

“I need the extra energy.” The girl flexed her arms with a pout earning a slight chuckle from him.

“Planning a busy day you two?”

Adrien nodded. “Very.”

“Extremely.” His partner added.

“What are the plans?”

Both youths exchanged a look with each other. Though they had casually decided on watching movies and cuddling against each other, he could imagine that doing that alone wasn’t enough to fill a whole day.

“Adrien?” Marinette asked him. “It’s your day so you get to decide the specifics.”

“Oh...eh...I was hoping to be able to help out a bit in the bakery again today? I think I might be able to get those flower decorations right this time and then maybe we go out to see a movie and go back here to play a game and...I don’t know...talk I guess. Is that okay?”

The girl took a seat at the dining and nodded.

Sabine tilted her head just a little in confusion.

“I’m a little confused. It’s not your birthday is it Adrien? Did I forget?”

He shook his head. “No. But it’s...eh...my last day in Paris for a while.”

The woman frowned. “How so? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I’m going to America tomorrow to...study. My father wants me to go there.”

“Oh! Well...I...suppose there are some good schools there to study the culinary arts. Though I don’t
know why your father would rather want you to study there than here."

Sabine put a croissant on his plate and then one on her daughter’s and on her own before sitting down. “It’s so much closer to home here.”

Out of the corner of his eye the former model noticed his friend looking away, pressing her lips together. A slight frown on her face. Clearly doing her best to hold her tongue and not go on another tangent about how unfair it was for his father to send him off like that.

“Father doesn’t want me to go to culinary school. He...he wants me to take over Gabriel’s. So...it’s business school for me.”

The woman frowned.

He hated it.

He hated how this particular end of their deal had made the two Dupain-Cheng women frown.

“Is that what you want too?”

Adrien merely shrugged.

What else could he tell her?

It wasn’t like he had another choice.

Not really anyway.

“I’d rather not think about it right now.” The boy eventually said, picking up his croissant and taking a bite.

Letting the sweet and buttery taste dance over his tongue.

“We’re just going to enjoy the day maman. Make it a fun one. Decorate cakes and cuddle and whatnot.”

He nodded in confirmation.

Yet he felt sad knowing that this would be the last time he would bake or decorate anything for a while.

The first time he had helped out in the bakery, he had helped Marinette to cover small cakes in fondant and decorate them with sugary flowers. She had patiently taught it to him and he found out he had a knack for the craft.

That he loved all things sweet and sugary did help matters.

As did the fact that the very smell surrounding the bakery reminded him of her.

And she reminded him of home.
It was certainly something he could see himself doing for the rest of his life.

Well...now it was something he could have *seen* himself doing.

There was no way he’ll be able to pursue that career now.

No.

He shouldn’t think like that.

He should just think positive and make the most of it!

Channel some of that positive attitude Tikki had most of the time.

Things could have been worse after all.

The best thing he could do now is bask in sugary goodness and Marinette’s company for the day and prepare himself to say goodbye to his friends.

He quickly found out that Marinette herself wasn’t really into all the things he wanted to be doing for his last day.

While he carefully pressed fondant against a cake, Adrien noticed the girl looking at her phone constantly.

The frown returning on her face every now and then.

“Hey Mari.”

She looked up from the screen.

“You okay?”

“Yeah sure. Why are you asking?” The dark haired girl answered.

“You look like you have something on your mind.”

“Just...trying to arrange something actually.”

“Oh? Like what?”

“Well if you want to know curious kitty.” She smirked. “It’s a surprise for you.”

“For me? How considerate Princess. Do tell me what it is.”

She tapped his nose.. “It wouldn’t be a surprise if I told you now would it.”

“Fair enough.” He shrugged. “Will I like it at least?”

“I hope so. So..ehm..sorry if I seem a little distracted today. I’m trying to delegate and micro manage this whole surprise thing.”
He cut away the excess fondant from the cake with ease. It was going so much easier now than the first time he tried it.

“It’s okay Mari. As long as we spend the day together.”

“I want to give you my full attention Kitty. I really do but I had this idea and I needed help with it so…”

“It’s fine Marinette.” He repeated. “As long as you can show me how you frost those cupcakes again I’ll be fine on my own.”

“You really like doing this don’t you?”

“It’s relaxing in some strange way. Keeps my mind off things. So go on. Arrange what you need to arrange. I’ll be here when you are done.”

Before she could protest her phone rang.

“Dang. I need to take this.”

“Go. I’ll promise I won’t burn the bakery down.” He joked.

She giggled before answering her phone and walking back. He could faintly hear her greet Alya on the other side of the line.

“You know.” Tom began as he walked back into the kitchen. An empty train in hand. “This might be the last day you ever get to tell her anything in person for a while.”

“What do you mean sir?”

“I mean, that if you want to tell Marinette something, you should do it before you leave.”

Oh.

Was he that transparent?

Not sure how to answer the boy opted to focus back on the cake in front of him.

“Sabine told me.” The baker resumed. “That you’re going to America tomorrow.”

Adrien nodded.

“And I know you care about my daughter.”

“It’s...it’s that obvious?”

“To us at least.” Tom laughed. Referring to him and his wife. “Have you told her son?”

“No. Not yet. I...I don’t know if I should now. It wouldn’t be fair. I mean...I love her. But I don’t want to risk standing in the way of her happiness.”

Her happiness and safety had always been one of his priorities.
Ever since they became partners.

“Knowing my daughter, she will wait for you if she feels the same way.”

Adrien had to admit that the man knew his daughter well. Since she had offered to wait for him the very night prior.

“It’s four years monsieur Dupain. A lot can happen in that time.”

“I understand Adrien. I just don’t want you to leave without regrets.” The man put the tray down and put a hand on his shoulder. “Marinette cares about you no matter if you tell her how much you care for her. You know that don’t you?”

“Of course! She’s amazing. She’s always been amazing and one of my best friends. I don’t even think it would matter much if I tell her but….I don’t know….everything is already going so fast and...”

The man gave him a couple of reassuring pats on his shoulder.

“No matter if you tell her, no matter what you decide, know you’re always welcome here as far as I’m concerned.”

“T-Thank you.”

Throughout the rest of the day Tom Dupain’s words echoed through his head.

Should he tell her now?

Wouldn’t that be weird?

It would.

But the man had a point. Wouldn’t he regret not telling her?

“You have that look again.”

He turned to her, not really focused on the game he was playing anymore.

“What look?”

“That ‘I-have-something-on-my-mind-and-I’m-not-telling-Marinette’ look.”

“Oh that look.”

“Care to share?”

Her fingers quickly raced from button to button as she moved quickly to defeat his mech in the game.
“Just wishing this day wouldn’t end.”

“Same actually.” She sighed. “Do you want to do one last patrol before calling it a night?”

He shook his head.

“I don’t mind calling it a night right now. You look tired.”

“I’m fine. Just needed to arrange a lot of things. Sorry if I wasn’t good company today.”

“You were great company my Ladybug. I’m going to miss days like these.”

“We’ll have as many as we can to catch up when you get back.”

The hero smiled. “I’d like that.”

“In the meantime I can kick your ass in Ultimate Mecha Striker on online matches between us.”

“I’m sure you will.” He laughed.

“And text you.”

“I’d like that too.”

“Send you photos.”

“I’d love that Mari.”

“Call you to hear your voice.”

“We’re...we’re going to really miss each other aren’t we.”

He didn’t even phrase it as a question, more as a fact.

“It won’t be the same. That’s for sure.”

He hadn’t even been waiting ten minutes to board his plane for him to suddenly feel incredibly lonely already.

He missed Marinette’s warm embrace.
Nino’s jokes and sturdy hugs.
Geeking out with Alya.
Listening to Chloé’s rambles.
Sabine Cheng’s motherly advice and Tom Dupain’s fatherly guidance.

That he only had Nathalie and his bodyguard next to him to send him off didn’t help either.
The Gorilla hardly spoke, aside from the occasional grunt and Nathalie had been busy arranging some last minute things regarding his school and where he was going to stay.

“He couldn’t even be bothered to say goodbye huh?”

He asked the question more to himself than to his chaperones.

“Your father is a busy man Adrien.”

“Isn’t he always.” The boy sighed, slumping down in his chair. “The least he could do was send me off personally. He owes me that much at least.”

The woman next to him didn’t argue against that.

At the very least he had hoped that Marinette would have stuck with him until he would board the plane. But she had told him she had some last minute arrangements to...well arrange. Something about the surprise she had promised him.

The surprise he had already forgotten about when he woke up that morning.

Every now and then he would look behind him or look at his phone screen. Hoping to see her face in the crowd or have a message from her on his phone.

So far neither had happened.

But she still had time. He was still hopeful that she, or any other familiar face, would run up to him to hug him goodbye.

It was then he realized he still hadn’t told Nino anything, and at this point he wasn’t sure when he should.

Maybe it was already too late?

Maybe Marinette had already told him?

She had been talking to a bunch of people on her phone the day before. Alya being one of them. That much he knew for sure.

Just when his head was filling up with a hundred worrying thoughts all at once, his phone let out a small ping to let him know he had a text.

The hero expected it to be Marinette, yet Nino’s name was on the top of his screen in bold letters.

“Dude. What terminal are you at?” It read.

So he knew already.

“I’m near gate one hundred twelve.” Adrien typed back. “Plane leaves in forty five minutes. Give or take.”
“We’re on our way.”

We?

He wasn’t alone at least.
Still he couldn’t help asking “Who’s we?”

All his best friend replied with was a winky face and “Surprise.”

No doubt about it now.
He was in on whatever Marinette was planning.

“You’re smiling.”

He looked up from his screen and to the woman next to him. “Am I?”

“Did you get a nice message?”

“I did actually. Nino is coming to say goodbye in a few moments and he’s not alone.”

“Good. I was afraid your father would have have been too late with his announcement for you to inform your friends.”

“He was.” Adrien admitted. “I only got to tell Marinette. I guess she told everyone else.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what Nathalie?”

“For not being able to convince him that the schools around here are perfectly fine for you.”

“It’s fine. It’s not your fault. I agreed to his terms and he’s clearly trying to keep me on a leash of some sort.”

“At least you’ll have the freedom to do what you want in New York. Outside of your education I mean. Make new friends.”

“Friends I have to leave after four years and they’ll forget about me because there’s a whole ocean between us? No thanks. I’ll stick to the ones I have here.”

“Adrien.”

“I know you mean well Nathalie. But I’m not doing this for father. Not for myself. But to keep the people I care about safe. That includes you too. You know more than anyone what father is still capable of, even without his powers.”

She nodded. “I do and I suspect he might have a way to get his Miraculous back.”

A short moment of silence fell between the two. “I figured as much.” The boy sighed. “It would explain why he was so sure when making demands.”

“Adrien!”
“Your friends are here.” Nathalie told him with a smile the moment he noticed a small group walking towards them. “Go.”

All he could do was give Nathalie a grateful nod before standing up and greeting his friends.

Nino was the first to launch forward and pull him into a hug.

“Bro! I wish I would have known about this sooner!”

“You and me both Nino.” Adrien sighed returning the hug.

Alya was quick to give the boy a hug of her own, even though her boyfriend was still in the middle of the whole hugging process.

“We don’t want you to leave.” She muttered. “You’re our best friend and who else can I geek out with about superheroes!”

He let out a small chuckle. “I don’t want to leave either Alya. It wasn’t my choice.”

“Well you better come back soon!”

Chloé’s voice was loud as always, but didn’t sound as clear as it usually was. Like she was holding back tears and emotions.

“Four years. Chlo. I’ll be back in four years.”

Alya and Nino let his body go, only for the mayor’s daughter to envelop him into another hug.

“That’s too long!” She complained. “Can’t you come back sooner Adri-kins?!”

“I wish I could.”

The blonde let him go and stared at him with a childish pout on her face. “Then I’ll come visit you! I’ve always wanted to go shopping in New York.”

Adrien smiled “I’ll look forward to it.”

“Adrien.”

He looked over Chloé’s shoulder to see his partner standing there with a sad smile on her face, holding a big box wrapped in colorful paper and decorated with a bow.

“We put a few farewell presents together for you.”

“Was that the surprise?”

She nodded. “It was kind of last minute and we all wanted to give you something to remind us by so…”

“Just you four?”
Nino nodded. “Just us four dude. Your besties!”

“Best friends forever right Adrien.” Chloé proudly stated.

He found it hard to swallow.
Hard to talk and even more difficult to keep his emotions in check.

“Guys…”

“Don’t get emotional on us Agreste.” Alya once again pulled him into a hug. “We’ll see each other again okay real soon okay.”

“You still owe me a online match too you know so don’t think you’ll get rid of me that easily.” Nino joked.

All the former model could do was nod and try not to cry.

If at any moment he doubted if he was doing the right thing, this would have been that moment.
A moment where he truly realized what he was leaving behind.

“I can’t come visit.” Marinette admitted as she handed him the present. “But we can talk as much as you want. We can send you goodies from Paris!”

“Not as good as having us right next to you but it’s the best we can do.” The Mayor’s daughter added with a flip of her ponytail.

“Guys. T-Thank you. This means a lot to me. You coming out here to say goodbye.”

Nino put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “It just sucks dude. Mari told us most of it. This would have been SO much easier if you had some mental prep time.”

“It would be so much easier if I didn’t have to go in the first place.” The boy laughed. “But...I’ll be back as soon as I can. Can’t leave anyone waiting too long after all.”

He made brief eye contact with Marinette, whom gave him a less sadder smile.

The brief conversation with her father briefly flashing through his head.
If he wanted to tell her, this would be his last chance to do it.

“M-Marinette? I need to tell you something before I leave.”

“You want us to give you two some privacy Adrien?” Alya asked only for the bakker’s daughter to ask him a question before he could even begin to answer.

“Is it important?”

“It’s important to me that you know it at least. I--”

Two soft fingers pressed against his lips so silence him. “If it’s that important, tell me when you get back alright.”
“Ugh! Why can’t he just tell you something right now. You’re being difficult Dupain-Cheng. Let the boy say what he wants to say to you.”

She merely smiled at Chloé, not getting angry or annoyed by whatever she said.

It was no secret that the both of them weren’t great friends, if friends at all. They tolerated each other and that’s more than Adrien could ask of the two.

“Because that way he has another reason to come back.” She clarified.

“As if we’re not reason enough.” Alya laughed.

“Of course you guys are reason enough!” He assured them.

Of course they were.

At this point even the Camembert cheese Plagg prefered was reason enough to come back.

“We better get going Adrien.”

Nathalie’s voice seemed to chase away all of the warmth which his friends had surrounded him with.

“Already?”

The woman gave him a nod and his bodyguard took the box from his hands.

“Dude. I’m going to miss you.”

For the second time Nino launched himself forward and wrapped the boy in another hug.

“Let me know if you need anything alright?”

The boy let go and pressed a quick goodbye kiss on Adrien’s cheek.

“Same here sunshine.” Alya pecked his other cheek first before also giving him a farewell embrace. “We’ll come visit sometime if we can.”

“Make sure you’re taking care of yourself there. You’ll be in New York. Lost of places there to pamper yourself.” The blonde girl gently pushed Alya aside and gave him a short peck on each cheek. “Text me later this week okay? We’ll set up a day and time to video chat.”

“Or course Chlo. Thank you.”

There was only one person left to say goodbye too. When their eyes met he could see she was having trouble holding back tears.

“Mari.” He sighed, walking up to her with open arms.

All she had to do was take one step before she found herself in his arms. He buried his face in her neck. Inhaling her scent. Trying to remember what she felt like under his touch.
“Marinette. I--”

“No. Don’t say anything. You don’t have to say anything.” She muttered against him. “I’ll be here when you get back. We’ll figure things out from there.”

“Okay. I trust you My Lady.”

“I trust you too Chaton. Always.”

“Adrien. We really have to go.”

Reluctantly he let go of her.
His bodyguard gently pulling on his arm.

A female voice repeating something on the intercom he didn’t even care about.

“I’ll miss you. All of you!” He called to his friends.

“Don’t forget about us!” Alya shouted to him.

He knew she probably meant it in a joking manner, going by the tone in her voice.
But what she had said, that was what he was most afraid of.

That either he forgot about them, or worse, they forgot about him.

The Gorilla gently pushed him in the back, guiding him towards where he needed to board the plane.
Knowing very well that he had already taken the first step towards the rest of his life.
Steps his father had planned out for him.

And he hated every second of it.
Welcome Home

Chapter Summary

Adrien finally returns home after four years.

Green eyes were intensely focused on his phone screen.

Around him, people were bustling about. Walking from one side of the airport to the other, suitcases in tow, trying to get to their destination on time.

Those who weren’t, like himself, had found a quiet place to sit down. Watching people pass by. Drinking coffee, having a quick meal.

It really wasn’t all that different from the New York airport. A bit smaller in size if he really had to point out a clear difference.

In that regards, it didn’t quite feel yet like he had come home.

In many other regards it felt much of the same.

Perhaps it was because there wasn’t a familiar face there to greet him back. Or because he was feeling the aftermath of the long trip back to Paris.

Whatever the reason, Adrien wanted nothing more to just find a bed, curl up and sleep for a month.

Unfortunately he had to wait for a reply from Nathalie.

With nothing more than two suitcases filled with clothes and some of his belongings, he knew he needed some help getting things back on a path he had been planning out for himself.

The young man knew there was no way out of the deal with his father. Not that he knew off right away anyway. Even if there was, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to risk it.

His “feline instincts” told him his father wasn’t someone to be trusted merely on his word.

Nevertheless the man shouldn’t expect a twenty two year old to bow to his every whim like Adrien had done when he was a still a teen.

If he was expecting it, Adrien certainly wasn’t planning to go with it all.

That’s why he had made, somewhat of a plan, to distance himself from his father as much as
possible.

The first step of it being, getting a place of his own as soon as he could and make it clear to the designer that he was no longer dependent on him.

Finally his phone buzzed and he wasted no time to swipe the screen and answer it.

“Hey.” He simply greeted.

“Hello Adrien. I’m sorry I couldn’t call you sooner.”

A small smile curled on his lips for a second before it dropped once again.

The woman knew she didn’t need to apologize at all.

If anything, he couldn’t thank her enough for what she had done during his stay in New York.

While his father hardly ever checked up on him, she was the one to call him or send him a text message.

Asking him if he was doing alright, if he needed anything, if he was eating and sleeping well.

How things at school were, if he managed to contact his friends that week.

In some strange way, she felt like more of a parent to him than his father had ever had been.

“It’s okay Nath.” He assured her “I wasn’t waiting that long.”

“Did you have a good flight?”

“As good as it gets. Did you tell father?”

“Of course not.” She answered without much emotion in her voice. “He doesn’t even realize you’ve already graduated. But I doubt I can hide it for that long that you’re back. He’s going to check your bank account at some point.”

“Yeah. Remind me to switch my accounts to a different bank.” The young man grumbled under his breath. “He has no business checking in on my finances.”

He would have put a stop to that ages ago if he could.

But if he wanted to change the password, a confirmation email would be send to his father’s email adres.

One he couldn’t access because he had no idea what the password for that particular email account was.

And he hated it.

He hated that his father kept more an eye on what he would and wouldn’t spend, rather than checking in on him.

That’s why he had spend the last three years, carefully saving up cash to pay for his plane ticket back.

So his father wouldn’t know when he would.
The last thing he needed was to be back home, only to have the man shove him directly in an office, somewhere in his company.

He needed a couple of days to prepare and recover at least.

“He was trying to make sure you’re provided for overseas.”

“Doubtful.”

He could hear her sigh softly. “In any case, I went ahead and made arrangements for your return.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I booked you a room in Le Grand Paris. I don’t know how long I can keep this secret from your father. He might find out about it and is going to start to ask questions. But it should hopefully give you a few days to rest up and perhaps look for a place of your own.”


“If I can make a suggestion?”

“Sure.”

“Visit him once you feel rested enough. There are things he needs to discuss with you and you need some time to prepare yourself for them.”

“Things as?”

“I don’t know the finer details, but he wants you to manage one department of Gabriel’s and he has yet to lay off the person who is currently managing it.”

“He’s firing someone just to place me in the company? That’s...that’s just wrong.”

“It is.” His father’s assistant agreed. “The people you will be working with might not be too happy about that.”

He let out a frustrated sigh. “Shit.”

“Couldn’t agree more.” She sighed back.

“Okay. You’re right. I need to talk that over with father. The last thing I need is to be blamed for someone’s unemployment.”

“You won’t be directly responsible.”

“No, but since I’m the son of....I might as well be.”

“It will be alright Adrien. I shall let you know if he’s in a good mood and you can drop by to talk to him.”

“Yeah. Okay...that sounds good. I don’t want to think about it too much now. My brain has a hard
time keeping awake after the flight.”

“Do you want me to order you a taxi?”

Adrien remained silent as he thought about it for a moment.

“No. I’ll be okay. It’s just another hour with the subway anyway. I’ll manage to keep awake for that long.”

“Get some rest. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“See you soon Nathalie. And thanks again. For everything. I know this might not be easy for you either.”

“Easier than you might imagine. Safe travels Adrien. Let me know when you’re in the hotel.”

“Will do. Bye.”

“Bye.”

He hung up with a tap of his thumb on the screen and ran a hand through his hair.

The superhero had already been dreading going back home, but now he really wished he would have stayed in New York.

“Addrrrriiiiiieeeeeennnn!” A small voice whined from the inside of his jacket.

He picked up his phone again and pretended to talk into it.

There were too many people walking about.

If anyone would think he was talking to himself. Well that would get some stares and from a wrong angle they might see his Kwami.

That was another problem he didn’t needed, nor wanted, to deal with right now.

“I know. I know.” He muttered. “You want cheese right Plagg.”

“Camembert!”

“I’ll do my best. Think you can hold on until we get to the hotel?”

“Ugh. I guess.”

“Good. Just try and get more sleep.”

“Or! Or you can transform, swing to the city and get me my cheese faster.”

“Not with these suitcases I can’t. Sorry buddy. You’ll have to hold on a little longer, we can get you cheese at the hotel.”

“Okay. Fine. I guess I can wait for my sweet, sweet cheese.”

“Thanks Plagg.”
“Are you even happy to be home? You don’t sound too excited to be back kid.”

He didn’t reply right away. “I just wish things would have been exactly like I left them.”

“Four years is a long time. You can’t expect everything to be the same.”

“No.” He sighed. “I guess not.”

By the time he reached the front door of the Le Grand Paris hotel, he was exhausted.

Forget the bed.

He would be more than content finding the nearest comfortable looking rug and just sleep on there for a year.

Tiredly he dragged his feet passed the front door and made a straight line for the frontdesk.

“Good evening!” The blonde woman behind the desk cheerfully greeted.

“Good evening.” Adrien muttered back. “I’d like to check in. There’s supposed to be a reservation made for Agreste.”

At the mention of his name the woman began furiously typing away at her computer.

“Hmmmm….let’s see. Ah yes! Monsieur Agreste, standard suite, for four weeks.”

“Sounds about right.”

“I’ll need to see your identification and reservation confirmation please.”

“My...what?”

“Reservation confirmation and identification.”

“I can show you my ID.” The former model politely told her. “But my...secretary booked the room for me so I don’t have the confirmation on me.”

“I’m sorry monsieur, I’m not allowed to check you in without those.”

He slapped his passport on the counter and sighed deeply.
Both in fatigue and frustration.

“Can you give me a moment? I’ll have to contact someone.”

Before he even hand the chance to pull his phone from his pocket, a blonde woman on white high heels stomped his way.

Her heels loudly colliding with the marble floor.
An angry scowl on her face and her thin lips pressed into a pout. Bright blue eyes flaring.

“Who let you in?!?” She sounded outraged as she pointed her manicured finger at him.

“Mademoiselle Bourgeois…” The woman at the front desk tried to reason.

Only to be silenced by the blonde’s hand the moment she was close enough to both of them.

“Who do you think you are, walking in here, looking like that!”

Adrien looked at his clothes. Granted, he wasn’t dressed in any designer clothing.

He hadn’t worn any in a long while. Owning only one or two nice shirts for the moments when he was needed at the New York branch. Even then, the people there didn’t exactly care what he was wearing.

He was there to do paperwork, not to look like a representative of the brand.

Which was, in a big way, a huge relief. He had done nothing but be the face of the brand when he was still a teen. With all his modeling gigs and whatnot. Of course just being an ‘Agreste’ didn’t help a single thing.

Not having to worry about what he was wearing or how perfect his hair looked felt like paradise.

Nevertheless, he didn’t think the old pair of jeans and the generic hoodie was wearing were that bad. Granted they weren’t new, and looked a little worn at this point, but that was expected after all these years.

“We are a five star hotel!” she continued. “We don’t cater to riff raff!”

“Mademoiselle, monsieur is a paying guest.” The lady at the front desk assured her.

The scowl on the young lady’s face fell and she blinked a couple of times before straightening her posture and pencil skirt.

“Well...yes...I see. My apologies monsieur…?”

“Seriously Chlo?” He snorted. “I know I’ve grown a bit but you’ve visited me...what...a year and a half ago? But I doubt I’ve changed that much.”

Her blue eyes went wide when she realized who was standing in front of her.

“Adrien?” He nodded in confirmation. “Oh my gosh! Adrikins! I haven’t seen you in forever! Without much warning she threw her arms around his neck and pulled him into a short hug.

“Ugh. You look horrible though.” She scrunched up her nose.

He chuckled. “I’ve been traveling for the last eighteen-something hours. Give a guy a break.”
“You sound horrible too. So...American.”

He shrugged. “Not surprised. I’ve been living there for the past couple of years. You know that.”

“Sorry. Sorry. I just…” Chloé waved her hand around as if she was looking for the right word to say. “...find it hard to get used to.”

“It’s just an accent. I’m sure it will disappear in time.”

“And sorry for yelling at you earlier too. We have an image to uphold here and I thought you were...well…”

“A hobo?”

“Your words not mine. But let me make it up to you Adrikins. Dinner is on me!”

“I’d love something to eat. Thanks Chlo.”

“And then…” She wrapped her arm around his own. “We have all the time to catch up! It’s been ages since we talked.”

“Can I...check in first? Get my stuff in my room and everything?”

“Oh! Of course!”

He turned his attention back to the lady at the desk. “Let me call the one who made the reservation for me. She should be able to mail me the confirmation documents you need.”

“Tsk. No need for that. I can vouch for him. Just give him his room key and all of his room service will be on the house.”

“Not to be ungrateful or anything. But I’m staying here for a month. That’s a lot of room service.”

“A month? Oh...what kind of room does he have?”

“A standard room with a single bed madame.”

“Unacceptable.”

“Chloé.” He tried to argue.

A simple room was just fine.
He just needed a place to sleep and quietly look through available apartments.

What Nathalie booked him was more than enough.

“No no no no.” The mayor’s daughter insisted. “Upgrade him to the royal suite, no extra charge.”

He heard a sigh coming from the other woman, but she quickly pressed the keys on her keyboard nonetheless.
“Room six-o-three monsieur.” A key was shoved his way.

“For a whole month?” Adrien turned to his childhood friend. “Are you sure?”

“We’ve been friends since we were cute little toddlers and I honestly feel horrible for shouting at you so see it as a way for me to make it up to you.”

“That’s not a good way to run a business you know?” He laughed.

“Oh shush.” She playfully slapped his arm. “Go get freshened up, I’ll keep a table at the restaurant open for you.”

“Okay. Thank you Chlo.”

Again she threw her arms around his neck, only this time, instead of a hug she gave him a short peck on each cheek.

“For my best friend? Anything.”

“Cheese!”

“Yeah. Yeah. I heard you the first time Plagg.”

“Cheeeeeeeessssseeeeee!”

“Okay okay! Geez. We’re back for a couple of hours and you’re already a needy kitty.”

“Well yeah. Because if I know you well enough. And I do. You’ll be transforming again, leaping over the rooftops of Paris, in search of your lovebug.”

“Not tonight. I’m barely able to keep myself awake. Besides...I doubt she’d want to see me.”

“You’re overreacting,” The little cat replied. “Of course she’d want to see you! She said she’d wait for you.”

“We haven’t spoken to each other in forever.”

“Neither have you and that loud girl and she seemed to be fine with it.”

“Chloé’s different. We grew up together.”

“Whatever. I think you’re just overreacting.”

He chose to ignore Plagg’s comment.

“Hey. There’s cheese in the mini fridge here.”
“Score!”

The Kwami was fast to reach the fridge Adrien was kneeling besides. His movements seemed more like a black blur than anything else. Within no time the small cat was feasting on a small round cheese he didn’t recognize right way.

Nor did he care all that much.

“I’ll get you some more in the morning Plagg.”

“Pwease awmn twank wyu!”

Leaving his Kwami to enjoy his reunion with his beloved cheese, he opened one of his suitcases and pulled out a button up shirt from somewhere among the pile of clothes he brought back with.

Even though he had no desire to get out of his most comfortable outfit, he was in no mood to get stares from the people in the hotel restaurant because he wasn’t dressed for fine dining.

Being silently judged would be a guarantee. Even more so since he was having dinner with Chloé.

“I’ll be back in an hour or so.” He exclaimed while buttoning up his light blue shirt.

“Take your time kid. I’m not going anywhere.”

The closer he got to the dining hall, the stronger the smell of food became and the more he realised that his hunger was actually greater than his fatigue.

Wolfing down a meal or two, getting some dessert and then sleep for ten years sounded like a good plan.

“Do you have a reservation?”

“Miss Bourgeois invited me to join her for dinner.” He answered instead.

“Mister Agreste?”

Adrien nodded.

“Please follow me to your table sir.”

He did as he was told and was soon waved down by the mayor’s daughter.

“Adrien! So you do remember how to dress yourself.” She teased.

“Of course I do. When it comes to trips that ended up being that long, it is comfort over fashion my dear Chloé.”

“With you maybe.” She smirked.

“So…” He sat down at the table. “What’s new?”
“Well. Daddy is letting me co-manage the hotel. If I do well enough he might let me take it over one day.”

He nodded in understanding. “I take it you graduated?”

“Of course! Finished hotel management last year.” The young woman stated proudly. “I want to travel after the summer though. See a bit of the world before dedicating myself completely to...this.” Slim hands gestured to their surroundings.

“You should. You never know if you might regret it if you hadn’t.”

“That is so true. Oh, come with me Adrien! It’ll be fun traveling around.”

“I wish I could, but I sincerely doubt father would let me.”

“Oh that old windbag! Don’t mind him and just do what you want to do.”

“Again. I wish I could. But I promised.”

She sighed. “Okay. Fine. But we’re going to take a trip together eventually. We can even bring some of the others if you want.”

Adrien picked up the menu, skimming over each dish.

“Have...have you heard from any of them by the way?”

“Hmmm?”


“Not personally no. What I know about them I got from their social medias.”

“I don’t suppose you’re willing to tell me what you know?”

She blinked a couple of times in surprise.

“Why? You have more contact with them than I do.”

“Well...things changed. I haven’t heard from them in a while. I figured they must be too busy to reply or something.”

“I know Nino is busy. He scored a gig on some festival in Belgium if I have to believe his Instagram. There’s not reason to show that off, it’s no Coachella.” Chloé scoffed. “He’s doing a lot with his music as far as I can tell.”

“Explains why he hasn’t been able to respond to my messages recently. Even though we hardly spoke anymore to begin with.” Adrien muttered. “I’m glad. Nino always wanted to either be a director or do something more with his music.”

She merely shrugged at his comment.

“What about Alya?”
“Oh! I’ve got some juicy gossip about her actually.”

He wasn’t that keen on gossip, but since they hadn’t spoken to each other in over a year, Adrien figured any kind of information about her well being would be good information.

“Okay. So. She and Nino broke up last month.”

“Didn’t they break up two years ago?”

“They have broken up and gotten back together three times since then.” Chloé explained. “I don’t know why they get back together every time.”

“They love each other. Sure they have their disagreements and they end up apart, but they do love each other.”

“Yeah well, I’m not sure how much longer this kind of relationship is going to work for them. He’s away for his music and Alya doesn’t like it. She’s complained about it on her socials.”

“Can’t blame her. But I’m proud that Nino is following his dream.”

“At least some of us are.” He mentally added.

“She’s doing the same though. Being a junior reporter for the local newspaper. Granted she isn’t leaving the city yet, but it’s what she wanted.”

“Sounds like Al has her hands full.”

“And she still runs the Ladyblog on the side too. Not sure how she managed to keep that thing going without Ladybug being there. It’s nothing short of a miracle really. Not that I visit the blog that much anymore.”

At the mention of his partner, Adrien shifted in his chair. “No...No more Ladybug?”

“Yeah. Neither her or that cat have shown themselves in the past years. The last Ladybug sighting was...around a year and a half ago? I think.”

That sounded about right.

It was around that time that Marinette stopped responding to his messages for some reason.

He had always figured that she was too busy with her studies to become a fashion designer. The last message he had received from her had been something along the lines of ‘Hey I can’t be online for a while. Things are crazy right now.’

She never gave specifics, but who was he to doubt his Lady.

If she needed space he was going to give it to her.

Yet after a month of sending that message, she stopped responding to his attempts at contacting her all together.
He was worried.

The only thing that still gave him some sense of comfort, was that he knew she was safe, if the notifications on the instant messaging app was something to go on. She had read his messages at least.

She had been online.

But for some reason she never replied.

“If I had to make a guess she either moved out of the city or got together with Chat Noir or something.”

He wished the latter was the case.

“Are there any supervillains around then?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“No supervillain, no superhero. She’s probably taking a long vacation until she’s needed again.” He tried to conclude.

He hoped that was the case.

“Probably. That girl needs the off time with everything she’s been dealing with over the years.”

A waiter approached their table. “May I take your order?”

“Give me the special of the day.”

“Eh..I’ll have the same please.” Adrien told the waiter with a small nod.

“And a bottle of wine too!”

“Chlo. I’m not planning on drinking tonight.”

“Come on Adrikins! You just got home! A reason to celebrate.”

“I’m also almost falling asleep here.” He chuckled. “Wine will only make me worse company for you in this situation.”

“Just one?”

The blonde pouted and looked at him with a pleading look in her eyes.

“Okay. Maybe just one glass.”

“I knew I could convince you! You won’t regret this. We just got a couple of cases with the best Italian wine money can buy!”

He nodded. Not really listening to the specifics of the wine and how much it had cost the hotel.
“Hey. Since you’re more up to date with the others than I am...may I ask if you know anything about Marinette?”

Chloé frowned at the mention of the girl’s name. “Dupain-Cheng? Figured out of all the people in the world she would stay in touch.”

“I think something happened. She told me that she couldn’t respond for a while and after that...she didn’t respond to my messages or anything. Even after months went by.”

“Don’t know if anything happened. Out of all our classmates she’s one of few that actually never updates her social media anymore. She used to just post a pic of whatever horrendous thing she designed. The last I remembered is that she mentioned a trip to Italy?”

“Oh man. That must have been ages ago. I was supposed to go with them but then my dad…” He sighed deeply.

“No. That wasn’t ages ago. But I guess they could have been old photo’s. She also posted a pic of a dress she was making for one of her design classes. That was nearly two years ago I think.”

“Sounds about right. She stopped talking to me about a year and a half ago. It’s...not like her to just do that.”

“No.” She agreed. “It isn’t like her.”

“I’m just a little worried. Being forced to stay in New York probably wasn’t the best option for my social life and now that I’m back I kinda wished I could have stayed. Seeing as I only have you left as a friend. Not that, that’s a bad thing...but...”

“Don’t say that. I’m sure your other friends still think of you as friends and people sometimes just grow apart. It happens.”

“That was what I was most afraid of.”

“If it helps anything, I guess I could try and see if I can schedule a reunion between us or something. Get everyone back together again and throw you a proper ‘Welcome back’ dinner.”

“You don’t have to. I’ve long since made peace with the fact that it just wasn’t meant to last.”

“You’re so dramatic.”

The waiter returned with a bottle of wine and presented it to the table. Chloé nodded in approval and before he knew it their wine glasses were filled to the brim.

The mayor’s daughter raised her glass towards him. Ready to bring a toast. “At least you’re back home again.”

“There’s that at least.”

He picked up his own glass and tapped it against Chloé’s.

“Welcome home Adrien.”
As tired as he was feeling, for some reason he just couldn’t get much sleep that night.

Perhaps he had eaten too much.

Or he was just past the point that his fatigue had turned into a mild case of insomnia.

That his phone buzzed loudly at eight in the morning, waking him up from a light slumber in the process, didn’t help matters much either.

He had hoped to sleep most of the day away.

Instead of ignoring his phone, he picked the device up anyway. Hoping it would be a message from Nathalie with either good news of some kind, or some further details as to what exactly his father had planned for him.

Instead the name on the screen really made him wish he had stayed in New York.

Father.

“We have things to discuss. I am expecting you in my office at three o’clock this afternoon.”

So far for being able to hide his arrival from his father for a couple of days. He doubted Nathalie told him.

It must have been a coincidence that he, most likely, happened to check on his finances, only to probably see a large amount written off to the Le Grand Paris hotel.

If that wasn’t enough of a clue for anyone to notice he was back, Adrien wasn’t sure what was.

The young man groaned at the message and threw the phone back on his nightstand.

It was too early to deal with all of this.

Whatever his father wanted, it would be a problem for Adrien a couple of hours from now.

Right now he really just wanted to try and get some more rest and sleep for a hundred years.
To-Do List

Chapter Summary

Adrien decides to take some matters into his own hands.

Italy was beautiful.
That was something Adrien couldn’t deny.
Every brick in sight seemed to ooze a certain warmth and charm.
So did the architecture in general and even the people walking by.

“It’s so busy here. I can’t even see Alya and Nino anymore.”

Then again.

Perhaps it was merely the presence of the blue eyed girl that made everything seem so charming to him.

“I think they ditched me. Some friends they are.” Marinette chuckled. “Now I just look stupid standing here all by myself. Which is just me saying I...actually completely lost track of them and that is probably, completely my own fault.”

He smiled at her.
Not agreeing or disagreeing with anything she said.

“I guess I’ll meet them again at the hotel later. You don’t need a whole group to go exploring afterall.” She laughed.

The girl suddenly pointed at a black cat basking in the sun on a insignificant stone wall. “Look! It’s you!”

It’s eyes were closed, not having a care in the world. “Look at it! It looks like it's smiling. I hope you’ll look that happy one day Adrien.”

She stopped speaking for a second only to quickly correct herself. “Not that I don’t think you’re happy...but you looked so sad when we said goodbye and...I just wish...you could be...happier than you already are. You deserve it.”

Again a moment of silence before she continued. “Maybe I’m just being selfish by wishing that. Seeing you happy makes me happy too. It makes me happy knowing you’re able to smile for real. I...I know that probably sounds stupid.”

His partner let out a shuddered sigh.
As if she was holding some kind of emotion back.

“You shouldn’t have to go through all of it. He has no right to…” Marinette turned away from the cat and focused her gaze on the people and the traffic passing her. “I’m sorry. I… I’m just rambling out thoughts at this point. You already know how I feel about your whole situation. I just... wished I could help you out more. Do something….”

Oh how he wished he could just pull her into a hug. Reassure her once again that it was going to be fine. Even when, at this point, he didn’t even know if he could tell her that without lying to both her and himself.

“But... we should look at this in a positive way instead. I’m sure we can get through it if we stay positive. That’s what Tikki always says.”

She started walking again, waving a quick goodbye to the sleeping feline.

“Okay so, on that positive note. When you’re back you’ll be old enough to do almost everything you want. Right?”

Adrien nodded.

“You could get your own place. Get some distance from your father. That would be a good start.” Marinette let out a soft humm. “What else? Oh! You’re not jobless at least and even if you don’t want to work there. There is such a thing as a contract right? Your father probably needs to write something specifically for you if he wants to keep you in the company forever right? Maybe he’s dumb enough to create a loophole and you... I don’t know... can just walk away without breaking your promise after a certain amount of years.”

“You’re so smart Bug.” He muttered.

“Ah. Don’t mind me. I’ve just been thinking too much. Not much to do for a girl besides think when her two friends are more occupied with each other than actually looking around.” She joked. “Which is a shame because they’re missing all the fun stuff! You have no idea how many ideas I’ve come up with for designs by just walking around here.”

Then. Everything turned black.

“Is it on?” He could hear Marinette ask.

“I think it is.”

Tikki’s voice, he recognized.

The girl moved and he was soon met with a starry night sky.

“Have you ever seen that many stars before? We never get to see this many back home!” She sighed. “I’m almost starting to believe we’re actually lucky that our car broke down and we had to camp out here.”

He could do nothing more but smile at her.

“I hope you don’t mind me doing this. Nino said he was afraid we would rub it in this way, since
you couldn’t come with us.” The camera moved again to show a tired, blue eyed maiden, surrounded by grass and wildflowers as she spoke once again. “I just wanted to show you, so it would be like you’re actually here with me and to let you know what you could be expecting when we are actually able to go back here. The four of us!”

The girl smiled at the camera.

At him.

“There’s so much here I want to show you Chaton. So I hope you don’t mind it that I’m making this horrible video letter to you.” She laughed.

“I don’t mind.” Adrien muttered tiredly. “I want you to show me.”

Eventually her laughter died down. “I miss you. Come home soon okay? I’ll be waiting for you.”

The camera shaked a little as she tried to steady it with one hand, the other she used to blow a kiss at the screen.

The video image fluttered for a few moments before everything was clear again. Nino and Alya smiling into the camera.

He had his hand on her hip and she leaned her head against his shoulder.

Both seemed to be sitting in some kind of lobby.

“Anything to say to Adrien?” He heard Marinette ask.

“What haven’t we already said at this point?” Alya asked the others.

“Alright. Alright. I got something.” Nino assured her. “Adrien. Bro. I know it’s been like two weeks, but I already miss you. I wish you were here because trust me, it’s no fun being the only one dragged around from clothing store to clothing store with these two.” The boy joked, pointing at the girls.

He earned a laugh from Marinette and a playful swat against his arm from his girlfriend.

“But seriously. We do miss you Sunshine.” The blogger added. “It’s not the same without you here.”

The boy nodded in agreement.

“We love you. Stay safe.”

“Let us know if you need anything.” Nino added.

“We’ll come visit you once we have saved up enough money.” Marinette assured.

“I...I still think we could have done more to keep him here.”

“Alya. You’ve never met Agreste senior. That man is unreasonable.”

“Nino’s right.” The girl holding the camera agreed. “Besides...it’s not like...”
“Not like...what?”

“Nothing. Nevermind. I’m getting hungry. Where do you guys want to eat?”

The video once again flickered. Only this time it was Ladybug’s face on the screen. Her eyes seemed puffy and her nose was slightly red.

“Hey. So...since I’m editing this thing...I figured...well.” She sniffled a little. “It wouldn’t be...horrible if I...just pretended to keep talking to you.”

He heard her swallow hard before continuing. “So we just got back from Italy and I realized a lot of things. Because I got to do a lot of thinking.”

She exhaled. Her breath shuddering.

“I realized I did nothing at all to help you get out of this. A-And I know it’s a difficult situation...but...I feel...guilty? For not being able to do more and that you’re the one caring all of this burden on your shoulders. Especially since I’ve known for years and let time just slip by and all of this happen.”

The hero shook her head and let one hand wipe away her tears.

“I never got to tell you, that...that...you’re my best friend ever and I’m so lucky to have met you. And I’m sorry...so sorry I couldn’t prevent this. I’m sorry you have to go through this that far away from home. I’m...I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault Bug.” Adrien muttered to the screen.

“I’m so...so sorry.”

“Not your fault.” He repeated. “This is all one me.”

“It’s a video you know.” Plagg yawned next to him as Adrien tapped a key on his laptop to stop the file from playing. “She can’t answer you.”

“I know. I...guess I’m going a bit...insane?”

“You’re overreacting that’s what you’re doing.” The cat spat back. “You miss them. That’s normal. But you shouldn’t sulk about it.”

“Well. What would you do if you were in my shoes?”

“Get new shoes because yours don’t fit my cute little kitty paws.” Plagg answered sarcastically.

Adrien rolled his eyes in reply.

“But seriously? Try to get in touch with them again! You’re back home. The only reason things ended up the way they did was because your old man kicked you to somewhere far, far away. Now
that’s not a problem anymore you can see them as much as you want. Right?”

“If they’ll even want to see me.”

“One way to find out. The worse thing they could say is that they don’t want to talk to you. And honestly? Does that sound like something any of them would say?”

“Okay...okay yeah. You may have a point.”

“I tend to have my good moments.” The cat grinned.

“But first I need to get my priorities together.”

“Was that why you were watching a video instead of looking for apartments?”

“I...I was feeling nostalgic. I just miss her the most you know.”

A moment of silence fell between the two.

“If it helps any.” The cat muttered. “I miss them too.”

He knew he was referring to her Kwami as well.

“I’m sure they’re looking out for each other.”

The small creature nodded.

“I’ll bet Mari has her own little place and a boutique by now. Maybe even an job at one of those well known fashion labels.”

“Like Gabriel’s?”

Adrien froze.

Plagg had asked an interesting question.

What if Marinette was a designer at Gabriel’s?

He knew she hated his father when he left, but she still adored his designs. The girl had sometimes cursed and wished that all of the lines Gabriel Agreste designed weren’t that inspirational to her.

Surely she could be working there?

She had the talent, the passion and more importantly she didn’t have to deal with his father directly. The company was huge.

Much bigger than the one he had experienced back in New York. Even there he noticed that some departments didn’t even need to speak to other departments. Despite working in the same building.

Adrien pulled out his phone to text Nathalie.
“Hey Nath? Who do I need to bother to figure out if someone specific works at Gabriel’s?”

As expected from his father’s assistant, she was quick to answer.


“Thank you!”

“Looking for someone?”

“An old friend.” He typed back. “She should have graduated as a fashion designer by now. Just curious to see if I can track her down.”

“You think she works for the company?”

“She has the talent. Wouldn’t be surprised if she ended up working for us.”

“Want me to look into it?”

He thought for a moment before typing back a reply. “It’s fine. I’ll try to track her down myself. You have enough work to do already.”

“Alright. Don’t forget your appointment in an hour. I’m sorry that I couldn’t keep it secret from him for long.”

“Did you tell him?”

“No.” Nathalie typed back. “But your father got a call from mayor Bourgeois.”

“Chloé might have told her father...who in turn told my father…That makes sense actually.”

“It was purely a coincidence. He needed to speak with your father about his charity gala this year. Gabriel’s is one of the sponsors of the event.”

“I suppose it just came up then.”

“I suppose so.”

He started typing up a reply before stopping.

Step one of his initial plan already seemed to fail and he hadn’t even been back for twenty four hours.

Look for an apartment.

Get a good lawyer.

Move your finances back under your control.

Get your life back together, marry someone you love and have a family.
All without father knowing a thing about it.

So far for the important part of that plan.

“Did you get enough rest?” Nathalie suddenly asked.

“Not really. Haven’t slept great to be honest. I feel like I’m having somewhat of a hangover, but all I had was one glass of wine during dinner last night.”

“I will inform your father then. Perhaps he’ll refrain from shouting at you this time.”

“Can’t promise I’ll do the same.”

“Noted.

“I’ll just get some food and make my way over to you guys.”

His father’s assistant didn’t reply to that.
Nor did she need to.

As much as he liked small talk, she never was one to keep a conversation going for longer than needed.
Short and to the point.

That was the Nathalie Sancoeur way.

“Do I have to come with you?” The small cat suddenly asked as he was looking over the boy’s shoulder to read along with the conversations.

When Plagg had decided he should move there, Adrien didn’t know and notice.
But after that many years, he was used to the cat sneaking around and doing his own thing by now.

Adrien shook his head. “Nah. I’ll manage. Just stay here and out of sight okay?”

“Don’t have to tell me twice.”

“I’ll bring back some cheese.”

“Camembert!” Plagg demanded, his eyes filled with anticipation.

“Yeah yeah.” Adrien laughed. “Can’t have you and your precious Camembert be apart for that long.”

“Exactly! I’m glad you’re seeing it my way.”

His lunch didn’t lay heavy on his stomach.

That was, not until he approached the front gate of the Agreste mansion.

For some reason, the salad and steak he had, felt like heavy, round, pebbles, moving around in his
stomach with every step he took.

Nerves.

It was probably that.

Merely a common side effect when one would step into the lion’s den. Or walk into something they had no idea what to expect off.

Maybe it was just something that came with the prospect of talking one on one to his father again after such a long time.

Whatever the case may be, he wanted nothing more than to turn around and go back to the safety of his hotel room.

Sadly, he knew, that wasn’t much of an option.

With a sigh, Adrien pushed the button of the intercom.

“Yes?” Nathalie’s voice asked.

“It’s me Nath. Could you open the gate?”

She didn’t reply, but the large metal structure moved regardless.

The moment he took a step onto familiar soil, he felt his body grow heavy. His movements feeling sluggish and slow.

Not even his father’s assistant waiting for him, with the warmest expression she could muster on her face, helped subside the need to run.

“Adrien.” She sighed. “You’ve grown so much.”

“Hey Nathalie.”

The blonde opened up his arms, ready to give the woman a hug.

She merely raised a brow at the gesture. Giving him the same cold look he was used to seeing when he was a boy.

Her expression softened slightly however and she stepped forward to give him a brief embrace along with three kisses on his cheeks.

A greeting so brief, he did not have time to respond or return it, before she stepped back again.

“It’s good to have you home.”

“I wish I could say the same.” Adrien sighed before steering away from the topic. “This place hasn’t changed a bit since I left. I don’t think it ever will.”

Green eyes scanned the large hallway he was in.
Paintings, plants and the color of the walls. All were still exactly the same as when he left.

It was as if he had stepped right back into a moment from the past.

“Your father is still busy.” She explained. “He should be finished with his meeting in a few minutes.”

“Still working from home I assume.”

The woman nodded, pushing her glassed up her nose when she did.

“Yes. He’s on a conference call. As he does with all his meetings.”

“I don’t suppose you have more details on what he wants to tell me?”

She shook her head. “Not much. I know he wants you on a manager position. I’m not exactly sure which department. But if I had to guess it’s either sales or distribution. Somewhere small to start you off with.”

“I can handle the small stuff.”

“He still has to give you a contract too. I suggest looking for a lawyer to help you look things over before you sign it.”

“That was on the top of my to-do list actually.”

She gave him a small smile. “I’m impressed you thought ahead that far already.”

“Advice of a friend from a long time ago actually.”

“The same friend you’re trying to find?”

“Yeah. Coincidentally it is.”

“Monsieur Tripoli should be in today. If you want you can drop by and ask him about it”

“That is not a bad idea actually. I need to introduce myself anyway to, whatever department father wants me to manage.”

“I shall let him know you’ll be visiting him today.” She nodded. “Monsieur Agreste hasn’t fired the current manager yet either as far as I know.”

“Okay. Okay. I can...find a solution for that. I hope.”

If only he had his Lady next to him to ask for advice. She was the one who could come up with the most practical solutions.

He was more of a logical thinker himself.

“Let me know if you need any help.”
The former model nodded. “So...all of that aside. What’s new?”

“Nothing much.” Nathalie straightened her back. “It’s difficult dealing with your father sometimes, but that isn’t anything new. Especially when he’s started working on a new collection.”

“You need a vacation.” He suggested. “A long vacation.”

“We both know your father would go insane if I do.” The corner of her red lips slightly turned up.

“Why, mademoiselle Sancoeur! Was that a sarcastic jab at your employer?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Being ridiculous make life tolerable.”

“That’s a strange philosophy to follow.”

Adrien shrugged. “I’ve heard stranger. If anything it keeps things spontaneous.”

She was about to answer back when a beeping noise from her tablet demanded her attention.

“Seems like your father is done with his call. You can go in now if you want. Technically your appointment isn’t for another twenty three minutes.”

“Talking with father is like ripping off a bandaid.” He started. “It hurts less to do it as quickly as possible. So I might as well get this over with.”

“Good luck in there.”

As with the rest of the house, the large, door to his father’s office remained unchanged.

Sturdy.

Intimidating.

The same nervous feeling building inside of him now, as it did when he was a little boy.

Only this time, he didn’t have his mother or his bodyguard standing behind him to provide some sort of protecting or support.

With slightly shaking hands he knocked on the door.

“Keep it together Adrien. Don’t yell at him. Not this time.” He muttered to himself. “Just go in. Hear what he has to say and get out.”

“Come in.” A gruff voice commanded.

Adrien did as he was told and pushed the door open before stepping into his father’s office.

Designs were scattered about and the man himself was looking at something on his computer screen.
“Father.” He greeted with a small nod.

“Adrien. I’m disappointed in you.”

“Hold your tongue. Hold your tongue.” He internally repeated to himself.

“Disappointed, that I had to hear from Mayor Bougeois that you are back. Instead of directly from you.”

“My apologies father. The trip back wore me out and by the time I arrived yesterday—”

Gabriel raised his hand to silence his son. “Enough. I don’t want to hear any of your excuses.”

“What do you want to hear then?” He asked through gritted teeth.

“Nothing. I want you to listen. That’s why I had you come here.”

And like a loyal puppy he had followed that command.

“I’m listening.”

“Now that you’ve completed your studies, it is time to fulfill the rest of your promise.”

“You want me to work for the company.”

“Indeed.” The man nodded. “Starting next week you’ll be managing the distribution and designing department of Gabriel’s regular collections.”

“The ones we sell for the standard consumers?”

Again Gabriel nodded. “You’ll have a small team underneath you. Mademoiselle London is the head designer for that department. She will be checking in every now and again to discuss matters with you as you should check in with her occasionally.”

Adrien remained silent and the designer continued.

“You will have your own office and secretary of course. You will be making sure deadlines are met, sales are processed and that the numbers are accurate. Do you understand?”

“Yes father.”

“I will have your contract ready by the end of this week. You will be paid on the twenty fourth like everyone else.” The man turned away from his son. “I expect you to work hard and not bring disgrace to the Agreste name or the company.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that I better not read anything scandalous in the tabloids mentioning your name.”

“No one-night stands, no wild parties. Keep away from paparazzi. Understood.”
“Good. Any questions?”

“Yes. Just one. Who am I replacing?”

“Pardon?”

“Nathalie told me you haven’t fired the guy who is currently managing...all of that.”

“He will be released before the end of the week. Don’t worry.”

“I’d like to know his name.”

His father frowned. “That is of no concern to you Adrien.”

“No offence, but you’re kicking someone out to make room for me. Which is absolutely unfair! Nobody should lose their job because you want to stuff me in some dusty office!”

So far for keeping his cool and just listening.

“This isn’t your concern!” Gabriel repeated with a harsh tone dripping off every word he spoke. “That man will be fired! You will start working next week! End of discussion!”

“Fine! But don’t expect me to not do something about your bullshit this time! This isn’t fair to him or me, and I’m not planning on working this position over someone else’s back!”

The young man turned around and rushed out of the office. His father hot on his trail.

With every large step he took he felt himself become slightly lighter.

“Adrien!” He shouted. “You come back here right now!”

He didn’t even look back as he stormed out the front door. Adrien knew he had places to go and people to see.

While not being on his to-do list, his top priority now was to find a solution for the poor man he was forced to replace.

Gabriel’s headquarters was massive. A large building housing several designing and distribution departments. Equally large windows illuminating the massive entrance hall, letting the sunlight reflect in the marble floor.

Adrien had never really been a lot in the building. A couple of times for a photoshoot if he recalled correctly, but not much.

Of all the departments that came together in this building, modelling wasn’t among them as far as he was aware.

At the end of the hallway stood a large, white, reception desk.
Behind it, two neatly dressed ladies were answering phone calls and directing the people towards the right direction.

“Good afternoon.” Adrien greeted.

A petite redhead behind the desk merely smiled and gave a nod before greeting him back. “Good afternoon monsieur. How may I help you?”

“With two things hopefully.” The former model started. “I’m looking for monsieur Tripoli’s office. He works for staff management?”

“Take the right elevator to the third floor, his office should be the third one on the right.” The woman politely explained.

“Ah. Thank you.”

“And the second thing monsieur?”

“I need to know where the department for Gabriel’s regular distribution is.”

She however didn’t seem to exactly understand him as a confused look appeared on her face.

“Maybe I’m using the wrong terms here. I’m looking for the department in charge of the clothing that goes out for the public masses and stores affiliated with Gabriel’s.”

“Oh! Take the left elevator to the fourth floor. On the left you’ll find the designing department and on the right should be distribution and management.”

“Thank you eh…” He glanced quickly onto her name tag. “Lucy.”

“Y-You’re welcome monsieur.” The young woman stuttered slightly, a faint blush appearing on her cheeks.

“I might be back here to ask for directions later. This place is a maze the last time I was here.”

She nodded in agreement. “It’s easy to get lost here. Sadly we don’t have any signs next to the stairway or the elevators to tell which department is in which wing. For new employees it’s especially confusing those first few weeks.”

“I can imagine. Thank you for your help Lucy.”

She gave him a broad smile. “Anytime!”

Walking to the elevator, he kept repeating the directions he was given. “Third floor, third door on the right. Third floor, third door on the right.”

Adrien pressed the gold coloured button next to the elevator. Calling it down.

When the door opened a small group of people walked out, but none he recognized. And nobody seemed to recognize him either.

Which was a good thing as far as he was concerned.
Perhaps Chloé had been right.  
Maybe he had grown so much he looked different from his teenage years.

Taking the elevator up, he stepped out on the third floor and started counting the red coloured doors on his right.

True to the receptionist’s directions, the door to monsieur Tripoli’s office was there. Labeled with a golden plaque right there on the door.

So the offices were labeled, only the departments weren’t.

How weird that was.

He raised his hand to knock on the door, yet hesitated slightly.

What if his hunch was wrong?
Then what.
How would he be able to find her then.

Maybe he could try calling her, just for some idle chit chat.  
It might be rude to just call her out of the blue. But he really wanted to know if she was doing alright.

On the plus side, if she really worked here, he might not have to.  
He could just ask Lucy for directions and surprise her.  
Maybe take her out for dinner to catch up?

Adrien let out a deep sigh before knocking gently on the door a couple of times and carefully opening it.

Peeking his head through the door, he noticed that monsieur Tripoli wasn’t working alone.

The office wasn’t tiny.  
There was enough room for a few desks, a lot of file cabinets and some sort of reception desk.

“Hello. I’m looking for monsieur Tripoli?”

An old man looked up.  
His hair white, his skin wrinkled and a twinkle in his eye Adrien imagined only grandparents and Santa Claus would be able to possess.

“You have found him.” He answered back with a smile and walked up to him. “Jean Pierre Tripoli.”

The blonde took the hand that was extended to him and gave the man a firm handshake. “Nice to meet you monsieur Tripoli. I’m Adrien Agreste. Nathalie might have messaged you I would be dropping by?”

The man nodded. “Yes she did. Something about wanting to find out if a certain someone is working here.”

“Yes! I wanted to reconnect with her and I know she’s a talented designer, so I figured...well...maybe she applied for a position here?”
“Her name?”

“Dupain-Cheng. Marinette.”

“George, could you look her up in that fancy computer of yours. I’ll go check our paper documents.”

George, a middle aged man wearing thick glasses merely gave a nod and typed away furiously on his computer.

“There are no records of her working here monsieur Agreste.” George told him after a few short minutes. “She did apply for an internship two years ago.”

“Did she get accepted?”

“She did.” Jean Pierre confirmed, handing him a folder. “She never showed up for her internship though.”

Hearing that, the heavy feeling that had vanished after he stormed away from his father returned tenfold.

Why on Earth would Marinette, who had dreamed about being a designer since she had been a little girl, miss the chance to intern at one of the biggest fashion companies in the world?

It made even less sense than there not being any signs with clear directions in the lobby.

Adrien opened the file, his eyes landing on her application letter. It was neatly written and showed motivation.

Below her letter was a list of tasks she needed to sign off for school. Her name and the name of a, assumingly, professor written on top. In the back of the folder were a few designs he had never seen.

Drawings depicting summer dresses, casual suits and even a wedding gown.

It certainly looked like something he could picture her wearing if she would ever walk down the aisle.

“Raw talent, madame London described her as.” The old man spoke up. “I remember that she was supposed to be mentored by her. Never met the girl personally but we set things up as much as we could.”

“Like we always do.” George added.

“Did she tell you why she didn’t take the internship?”

“No to us at least.”

A dead end.
For now at least.

“Well...thank you anyway.”
“Sorry we couldn’t be of more help monsieur Agreste.”

“It’s fine. I’ll find another way of getting in contact with her.” He handed the file back to the old man. “Can I ask one more question monsieur Tripoli?”

“Of course.”

“According to my father I am to replace the current manager of the department in charge of the regular clothing lines that go out to our affiliated stores. But the poor man hasn’t been notified yet that he will be fired. Is there a position open he should be able to fill?”

“George?”

Again the man wearing the glasses typed away at his computer.

“There is an opening in accounting. He will be paid a little less than his management function, but at least he will have work. Nobody internally or externally has replied to the opening yet.”

Adrien nodded.
It was clear what he needed to do to fix his father’s mistake.

“Thanks again gentlemen. I’ll be leaving you alone then. Keep up the good work.”

Giving a final wave, Adrien left the office and found himself back in the long hallway.
He knew more now, but he wasn’t at all closer to Marinette.

On top of that he still had so much to arrange so he could cut himself off from his father as much as he could.

He hoped he would be able to do all of that before he was thrown behind a desk.

Taking the elevator back down, he soon realized that he absolutely forgot where he needed to go next.
Thankfully, Lucy didn’t seem too busy.
Surely he could bother her one more time to ask for directions.

“Sorry to bother you Lucy.”

“Oh! No bother at all. How can I help you?”

“The directions to the department in charge---”

“Of distribution between our affiliating stores?” She finished.

The former model nodded.

“The elevator up to the fourth floor. Designing is on the left, management on the right.”

“Thanks again.”

“No problem! That’s what I’m here for!”
The fourth floor of the west wing was completely different from the third floor of the east wing.

Instead of several smaller offices, the whole floor was divided in two bigger rooms. The several doors in the hallway leading to their respective half of the floor, as far as he could see through the large windows.

On his left, designers were busy sewing and drawing. Half finished designs already draped on mannequins, the sound of sewing machines ever so softly humming.

On the other side, the space was occupied by desks in groups of four. Several employees working behind their computers. Making calls, discussing things with each other, drinking coffee in between it all.

Adrien knew, that if he was going to get as little damage as he could from his father’s demands, he needed to act on his own.

Introducing himself to his new team and relocating the man he would be replacing to another function within the company, would probably be a good start.

Better than leaving someone jobless on the street on such short notice.

He was almost sure that wasn’t even legal. But honestly he didn’t pay much attention in those classes so he couldn’t completely be sure.

He just needed to fix this.

That was one thing that was clear.

He didn’t knock on the door, yet carefully opened it before stepping in.

Everyone seemed to be so busy, they didn’t even notice him. His eye immediately fell on a out of place door. Leading to, heavens knows where, but he assumed a small conference room of some sort. Not back out to the hallway, that was one thing that was for sure.

“Can we help you?”

Startled by the sudden voice, Adrien looked up to see a tall woman looking slightly down at him.

“Ehm...yeah...I'm Adrien. I'm here to speak with the manager of this department.”

She frowned at hearing that.

“Go through that door sir. If you have an appointment, monsieur Vienna’s secretary would be happy to help you further.” She pointed at the out of place door.

He thanked the woman and walked up to the door, knocked on it before letting himself in.

A small, auburn haired, clearly pregnant woman, stood up from her chair and greeted him with a
It seemed like his future secretary had her own office.

“Oh! Welcome. Do you have a appointment with monsieur Vienna?”

“N-Not exactly. No.” He stammered. “My name is Adrien Agreste. My father...well...ehm...I need to speak with monsieur Vienna.”

“Agreste? The son of monsieur Gabriel Agreste?”

Shyly he nodded.

“Goodness! Okay. Alright. I didn’t even knew you were coming in here to check up on us.”

“Well that’s not--”

“Monsieur Vienna should be available right now? Let me notify him and you can go right in.”

“Thank you and...congratulations.”

“Hmmm?”

“Your pregnancy. Do you have a long way to go?”

“Four more months.” She stated with a smile.

“Your first?”

Her smile widened and she nodded.

“We’re really excited to have it. But it hasn’t been easy so far.”

“I can only imagine.” Adrien nodded.

“Just listen to me.” She laughed. “Getting distracted just like that. I’ll let him know that you’re here.”

She pressed a button on the phone beside her and a soft buzzing sound was heard echoing through the small office.

“Paul? Monsieur Agreste is here to see you.”

He could hear some faint rumbling and shifting of papers on the other side of the line, before a confused answered. “L-Let him in Mary.”

“That way sir.” The secretary, Mary he now learned she was called, motioned to the other door in the room.

No doubt it lead to another office.

As he opened the door, the young man felt anxious.
He wasn’t sure how well this conversation was going to go.
How surprised would monsieur Vienna be, hearing he didn’t come for some sort of inspection or social call, but to announce that his father meant to lay him off starting the next week.

Adrien wasn’t even two steps into the room when the current manager, a stout, slightly overweight man walked up to him, hand already outstretched.

“Monsieur Gabriel Agreste!” He greeted. “I wasn’t expecting you to show up.”

“I wasn’t planning on going here in the first place.” The blonde admitted. “And Gabriel is my father. Please call me Adrien.”

“Agreste junior! W-What brings you here?”

Paul closed the door behind him. All the while giving off a nervous expression.

“To talk with you and hopefully find a solution.”

“A solution to get our distribution back in order I hope.”

“Our distribution?”

“That’s why your pops send you here right? Our orders are all over the place and I can’t retrace some of them or fix them. We have clients dropping out of their contract with us. It’s a mess.”

Right then he understood why his father wanted him in this position. To clean up the mess that was made.

“I don’t know where I went wrong.” Monsieur Vienna continued. “I checked all the numbers and orders over and over again and still people complain they got overcharged or didn’t get the right amount of clothing and with the added pressure your father has put on us…”

“Do you feel like you can handle this on your own?”

The man’s eyes widened.

“Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“Not exactly.” Adrien admitted. “I just came back from New York and I just finished business school there. My father wants me to work somewhere inside the company and...today he told me...he wanted me to replace you. Starting next week.”

Paul remained silent for a moment as he let the news sink in. It didn’t take long before he started to panic.

“H-How am I going to survive? I worked day and night for the past month! I haven’t seen my wife and kids in weeks! I have four children! They are all in the middle of their studies.”

“I...I might have a solution. Please hear me out because I don’t like this anymore than you do. The last thing I wanted was to get someone fired just because my father wants me in a certain position.”
"A solution? O-Okay. What kind?"

"I can’t exactly defy my father on his wishes."

"Your old man that strict?"

"More like...I’m obligated by verbal agreement to take over the company at some point? It’s complicated. But...I do know there is an opening in accounting right now. You would be making a little less than what you are making at the moment, but at least you would be employed. I can try and help you as much as I can to make sure you get the position."

"How?"

"It’s not a card I like to play but I can assure them there will be consequences, when my father hears about their decision to deny a perfectly capable candidate for the position if they don’t hire you. You know. If I need to use it in the first place."

"That’s all."

"It’s all I’ve got. Like I said, I don’t like this anymore than you do but this is the best solution I can offer at the moment."

"It’s probably better than nothing." Paul sighed. "Alright. I’ll apply. My kids need to eat. I need a job."

Adrien nodded. "I’m glad you think that way and I’m sorry. I wish I could do more for you in this case."

"How much time do I have?"

"If I have to believe my father, until the end of the week. He’ll send you the official letter by then."

"That will give me a little time. Unless Gabriel pays me off. Then I have to move out of here whenever he wants me to."

"I’m sorry."

He shook his head. "Not your fault kid. I...I appreciate it that you came to warn me and help me out like this. That’s more than your old man would do, that’s for sure."

"He’s hardly even in the building." Adrien chuckled.

"Exactly!"

"Can I ask you something monsieur Vienna?"

"Sure."

"I don’t suppose you’re willing to show me how this department works before you leave? Maybe I can help you out with this distribution problem before I have to take over completely."

The man thought for a moment but eventually nodded. "Come back here tomorrow. I’ll introduce
you to the team and we’ll get a head start on getting you used to this place. And the placed used to you for that matter.”

“Thank you monsieur.”

By the time Adrien got back to his hotel room, cheese for Plagg not forgotten, the sun had begun to set.

Looking back, he didn’t even make a dent in his to-do list.

On the plus side, he fixed the situation his father had created the best he could.
He got some guidance for the rest of the week and he could at least cross Gabriel’s off as a place where Marinette would work.

“Cheeeeeeesssssee!” Plagg gleefully shrieked when his chosen came back in his room.

“Lots of it you glutton.”

Putting the plastic bag on his bed, his Kwami didn’t hesitate to dive headfirst into it.

It was then that he noticed he had left his laptop on before he left for lunch.
An orange light on it blinking every now and then.

Moving his finger across the mousepad, the screen came back to life.

Ladybug’s puffy face being the first thing he was greeted with.

Reluctantly he pressed the play button of the media player and she continued her talk.

“I’m so...so...sorry.” Ladybug sniffled.

“I’m sorry too.” He muttered back.

“I...I never even got to tell you. How much y-you mean to me. I-I know I’m selfish, b-but I need you next to me. I-I feel lost without you. Chaton...I....L--“

The video ended there.
Leaving the screen on black.

He knew she edited it, so whatever she said at the end, it might have been something she either regretted saying or didn’t want him to know.

“I feel lost without you too Bug. So. Very. Lost.”

He let out a shuddered sigh before closing the laptop.

Pulling out his phone he scrolled through his contacts and dialed Marinette’s number.

Perhaps it would have been rude to call her, she had asked for some space after all.
But that had been a long time ago and he needed to know if she was alright.
Almost immediately he got to hear her voice.

Too bad it was her voicemail and not his Lady herself.

“Hey this is Marinette! I can’t come to the phone right now. Leave a message after the you-know-what and I’ll get back to you.”

He hung up and stared at his phone for a few seconds before redialing her number.

At the very least he could leave a message.

“Hey this is Marinette! I can’t come to the phone right now. Leave a message after the you-know-what and I’ll get back to you.” ---beeeep.

“Hey Bugaboo. It’s me. I just got back from New York and...well...I miss you. I miss talking to you. I hope everything is alright. You...You haven’t responded to my messages. I mean...it’s okay if you don’t want to talk to me anymore, just let me know okay and I’ll leave you alone. If not...well I’m staying at the Le Grande Paris for now. I’d love to catch up with you. Maybe do a patrol for old times sake? Anyway. I...I hope to speak to you soon.”

After he hung up again he was certain of one thing.

He needed to find her.

If only to ease his own mind. If only to know if she was really alright and that she had simply changed her mind when it came to an interning spot at Gabriel’s.

Combined with what Chloé had told her about her inactivity on her social media, it slightly worried him and it all just didn’t make sense.

It was one more thing that was going on his to-do list.

Right at the very top.

Along with trying to reconnect with Nino and Alya.

Adrien just hoped that he would be able cross something off it before the start of next week.
“Chlo?”

The blonde woman looked up from her phone.

“Do you know a good lawyer?”

“Why?” She snorted as if it was the most ridiculous thing she had ever heard him ask.

Adrien scarved down the last bit of his dinner. “I need one.” He mumbled as he chewed. “One that isn’t connected to my father.”

“I could direct you to mine. She’s got a big company. Pretty sure she’s got more capable lawyers under her employment.”

He raised a brow.

“How do I know the firm is any good?”

“I sued my last hairdresser for putting the wrong color blonde in my hair last year. I won.”

“Was that really necessary?”

She merely shrugged. “It’s utterly unacceptable that he put ‘summer blonde’ in my perfect locks, while I specifically asked for ‘honey blonde’. I was merely trying to make a statement. I didn’t even sue them for monetary compensation or anything.”

“She must be good then, winning such...cases.”

The mayor’s daughter nodded. “That she is. Another glass of wine?”

Adrien nodded and held out his glass for her to pour.

She did so elegantly and without spilling a drop.

“I tried to track down Marinette today by the way.”

“Any luck?”

He shook his head. “I had hoped she would be working at Gabriel’s. But alas. Seemed like she applied there for an internship two years ago, but never went in.”
“Weird. You would think she’s smart enough to recognize an opportunity when she sees it.”

“I tried calling her.”

“Going by the disappointment on your face, no answer.”

“I left a voicemail.”

“You know. I might know a guy who knows someone who is a brother of someone who might be able to figure out where she is. He’s a private investigator.”

That was the last thing he needed.
Too much investigating and someone was bound to find out that Marinette was Ladybug.

He didn’t want to be responsible for that mess.

“It’s fine Chloé. I don’t feel the need to put a private eye on the case just yet.”

“Then...I might be able to contact someone who might know where she is.”

“Who?”

“Alya.”

“You have her number? I think she has a new one. Her old one hasn’t been online in forever.”

“Ehm. No. But I know where she works and how to get her here.”

He blinked a couple of times. “Really?”

“Just leave everything to me Adrikins. I’ll text you the details tomorrow.”

“T-Thanks. I don’t know why you’re going through so much trouble, but...thank you Chloé.”

“I don’t know why I’m doing this either. All I know is that, for some reason, you’re so hung up on your old friends and if it makes you happy then I’ll do what I can to get your pathetic group back together.”

“That would make me happy. I didn’t know you cared.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She scoffed. “Of course I care. You’ve been looking utterly miserable since you walked in yesterday. No. Even before that. You looked miserable when I last visited you.”

“Sorry. I...I didn’t meant to look like that.”

“What on Earth are you apologizing for?! I know why you’re unhappy. I don’t know the exact details, only that your father is controlling your life waaaaay too much and that it is probably the reason. That is what is making you feel horrible.”

“You’re...You’re not wrong.” He hated to admit it, but she was right.
Seven thirty in the morning, while still feeling the aftermath of his jetlag, wasn’t a great combination. Add a significant amount of papers and numbers to that combination and Adrien was sure he needed a lot more than two cups of mediocre coffee to keep himself going.

“This is a puzzle.” He muttered tiredly to himself.

The blonde had taken the liberty to go to the office early, take a seat at one of the desks in the back. One that was covered in dust and deprived of any personal belongings. Unlike many of the other desks.
He figured nobody had used it in a long while.

His suspicion was only confirmed when the computer took forty minutes to process any missed updates it had lined up since the last time it was used.

The moment he was able to compare orders and numbers he realized why it had taken Paul so long to find the problem.

As he had told him, nothing made sense.

Processed orders from the distribution warehouse gave a far different amount than the order they had send out had.

And it wasn’t a one time occurrence either.

Clearly something went wrong between them and the warehouse.

“Hey.”
Adrien looked up from the screen to come face to face with the tall woman from yesterday. It was only now that he was able to take a good look at her.

Her black hair was pulled up in a bun.
Blue eyes, red lips, the faintest touch of makeup on her face.

“Good morning.”

“You were here yesterday too right?” She asked him. “You had an appointment with Paul.”

The blonde nodded.

She extended a well manicured hand to him. “Veronica.”

He took her hand and shook it gently. “Adrien. Nice to meet you.”

“No. Nice to meet you! You’re here to help us out aren’t you? Mary told us something about that.”

Again he nodded. “I am.”

“That’s great! We’re so understaffed and I’m not sure how many more angry clients I can manage to calm down.”

“That bad? I mean...I knew it was bad, but...that bad?”

Veronica gave a confirming humm. “The higher ups have been demanding more sales from us. We have four months to double what we sell on average.”

“That’s insane.”

“Right?! I’m glad you think so too.”

“Who demanded it?”

“Gabriel Agreste himself I guess.” She shrugged. “His name was on the demand Paul received.”

“Double the sales in such a short time, that’s insane with the amount of clients dropping out. I should talk to Gabriel about that.”

The woman placed herself on the edge of his desk and let out a snort. “Nobody talks to Gabriel about these things. Rumor has it that everyone who tries to define his orders will be fired on the spot.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time I did that.” Was the first thought that entered his mind. “Then I will talk to him once I get this problem fixed for you guys.” He assured her.

“That would be grand. If I can help you with anything, let me know.”

“Well, actually. Can you tell me how to work with this program? I managed to pull up some orders and the feedback from the warehouse, but I have no idea how to put in orders and make a new account for new clients.”
She blinked a couple of times. “You’ve been hired to help us out but you have no idea how the software works?”

“Eh...I...I just graduated and we weren’t working with this program, so I’m slightly lost, but absolutely willing to help you guys out.”

“You...You just graduated? How old are you even?”

“Turned twenty two last month. Why?”

“Oh...Oh you poor sweet child.”

“Technically not a child anymore, but...thanks? I guess?”

“You really picked out the worst place to gain experience. Work pressure is off the roof these past few months and not only on this side of the department.”

“Designing too?”

Veronica nodded. “Gabriel wants to add at least five more pieces to the next collection. The team isn’t that big, only three designers working on every collection. They barely made their deadline last time, there’s no way another five designs added will keep madame London sane this time.”

“They already design like...twenty pieces every season right?”

“Give or take.”

“I’ll bring that up when I talk to him as well.”

“Good luck with that. Hey...can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“What flowers are your favorite Adrien?”

“Not sure. Why?”

“For your funeral.” She teased with a smirk.

“I can handle it.” He assured her once more.

It was high time he was the one making demands anyway. Perhaps he could throw it on the table when signing his contract.

So far his father had been more on the receiving end. What harm would it be to make his job a tad more easier.

“I have an idea by the way.”

Veronica let herself slide from the desk. “Oh?”

“If I set up a ghost account, put in an order, then contact the warehouse to see what they receive, we
can go back and forth to see which one of us has a kink in our systems.” He explained. “If it’s not us, it’s the warehouse that has the problem.”

“Worth a try. Scoot over and let me explain to you how this relic amongst computer programs works.”

By the time lunch rolled around, Adrien had managed to get a lot done.

He met most of the people working in the office.

Asked Paul and Mary to keep the whole ‘Adrien is replacing Paul and is actually the son of Gabriel’ thing quiet until Paul actually had to leave.

In turn monsieur Vienna had announced he was forced to leave the department soon and had already applied for an opening within the company itself.

He had discussed his plan of attack with Paul and had asked Mary for a list of numbers from all the clients who got screwed over and the number for the warehouse.

He had found out the problem wasn’t with the warehouse, as they had texted him with added screenshots and explained the total matched up with the amount from their end.

Yet it was still not the order he had put in on the ghost account Veronica helped him set up.

Clearly the problem wasn’t with distribution.

“Going already?” Veronica asked him as he picked up his bag.

“Yeah. I officially start working here next week actually and I need to arrange some things to get settled in.”

“Like?”

“Like a place to stay that isn’t a hotel.” He laughed. “Some finances. That kind of stuff. Not to mention get some more sleep and think about this problem some more.”

“You do look tired. Will you be back tomorrow?”

“Of course! With a solution hopefully.” He sighed. “I’ll let Paul know I’m leaving. Thank you for your help today.”

Veronica merely gave him a smile and a nod.

He made his way to Mary’s office, carefully knocking on it before opening the door.

“Hey. Is monsieur Vienna busy?”

Mary shook her head as she kept typing on her computer. “Go right in.”

“Thank you.”

Instead of walking right in, he repeated the same steps as he had done a couple of seconds ago.

“Paul?” Adrien asked, poking his head through the door. “I need to go. There’s a lot of personal stuff
I need to take care off and--” His phone buzzed. He quickly fished it out of his pocket to see who it was. “Apparently I need to get my ass back at the hotel before five.”

“Do you know how we can fix our problem?”

“Almost. I’m getting closer to finding where the problem actually is. The warehouse was very helpful in providing assistance. They even sent me a list with prices each piece should be. I did the math. From their end things seem to work out, but from our end not so much.”

“Darn. I was afraid of that.” Paul grumbled.

“Might be a software issue. Veronica joked about it being ancient. But now I’m not so sure she was joking. I haven’t worked with this kind of program nor did I hear any of my professors, students, or the folks at Gabriel’s New York branch mention it.”

“What kind of software do they use there?”

“Uhm...Distrumode version...4.5 I think. But hey, if our stuff works that wouldn’t be an issue on it’s own. When was the last time this software was updated?”

“I’ve been working here for ten years. I haven’t seen it updated once since then.”

“Ah...I think we found our problem. Both programs must be conflicting with each other. We send something out, the warehouse corrects is according to the prices and then things get messed up. An update should be able to fix most if not all of the problems.”

“Such a simple solution.”

“Sometimes you’re just too focused on how complicated a problem is, you’re too blind to see how simple the solution can be.”

“True for many things. I’ll contact tech support and ask them how we can update our software.”

“Let me know if that works okay? If not I’ll keep pondering for a solution.”

“If it works, will you be here tomorrow?”

Adrien nodded. “For half a day maybe? There’s still some mess to clean up.”

“Thank you. I’ll keep you updated.”

“Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

Fingers quickly tapped on his phone screen.

He wasn’t sure why Chloé demanded that he would be back before five o’clock, but he was determined to find out.

“Surprise.” She typed back quickly. “I also have my eye on a pretty diamond bracelet, if you’re
looking for something to pay me back with.”

“Must be some surprise then.”

“I pulled a lot of favors for this one. So it’s absolutely worth it.” Was her reply.

“Do you want to pick it out when we go shopping this weekend?”

“YES!”

Even though the conversation was short, and he hadn’t really learned why he had to be back on time, he was sure it wasn’t anything to concern himself about.

Perhaps she had set up a appointment for him with a lawyer?

Maybe she found out where Marinette was working or living.

It could have been something else entirely for all he knew.

He would find out at the end of the day.

For now, he found himself with some time on his hands. Time to get back to his list and cross some things off it.

Again his fingers danced over the screen, trying to look up what was the easiest and quickest thing to get done before the end of the day.

He couldn’t even open the file he needed when a familiar name popped up on his screen. Making his phone buzz every so often.

Nino.

Now there was someone he hadn’t spoken to in a while.

Adrien couldn’t blame him. His career suddenly rocketed off after a small gig on a small festival. Leaving the DJ as busy as ever.

Maybe he had called him by accident.

“Hello?”

“Adrien my man!”

So not on accident.

“Nino? Man I haven’t talked to you in forever!”

“I know. I know. That’s on me bro. I’m sorry. I’ve been so busy and my last breakup with Alya was so messy dude. I needed some time and totally forgot to give my best friend some tlc.”

“It’s fine. I know you were busy. I….I’m just happy to hear I’m still your best friend.”
“Of course you are dude!” Nino exclaimed. “I haven’t forgotten you. I know it doesn’t seem like it and I do feel horrible because I know you’ve tried to keep in touch and everything.”

“I did.”

“And I’ve been the worst friend ever to everyone lately. Especially you by, y’know, not being there. Forgive me? I promise I’ll do better. It’s just hard juggling life and friends and I know those are crap excuses but….I want to do better.”

“You’re still my best friend too Nino. Of course I’ll forgive you.”

“Start over?”

“Yeah. Let’s start over.”

“Cool! Cool! Because I’m absolutely going to make things right. I’ve got some time to hang out the next couple of days! What’s your address, I’ll take an taxi or something to get there.”

“My address? Oh...ehm I’m staying at the Le Grand Paris for now.”

“Le Grand Paris? Dude! I didn’t even know they had one here.” Adrien arched a brow, even though his friend couldn’t see it. Everyone knew about the hotel. “Didn’t you say you had a whole penthouse apartment for your lonesome though?”

“Nino?”

“Yeah.”

“Where exactly are you?”

“New York dude! It’s like early in the morning here, so I figured I’d give you a wakeup call and surprise you!”

“Wow.”

“I know right!” His friend kept going. “Monique invited me to do a collab with her. She’s in the top ten charts worldwide! And she wanted to record in New York so I figured I’d beg for forgiveness and hang out with you like old times again now that I’m here and...I dunno...be friends again like old times.”

“Nino.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not in New York.”

The DJ fell silent. “Where are you then?”

“Home. Paris.”

“Since when?”
“Since three days.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!”

“Sorry.”

“What are you sorry for dude! We just missed each other you know.”

“We did?”

“Yeah, I arrived here three days ago, but I had this huge jetlag so I couldn’t be in the studio until yesterday.”

How cruel the universe was.

“I must have left the moment you arrived.”

“Give or take a few hours maybe.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah man.”

“When will you be back? I’m not leaving Paris in the foreseeable future anyway. We can hang out again then.”

“In a month if I’m lucky.”

“That’s not too bad.”

Nino however sounded disappointed. “True, but I had hoped to surprise you.”

“Your call was a surprise. I never expected to hear your voice.”

“So...hey. How are you holding up anyway?”

“Hmmm?”

“You’re home again. So...that means your four years are up right?”

“Yeah.”

“Your old man putting you to work?”

“Starting next week. I’m trying to get my finances back under my control and find a apartment or something before the month is over.”

“Doing okay?”

“I’m holding up so far.” Adrien sighed. “Trying to ignore my father as much as I can actually. Chloé’s been a great support these past days.”
“Chloé? I figured Mari of all people would help you out.”

“Haven’t...I haven’t heard from her in a while either. Around the time you got too busy actually.”

“Damn. You’re kidding!”

“I’ve been trying to find her, left her a voicemail last night. But nothing so far.”

“Actually. I remember Marinette asking me and Alya for some space. She was dealing with some shit she never specified on. I didn’t think much of it. Girl was stressing about internships and stuff the week before so...I figured she needed a break.”

“She told me the same.” He admitted. “I tried to text her after a month of radio silence. She read the messages but never replied.”

“Dude.” Nino whispered. “Alya got the vaguest replies from her. I think something happened and she didn’t want her to worry. Not sure if those two are talking.”

“Don’t know either. Can’t seem to contact Al since she seems to have changed her phone number. Chlo said she’d take care of it. Whatever that means.”

“I wish I could give you her number, but I deleted it from my phone after...we broke up.”

“Sounds like you regret it.”

“Yeah...Yeah I do. We didn’t exactly part on good terms.”

“I’m sorry to hear that man.”

“Say hi to her for me if you see her again?”

“Sure. Anything else I need to say to her?”

“I don’t know...just...that I miss her or something...I...can I ask you for her number when you find out what it is? I need to make things right with her.”

Adrien felt himself smile. “You still love her don’t you, you old sap.”

“Of course I do! Fuck man! She’s...Alya is just amazing okay! We didn’t break up because we didn’t love each other anymore or that we needed a break from each other. We broke up because I was an idiot and I regret it. Let’s just say you’re not the only person I need to beg to for forgiveness.”

“If I speak to her at some point, I’ll pass on the message man. I hope you guys will work things out together.”

“Me too.”

“Hey. Are you busy tonight? We can go for a round of online Ultima Mecha Striker? Just like old times.”

“Yeah...Yeah that sounds cool bro. I think I can get myself a copy and find some internet café here or something. Meet you up in eight hours? Usual server?”
“You got it man.”

“Cool.”

“Hey Nino.”

“Hmmm.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m proud of you that you’ve managed to make your passion your career.”

“Dude. Stop before I choke up.”

“Just being truthful.”

“You’re the worst sometimes you know.” Nino laughed.

“So I’ve been told.” He laughed back. “Thanks for the call Nino.”

“No problem man. Thank you for giving me another chance.”

“You’re my best friend. Of course I’ll give you another chance. Hey, good luck recording today.”

“Thanks man. Good luck dealing with...whatever you need to do. Talk to you tonight.”

“Until tonight.”

“Bye.”

“Bye Nino.”

It was strange.
Their conversation had been short, just under ten minutes going by the screen, but it didn’t feel like much had changed between them.

Nino still considered him his best friend and he did the same.

He opened up to him about his love for Alya, as he had always done.

It seemed like the time apart and the times they hadn’t spoken, didn’t do much for their friendship.

And Adrien was glad.
It was as if a small weight was lifted from his shoulder.
A confirmation that one of the biggest things he feared, was something he didn’t need to be afraid off at all.

That he hadn’t lost the people he cared about.

So far anyway.

The former model let out a sigh of relief and pocketed his phone.
Looking around, he noticed that, during his conversation with Nino he had stopped across the street
All in all Adrien had spent a good two hours in the bank trying to open up a normal and a savings account and have his current finances transferred. Two hours, only to hear that the entire process would take three working days to complete.

They did give him his new bank account number in advance, which he forwarded to Nathalie so his future salary would be where it was supposed to be.

As expected, he didn’t get a reply from her.

It was a little over five o’clock when he dragged his tired feet back to the hotel. Chloé was behind the reception counter, checking in people and communicating with the other members of the staff. All of which she dropped right away the moment he noticed him walking in.

“Adrien! You’re late.” She scoffed, leaving her place behind the counter.

“By two minutes. I’ve been all over Paris with only two cups of mediocre coffee to fuel me through the day. Have some mercy Chlo.”

“Ugh. Fine. I guess you’ll just have to wait until they’re done.”

She made no sense to him. “Who are ‘they’?”

The blonde woman pointed at a corner of the lobby.

There, on a sofa, sat Jagged Stone. Next to him his manager Penny and across from them a very familiar face. Red-brownish curls pulled up in a ponytail. Thick rimmed glasses resting on her nose. Wearing a neat jacket with dark jeans. Casual yet professional enough for a reporter. Even from this far away he could still recognize her in a heartbeat.

“That’s…”

“You’re welcome.”

All of a sudden Chloé’s surprise made sense.

“You arranged all of this?”

“I told you I would try to bring your pathetic friend group together again and I knew how to lure Alya here. Figured that was as good a place to start as any.”
He felt happiness swell up inside of him.

“Chlo…”

“After she’s done interviewing Jagged Stone, I’ve arranged for you two to have dinner at the hotel. It’s on me. You can catch up until your heart’s content.”

“Thank you Chloé.”

“Worth that diamond bracelet no?”

“Pair of designer shoes too.”

“Someone is in a good mood.”

Adrien nodded. “Nino gave me a call right after lunch. Apparently he’s in New York and wanted to surprise me with a visit.”

The woman snorted. “Sounds like something he would do.”

“I haven’t lost him. We’re still friends.”

“I would be surprised if you two weren’t.”

He let out a uncertain humm. “I was afraid that we had drifted apart too much.”

“It happens.” Chloé shrugged. “Life happens and it’s not like we’re in lycee anymore. We aren’t in an environment were we are forced to see each other on the daily. Most of our old friends are destined to drift apart.”

“You...them...it’s all I’ve got Chlo.”

“I know. Oh. Seems like they’re done.”

Alya stood up, shaking Penny and Jagged’s hand before grabbing her bag.

“That’s why I asked you to come at five sharp. Their interview was only supposed to take an hour. You’re lucky it ran a little longer. You know how tightly scheduled these interviews are.”

“I know I know.” He sighed. Having gone through plenty of interviews himself over the years.

Both of them waited patiently as the young reporter made their way over.

“Thanks for arranging the interview Chloé. I’m not sure why you went through so much trouble for me but thanks for the scoop!”

“I’m getting a diamond bracelet out of it actually.” She proudly stated. “So you’re very welcome.”

“Not from me if that’s what you’re hoping.” Alya frowned.

“From me actually.” Adrien muttered.
The girl looked at him from top to bottom and raised an eyebrow. “You look kinda familiar.”

“How about you? I swear I haven’t grown that much guys.”

“Maybe if you got a haircut and shaved for once people would recognize you Adrikins.”

“Adri---- Oh my gosh! Adrien?!”

He nodded.

“Sunshine!”

Without warning, the girl launched herself forward and enveloped him in the biggest hug she could give him.

“Hey Al.”

“Holy shit! When did you get this tall! When did you get back?! When--”

“You’ve got enough time to ask him during dinner.” Chloé interrupted. “I made reservations in the hotel restaurant. Go. Catch up. Gossip. Whatever. I have work to do.”

“That’s why you insisted in having me come over?”

“God you’re slow! Yes! I made you come over to interview Jagged, so that Adrien could catch up with you because apparently you two haven’t spoken in forever! I have to earn that bracelet! So go eat and leave me alone!”

With a huff, she turned around and resumed her place behind the front desk.

“She never changes does she.” Alya muttered with a smile.

“Sometimes it doesn’t seem like it. I’m happy to see you again Alya.” He hugged her once more. “It’s been too long.”

“It has. Hey let’s take Chloé up on that free dinner offer and catch up huh?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

He lead her to the dining room and they were seated within a few minutes.

“I don’t know why Chloé thought she had to lure me here just for us to meet up. I would have meet you here without the added interview.”

“You know how she’s like. Besides the two of you haven’t been on the best terms throughout the years. You might have thought she was lying or something.”

Alya shrugged and filled a page of her menu. “Point made Agreste.”

A moment of silence fell as both of them turned their attention to the menu. Something he didn’t really need to do as he had studied it heavily the past two days he had eaten
“So, what have you been up to?” He asked to break the silence.

“Working mostly. Too much working. Being a journalist really is murder on my social life.”

“Is that why we haven’t talked in so long?”

“There’s a lot of reasons for that Adrien. All of them my fault so don’t go beating yourself up for it.”

“What? Why would I—”

“I know you! You’re the one who called me and blamed yourself for making Mari cry after our trip to Italy. You bawled your eyes out during our video chat at four in the morning!”

“You would do the same after seeing her video message.” He muttered.

“Probably.” She sighed. “How is Mari by the way?”

That was one question he did not want to hear. He wanted answer he hoped Alya would have.

“You don’t know either?”

“Like I said, my social life has been dead and buried for the past year or so. The last thing I heard from Marinette was that she needed some breathing room. I haven’t heard much from her since. Honestly...I haven’t even been able to contact her after a certain point. Some best friend I am.”

“Al. You’re not the only one. I tried contacting her too, but she isn’t answering. I figured you of all people would know what’s up. You’re close to her.”

“I haven’t been much of a best friend in recent years. I’m willing to admit that.” Alya softly spoke. “I don’t know how to fix it. I already lost Nino because of my own stupidity. I almost lost you. I lost Mari.”

At that moment Adrien knew he had found a kindred spirit, because he had felt exactly the same.

“Not everything is meant to be Al. But I don’t want to lose your friendship either. Who else am I going to geek out with.”

The reporter smiled briefly.

“Besides.” He continued. “You haven’t lost Nino. Not yet.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know you two had a messy breakup.”

“Understatement of the century.” She mumbled.

“But I know he still cares about you.”
“How can you be so sure?”

“He called me for the first time in a long time this afternoon. Apparently he’s in New York recording a song with a high ranking artist. He wanted to visit me as a surprise but...I was already back in Paris. He told me about your breakup. He told me he still loves you and knowing Nino I don’t think that will ever stop.”

Water began to form in the corners of her eyes.

“He wants to talk things out. At least be friends again. I can give you his number if you want or you can wait for a couple of hours. We were supposed to play some rounds of Ultimate Mecha Striker, you should be able to talk to him directly if you want that.”

“I’d like to call him.”

Adrien pulled his phone out of his pocket, unlocked the screen and brought up Nino’s contact info before shoving the device to her.

“Did you get a new number by the way? I haven’t seen the one I have online in a long while.”

“Oh...eh...yeah I did. I’ll put it into your phone in a sec.”

Alya was quick to add Nino’s number in her phone and quick to alter her own in his phone.

“I’m...I’m just going to text him. That’s a good point to start over right?”

“Sure. Want some wine?”

She nodded.

Adrien waved down a waiter and asked for a bottle of wine to go with their dinner as well as a couple extra minutes to decide what to have.

“What’s the last thing you heard from Mari by the way?”

“She was stressing out about an internship. She got accepted at Gabriel’s actually.”

That much he knew.

“She didn’t follow up with that internship.”

She raised her brow. “Are you sure? This is Marinette we’re talking about. She wouldn’t let something that big pass her by.”

“I’m sure. I checked. I figured that she might have been working at Gabriel’s at this point, but they only had her application for the internship on file. With a blank form that needed to be filled in by her supervising mentor. Staff management told me she never showed up.”

“Do you think something happened?”

“I hope not.”
“I...I could ask her parents? The bakery should still be there right? If anyone knows where she is they would.”

He mentally slapped himself for not thinking about that sooner. “I think I left half of my brain back in New York. That would have been the most logical first step actually.”

"What was your unlogical first step?" She asked with a snicker.

"Find out where she works?"

The waiter returned with the bottle of wine and poured some in both of their glasses.

“Are you ready to order?”

“I know maman makes the most perfect chicken. So I’ll take that.”

“Your mother is still a chef here?”

Alya nodded.

“I’ll have the chicken as well then.”

“The bakery is closed right now unfortunately.”

“I’ll drop by in the morning. I need something to bribe my future team with anyway.”

“Bribe your future team?” She laughed. “Now there’s a story I’d love to hear. Give me all the deets Sunshine.”

“Not many details to share. Father wants me to manage a department that’s currently a mess. He’s laying off the current manager at the end of the week to put me in that position. We haven’t told the team yet, I managed to do some damage control before I officially start, but it seems like my father still has a leash on me.”

The blogger frowned. “You need to get out of that house.”

“That’s why I’m staying here for a month.”

“Not the most practical solution I’m sure. But not bad for a temporary one. Are you going to look for an apartment?”

“Anything liveable really. I’m sure I’ll find something soon.”

“I hope so. Hey...keep me updated on the whole Mari situation? I’d love to have my best friend back. To get everyone back. I...I just need to stop putting my work before everything else.”

“A hard thing to do. You’re doing something you love. It’s easier to put all your energy in that than to keep up with the rest of the world around you.”

“You know me. Can’t go after a story without giving at least a hundred and twenty percent.” She laughed. “That gets me into trouble every damn time.”
He laughed as well. “I remember from lycee. Got you expelled once too if I remember correctly.”

“Oh hush mister perfect. As if you haven’t done anything bad in your entire life.”

“I forgot to brush my teeth one time.”

“That doesn’t count!” She laughed again. “Give me something juicy Adrien! You can’t be that perfect.”

“Well if there’s one bad thing I’ve done... it’s not telling Marinette how I feel about her when I could.”

“You... You never told her?”

He smiled sheepishly and shook his head.

“You potato! Why not?!?”

“She wanted me to tell her when I got back. So that I have another reason to come back.”

“Was that what you wanted to tell her at the airport?”

“I’m surprised you still remember I wanted to tell her anything back then.”

Alya groaned. “How can I not! Mari was freaking out about it for the first two days after you left. You two could have been married by now!”

“Now there’s a nice thought.”

“You should have told her afterwards.”

“How romantic. A love confession through video call.” He rolled his eyes. “Besides, I don’t know if she feels the same.”

“You’re kidding right?”

“No?"

Again Alya groaned before taking a large gulp of her wine. “You’ll be the death of me someday Sunshine. I swear.”

“Cheese?”

He hadn’t even set one step back into his room when Plagg looked at him big kitten eyes and a hopeful look on his face.

“Didn’t know you wanted any.”

“You know I always want cheese. I shouldn’t even need to ask at this point.” The Kwami pouted.
“Some chosen you are.”

“Think you can hold out until tomorrow morning? I can get you some of those cheese danish you like so much.”

Tiny cat ears perked up. “Two cheese danish!” He demanded.

“Fine fine.”

“And some cheesecake!”

“Fine! But you’ll have to be stuck with me for the day.”

“As if I’m not used to it by now.”

Adrien’s phone buzzed before he could reply.

A text from Paul he noticed.

“It took the IT guys all evening, but everything should be up to date again. Let’s test it in the morning. -Paul.”

Soon afterwards another buzz and another text. From Nino this time.

“Dude. Thanks for passing on the message. Alya just texted me. I’m going to call her in a few minutes. You mind if we postpone our online match?”

“Tomorrow. Six your time?” He texted back.

“You’re on!”

While he didn’t necessarily needed to reply to Paul, he did so anyway. He had seen he had read the message at the very least.

“That’s good news! I’m surprised it took them so long to update the system. I hope this will fix most of the issues now. Just a heads up, I have something important to arrange tomorrow morning. I’ll be in the office a little later. Will bring pastries for everyone to make up for it. - Adrien.”

With a tired sigh he let himself fall on the bed once again. “Y’know Plagg. This is actually the time in a while that things are starting to look up. Got my finances almost where they should be, got a head start at fixing most of the problems. Rekindled my friendship with Nino and Alya all on the same day. I got a lot done actually.”

“Just one more friend to look for and you can stop moping around.” The cat yawned before curling up against the man’s neck.

Taking Chloé’s advice to heart, the first thing Adrien did when waking up was shave. Something he hadn’t done since his departure from New York.
The rough stubbles on his face were a clear indication of that.

The last thing he wanted was for Marinette’s parents not to recognize him when he would step into the bakery.
A stranger wasn’t as quick to get answers from them after all. Especially about their only daughter.

Pulling on his nicest shirt, he glanced at his phone once more.

Still no message or missed call from Marinette at this point, he didn’t expect her to actually reach out for a message anymore.
Not that it mattered.
He was possibly one step closer to her.

“Wake up Plagg.”

“Hmmmmmmmmmmnooooo”

“No cheesecake if you don’t. It’s a one time offer buddy.”

Plagg groaned. “Fine! Where do you want me to hide?”

“In my bag. More room for your goodies in there.”

“I want camembert on the way back.”

Adrien rolled his eyes as the cat disappeared into his bag. “If you behave I might consider picking some up.”

“I always behave.”

“Lies.”

As far as he was concerned, the elevator to the ground floor wasn’t fast enough.

Neither was the subway to the bakery or the people walking in front of him.

He wanted answers to the questions that had sometimes kept him up at night.
At the very least, he wanted to know if she was okay.
And he wanted to know as fast as he could.

The moment he found himself back on the surface again, the heavens decided to open up, releasing heavy droplets of rain.

It didn’t bother him as much as his goal was in sight already, yet he hoped it wasn't a bad omen of any kind.
Tom and Sabine's bakery was only a few meters away.

Adrien didn’t even realized how drenched he actually was, until the moment he pushed the door to the bakery open and droplets fell from his bangs onto the dry floor.

Even though it seemed deserted, the smell of fresh bread and pastries didn’t seem to waste any time
to make him feel nostalgic.

Memories of the days he spend in the kitchen decorating cupcakes, cuddling with Marinette after a patrol and having dinner with her parents all flooded back to him in an instant.

“Good morning.” A voice greeted him, pulling him out of his short nostalgia trip.

He was half expecting madame Cheng to have been the one greeting him.

What he didn’t expect was to be met with a pair of bright blue eyes instead.
“Good morning.” Adrien sighed back as he felt himself drowning in pools of bluebell all over again.

“You’re welcome to shelter from the rain here for a bit.” She offered, giving him a small smile before resuming to stock up the displays.

She looked different from the last time he saw her.

Gone were her signature pigtails. Instead she was sporting a cute pixie cut, with only her bangs seemingly remaining the same as before.

Her face was less round, her figure slightly more curvy.

Despite all that it seemed like she hadn’t grown an inch since he left her at the airport. As she once was almost as tall as he was, now she barely seemed to reach past his shoulder. Still there was no doubt in his mind that this was her.

This girl, was Marinette.

“Is there something wrong monsieur?” She politely asked the moment she noticed his stares.

His heart seemed to stop beating for a moment.

He had finally found her, yet she didn’t seem to recognize him right away.

Maybe Chloé had been right.

Perhaps he did need a haircut and he still looked like the hobo she first thought he was. Even though he shaved and dressed as nicely as his current wardrobe allowed him to.

How else could he explain that, out of all the people he knew, his partner wasn’t able to pick him out of a crowd.

Then again.

It could have just been too long since they had last seen each other’s faces and he was happy to give the girl a reminder.

“Nothing is wrong mademoiselle.” He assured her as he flashed her a signature Chat Noir smile. “I
am merely mesmerized by the vision of beauty that stands before me.”

She didn’t look impressed. “I’m afraid flattery doesn’t get you a discount here monsieur.”

“I wasn’t looking for a discount.”

“It won’t get you my number either.” She flat out told him.

Adrien let out a nervous chuckle.

The lack of a smirk on her face told him enough to know that she wasn’t playing along with his antics like she usually would.

Nevertheless he pressed on. “A date then perhaps?”

“Nice try. But no. I don’t go on dates with strangers.”

“You wound me Marinette.” Her eyes grew wide at the mention of her name. “Am I a mere stranger to you? After all this time.”

“Do...do I know you?”

Even though he had hinted enough to the fact that she did, the baker’s daughter seemed to still be sceptical.

“Of course you do Princess! Handsome, charming, looks amazing in black. You can even say that I’m the ‘cat’s meow’. Doesn’t that remind you of someone?”

“A...Adrien?!”

“Hey Bug.” He smiled, letting his Chat Noir act fall. “It’s been a while.”

“Adrien....” Marinette took a step forward, her voice slightly shaking. “Adrien!”

The moment she wrapped her arms around his waist, something felt off.

In the last few days a fair amount of people had hugged him. Yet this one didn’t feel sturdy like Alya’s.

Or casual like Chloé’s.

Not even Nathalie’s brief greeting had felt like this.

He wasn’t sure how to even describe said feeling until he felt her shake under his touch.

Fragile.

That was the word he was looking for.

He was almost afraid he would break her if he hugged her back too tightly.

He resisted the urge to wrap his arms around her as strongly as he could and just held her against him.
in the gentlest way possible.

It wasn’t long until he realised another thing.

She was crying.


“And I’m not going anywhere Mari.” Carefully he put his hand on top of her head, pulling her closer against him.

Letting the girl pour out her emotions. Basking in her presence, not daring to break the silence between them until she stepped away from him. Breaking their contact.

He had trouble finding his voice when she did. “You okay?”

Marinette nodded, whipping away her tears with the palm of her hand. “Y-Yeah….sorry…I… I’m just so happy you’re back!”

“Hey, don’t be sorry. I’m just glad those were ‘happy’ tears. I mean… they were happy tears right? I can just walk back out in the rain if you’re sad I’m back.”

She let out a small giggle, once again running the palm of her hand past her eyes to dry her tears. “These are happy tears.”

“I’m glad. I missed you.”

Pink lips curled up into a soft smile. “I missed you too.”

Reaching up, he used his thumb to wipe the wet remains from her cheek. Brushing gently over the tiny freckles on her face and her warm skin.

“Come.” Her own hands reached up and took hold of his cold fingers. “Let’s get you dried off in the back.”

Adrien allowed her to pull him past the store counter and into the small bakery kitchen.

It seemed his childhood home wasn’t the only thing that hadn’t changed in all these years. There were still two ovens. One big mixing machine. The table he used to help frost cupcakes on. Big metal racks filled with bread and pastries that were cooling down.

“Sit. Sit.” She urged on, practically pushing him onto a small stool.

His eyes followed her as she scrambled about the kitchen in search of a towel.

“So…eh…helping out your parents today?”

She nodded before throwing a small cloth at him.
He caught it with ease.

“Yeah. It’s...the busy season.”

“I’m impressed!”

His partner raised a brow. “Impressed?”

“That you have time to help out. You must have your own boutique or something by now right?”

“Well you know me.” She laughed sheepishly. “Still can’t say no to a favor.”

“That sounds like you alright.” He laughed softly with her.

“So...how have you been? You know...since the last time we…”

“The last time we spoke?”

Adrien brought the dry cloth to his face and let it absorb the remaining drops of rain.

“I’ve been holding up. Father seems to not be wasting time putting me where he wants me. So I’ve been mostly trying to...deal with it the last few days.”

“Last few days? Y-You’ve been back for a few days already?”

“I called you, you know. The night after I arrived.” He moved the cloth moved to his soaked hair. “Left a voicemail since you didn’t answer.”

“O...Oh. I haven’t had time to check my messages yet. Sorry.”

“Been looking for you these last couple of days too.”

“You have?” She frowned. “Maman didn’t say anything about you dropping by.”

“That’s because I wasn’t looking for you here. I didn’t think of that since last night.”

“Seriously?” Marinette laughed once again. More confident this time. “You know this is one of the first places you should look right?”

“In hindsight, I should have known. I just figured I’d find out where you work and surprise you.”

“How did that go Sherlock?” She teased before sitting down across from him.

“Horrible. I got to find out you were accepted for an internship at Gabriel’s before I hit a dead end.”

“O-Oh! You found out about that. Yeah, my third year internship at Gabriel’s was fun. I learned a lot.”

The lie came unexpected.

The big question now was, why would she be lying about that.
Marinette hated to lie.
He knew she always had.

Nevertheless he didn’t want to pry.

If she didn’t want to be truthful to him, there had to be a good reason for it.

There always was.

She would tell him the truth when she was ready.
Or when he needed to hear it.

“How have you been by the way?”

“Just doing my thing.” She forced a smile. “Being pretty busy. Doing a lot of commissions...that kind of stuff.”

“Okay...neat.”

Awkwardness blossomed between them and Adrien didn’t know why.

It seemed she was a lot less relaxed around him compared to a few moments before.
Shorter with her answers.

Perhaps it was related to why she was lying to him?

Maybe it wasn’t related at all.

“Adrien?”

“Hmmm?”

“You have that look.”

“What look?”

“The I-have-something-on-my-mind-and-I’m-not-telling-Marinette look.”

“Oh that look.” He smiled, remembering very well the last time she had said that to him.

Even if it had been years ago.

“Something bothering you?” Marinette reached over the table and took hold of his cold, damp, hands. “You can tell me you know. We’re still friends. I...I’d like to believe we still are...despite it being a while since we spoke. Unless you….don’t think we--”

He gave her hands a gentle squeeze, interrupting her in the process.. “Do you still trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Listen. I’m okay if you don’t want to tell me and I’m not going to force you to. But I know.”
The designer raised a brow. “You...know?”

So much for not trying to prye.

But he couldn’t just pretend there wasn’t anything he was keeping from her either.

“I know you never started your internship at Gabriel’s.” The grip on his hand weakened. “You don’t have to tell me why you lied...but...you can tell me. I confide in you and you should be able to tell me anything too. Because we are friends who trust each other. Even after all this time.”

“I...I need to get back to work.”

“Mari.”

Standing up from her stool, she rushed to one of the ovens.
Opening it, the metal door moaned loudly.

“I don’t need details, but let me know. Did something happen?”

“What do you mean?” Hastily pans of freshly baked bread were pulled from the oven.

“You said you were going off the radar a long time ago. It’s...it’s been over a year since we last spoke. You missed your internship. That’s not something you would do without reason.” The young woman didn’t reply. “You don’t owe me an explanation, I just want to know if something happened that made us...drift apart like that. That made you change your mind about interning at Gabriel’s.”

Her hands started to shake as she pulled out the last bread. “Yes...something.... He…” The shakes became more violent.

Something that didn’t go unnoticed to him.
Adrien discarded the towel on the table and slowly walked over to her. “You don’t have to explain Bug. It’s okay. Take a couple of deep breaths.”

The moment his hand touched her back, she dropped the bread pan on the stone floor.
Her voice trembling when she cussed out in frustration.
Making it seem more like a sad sob had left her instead of a angry hiss.

“Shit.”

Initially Marinette’s first response was to bend down and pick it up.
But he was quick to stop her from doing that by gently pulling her against him.

She had to calm down first.

“Just leave it Mari. It’s okay.”

“Shit.” She repeated again.

“Shhh. It’s okay. Let’s sit back down.”

“I-I-I can’t!”
Tears once again began streaming down her face.

This time however, he was sure they weren’t happy ones.

“It’s okay.” Adrien repeated while he traced soothing circles on her back. “Try to breath. Calm down.”

No matter how calmly he spoke to her, or how much he wiped away her tears, she didn’t seem to calm down in the slightest.

The worst part was, he wasn’t sure what triggered it.

His question?

Her answer?

A combination of both?

Nevertheless it had caused his partner to break down for some reason and all he could do was to hold her close.

“Marinette? Are you alright sweetheart? I heard something fall--- Oh!”

Sabine froze in her tracks the moment her eyes fell on her daughter, hugging someone tightly, while she sobbed against him.

“Marinette?” The mother asked gently as she approached the two. “What’s wrong? Talk to me.”

The girl in his arms let out a few sobs mixed in with words. None of the mutters seemed like a language he recognized or spoke.

Her mother on the other hand gave her daughter a nod in understanding. “Let’s get you upstairs. Get you some water.”

He let her shaking form go for her mother to take over. All he could do was watch as the girl was leaded to the apartment upstairs. Leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Never had he seen the girl break down that much before. And it felt like he was to blame.

Whatever had happened, if he had to guess by her reaction, it wasn’t good. Maybe it was something he could have prevented if he had stood up to his father and stayed in Paris.

Perhaps he was simply overthinking it and asking her that question had just made Marinette feel guilty again.

Like she had felt when he first left.

They had talked it out during video chats of course. Hoping that she had let it all go as time passed on.
But now….

Now he wasn’t so sure he had helped her with that.

Bending down, he picked up the dropped bread pan. Which was still quite warm to the touch. Half of the bread had slipped out of it’s hold and onto the floor, leaving crumbs and pieces of crust scattered.

No way the bakery could sell this now.

Shame.

“Did you mess up?” Plagg asked from his bag. “I heard her cry.”

“I don’t know. I hope I didn’t. But I might have.”

“Did you see Tikki anywhere?”

“No. But she might be in Mari’s room.”

“Well get in there!”

“Plagg I can’t just go up there and barge into her room just like that!”

“The balcony!”

“No!” He firmly told the Kwami. “I know you want to see her but...have a little patience. We’ll be back here soon enough then you can sneak up to see Tikki again without anyone noticing.”

Plagg didn’t grace him with a reply, merely a short grumble before falling quiet again.

“I am so sorry.”

Adrien jolted slightly at Sabine’s sudden apology, nearly dropping the bread pan in the process.

“It’s the first time I’ve seen her like this.” She explained further. “I’m glad.”

“Glad your daughter is crying?”

Not something he expected to hear.

“Oh that must have sounded horrible without context. But I assure you it’s a good thing.”

“Will she be alright madame Cheng?”

The woman nodded. “She needs a little time to get herself back together. Thank you for your concern monsieur.”

“No need to call me that. Just Adrien will do.”

“Adrien? Goodness! Adrien Agreste?”
He nodded.
The short woman walked towards him, took the pan from his hands to put it on the table and proceeded to give him a warm hug.

“It’s good to have you back sweetheart!”

“It’s good to be back.”

“Let me look at you!” Gone was the warm embrace. “You’ve grown so much dear. I hardly recognized you!”

“You’re not the first one madame.” He laughed. “None of my friends seemed to either.”

“I can’t blame them. You’ve grown into a handsome young man. You hardly look like you did all those years ago.”

At least she didn’t think he was a homeless person. So that was a good thing at least.

Otherwise he would have probably been kicked out of the building the moment she had noticed her daughter clinging onto him.

“Thank you.”

“It’s good to have you back Adrien.” She repeated. “Did you drop by to see Marinette?”

He nodded. “To get some pastries too. But...I...I don’t know why she suddenly started crying. Maybe it was something I said?”

The joyful smile that had been on Sabine Cheng’s face fell in an instant.

“She didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Tom...Tom passed away about seven months ago.”

Time stopped.

He held his breath as the news hit him hard.

The shock on his face didn’t go unnoticed by the mother before him.

“You really didn’t know did you?”

“N-No. She...Mari...she never told me. Nobody did. I don’t know why... I...I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. It...it’s been a long struggle before he passed away. I think it’s only now taking its toll on my daughter.”
Adrien was at a loss for words.

Still having trouble processing what had happened, theorizing why he wasn’t informed by Marinette or anyone else.

“She was strong when I wasn’t able to be.” Sabine continued. “She...gave me room to mourn, to not worry about a lot of things before Tom passed away. But I don’t think she allowed herself the time to do the same and process the loss of her father.”

“So...her being so emotional. It has to do with that?”

The mother nodded. “I believe so. I doubt it’s anything you’ve said dear. She has held back so many emotions and pushed aside so many things to help her father and myself. I wouldn’t be surprised if it simply became too much for her at this point.”

“Is there anything I can do? I...If I hadn’t asked, if something had happened, maybe she wouldn’t be…”

“You didn’t know.” She assured him. “Besides, it was bound to happen sooner or later. She needs to take that first step towards accepting that he father is gone. Crying about it is a good first step. Believe me, it helps.”

“I know...but it’s hard to accept such a thing.”

Adrien was all too familiar with the process of mourning.
It had taken him many tears and bad days to accept that his mother wasn’t going be found and probably wasn’t even alive anymore.

“It takes time. Letting go is hard and I haven’t fully made peace with the fact that Tom isn’t there anymore when I wake up either. But...I can talk about it at this point. It helps and I’m going to help my daughter do the same.”

“I want to help her too. Both of you. If you’ll allow me.”

The small women smiled brightly at him. “It would be nice to have a familiar face visit us again. Perhaps you can convince her to take a break every once in a while. She’s been working in the bakery non stop for the past year or so.”

“I might be able to convince her at some point. It would be nice to hang out again like old times.”

“Do you want to join us for dinner?” She suddenly asked. “I’m sure Marinette would love to properly catch up.”

“I’d be honored madame Cheng.”

“Will seven be okay?”

He gave a short nod. “I can be here around that time.”

“That’s great! Now. You said you wanted to buy some pastries?”

He almost forgot about that.
“Oh! Yes! Yes I do. I need something to sweeten up my co-workers. Pun intended.”

Madame Cheng let out a soft giggle. “Let’s go out in front and I’ll see what I can do for you.”

She motioned towards the register before leading him back to it.

“I was thinking about those little fruit tarts you guys have. Or maybe an assortment of cookies! Or--”

“Sounds like someone has a sweet tooth.”

“Everything in your bakery is delicious. It's hard to pick just one thing.”

“How about I pack you a big box of assorted goodies? I’m sure there’s something in there your colleagues would like.”

“Yes please.” He felt something in his bag poke against his hip. Plagg no doubt. “Oh...and could you pack up two cheese danish and a slice of cheesecake separately? Those are for me.”

“We don’t sell slices anymore. But we do have mini cheesecakes.”

“Even better.”

The mini cheesecake wasn’t as ‘mini’ as he thought it would be. He expected something small. Something you could gobble up in two bites.

Instead a small cake was packed in a box. A cheesecake of a size he could easily cut four slices out of.

Lucky Plagg.

“That will be forty six euros and fifty cents please.”

He pulled out two fifty euro bills and handed it over to madame Cheng. “Keep the change.”

“Are you sure? It’s a lot.”

“Consider it a apology for dripping all over the floor because of the rain.” He joked.

“That isn’t your fault. I doubt you would be the last person today doing that.” Despite his offer to keep the rest of the money, madame Cheng gave him back one bill and the remainder of his change. Not giving him the opportunity to argue. “We’ll see you tonight Adrien.”

Opening up his bag, he put the wrapped up cheese danish in there for Plagg to munch on.

“I can’t wait. Thank you for inviting me.”

The rustling of a plastic bag was heard as the boxes filled with pastries were put in there.

“You’re always welcome here.” She offered the large, plastic bag to him, which he gratefully took.
“Thank you. I guess it’s time to venture back out in the rain again. Don’t want to be too late for work.”

Adrien gave the baker’s wife a small wave and headed for the door. He barely had a hand on the handle when he heard Marinette’s voice.

“Is he still here?!”

“He’s just—” Her mother tried to answer.

He stopped and turned around to see the girl rushing up to him.

“Wait! Adrien!”

She had a black umbrella in her hands. Her eyes were puffy and her face red.

It didn’t make her look graceful, but he still felt a great urge to just grab her face and kiss her senseless anyway.

But not now.

Maybe another time, in another place, after she would know how he felt about her and he knew if she felt anything for him.

“I’m...I’m sorry—”

“It’s okay Bug.” He muttered. “I understand.”

The girl pressed her lips together in a thin line before giving a nod.

“Here. It’s raining.”

The black umbrella was shoved into his free hand.

“You don’t have to give me your umbrella. It’s only a short walk to the subway.”

“It was yours to begin with. Take it. It’s really bad out.”

“Mine?”

“You let me borrow it. On your second day of public school? Remember?”

“I do. You kept it?”

“Yeah. I kept forgetting to give it back to you.”

“I wouldn’t have minded it if you kept it.” He admitted. “But I also wouldn’t mind borrowing this for now. Thank you.”

His partner forced a small smile.
“I’ll be sure to bring this back to you.” Adrien assured her.

“What’s eating you?”

Veronica’s voice startled him so much he almost fell from his seat.

“Geez. Bad conscience much?”

“No. Yes. What?” He muttered.

“You’ve been staring at your screen for the past half hour. You okay?”

“Yeah...Just...I found out the father of a close friend of mine passed away a while back. He was a good man and...shit... it just...feels unreal.”

“Ah I see.”

“He was there when I left for New York and now...he’s just gone.”

“Hey. Talk to Paul. Maybe he’d give you the rest of the day off to give this a place huh.”

“No. No.” The former model muttered. “I’m here half a day anyway. I can’t just leave you guys.”

“You’re not exactly helping either by zoning out.”

“True. I’ll be fine Veronica. I...I just need to push this aside and focus.”

“If you say so kiddo.”

“Again. Technically not a kid anymore but...thanks for checking up on me.”

“Adrien?” Paul’s voice boomed throughout the office. “Could you meet me in my office please?”

As the man disappeared back into his own section of the department, the woman next to him gave him a smirk.

“I think you’re in trouble.” She teased.

“I brought sugary goodness! No way I’m in trouble.” He joked back before standing up and making his way to Paul.

Pushing the door open slowly, he gave the man a small nod. “You wanted to see me? Doesn’t the system work anymore?”

“It still works. No worries. You’ve helped us out tremendously.” He assured Adrien. “No. I wanted to speak to you about this.”

He held up a white envelope.
“Your notice of termination?”

Paul nodded. “I’m going to make an announcement to the team in a few minutes.”

“What are you going to tell them?”

“I’ve been thinking long and hard about that these past few days. I’ve got a speech memorized by now. So don’t worry.”

“So...that’s it then. Did...did father give you some more time before you have to go?”

“A week. I have to be out of the office next week. After I’ve received my last paycheck.”

“That’s at least a little more time than he told me he would give you.”

“I will be showing you the ropes in that week. As much as I can anyway.”

“I would appreciate that. Thank you monsieur.”

“Come. Let’s get this over with. The sooner they hear it the better.”

He guided Adrien out of his office again, only stopping at Mary’s desk. “Mary. I have an announcement to make. Will you join us in the main office?”

“Shouldn’t design be notified too?” The blonde suddenly asked.

“I’ll get them.” The pregnant women offered before she was even asked to do so. “I need to stretch my legs anyway.”

She hurried out of the smaller office, followed suit by the two men. While Mary made her way to the designing department, Adrien lingered in a corner of the office space.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Listen up! Grab yourselves a cup of coffee or something. I have a announcement in five minutes!” Paul shouted. “You better all have dropped what you were doing and get ready to listen.”

“Can’t this wait until lunch break?!” Someone else asked.

“No.” Was the manager’s short reply.

Not even a minute later a small group of women barged into the office. A tall, grey haired, stern looking woman marching right towards Paul.

“You better have a good reason to call us here Paul.” She spat at him. “We’re on a tight deadline here and we can’t afford to waste much of it.”

“Now, now. Bettina calm down. This will only take a minute or two. Find a seat get some coffee.”

“We don’t have time....ugh! Fine just...hurry up.”

“Who’s that?” Adrien asked Mary in a whisper.
“Madame London. She’s the head of the designing team across the hallway.”

“She’s kinda…”

“Scary?”

“That’s one of the words I had in mind.”

Mary giggled softly. “She’s always like this when she’s stressed. Other than that she’s actually really nice once you get to know her.”

“Settle down folks settle down!” Monsieur Vienna called out again. “I have a important announcement to make.”

He waited for the murmurs and whispers in the room to quiet down enough so he didn’t have to raise his voice that much.

“As you all know, I’ve been the department manager for ten years.” He paused for a moment before continuing. “In those ten years I’ve seen all of you grow. Seen how capable you are in keeping this department running. I’ve been proud to even be a part of your personal lives to some extent. From hearing about Marcel’s many girlfriends.” The room laughed at that. “To being asked to be the godfather of Mary’s soon to be born son.”

A collection of ‘awww’s’ sounded through the small crowd.

“In these short ten years, I’ve felt like we’ve become sort of a family in a way. A group of people who are dependable, efficient, invested, in both each other and this company.” He continued. “That’s why it pains me to say that today, I’ve received a letter of termination and I am forced to leave you all by the end of next week.”

“What?!”

“That’s not fair!”

“Please tell me you’re joking Paul.”

The manager held his hand up, hoping the room would quiet down. Eventually the outbursts and questions stopped.

“I am afraid it’s quite true. Despite all that, I have applied for a position within the company. If I’m accepted, I won’t doubt I’ll be visiting you all from time to time.”

“Who’s going to replace you then?” Someone asked.

Paul motioned to Adrien to step forward.

“As you might all know. Adrien has been a part of the team for two days now. He has showed he is more than capable to fix problems and keep this department working smoothly. I have every faith in him and all of you, that you’re able to work well together.” The whispers returned. “For the coming week I’ll be guiding him into his new position and after that I hope you will be able to help each other out where you can.”
He turned towards the young man. “Adrien? Is there anything you would like to say?”
It was now or never.
If he managed to motivate the people before him, he might be working with a great team.

“I...I can’t promise you all that I will be as great as a manager as monsieur Vienna is. I am aware that to most of you I probably still seem like a child. Truth be told, I am as inexperienced as one. But that doesn’t mean I am not willing to give it my all and keep trying my best to keep everything running as smoothly as possible. Something I can not do without your help. So...I hope I can prove myself to be someone reliable to work with in this team and I hope you will give me the change to work with you.”

It wasn’t the best speech he had ever given.
Nor the most motivational one.

But, unlike monsieur Vienna, he didn’t have time to prepare.

The skeptical glances from his audience however were enough to tell him that he indeed needed to work hard to show everyone he was able to do this.
That he was able to lead and fix problems.
Even if he had trouble fixing his own sometimes.

It was a good thing that Paul hadn’t mentioned his last name during his speech.

Which, now that he thought about it, was probably intentional.

He just hoped things would work smoothly in the end.

“Give me the deets Sunshine.”

Alya’s call after lunch came unexpected, but hardly as a surprise.
He had promised to keep her posted after all.

“She’s at the bakery.” Adrien confirmed, sipping from his coffee.

“I knew it! Shit! I wish I could have the time to visit her sooner.”

“Don’t go today Al.”

“What? Why not? That girl is still my bestie and I’m–”

“I’m not sure if she can handle seeing two of her long lost friends on the same day.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think you need to hear this from Mari...or her mother...since it’s none of my business but...something happened and Mari...Marinette’s a little...incredibly...overly emotional because of it. Give her a day. Besides, I don’t have the full details yet either so...I’m not exactly sure what the best way to approach this is.”
“O...Oh.”

“I’ve been invited to come over for dinner there tonight. I can...I don’t know...give her your number and ask her to call you?”

“I’m worried about her Adrien. What happened?”

It was all he needed to hear to know that she hadn’t told Alya a thing about Tom’s demise either.

Even if he wanted to tell her, he felt it wasn’t his place to say. Marinette chose to hide this information from both of them. There had to be a good reason for it.

“Something...something I don’t know if she wants me to tell you.”

“Don’t keep secrets from me. Don’t be like her and close up.”

“I’m not! Her mother told me. She...she couldn’t even tell me because even thinking about it made her bawl her eyes out. She wasn’t able to say anything.”

“Okay...what did her mother tell you.”

“Alya.” He sighed.

“No! You listen to me Adrien Agreste! Marinette. My best friend, doesn’t just cry. It sounds like she needs support. Our help! And you not telling me is keeping me from being able to help her. So...tell me! Or I swear to everything that’s holy...”

Well when she put it that way.

“Fine! Fine I’ll tell you. Just...fuck. Just... It’s her father.”

“Yes?”

“He passed away a couple of months ago and she hasn’t come to terms with it yet.”

“Shit.” The girl on the other side of the line grew silent. “You serious?”

“Yeah. Madame Cheng told me he had fallen ill a long while back.”

“Around the time she asked for a break from us if I had to guess.”

“I came to that conclusion too.”

“Why didn’t she tell us? We could have been there for her. Help her get through this.”

“I don’t know Al. I really don’t. I hope she’ll feel better tonight and I get her to open up a little. She...seemed so...fragile when we spoke this morning.”

“I’m going to visit her anyway.”

“You’ll risk making her cry.”
“I don’t care. I need to make up for my shitty behaviour as her best friend. I should have made time for her. For you. For Nino. Instead I’m stuck in this endless loop of works, eat, sleep, repeat. I need to be there for her Adrien. My girl needs us. She needed me back then too! I failed her once, I’m not going to fail her a second time.”

“Okay...okay. I can’t really stop you anyway.”

“That is very much true. Thank you. How are you holding up by the way? I know Tom and you were pretty close.”

“He was a good man Alya. He...he gave what my father could never give. He was family to me. A father figure who I could always turn to for advice. Knowing he’s gone...shit...I...I don’t know. It just leaves a empty space inside of me you know.”

“Yeah. I can only imagine how that must feel. Anything to distract yourselves with today?”

“I’m going to find a real estate officer to help me buy a place to call home. Then it’s probably off to Mari’s for dinner.”

“It’s something at least.” She muttered. “I have half an hour of free time between an interview and my desk job. I’ll drop by to say hello then.”

“Sounds good.”

“Adrien. Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Keeping me in the loop.”

He was a little early.
But only just a little bit.
In his arms he held two bouquets.

One was a delicate arrangement of different kinds of flowers.
The other was a small bouquet of deep red roses.

One for each of the Dupain-Cheng women.

After he rung the doorbell however, he was surprised to find Marinette answering.
Flour still in her hair and on her cheeks.

Her apron covered in red, pink and yellow smears.

“Hey.” He softly greeted.

“Hey...I...I didn’t expect you back here so soon.”
“I told you I would bring back that umbrella.”

She looked at him. Gaze searching for the mentioned item. “You don’t have it with you though.”

“Oh dear me!” He pretended to be taken aback by her observation. “I must have left it at work since it’s not raining anymore. I’ll be sure to bring it back to you the next time I’m invited over for dinner.”

“Dinner?”

Adrien dropped his overdramatic act and frowned slightly. “Yeah. Your mother invited me over for dinner tonight.”

“She never told me---” The girl sighed hard. “That explains why she told me the food only needed to be heated up before she left.”

“She left?”

“It’s Thursday. She always visits miss Chamack on Thursday.”

“Oh...do you...do you want me to go? I can come back another time.”

“No...no you can stay Adrien. I...I could use the company.”

The door was opened a little further and he stepped over the threshold. “Thank you.”

“Are those...” Marinette nodded towards the flowers.

“One for you and one for your mother.”

“They are lovely! Thank you! Let me put them in some water.”

Gently she took the flowers from him.
Cradling them in her arms as if they were an infant.

Once her back was turned towards him, he opened up his bag and gave a nod to Plagg.
The little Kwami wasted no time zooming out of it to the upper floors of the building.

“I’m sorry for this morning by the way. I...I’m usually not that...sensitive.” The designer suddenly spoke up.

“Your mother told me why you are Bug. It’s okay. I understand.”

“I...I guess you do. I almost forgot...”

“Yeah.”

“Does...does it get better? Does it ever stop hurting?”

Adrien walked up to her and hugged her back, wrapping his arms around her waist.
She leaned into it without second thought.

“In a way, it does. On some days it feels like it never stopped. But...having people around you who
love you softens the pain. It just takes time.”

“Maman said that too. That I have to give it time.”

“You don’t have to work through this alone either. You’ve got your mom. Now you’ve got me too.”

“And Alya.” She smiled.

One of the few times he had seen her truly smile that day.

“She told me she was going to visit you today.”

“She did. I cried and...she cried with me. I’m pathetic aren’t I.”

“You’re human. You’re grieving.”

“I shouldn’t be. Not after all this time.”

She started to choke up again.

“You should. Your mom told me, that she suspects, that you haven’t started to mourn the loss of your father yet. That you haven’t taken that first step coming to terms with it. This is you taking that first step and it’s okay it’s half a year too late. You helped your mother and father all this time and now that your mother is gaining some peace, it’s your turn to do the same.”

“It’s really okay?”

“It’s really okay.” He repeated. “Everyone goes through this in a different way. So cry as much as you need to. Okay?”

“Oka—”

“Where is she!”

Startled by the sudden voice Adrien let go of the girl, who jumped back just a little at the small, black, creature flying up to her face.

“Where is she!” He demanded again.

“Plagg!” He scolded.

The Kwami however, didn’t pay any mind to what his chosen had to say. “She’s not here! Where is Tikki!”

“I-I-I…” Marinette stammered.

“Plagg calm down.”

“Where’s your Miraculous! Where is Tikki!” He repeated once more.

It was only then that the hero’s eye’s fell on where her Miraculous should be resting.
Her earrings.

They were gone.
“Where is she!” Plagg once again demanded.

Something Adrien would have liked to know the answer to as well.

“S-S-She...Tikki…”

Marinette took a step backwards, bumping against him in the process. Instinctively his hands found their way to her shoulders, giving them a light squeeze just to let her know that he was there for her.

“Plagg. Calm down. You’re scaring her.”

The cat snorted in disbelief. “Me? Scaring her?” He flew closer to them. “She’s supposed to be here! I searched all over! Don’t you think that’s scaring me! What happened to her!”

“She’s safe!” The designer managed to gasp.

“Then where is she!”

“Plagg!” Adrien once again scolded. “Stay calm. Give her a chance to explain.”

“She’s safe.” She repeated. “She’s...she’s with master Fu.”

“You gave your earrings to master Fu?” The small cat seemed to have calmed down somewhat. With spite replacing his anger. “Why? Why did you abandon her?”

At the word ‘abandon’ the girl started to once again shake under his touch.

Adrien had a feeling that the events of that morning would be repeated soon.

“I-I-I-…” Marinette swallowed hard and took a deep breath. “I...I had...I didn’t w-w-want to.”

He noticed that she tried her best to stop the tears from flowing once again. If he had to make a guess, the fact that Tikki wasn’t here anymore might have been related to the death of her father.

“Take deep breaths Mari. Deep breaths. Tell us when you’re calm again.”

The baker’s daughter gave a small nod. “U-Upstairs.”
She wanted to go up?

Maybe she didn’t want to cry her eyes out in the bakery again.

“Okay. Let’s go up Bug.”

Again she swallowed hard before taking the lead. Showing the other two the way to the top floor apartment.

She was still shaking ever so slightly, but her steps were sturdy all the same.

“Sit.” Marinette sighed once the door to the living room was opened. “I'll...I'll tell you everything…”

“You really don’t need--”

“You deserve...to know Adrien.” She hiccupped. “I should have...I should have told you a while ago.”

“Okay.” He let himself fall on the couch. Plagg settled himself on his shoulder. Snuggling against the fabric of his coat. “If you think you’re ready to tell Mari.”

She shook her head and took a seat next to him. “I’m not.” Leaning forward, the girl reached for a box of tissues on the coffee table and pulled a bunch out of them. “But I have to tell you at some p-point. I can’t promise I won’t cry this time though.” She shot him a sad grin.

He moved a little closer to her. “Take your time.”

“But not too long.” Plagg added.

“Keep this up and I’m removing your camembert privileges.” Adrien warned him.

“I’m pretty sure you still owe me some kid.”

“Doubtful.”

“I never got paid for the times I let you transform in New York.” The cat pouted.

“Pretty sure I pay you in stinky cheese every day.”

The sound of sad giggling filled the room. “You two….I missed hearing you two bicker.”

“I missed you too Marinette.” He gave her a small smile. “So did Plagg. Even if he’ll never admit it.”

“Tikki missed you too Plagg. Every single day.” Marinette paused and bit her lip before continuing. “She...she would…”

“Take your time.” Her partner reminded her. “Start from the beginning. We’ll get to why you gave Tikki back eventually.”

The young woman nodded. Her grip on the tissues getting stronger.
“It...it started a while back. I...I was just starting my third year of fashion design classes. Back then the only thing I had to worry about was keeping my grades up as well as my social life and keep being Ladybug.”

“How did you not go crazy?” He asked in a joking manner. Hoping to create some sort of comfort between them again.

“It was easy actually. I could still come home to my parents to recharge Tikki and it wasn’t like I was fighting Hawkmoth. Just...minor supervillains. Nothing in comparison to...that man.”

“I watched some of your fights on the internet. I’m glad Rena was there to help you out.”

She nodded. “So was I. Rena...she helped me out a lot while you were away. Even if she was busy herself.”

“What changed Bug? Sounded like you kept everything together.”

“You know what changed.” She sighed. “Papa….papa got ill. I didn’t notice it at first because my parents didn’t say a thing but...not even a couple of months into my third year...he…”

Marinette began choking up again.

He placed a warm hand around her shoulder and gave it a light squeeze.


“H-He told me….they t-t-told me...he had a brain tumor. T-That he couldn’t d-d-do his job anymore according to the d-d-doctor.” Tears began to flow once more. Taking the tissues in her hand she brought them to her face, trying to hide her sadness behind the thin sheets of white paper.

“H-He kept on working.” She sobbed. “I-I-I couldn’t stand watching h-h-him go through all that!”

“So you helped your parents out in the bakery?”

“Y-Yeah? How did you k-k-know?”

“Your mom told me some things. Not everything. But some things.”

Marinette gave a small nod in understanding and took a couple of deep breaths to calm herself down.

All the while Adrien kept rubbing her shoulder.

Hoping that the gesture would aid her in some way.

It took a few moments before she was able to continue.

Her voice raw from crying and the emotions flowing through her.

“I...I woke up early and went to bed late to prepare bread and pastries for them. It...It wasn’t long until papa couldn’t….do much of anything. Maman...maman stayed with him in the hospital and...and I…”

“Yes?”
“I...dropped out of school.”

“What?!”

“I dropped out. So I could help my parents every day.” She gave him a sad smile. “The only thing I get to design these days are...cakes.”

“Oh…Mari… Why didn’t you tell me? I could have--”

“You would have helped!” She interrupted. “You would have flown back from New York and helped my family. H-H-Helped me get through it when papa died, when I-I made all the funeral arrangements.”

“Of course I would! So why didn’t you tell me?!”

“Your father would have found out!” Her breathing shuddered. “Your father would have found out because he always does and I’d hate to i-i-imagine what he could do to you...to us...to Paris.”

“Is that why we stopped talking?”

She nodded. “I wanted to...I wanted to pretend there was nothing you should worry about. But...I couldn’t. Every time I got a text from you, I was itching to pour my h-h-heart out. Tell you everything so…”

“You just asked for a break between us and stopped responding all together.”

“No… when I asked for a break because I had hope papa would get better and things would go back to normal after a while….but it didn’t. I....stopped responding to you when there was no turning back. When...my family needed all my attention and time...and after t-that...I couldn’t just l-leave maman alone and...I just couldn’t reply to you...so I just turned off my phone all together....I’m….I’m sorry.”

“Bug…”

“I should have told you.”

“Hey…”

“I-I just d-d-didn’t want to r-r-risk that man doing s-s-something to you!”

He couldn’t take it anymore.

The sight of his best friend, once again, bawling her bluebell eyes out was making his heart hurt.

“Hey….Bug...it’s okay.” He pulled her against him. Her arms found their way around his waist once more and for the second time that day, he let her weep against him. “I’m not angry with you. I understand. I understand your fear for what my father can still do. I still don’t trust him either.”

The soxs became a little softer.

“I also understand what you were going through. You...you gave up your dream for your family. You gave up so much to help them. I just...shut.” For a moment he was at a loss for words. “I wished
“you didn’t feel like you had to carry all of this on your own.”

“W-Wouldn’t be fair.” Marinette sniffed against him. “You...y-you have your own crap to deal with. I...I couldn’t t-t-throw my family p-p-problems on your plate.”

“What about Al or Nino? You didn’t tell them either.”

“S-Same reasons. They would have t-t-told you a-a-and you would have come home.”

“They would have probably stopped what they were doing to help you out too right?” Plagg guessed. “Seems unfair to take them away from their dreams just so you can have someone to cry against.”

“Plagg!”

“N-No he’s right. T-That’s also why I didn’t….and...and Tikki. Tikki was enough b-b-but...I couldn’t keep b-b-being Ladybug...the bakery...maman...papa...they needed all of me. I...I couldn’t give them that and be Ladybug.”

“So you gave her back to Fu.” The cat scoffed.

“She offered….I...I wish she...hadn’t but...s-s-she knew it was for the best. I was a-a-already a mess at that p-p-point.”

“What did master Fu say?” Adrien asked softly.

“He…” Again she swallowed hard. “He was surprised. T-Told me it was okay to k-k-keep holding on to the Miraculous...b-b-because the peacock one h-h-hasn’t turned up yet. I...I told him I couldn’t so...I g-g-g-ave him Tikki and ran out.”

“We can get her back. When you’re ready.”

“M-Maman. She needs me...I...I don’t think I…”

“Princess. Look at me.” Puffy eyes gazed up at him. “You have to think about yourself now okay. You’re going through some heavy stuff and being Ladybug is a good break from all of that. But not now. Not when you’re like this.”

“Like an emotional wreck.” The cat added.

“Okay.” He clicked his tongue. “Seems like I have to stock up on American cheddar.”

“Nooooo!”

“You practically insulted her!” Adrien argued. “I warned you!”

“You’re awful!” The tiny creature moved away from him only to nuzzle Marinette’s cheek. “I’m sorry for yelling at you Ladybug. Can you tell Adrien it’s animal cruelty to feed me something that isn’t camembert!”

She giggled softly. “It is animal cruelty Adrien.”
“You’re siding with him. Great.” He huffed.

“I know you two are only joking. Once you’re home you’ll give him a round of cheese anyway. That’s how you are.”

At least she seemed to have calmed down enough to get a full sentence out again.

“Besides.” She added, scratching the small cat under his chin. “He’s right. I’m an emotional wreck right now.”

“I want to help you get through this. You don’t have to be alone anymore. You’ve got me, you’ve got Alya and maybe Nino too.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“It’s the least I can do for you Princess.”

“Kitty.”

“Will you let me?”

She moved away from his embrace. “You should be angry with me. I...I just ignored you all this time.”

“You are also the one who shipped a monthly care package all the way to me in New York until we stopped speaking to each other. I know you care. I never doubted that for a moment. Now let me care for you this time. Let me help you.”

“Okay.” She sniffed. “Okay...I...I don’t know how you can help but...okay.”

“I...don’t know either.” She laughed at his honesty. “But I will do my best. I know how it feels Mari and I know how it feels dealing with this alone. But you’re not alone.”

“Okay,”

“We’re going to help you get through this. Me. Nino. Alya. Your mom. Tikki...maybe even Plagg at some point.”

“Only if there’s cheese involved.” The cat commented in a joking manner, yet continued to cuddle Marinette’s cheek, purring ever so slightly.

“Okay. Y-Y-You can help. I have no idea h-h-how to get through all of this. It hurts Adrien. So much.”

“I know Bugaboo.”

Plagg moved away from nuzzling her cheek the moment she started to move on the couch. With a tired sigh, the young woman pulled up her knees and placed her head on his shoulder.

“Is this okay?” Marinette carefully asked.

“Are you comfortable?”
“Yes.”

“Then it’s okay. I missed cuddling you anyway.”

“I missed you.”

“I missed you too.”

“Will you ever forgive me for...being stupid like this? For not talking to you in such a long time.”

“I forgave Alya and Nino for the same things.” He told her with a smile. “I think I can forgive you too.”

“Thank you.” She leaned more into him and let out another deep sigh.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Just...tired.”

“Crying your eyes out will do that to you.” The black cat commented.

“How about some food huh? Your mom said we only needed to heat it up right?”

His partner nodded. “She made vegetable soup. We just need to reheat it and it should be fine.”

“Alright. You make yourself comfortable here and leave everything to me. You’ll feel a bit better after a warm meal.”

“Okay.” She moved again and he instantly missed her warmth against him. “Just don’t...burn my kitchen like you did yours.”

“I almost burned it.” Adrien corrected her as he stood up and took off his coat. “It was my first week on my own. It could have ended up much worse. You know that.”

“It did. He burned a lot of food the first few months.” Plagg added. “There was so much cheese wasted!”

“Oh...Chaton.” She muttered, trying to muffle her laughs.

“Making a grilled cheese sandwich is harder than it looks okay! Especially when you’re seventeen and never made one. Ever!”

The only reply he got was laughter.

Genuine laughter.

It was the greatest sound he had ever heard.

“Besides.” Adrien continued. “I haven’t burned anything in the past two years or so. I can do this.”

Walking to the kitchen space, he turned the stove on.
Fire burned under the large pot Sabine had left on there.

As he pulled open a drawer to look for something to stir the soup with, he heard a rustle coming from the couch. Followed by soft footsteps.

“So...how was New York?” She carefully asked.

Adrien looked up to see that she had moved to sit at the dining table. Probably to keep a close eye on him so he wouldn’t screw up or actually set the place ablaze.

“It was...fine.”

She frowned. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened.”

“Doesn’t sound like it.”

“Nothing happened Mari. I’ve been stuck in this endless loop of going to school, having dinner and spending a few days at Gabriel’s New York branch.” Describing his experience made him realize that this was exactly how Alya had described her current life as well. “Not much to do otherwise.”

“Except for working out.”

The young man grinned. “So you’ve noticed.” Raising his arms he flexed them and shot her a wink. She merely rolled her eyes as she always did when he was ‘showing off’.

Though he hadn’t gone to any gym when he was there, out of sheer boredom he had been running across rooftops more frequently than he had done back home. Much to Plagg’s dismay. Pretending to spar against an invisible opponent, climbing against buildings, jumping over rooftops, stopping the occasional petty crime, until he was too tired to move.

As a result he wasn’t immensely muscular, but he wasn’t the lean, skinny, boy he was when he left Paris either.

“It looks good. I mean! You look good. I mean..you always looked good! You were a model why wouldn’t you look good. I mean--”

“Holy shit.” He laughed. “I think your thirteen year old self is shining through! I thought she left years ago!”

“I never had to deal with you being so....so....”

“You can just say I’m handsome you know.”

Marinette pressed her lips tightly together. “You would love to hear me say that wouldn’t you.”

“Oh no. I know I look good. But some confirmation every now and then is nice. Especially from you.”
“Good to know Chat Noir hasn’t lost his confidence over the years.”

“And I didn’t think it was possible for Ladybug to be even more beautiful than she was the last time I saw her. But you’ve proved me wrong.”

“Nice try.” She laughed. “But I know I look like a total mess right now. My whole face is probably red.”

“It is.” He admitted. “Red and puffy. But you’re still pretty.”

She snorted in disbelief. “Thanks...for trying to make me feel better I guess.”

“Is it working?”

Marinette shrugged. “A little. I think.”

“Then you’re very welcome.”

He pulled out a wooden spoon from the drawer and started to stir the soup. Steam starting to rise from the pot.

“I missed this too.”

“Missed what exactly my Lady?”

“This.” She gestured back and forth between them. “Us. Talking. Bantering. I missed it.”

“Me too. It’s been too long.” He admitted.

“I’m sorry.”

“No. No Mari. It’s okay. That’s in the past and now..Right now. It’s just us.” He opened a cupboard where he vaguely remembered the bowls to be in.

Seemed his memory hadn't failed him just yet. Taking one out he scooped some of the soup into it.

“Hey!”

“Us and Plagg.” Adrien corrected after the black cat spoke up. “We’ll catch up for lost time eventually. It’ll be like nothing ever changed between us. Like I never had to leave.”

“I...I hope so....”

“And you...you’re going to feel better again in time.” He put the bowl in front of her.

“I hope so.” She repeated.

Her partner handed her a spoon for her to eat with. “You will. It might take months. Years even. But it will get better.”

Marinette let out a small humm, took the spoon and took a sip from her food.
The moment she did so her nose scrunched up.

“Adrien. This isn’t warm.”

“What do you mean it isn’t warm? There’s steam coming from the bowl.”

“I mean it isn’t warm!”

“Give me that.” He grabbed a clean spoon and dipped it in her meal. “The moment the liquid touched his tongue he knew she had been right.

It wasn’t ice cold.

But it wasn’t particularly warm either.

“Yeah...this is cold.”

“Just because there’s steam coming from the pan doesn’t mean that it’s all warmed up.” Marinette told him with a grin on her face.

“At least it isn’t burned.”

She nodded in agreement. “At least there’s that.”

“Let me try again.”

A cold, autumn, evening breeze, brushed over his skin the moment he stepped out of the hallway.

He gave her a warm smile as she leaned against the front door.

“Thank you...for coming over tonight.” Marinette muttered.

“You should thank your mother. She invited me over.”

“Yeah but...you didn’t have to accept it.”

“I wanted to.”

“I’m glad you did.” She smiled. “It...it helped talking about papa. About what happened. I feel…”

“Lighter?”

“Yes. Lighter.”

“I’m glad.” His hand found it’s way to his neck as he nervously rubbed the skin there. Trying to find ways to keep the conversation going a bit longer. “So...euhm...random question. But what are you doing this weekend?”
The girl shrugged. “The bakery is open on Saturday and I’m not sure what I’ll be doing Sunday. Why?”

“Do you feel like going out Saturday night?”

It took a few moments before she replied.

“Just the two of us?”

“Well...no...unless you want to. But I figured we could try to pull Alya from her work and hang out together again. Grab some dinner and a movie?” Adrien explained. “Nothing fancy. Just a fun night among friends.”

“I...I....”

“You don’t have to answer right away Mari. You can think about it and it doesn’t even need to be this weekend.”

“Okay...okay yeah. I’d love to hang out with you two again.”

“Great! Yeah! I’ll ask Alya to join us and made some reservations somewhere.”

“Okay...cool.” Her smile widened.

“Cool. I’ll see you then my Lady.”

Her fingers curled up into a fist and she held it up towards him. Without second thought he gave her a gentle fistbump.

“See you then Chaton. Say hi to Nino for me.”

“I will and you can call or text me whenever you need to talk.”

Taking that first step on his way back to the hotel, he couldn’t help but keep looking back at her. Her small hand waving him off. The smile still on her face.

It gave him hope that she would be fine in the end.

“How did it go in New York today man?”

Fingers pressed rapidly on the keys of his laptop as he spoke into the microphone of the device. Not the perfect way to play a game and talk with your friend, but the only way he was able to at the moment.

He would have to get a proper headset at some point.

“Harsh dude.” Nino’s voice sounded far away and muffled. “Monique might be in the top tens, but she’s difficult to work with.”
On the computer screen, two robots were fighting against each other. Adrien was clearly losing this round.

“Difficult how?”

“Difficult as in she’s a perfectionist. She’s not happy with a bunch of samples I mixed up last night. Doesn’t have the right flow she’s looking for or some crap like that.”

“Yikes.”

“I’ll say! Why did you snatch away that power up from me!”

“All is fair in love and Ultimate Mecha Striker Nino.”

Adrien activated his power up. Draining the last half of the other bot’s HP bar.

“That’s it. I’m dead.” He heard his friend sigh on the other side.

“You got close this time.”

“So close.” The other groaned. “Are you sure you’re rusty? You don’t seem like it.”

He nodded, even though Nino couldn’t see that. “Maybe we should pick out another game we can play together. A kart racer or something?”

“Getting bored of beating my ass?”

“Yes actually. I am. And I can imagine it not being fun for you either.”

“It’s really not.”

“Could be worse?”

“How?”

“I could have had mad skills.”

“You don’t call this having ‘mad skills’?” Nino snorted.

“I know a person or two who are able to play this a lot better than I can.”

“Maybe you should play against them to actually have a challenge.”

“Nah. We aren’t exactly friends.”

“Oh?”

Adrien shrugged to himself. “Classmates from New York. They were...okay. Nice enough to have a conversation with. Just not the kind of people I wanted to befriend and just abandon after I got back home.”
“Dude.” The DJ whispered. “Now I feel even more guilty.”

“Don’t. Things happened. I’m not mad at you or Alya or Mari. I’m just glad I haven’t lost you guys.”

“Stop. If you start talking like that again I might tear up for real this time.”

“Wouldn’t be the first person I’ve seen crying today.”

“Oh no. Don’t tell me you made someone cry for real! For shame Adrien!” Nino joked.

It wasn’t something he could find himself laughing along with.

“She didn’t tell you either did she?”

“Who told me what?”

“Marinette.”

“Man I haven’t spoken to Mari in months. How’s she holding up?”

“She’s going through some shit right now.”

A little voice in the back of his head told him that it still wasn’t his place to spread the news.

Another voice, which sounded suspiciously like Plagg, told him the opposite. He had talked to Alya about it earlier that day after all.

“I know. Alya told me about that. Just not how’s she’s dealing with it.”

Never mind.

Seemed like the reporter was already one step ahead of him.

“I hate to say it but she's a mess. I didn't even know you spoke to Alya man! When was that?”

“This morning dude. Way early but it was worth it. It was nice hearing her voice again y’know.”

“I can imagine. Did you talk things out with her?”

“Partially. I mean…we’re not back together if that’s what you’re actually asking.”

“Well I wasn’t expecting that after one phone call.” Adrien snorted.

“Neither did I. But we talked things trough. I...I was wrong blaming her for our last breakup. She was putting all her time into her work, but only because I didn’t make time for her anymore.”

“Nino I doubt that’s the real reason.” He assured him.

“Alya blames herself. Said she was too caught up with her dream job to make time for me. I guess we drifted apart because we’re both garbage people.”
“You two are my favorite garbage people though.”

“We’re the only garbage people you know.” Nino laughed.

“That is true. But I hope you guys stay in touch after you come back home.”

“Me too man. Shit. I swear when I heard her voice, I fell in love with her all over again.”

“Maybe you should tell her that at some point?”

“Maybe. But not now. First I need to finish up this gig and figure out how to show Mari she can count on me for emotional support too.”

“You could give the bakery a call.” He suggested. “Or write her a song or something. I don’t know man. I’m not great with this kind of thing either. The most I could do for her was give a hug and offer some advice. Not sure how long that'll keep making her feel better.”

“More than I can give her right now from this far away. That’s for sure.”

“You know. Almost every month she put together a care package for me and ship it to New York. Filled with magazines, candy, pastries and stuff like that. Maybe you can scrounge up some nice things in New York and send it to her as a care package? That might let her know you’re there for her too.”

“Not a bad idea dude. I’ll put it on my idea list.”

“Cool.”

“So. You wanna play another round or do you want to keep staring at your victory screen?” Nino asked.

“Didn’t know you wanted to get your butt kicked again so soon.”

“Less talk and more action my man.”

The end of the week came faster than he anticipated. Adrien didn’t even realized it was Friday until Nathalie texted him to remind him he was supposed to sign his contract today.

She would let him know at what time his father wanted to meet him later that morning to sign away his remaining years of freedom.

He needed to make sure there was a lawyer present for when he did.

Knowing his father, no doubt there would be something hidden in the fine print that would tie him to the company for the rest of his life.

Something he wasn’t looking forward to and if he could help it, something he would avoid all together.
“You okay?”

He looked up from his cup of coffee to see Chloé giving him a worried glance.

“Yeah. Father wants to speak to me today. Not looking forward to that.”

“You could just not go.”

That wasn’t an option.

Well….

It was.

Just not one without consequences.

“I have to speak to him at some point.” Adrien shrugged. “Besides, this is strictly business for him. If I’m lucky I won’t have to step into the mansion for a good while after this.”

“Can’t he just video call you like he always does?”

“I need to sign something. Besides, It’s better to meet up this time. If I’m going to yell at him, I rather yell at his face rather than a screen so he can’t just pretend cutting me off fixes everything.”

“No way out of it then?”

He shook his head.

“Well.” She started. “It’s a good thing we’re going shopping tomorrow then. That’ll be sure to cheer you up Adrikins!”

“When are you planning on dragging me to anyway?” He took a sip from his coffee.

“To get a haircut and a facial for starters. Maybe a manicure too. Goodness knows you need it.”

“Do I? I agree with the haircut, but a facial and a manicure?”

“When was the last time you had one?” The mayor’s daughter asked while raising one brow.

“When was the last time you visited me again?”

“Ugh! See! You’re a mess! Why have you been neglecting yourself like that?”

“I...haven’t…”

“We’re getting the works tomorrow.” She insisted, pulling out her phone and typing away at the screen. “Trust me, you’ll feel a lot better afterwards.”

“That has us covered for about three hours. Then what?”

“I just booked us in for an appointment at three. We can go shopping for clothes before that. Get you
something nice to wear so you can throw out that disgusting hoodie you had on a couple of days ago.”

“But that’s my favorite one!”

“It’s falling apart!”

The sleeves were slightly ruffled and there was a small hole near the hem. Still he couldn’t consider that as ‘falling apart’.

“Fine. But I’m not throwing that thing out.”

Chloé rolled her eyes but gave him a nod anyway. Clearly she wasn’t in the mood to argue any further with him.

“Did Alya know where Dupain-Cheng is hiding out by the way?”

“Hmmm?”

“Listen. I didn’t just lure her in here for shits and giggles and to just catch up with you. She had info on her bestie right?”

“Oh! Yeah. Yeah she didn’t know exactly where Mari was hanging out, but Alya figured her parents might known something.”

“You didn’t ask them first?” Chloé scoffed.

This time Adrien rolled his eyes. “I have a lot of things to worry about Chlo.”

“Sure you do.”

“Anyway! Turns out she’s at the bakery.”

“The bakery? Weird place to build up a designing career.” The woman laughed.

“She’s not a designer. She’s helping out her mother.”

“She failed design school!” She assumed, her laughter becoming louder. “That’s rich! I knew that birdbrain wasn’t talented enough!”

He frowned deeply, shooting the most foul glare he could muster her way.

It wasn’t long until she noticed it. “W-What? It’s funny!”

“It’s not.”

“Oh come on. It’s a little funny. She was always so proud of people pretending to like her designs, it’s ironic that she wasn’t talented enough to be an actual fashion designer.”

“You’re just jealous because people did like her designs.” He grumbled. “Besides she didn’t fail. She chose to drop out to help her family.”
“Lame reason to drop out but whatever.”

“Chloé. You’re my oldest friend and I accept all of you. Flaws and everything. And I know you don’t know anything about her situation, but please stop talking about Marinette like that.”

“You mean telling you the truth?”

“I mean you’re acting like a bitch.”

Chloé gasped.

“She lost her father.” He hissed through gritted teeth. “She dropped out to help him and her mother when he fell ill. She gave up her future for her family. It would be nice if you stopped talking shit about her because she kept herself strong and made a selfless decision.”

“I….I didn’t…”

“I know you didn’t know. I also know you never like Marinette and I’m not forcing you to like her. But could you just try to not talk shit about her or anyone you don’t like in front their friends.”

“I’m...sorry. Sometimes words just come out of my mouth and my brain doesn’t stop me or tell me what I say is wrong….I….”

“It’s fine.” He waved off. “I guess the old you isn’t gone completely yet.”

“The ‘not nice Chloé‘ you mean?”

He nodded.

“I’ve been trying to do better. To be nicer. It’s difficult for me, you know that. But...I’ll guess I could try a bit harder. For you.” The blonde promised.

“Thank you and...sorry I called you a bitch.”

“I kind of deserved it.” Pink lips pursed into a small pout. “Do I still get that diamond bracelet?”

He let out a small chuckle and nodded. “Sure.”

“The designer shoes too?”

“Yes. Yes sure. The designer shoes too. But you’re paying for lunch.”

“Sounds fair. Anything specific you would want to have?”

After he had breakfast, Adrien had texted Paul to let him know that he wasn’t going to show up for work that day, but that he would try to convince his father to give up some of the ridiculous sales numbers he wanted the department to reach.

At least hat way, his father wouldn’t be the only person throwing demands on the table.
The moment Nathalie had messaged him the exact time, he dialed the number of the law firm Chloé had recommended to him.

“Vallet and Alton law firm. How can we help you?” A friendly male voice greeted him.

“Ehm...hi. I’m Adrien Agreste. Chloé Bourgeois recommended your law firm to me a couple of days ago.”

“Ah yes! Madame Vallet did notify me that you could be calling one of these days. How can we help you?”

“I have an important meeting this afternoon to discuss some...work related conditions with my father. I want to know if the contract he’ll present to me is eh...well..... Legal.”

“Oh...I see.”

“I don’t suppose you guys have someone available to help me go over it during that meeting? I’m expected to sign right away but if the whole agreement isn’t on legal terms I can’t agree on that.”

“Understandable. What time do you have said meeting?”

“Three this afternoon.”

“Three this afternoon.” The man on the other side of the line repeated. “Let me see. Let me see. I’m afraid madame Vallet herself is in court at that time, but monsieur Verona is available.”

“Perfect!”

“Where do you want him to meet you monsieur Agreste?”

“The lobby of Le Grande Paris. I’m staying there for the time being and the actual address the meeting is being held is close by anyway.”

“I’ll let him know monsieur Agreste. Will half past two work?”

“Absolutely. Thank you kindly.”

“No problem. Glad to be able to help sir.”

“Thanks again. Have a good day.”

“Have a nice day sir.”

The moment Adrien hung up his phone he realized one thing.

He had no idea what to do until the meeting with his father.

Tapping on his phone, he opened up his to-do list.

His finances weren’t under his control just yet, but he figured it wouldn’t be long until his new bank would confirm the transfer and he could check that off from his list.
The real estate agent he had contacted earlier that week hadn’t gotten back to him with any possible homes he could buy.

Maybe he had been too picky when asking for something with a garden or a large balcony, at least two bedrooms and a decent size bathroom. Money wasn’t an issue and they knew that.

The most likely case however, could be that they were just too busy at the moment. It had only been a short week since he got back after all. Half of that time he had spent fixing the shit his father wanted to throw him in as well as rekindling with his old friends.

He couldn’t expect to have a place to call home after such a short amount of time. Especially when he wasn’t as actively looking for it as he would have liked.

“Now what?” He muttered to himself.

“You could go check up on Ladybug?” Plagg suggested sleepily.

“Former Ladybug.” He reminded the Kwami. “And...I don’t know. Maybe I should give her a little room to breath. I’ll see her again tomorrow night anyway.”

“If you say so. We both know you want to see her again.”

“I do! But...I don’t want to overwhelm her either.”

“Do what you think is right kid.”

The little bell above the door jingled when he pushed it open.

“Good morning Adrien!” Sabine greeted him the moment he walked in.

The bakery didn’t seem to have any customers right now. He might have just missed the rush hour.

Which was a good since he didn’t want to be a bother.

The blonde gave her a small grin. “Good morning madame Cheng.”

“Do you need more pastries for your colleagues?”

“No. Not not today. But eh...I could go for some croissants and more of those cheese danish?”

“Of course! Of course! We’re fresh out of croissants at the moment. But Marinette should be in the back making more. The first new batch should almost be done. Why don’t you keep her company while I get you those danish?”

Adrien simply nodded and hurried into the kitchen of the bakery.
“Hey Marinette.”

The baker’s daughter looked up from her work.

Flour sprinkled in her hair and on her clothes. Her apron still relatively clean and a large smile on her face once she noticed him.

Compared to how she looked yesterday morning, she looked to be feeling a lot better.

“Hey Chaton.”

Using her apron she cleaned off her hands and walked over to him to give him a hug. The moment her arms wrapped around his neck, it felt like he was home again.

“Did you sleep okay?”

Marinette nodded against him before pulling back from the embrace.

“I haven’t slept this well in a while actually. I think that was because of yesterday.”

“Good to know cold soup can help with insomnia.”

She giggled and pushed his arm in a playful manner. “Not that you dork!”

“I know. I know.” He grinned. “I’m glad to hear talking helped.”

“It did. Thank you for listening.”

“Thank you for trusting me enough to open up.”

“Yeah...I should probably learn to open up more. Maybe then it wouldn’t be breaking down every five minutes.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“It feels that bad.”

“Even now?”

She shook her head. Strands of hair dancing over her skin. “No. I feel a little better for now. Again. Thanks to you.”

“That’s what friends do right?”

“Friends. Right.” Marinette shot him a wide smile. “Right! We are still friends aren’t we?”

“I’d like to think so. Did you think we weren’t anymore?”

“No...but...I haven’t been the best friend to you. You can't deny that.”

“Déjà vu. That’s what Alya told me too.”
“Did she?”

“She did and I told her that I still consider her a friend.”

“You're too forgiving.”

“Can you blame me? You guys mean everything to me.”

“And I still just stopped talking to you. To all of you.”

“You had a good reason and I’m not mad at you. I told you that already. I'm not mad at any of you. I just want my friends back.” He brought a hand to her cheek. His thumb gently stroking her freckled skin. “I want us to move forward.”

“You…” She threw her arms around his neck once more. “You really are too damn forgiving Adrien Agreste.”

She was right of course.

If he wasn’t, his father would be in jail.

He would have been a pastry chef.

He could have helped Marinette and she could have continued pursuing her dream.

In a way it was ironic.

Alya, Nino, Marinette.

They all had asked him for forgiveness.

But maybe he was the one that needed to ask them for the same soon.
Adrien finds out what kind of trick his father has up his sleeve.

Georgio Verona seemed to be a as normal a man as there ever was one.
A calm, professional, glasses and suit wearing, normal built and height man.
At least that was the first impression Adrien got when he met up with his lawyer.
Some of that seemed to changed the moment his father’s strict glance fell on the man.
A glance Adrien was all too familiar with and knew how to brush off.
Monsieur Verona however turned from a calm and collected person to a nervous and tense individual within a few seconds.
Honestly, he couldn't blame the man.

“This is your contract.” His father’s lawyer, a older but stern looking man, told him as he shoved a piece of paper across the table to him. “We’ll run it down with you.”

Gabriel nodded in agreement before his lawyer continued.

“Starting next week you will be guided by monsieur Vienna and taught the ins and outs of the distribution and designing departments dealing with the regular clothing lines for standard consumers.”

The blonde gave a nod.
This wasn’t new information to him.

“When monsieur Vienna’s last week is up, you are to take full control of the department.”

“Excuse me...but eh...this eh...contract doesn’t say anything about the hours monsieur Agreste is supposed to be working.” Georgio nervously spoke up as he had skimmed the papers.

“You are free to fill in your own hours.” Gabriel told him. “Your salary will remain the same regardless of how much you work. The only thing I ask of you is that you keep the department running smoothly, efficiently and keep making a profit.”

“That’s a...eh...thing that should be in here.”

Gabriel’s lawyer bent over the table, turned a page of the document and pointed at a specific paragraph.
“It is. Right here.”

“Oh. Yes. Yes I see.” Georgio blinked a couple of times before he spoke again. “Gee...that...that’s a lot for a management salary.”

Adrien leaned over to him and noticed the large amount on the piece of paper.

“No.” He firmly stated. “That’s two times as much as a normal manager gets.”

“It’s nothing to be concerned about.” Gabriel informed him. “Gabriel’s is still my company and if I want you to be paid that amount, you will get that amount.”

“It’s too much father.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Adrien.”

“That’s more than I need on my own!”

“Then give it to charity, use it to hire a personal assistant. I don’t care.”

“If you don’t care, why even give me that much?” He tried to argue.

“Is it wrong of me to make sure my son is provided for?”

“I...I guess not. But I’m old enough to provide for myself.”

“At some point that will happen. When you take over the company completely you can give yourself whatever amount of salary you want. But for now, I will determine that.”

“On top of that--” His father’s lawyer spoke up only to be interrupted by Adrien’s lawyer.

“There is no indication on how long this contract will last.”

“That’s because it’s stated in paragraph ten that monsieur Agresto senior, will determine when the contract will end or transfers into another type of contract.”

“That’s eh...out of the norm.”

“What if I want to quit?” Adrien suddenly asked. “What if I think this whole verbal agreement between us is bullshit and I want to just do my own thing and let you keep running the company?”

Gabriel didn’t respond right away, but the slight smirk on his face was enough to send a shiver down his spine.

The designer reached for something in his jacket and pulled out something to put on the table.

Small, metallic, green and blue.

Shaped like a peacock.

“Do I have to explain to you what this is?”
Thanks to Marinette’s retelling how her conversation with master Fu went down, his father didn’t have to.

“No.”

Adrien wanted to reach forward, hoping to just grab the piece of jewelry and make a run for it. Ending it all in one deed of minor theft.

He wasn’t quick enough however as the older man took the magical item back before he could even start to move towards it.

“Good. Let me make this clear Adrien. If you back out of this contract or our agreement, I will not hesitate to use this and I think you know what will happen if I do.”

He frowned and tried to give his father a nasty glare. As nasty as he could anyway.

So he did have something up his sleeve.

Something he wasn’t even expecting or considering.

At the very least he was expecting minions.

Guns for hire.

Anything non magical related that could put him back as a threat to the city.

Not another freaking Miraculous.

“Judging by your expression I’d say that you do know. Good. I Don’t want to hear any more complaints about the contract.”

“I am not sure what all that was about but...may I continue?” Gabriel’s lawyer asked.

The man gave a small nod in approval.

The older man cleared his throat. “Furthermore, as the contract states in section three paragraph ten-” He shot a look towards Georgio. “You are to make sure the department increases their sales with a hundred percent and that the design department designs at least an additional five pieces on top of their current ones. If these requirements aren’t met after a year, then this is considered a breach of contract and of the verbal agreement between you and your father.”

He couldn’t keep quiet anymore.

Adrien knew he had held his tongue for so many years.

And while he had screamed and yelled and tried to defy his father many times, for every time he did, he had also complied and did as he was told for the sake of keeping the peace between them.

Not really being able to keep his stance and get his way.

It wasn’t like demanding for less work pressure was a breach of their agreement to begin with.
So why shouldn't he demand reasonable conditions for his staff.

“That’s bullshit!”

“Ehm…monsieur Agreste?”

He ignored Georgio.

“Nobody can reach those numbers in a year!”

“You should be grateful. I first demanded that those numbers would be reached at the end of next season.”

“Five years. I can do it in five. One year is not enough!”

“I don’t think you are in a position to make demands Adrien.” His father grumbled in annoyance.

“And you’re not in a position to put unreasonable demands on the table! Do you want your company to fail? You can’t expect the department to reach those numbers with the amount of people we have! Especially since you can’t seem to be bothered updating the system to avoid mistakes! Do you have any idea how many clients we’ve lost because the system wasn’t updated? Isn’t it your job to pay people to make sure that happens on a regular basis?” He ranted. “You can’t expect miracles with the manpower and the outdated crap we have to work with!”

Gabriel took a deep breath. Nostrils flaring as he tried to keep his posture.

“Adrien.” He started. “I am disappointed that you are acting like a spoiled child. You’re making a fool out of yourself.”

“I don’t care! I am trying to look out for the people working in that part of the building.” He grumbled. “They are good people and I refuse to let your incompetence and disregard for any of your staff, be the reason why they are out on the street or get burned out by the added work pressure you ask of them!”

“Don’t pretend you care about them!”

“I do!” His fist came down hard on the table. “I don’t give a crap what you do to me or demand of me, but what you’re asking is going to affect the entire department and I sure as hell won’t let that happen without raising my voice!”

“Well…” His father took another deep breath. “You have accomplished doing that.”

“Five. Years.” Adrien once again demanded. “I can reach those number in five years.”

“Fine!” The man finally caved in. “Five years. But designing better has those twenty five pieces done next season.”

“But--”

“That is my final offer! If you don’t take it you better get out and I’ll close the department personally!”
“You can’t afford to do that!”

“I can afford to do that and a lot more Adrien!”

“Hey..euhm..how about we take a break and come back tomorrow when the contract is revised with your eh...new agreement?”

“I agree with monsieur Verona. Let’s meet up again tomorrow at the same time.” Gabriel’s lawyer suggested.

“Agreed.”

“Fine.” The blonde muttered.

Standing up, he took his coat and walked out of his father’s office. Georgio walking right behind him.

“So...eh...what was that all about?” He nervously asked his client once they made it outside again.

“It’s...complicated. I’m sorry I lost my cool. I’m normally not like that it’s just that...my father can bring out the worst in me these last few years.”

“You’re braver than I am. Your father is very intimidating.” He admitted. “What about the pin?”

“Family heirloom.” Adrien lied. “The last thing we still have that belonged to my mother before he disappeared. He….he knows that I want it back. She gave it to me.”

“So he’s holding that piece of jewelry hostage in exchange for you to work somewhere in his company?”

“Something like that.”

“Seems kind of odd to bend to his will over a heirloom. I mean...I understand that it’s your mother’s and all...but it’s also material possession. Her memories of her should still mean more to you than a bit of metal.”

“There’s a bit more to it than that actually.”

“I’ll admit monsieur Agreste, I am just as confused now as when your father put that pin on the table.”

“Like I said. It’s complicated.” He muttered. “Did you...did you see anything legally discriminating in that contract?”

“Not really.” Georgio shrugged. “The lack of steady hours put down on paper and the amount of salary you will be getting isn’t really normal. But it is like you father said. He is the boss of the company, he gets to determine what kind of salary and hours you will work. Even still it’s a generous deal, even with the restrictions.”

“So I should sign it right?”
“From my point of view, I don’t see why you shouldn’t sir.”

Adrien gave a small nod. “Alright. Thank you for your help monsieur Verona.”

“That’s what I do. Feel free to give me a call if you need me again.”

He reached into his pocket and handed him his business card.

“Thank you. I will.”

“So...how was the meeting with your father?” Marinette carefully asked.

“On a scale of one to ten? Ready to commit murder.” He joked.

“Might be tricky to hide the body in this city.”

“The mansion is big.”

“And full of security cameras.”

“So murder is out of the question.” Adrien sighed as he scrolled the webpage on his laptop.

Various houses and apartments which were up for sale flashed passed him.

“You can just say no. What’s the worst he can do? Disown you?”

“Transform into another supervillain.”

The girl laughed at the other side of the phone, thinking he was joking.

“Master Fu has his Miraculous.” Marinette reminded him. “No way that will happen.”

“He has the other one. The peacock one you said was still missing.”

“He...He what?”

“He has the peacock Miraculous.” Adrien repeated.

The happy tone in her voice died down instantly. “That’s...shit....that’s bad.”

“Don’t worry. As long as I’ll do what he says, he won’t use it. We have a contract now. I’m going to sign it tomorrow and that will be that.”

“Will he give you this one too in exchange?”

“No. But it’s okay Bug. I’ll deal with it.”

“Are you sure?”
“Yeah. Nothing has happened now and when I have an opportunity I’ll just rob him or something and take the thing back.”

“Okay. Okay I trust you on this.”

“I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have told you this. I didn’t mean to make you worried.”

“You should have told me. We...we are still partners right?”

“Or course we are.”

“Then...then I’m going to help you this time. Just let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.”

“This time? Marinette you’ve always helped me.”

“No. No I...I could have done more when that man offered you that deal years ago. We could have done things different. So you didn’t have to go...and do things you don’t want to do.”

“It’s not your fault. You know that.”

“I didn’t exactly help make things better either.”

“Stop. This was my decision Mari. I took his deal, I chose not to tell you beforehand. Nothing we can do about it now.”

She didn’t reply.

“But…” He continued. “If I need your help, I’ll be sure to come running to you okay.”

“Okay.”

“But right now you shouldn’t worry about that. Right now there is no danger, we don’t need to transform. We just need to focus on today and ourselves.”

“Right. Focus. Get...get to the point of acceptance.”

“Right.” He nodded even though she couldn’t see it. “We’ll figure out how to deal with this later. For now there are more important things we should worry about.”

“The safety of the city isn’t important?”

“The city is safe as long as I’ll sign that contract and do my job and not talk to my father again.” Adrien assured her. “The city can wait. We just need to be keeping an eye out and I’ll keep you posted if anything changes. To me, right now, being there for you is more important than the safety of the city.”

“Adrien Agreste, you sure don’t have your priorities straight.”

“Well aware. I would have found a place to live by now if I had.”

Marinette fell silent on the other side of the line. “Where are you even staying? At your old home?”
“No way. I’m staying at Le Grand Paris for now. I’m not setting foot in that mansion for any longer than I have to.”

“And you’re looking for a place to stay?”

“Looking at some possibilities right now actually. Haven’t found anything that really speaks to me yet.”

“What are you even looking for?”

“Something with four walls, a non leaky roof. A room or two to put down a bed or have someone sleep over. I don’t know. Anything really. Anything that isn’t my old house.”

“That’s not really specific.” She giggled. “Don’t you want your new home to be...well...a home for a while?”

“I...I guess? Thing is I don’t feel like I have total control over everything in my life just yet. I’m okay with just finding a temporary place for now.”

“Hey...if you’re desperate...there’s always a spot available here for you to sleep.”

He felt himself smile at her offer. “That’s sweet of you Mari, but it’s okay. Besides. I don’t want to invade on your privacy.”

“Never stopped you in the past.”

“Things were different back then.”

“They were. But...they don’t have to be. As far as I’m concerned, you’re allowed to drop in at any time you want Kitty. I’ll leave the skylight open for you.”

“Secret midnight visits? That brings back memories my Lady.”

“That it does.”

“So eh...what are you up to right now?”

“Cleaning up the bakery. I’m going to take a hot bath in a moment and turn in for the night.”

“Pretty early for that isn’t it?”

She laughed. “Do you have to get up at five in the morning every day?”

“Ehm...no...”

“Then don’t judge.”

“We still good for tomorrow night by the way?”

“I think so. Yeah.”

“Great. I’ll ask Alya to join us. What are you in the mood for for dinner? Pizza? Chinese? Greek?”
“I’m fine with anything Adrien.”

He once again nodded to himself.

“I’ll leave it up to Alya then. Anything playing you would like to watch?”

“I haven’t looked at it to be honest. I’m fine with anything really as long as it’s not a scary movie.”

“You okay? You don’t sound too excited for tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry. I am! I am really looking forward to it. I’m just...tired. It’s been a long day.”

“Alright. Then I’ll let you rest Bugaboo.”

“Okay. Get some rest too. I can imagine that talk with your father took a lot out of you.”

“You imagined right.” He laughed. “Sleep well Marinette.”

“You too Chaton. I…” She paused for a moment. “Thank you. For everything so far.”

He didn’t got the chance to assure her that she didn’t have to thank him before she hung up.

High heels loudly clicked against the sidewalk tiles beneath them.

How Chloé managed to even walk that fast wearing those high pumps, was a mystery to him. But she did and she was walking a lot faster than he was.

Maybe fair amount of bags he was carrying didn’t help much with that.

Most of the bags were filled with clothes for himself, but one or two had some dresses and a new pair of shoes Chloé had bought herself.

“Hey Chlo? Could you slow down? We have plenty of time to spare.”

“Maybe you should speed up.” She teased back.

“Maybe you could carry more than two bags and I would be able to speed up.”

“Ugh. Okay fine. Just give me my stuff then.” She stopped, allowing for him to catch up to her. “I thought you were strong?”

“I am. But five bags full tends to weigh down your arms after a full morning of shopping. This feels more like a sport than a relaxing activity.”

“I never claimed that shopping is a relaxing activity.” The blonde woman scoffed. “It is a serious sport that will leave you satisfied and burns calories at the same time.”

“It also burns a hole in my new bank account.” Adrien joked.
“But it fills up the empty space in your closet and the one in your heart.”

“I’m going to assume that last one is temporary?”

“Of course! That’s why I repeat my shopping spree every month.”

He couldn’t really tell if she was serious or not.

“Sound tiring.”

“It’s therapeutic.” She took two of the bags he was carrying. “Better?”

“Yeah. A little. Thanks. Where do you want to head next?”

“The jeweller’s. You promised me a diamond bracelet remember.”

“How could I forget.” Adrien rolled his eyes. “You keep reminding me.”

“It’s for a good cause.” The mayor’s daughter assured him.

“The good cause being you?”

“Not mainly but yes.” The woman smirked.

“Okay you lost me.”

She placed an arm around his own and gently pulled him along with her for a minute or two and dragged him into a big jewelry store.

Gold, silver, watches and gems sparkled in the artificial light once he stepped inside.

“So eh...you said you had your eye on something already right?”

“I did! Come! Come! Let me show you Adrikins!”

Chloé dragged him further into the store towards one of the display cases.

“That one.” She pointed at a thin, gold bracelet, decorated with three little diamonds.

Nothing as extravagant as he had expected she would pick out.

“That’s a modest design.”

“It has to be modest.”

“Because?”

“Because I want to wear it to daddy’s charity gala next month. I’m organizing it. If I show up wearing something too glamorous it’s going to look like I’m showing off.” She explained.

“Oh and that is absolutely not your style.” Adrien remarked with a sarcastic tone in his voice.
“Adrien, you know it is. I make it my mission to one-up anyone at any special event. But this is for charity so I have to be fabulous, but in a modest way.”

“Sounds like a challenge.”

Chloé nodded.

“I hope you don’t mind but I’m using auntie Emilie as an example. She always had this...elegant and tasteful way of dressing herself. From what I remember anyway.”

“Yeah. Mom did always knew how to use modest accessories.”

“Hey. Why don’t you buy something for yourself too? A new watch maybe?”

Adrien shrugged. “Don’t really need one.”

“Cufflinks?”

“Ah yes. Cufflinks for the suit I don’t have.”

“You could buy something for Dupain-Cheng. Nothing will cheer a girl up like some diamonds.”

“That cheers you up. Doesn’t mean it will cheer Mari up.”

“Trust me it will.”

“Chlo. She’s grieving. She doesn’t need a necklace or something right now.”

“You don’t know that! It might help.”

“I appreciate the advice but--”

“You want to get with her don’t you? A gift will go a long way.”

He blinked a couple of times in surprise. “What gave you that idea?”

“Oh please.” She rolled her eyes. “You’re as subtle as a brick to the face.”

“That subtle huh.”

“Yeah. You should get her something to show her you’re into her.”

“I don’t know. I’d like to believe that the only piece of jewelry I have to buy to show my undying love for her is an engagement ring.”

“Then buy one!”

“What?”

“Buy one. Even if you’re not going to ask her to marry you right now, it might give you a confidence boost to ask her out or something and if it never comes to that you can just sell it or
“I...I don’t...I don’t know Chloé. I haven’t even kissed her yet, or asked her out. The most intimate we ever got was cuddling in the same bed and a kiss on the cheek.”

“Ugh. Lame.”

“Besides. We’re friends and at this point I don’t see us becoming more than that. Even if I do love her. I don’t know if she feels the same.”

“Are you serious! How can you not know?” The mayor’s daughter huffed.

Again he blinked. “Know what?”

She threw up her hands in the air.

“You’re impossible I swear!”

“Oh! Hello Adrien. You’re here to pick Marinette up for tonight right?”

Sabine looked happy and cheerful when she answered the door.

Adrien gave her a nod and ran a hand through his long hair.

Due to the disagreement with his father, he didn’t have time for a haircut, a facial and a mani-pedi. So unfortunately Chloé had to go through all of that alone.

Not that she minded.

But he did need to get that haircut pretty soon.

“Yeah I am. Alya is waiting for us at the restaurant.”

“Come in. Come in. Marinette should be in the bakery.”

“Thank you madame Cheng.”

He stepped inside before Marinette’s mother closed the front door.

“Make sure you bring her back on a reasonable time.” The woman demanded before heading up the stairs.

What she would consider a ‘reasonable time’ he wasn’t sure. Anything before midnight if he had to guess.

Or maybe before three in the morning.

Nothing too late anyway.

He knew that Marinette needed her rest.
Walking straight towards the bakery.

There she was.
Hunched over a stack of papers on the same table fondant and dough was rolled out.

A light blush on her cheeks.
Her lips shimmering ever so slightly.

lipgloss, if he had to make a educated guess.

Dark jeans, a pink with black sweater completed her whole getup for a night out on the town.

“Hey Bug.” He greeted softly.

She looked up from her papers, giving Adrien a small smile.

“Hey Kitty.”

“Ready to go?”

“Yeah. Just let me grab my coat and purse from upstairs.”

He gave her a small nod. “Good idea. It is getting chilly out.”

“A scarf too then.”

Her smile broadened as she walked passed him and out of view.

She looked a lot happier compared to the night he came over for dinner.
More relaxed and at ease too.

That was a good thing.

That was progress.

Adrien turned his gaze towards the table again and looked at the large amount of paperwork on it.

He never realized that running a bakery also meant keeping up with so much administrative work on the side.

Going by the calculator sitting next to the pile, he assumed Marinette had been working on either taxes or calculating their weekly profit.
When he approached the table however, he noticed it was far from the case.

The sentence ‘payment overdue’ as well as the name from an insurance company and, what he assumed, was a supplier was mentioned all over.

Bills.

These were bills and payment notices.

He shouldn’t pry.
These weren’t for him to see.

Then again…the amount of them on the table was enough to make him both worry and suspect that her new found smile was at least a little forced.

“I’m ready!”

He turned towards her, the moment she stepped back into the kitchen.
The smile on her face fell fast when she noticed his hand on top one of the papers.

“Is...everything going okay?” He carefully asked.

“Yeah. It’s nothing you should worry about. We’re just behind on some bills but it’s the busy season again. We’ll be able to pay most of those at the end of the month.”

“Are you sure?”

The young woman frowned slightly. “I’m sure. I’ll deal with this Adrien. Don’t worry.”

“Alright. If you say so Mari.” He sighed. “Ready for a night out?”

The smile on her lips returned.

A lot more forced this time.

“I’m ready.”

“May our futures be bright, our friendship stay strong and all that jazz.”

“I’ll drink to that Alya.” Adrien raised his glass of wine and tapped it gently against the reporters glass and then against Marinette’s.

“I still feel so underdressed.” The former superhero muttered under her breath. “I thought you said ‘nothing fancy’.”

“Alya suggested something fancy. Besides it’s not like it’s a four star restaurant. You’re not underdressed Marinette.”

“Yeah girl! This place only has one star and you look fabulous like always.” Her best friend added.

He nodded in agreement.

“Thanks guys.”

“Hey.” He put his hand gently on top of her own. “Let’s just enjoy the evening okay. It’s going to be nothing special, just dinner and enjoying a movie with your friends.”

“Right. Yeah. I can do casual.”
“Why do I have this feeling like you’re forcing yourself to be here?” Alya suddenly asked her.

“Well...eh...mama keeps telling me that I need to get out more. Even before Adrien came back and...well...I never had a reason to or knew where to go until Adrien invited me this week.”

The reporter gave a small nod. “I hear you. Work has been eating so much of my free time, I didn’t really have a reason to make time for anything fun. Until Adrien practically begged me to be here tonight.”

“For your own good.” He simply stated. “For both of your own good.”

“Good to know someone is looking out for us.”

“Just reminding you that it’s okay to wind down every once in a while. That’s all.”

“Thank you Adrien. That’s very sweet of you...especially after...well…”

“We’ve been the worst friends to you.” Alya finished Marinette’s thought.

“No. No I’m the one who has to apologize. If...If I just had said ‘no’ to my father, shoved this agreement with him back up his ass, I wouldn’t have to leave. I wouldn’t have lost contact with you guys, I would be there for you.” He turned towards his partner. “You would have time to mourn and I could have helped you guys out in the bakery so you wouldn’t have to drop out.”

“Wait...what?” The other woman asked bewildered. “What deal? I thought your father just forced you on that plane to go study wherever he wanted you to.”

The blonde exchanged a apologetic look with Marinette.

He didn’t mean to start ranting.

“There’s a little more to it Alya.”

“You are in on the details too! Marinette!”

“It’s complicated.”

Alya raised a brow. “It’s always complicated isn’t it. Just tell me the deets Sunshine.”

Again he exchanged a look with the baker’s daughter, who simply gave a small shrug.

“So eh...father...father turned out to be Hawkmoth.”

All expression fell from the woman’s face. Still he continued with his explanation, lowering his voice in a hushed tone.

“When I found out, father struck a deal with me. He would give me his Miraculous in exchange for me taking over his company.”

“Shit. Are you serious?”

He nodded. “I agreed and gave the Miraculous to Ladybug and Chat Noir. That has been….about
seven years ago.”

“Guess your old man didn’t forget about the deal huh?”

“Sadly no. So...if I hadn’t taken it. I would have been a better friend to you guys too. I’m to blame just as much for our group falling apart.”

“Bullshit.” Marinette muttered.

“Hey thanks to you nobody has to be afraid to be Akumatized. If anything you should have gotten a medal or something.” Alya commented. “I just wished you would have told us sooner. Well...by us I mean Nino and myself. Or...does Nino know too?”

“No. Only Mari knew.”

“I found out by accident.” The girl lied to keep her past secret identity a secret.

“That’s why I’ve been falling out with my father as well. We haven’t seen eye to eye since I found out he was putting the city in danger.”

“Any idea why he did it?”

“Something to do about bringing my mom back with the power of Ladybug’s and Chat’s Miraculous.” He shrugged. “The thing is, even if we know he was Hawkmoth, we don’t have any evidence right now to actually put him behind bars for what he did. Only mine, Ladybug’s and Chat Noir’s word on it.”

She nodded in agreement. “Not to mention both of them have been off the radar for a while. It will be hard tracking them back down for any kind of testimony. That means no scoop for me either.”

“It’s better to just let things be for now.” Marinette grabbed her fork and started to shove her food around the plate. “The city is safe, Adrien is back home and we’re all a bit to blame for our friend group falling apart like it did. All we can do now is move forward.”

“That’s true.”

“And we should move forward.” He agreed. “So let’s just enjoy ourselves for now before we’re sucked back into work and whatever society demands of us.”

“Nicely said Agreste. Nicely said.”

The autumn air felt cold against his skin.
It wouldn’t be long until the frost would set in every night.

Still he had never felt warmer before as one of his best friends walked close to him.

“Shame Alya lives the other way. Would have been nice to get a cup of coffee together after the movie ended or something.”
“Is that an invite to get a cup of coffee Kitty?”


“Well it is getting pretty cold out. I guess a cup of cocoa would be nice.”

“Great! Where do you want to go and get it?”

“The usual place.”

“We both know the usual place is your balcony. Or do you mean the top of the tower? The other usual place.”

“Do you have Plagg with you?”

“No. He’s being lazy these past few days. All that’s on his mind is naps and cheese. He eh...might be a little upset that he couldn’t see Tikki.”

“He still blames me doesn’t he?”

“No. He just misses her is all.”

“He should blame me. I didn’t even argue when she suggested going back to master Fu.”

“You both did the right thing. We’ll get her back when you’re feeling a bit better and Plagg just has to be a bit more patient.”

“I see. Well...since you don’t have Plagg with you, the balcony it is.”

He held out his hand for her to take.
Without hesitating she took it, letting their fingers intertwine.
Sharing each other’s warmth.

The moment they touched, it felt like his fingertips were tingling and his heart skipped a beat or two before starting to beat as hard as it could.

A heavenly feeling that lasted far after they had made themselves a cup of hot chocolate and settled themselves on the lounge chair which was placed on Marinette’s balcony.

The flowers and plants she had there were no longer in bloom, or even green.
But it was cozy all the same as they huddled against each other.

“This is nice.” She sipped her drink carefully. “I’ve missed this.”

“Me too. New York has lights during the evening but Paris has lights. You know.”

“That’s because Paris is your home Adrien.”

“I don’t doubt that’s a big part of why this view is breathtaking.”

“And the other reasons?”
He leaned more against her and used one hand to tilt her chin upwards so she was looking at him. “Enjoying the view next to you.”

“You really haven’t lost your charms have you Chaton.” She grinned, pushing on his nose with one finger to push him away from her.

“I certainly hope not. How else am I going to make you laugh?”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right. Only your Chat Noir charms are ridiculous enough to do that.”

“I should be insulted shouldn’t I? But coming from you, I will consider it a compliment.”

“It is. Because I missed all your ridiculousness. Flirts, puns and all.” She took another sip. “And I wouldn’t want to have you be any other way.”

“That’s good because I am feline pawticular punderful tonight.”

“Oh no. What have I unleashed!” She giggled.

“You eh...ehm...”

“What’s the matter Kitty? Cat got your tongue?”

“I have to admit. I am a little rusty.” Adrien chuckled.

“Don’t worry I’m sure you’ll get the hang of your puns again in no time.” She yawned.

Adrien put his half empty cup down on the ground. “Tired?”

“Yeah. It’s been a long day for me.”

“Let’s get you to bed then.”

“It’s fine. It’s fine. Besides I haven’t finished my drink--” Another yawn. “--yet.”

“How about I drop by tomorrow and we’ll redo this whole cocoa thing?”

“Yeah...okay...sure. To--” Once again she yawned. “Tomorrow. We can talk more about that man having another Miraculous too. We need a plan for that Adrien.”

“Sure. In due time Bug. Get some rest first okay.”

She nodded slightly. “I’d better get myself to bed then before I fall asleep here.”

Standing up, Marinette put her cup on the small, wooden, table and made her way to her skylight. Opening it, she dropped down on her bed.

Adrien soon followed.

“I had a nice time tonight. Thank you for getting me out of the house.”

“Maybe we should do it again real soon. You and me.”
“Just you and me?”

“Watching a movie, taking a nice walk, eating fast food and ice cream. Like old times.”

His partner gave him a warm smile. “I’d like that.” She answered before kicking off her shoes and taking off her coat.

He could only give a nod as he made his way off her bed. “I’ll leave you to rest Bugaboo. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thanks. See you tomorrow Adrien.”

His initial plan was to sneak out the front door without alarming madame Cheng. Whom, according to Marinette, had probably already gone to bed by the time he had brought her home.

It was a bit of a surprise when he noticed that the woman in fact hadn’t gone to bed, but was sitting comfortably in the living room with a hot drink.

“Oh! Ehm...hello madame Cheng. I...we thought you were already sleeping.”

“I was. But I couldn’t fall asleep.” She admitted.

“I hope we didn’t talk too loudly.”

“Oh no. Not at all dear. It’s just...the bed seems awfully large without my husband next to me. Some nights...it’s just hard falling asleep without him you know. As if my mind knows he's missing and doesn't want to make me fall asleep knowing that.”

He nodded in understanding.

“Can I get you something before you leave?”

“No. No it’s fine madame Cheng. I’m just going to head out and get some rest myself. I’ll be back tomorrow to take Mari out for a cup of hot cocoa at the café next door. If...If that’s alright with you of course.”

“You don’t need to ask me for permission Adrien. If Marinette wants to go she can go wherever and with whomever she wants to. She is old enough to make her own decisions.”

“I know. I guess I’m just used to asking for permission for everything from my own father. It’s hard to lose that habit.”

“I understand.”

“Can I...ask you something?”

“Of course dear.”

Adrien took a seat next to her and lowered his voice. Afraid Marinette would hear their conversation.
“I noticed the bills Marinette was looking over earlier tonight and...I know it’s not any of my business and you don’t need to answer, but I just want to know if it’s true what she told me. That everything would be alright at the end of the month.”

Sabine shook her head and sighed deeply. “Oh Marinette.”

“She probably doesn’t want to make me worry about her. That’s how she is. But is it true? Are you guys going to be okay?”

Again the woman shook her head. “N-No.”

Sabine Cheng was on the verge of breaking down.

“No? How.. How bad is it madame Cheng?”

“I...I haven’t told Marinette because she doesn’t know about this but...at this rate...we’ll lose our home and the bakery within the next three...maybe four months.”

Homeless.

They would be homeless in four months.

A hundred questions raced through his mind, but Adrien asked only one.

“How did it come to this?”

“We had to close down the shop for a while when Tom got sick. We lost a lot of income then. After that we found out Tom’s treatment wasn’t fully covered by the insurance and then one of our ovens broke down so we aren’t as stocked as we would have liked.” She explained. “On top of that there have been a couple of new bakeries in the neighbourhood. Most of our clients went to them.”

“So the whole busy season thing…”

“No. We get customers, but it’s not as busy as it used to be. We’re lucky we’re making any profit at the end of the month, but it’s barely enough to support ourselves, let alone pay off those large bills.”

The poor woman.

She was about to lose almost everything.

“Okay...Okay. I...I am going to think about this and come up with a solution for both of you okay. I’m going to help out. I don’t want you to lose your home.”

“Adrien. We can’t ask you to do that.”

“Well. Then it’s a good thing I’m insisting.” He gave the woman a smile. “Both of you are going through so much right now. If I can take away just one of your worries, things will be easier for you. I just...need to find out how.”

Tears began rolling down her cheeks.
“T-Thank you. Thank you.”
Plan A and plan B

Chapter Summary

Adrien talks business with Sabine Cheng.

It was a newly renovated building. The exterior blended in perfectly with the old architecture of the city and the neighbourhood.

The inside however was barren and modern looking with it’s open layout and plastered walls. Big windows showcasing a ocean of rooftops reaching out as far as he could see.

Every step he took echoed back to him.

It felt...lonely.

That was the word Adrien was looking for.

Lonely.

A perfect reflection of how he had felt when he was still a teenager. How he felt in New York and how he felt when he had flown back.

“This apartment has a stunning view, with the tower clearly in sight.”

The young man nodded as he followed the gesture of the blonde haired woman showing him the house.

The sun began setting behind the buildings already, even if it wasn’t even that late in the afternoon yet.

Last rays of light illuminating the tips of buildings.

In the distance, he could faintly make out the rooftop of his old home, the hotel and what looked like Marinette’s balcony.

“Everything in here is brand new. Plumbing. Electricity. Floor heating.” The woman continued to sum up.

“It’s….nice…”

“I sense some doubt.”

“Well it’s not awful. Absolutely the best out of the three you’ve showed me today. It just looks so...sad…”
The woman nodded. “It’s a blank canvas. You can turn this place into whatever you want it to be. And you’ll have yourself a cozy penthouse apartment in no time.”

Adrien frowned.

He had lived in a penthouse apartment before. It wasn’t what it was cracked up to be. Though he had to admit that sneaking in and out as Chat Noir was a lot easier being so high up. The view was also nice but other than that it was big, empty and really no different from his childhood bedroom.

This place, as well as the one in New York, was lacking something. Something warm, cozy and homey.

Something he knew the bakery and, to some extent, his room at the Le Grand Paris, did have.

Something he couldn’t even imagine this apartment to have.

“I don’t think this is a good place for me.”

“How so?” She asked.

He gave a light shrug. “I’d hate to complain but…it seems so big. I mean. Four bedrooms. I don’t need four.”

“Maybe not now. But for the future? Unless you don’t want to have children.”

Did he want to have children?

“Never gave it much thought to be honest.” He shrugged.

“You can always turn one room into a study, another into a gym, one more into the master bedroom and the last one into a spare bedroom.”

“A gym. With downstairs neighbours.” Adrien laughed. “They are not going to be happy with that.”

“The floors are well isolated. Sound from here won’t be heard down there.”

“Hard to imagine but I’ll take your word for it.” He gave a small nod.

“There’s a rooftop garden upstairs that goes with the penthouse. You can really enjoy the view up there and it’s perfect to just enjoy any day with nice weather and you have so much space to have the family come over for dinner.”

An idea suddenly came to him.

“There’s enough room to have some of the family move in too.”

Well…

Technically not his family. Not on paper anyway.
But that was but a minor detail.

“Absolutely! This apartment is well suited as a bachelor’s pad or a family home. It can be whatever you make of it!”

A studio slash living space for Marinette and her mother. It wouldn’t be a perfect solution, but at least they wouldn’t be homeless for the time being.

“Would it be alright if we made an appointment to take a look at this place again?” He asked her. “I’m not completely sold on it, but it’s a definite ‘maybe’ for now. I can take a friend with me next time, to take another look and get another person’s opinion on this place?”

The real estate agent nodded. “Of course monsieur Agreste. Do you want me to keep looking for potential homes too?”

“Yeah. I’m...not sure what I want really...this is my first place of my own.” It wasn’t entirely true, but he just couldn’t count his own bedroom or the penthouse in New York as something that he actually owned. His father had paid for those.

Nervously he rubbed the back of his neck. “Just four walls should be enough in my book, but I suppose this should be an actual home and not just a place to sleep after the day is done huh?”

“Most people tend to look for a home. Others actually do look for a place to eat and sleep. What are you specifically looking for monsieur Agreste? You weren’t very specific when you asked us to help with the purchase of a house? Only that--”

“That money was no issue.” He finished her sentence. “And it still isn’t. I guess….I guess I’m not really sure what I’m looking for in a home.”

“Well. Maybe you’ll know it when you’ll see it. In the meantime I’ll put this apartment on the list of possible candidates.”

Sabine Cheng gave him a wide smile the moment she opened the door. Adrien greeted her back with a wide grin.

“Adrien.” The small woman opened up her arms and reached out to pull him into a hug. “I was expecting you a little earlier today dear.”

“So was I. But looking at apartments took a little longer than I had hoped.”

“No matter. Have you eaten yet?”

“Well. No. I was hoping to take Marinette out for a quick bite and that hot cocoa I promised her.”

The small woman frowned as she stepped aside to let him in. “If you can get her out of bed.”

“What?”
“She hasn’t been out of bed all day. She just says she’s tired and wants to sleep. So...I let her.”

“Has she had some food?”

“Not much.”

The blonde shot her a small nod. “If you’ll allow me, I could try and see if I can get her down for a meal?”

“Would you? Thank you Adrien.”

The moment he pushed the trapdoor to her room open, he noticed things were different.

Her walls were still pink.

The chaise still in its place.

But gone were the sketches of dresses and suits that once had decorated her walls. The posters of Jagged Stone were no more.

“Marinette?”

A soft moan was heard from the platform she slept on.

“You okay?” He carefully asked her, slowly approaching the stairs leading up to her bed.

“Adrien?”

“Yeah it’s me Bug.”

Her barely awake form turned towards him once he reached the top of the step, and he noticed her bluebell eyes were bloodshot. Remains of tears still lingering in the corner of her eyes.

She had been crying.

“What are you doing here?”

“Taking you out for hot cocoa. Remember?” He smiled at her. “But if you’re not feeling up for it, we can take a raincheck.”

“Hot cocoa. Right...I remember.” His partner sighed. “I’m....I’m sorry...I must have fallen asleep.”

“That’s okay Princess.” He gently assured her. “Your mom did say you’ve been bunking up here all day. Are you feeling okay?”

She put her head back down on her pillow. “I...don’t know. I feel...numb. I guess.”

That didn’t sound good.

“Numb?” He asked her, yet she gave no further clarification. “Okay move over, I’m joining you.”
“What?”

“I’m joining you.” He repeated. “And we’re going to talk and hug until you feel a little better again.”

“No. No it’s okay.”

Adrien ignored her protest and climbed over the bed towards her.

“I don’t need a hug.” She protested once again, pressing her face closer into her pillow.

Adrien wasn’t sure if she was trying to ignore him this way or simply trying to hide. Either way, he wasn’t going to leave her room until he was sure she was okay.

“Okay. No hugs then. Let’s just talk.” Pulling up his legs, the former model made himself comfortable on her bed. “What’s bugging you Bug?”

“Aside from your horrible puns?” She groaned into her pillow.

“Aside from that.”

“I...I don’t know...I just can’t seem to get myself out of bed today.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know. I...I.” He noticed that her voice started to break. “I thought I was doing better Adrien. I’m sorry.”

Marinette let out a couple of muffled sobs.

“You don’t need to apologize. Cry if you need to Mari. That’s normal.” Adrien put a warm hand on her arm and stroked her skin with his thumb. “It’s okay to feel like this.”

“I...I feel b-broken.”

“You’re not Bugaboo. You’re just going through a low point and you’ll come out stronger than ever. You’ll see.”

“Why...w-why doesn’t it feel like I will?” She pushed herself in a upward position, forcing him to remove his hand, and he could see how exhausted she looked. A couple of tears rolling down her face. “I-I just don’t feel like myself a-a-anymore.”

He moved a bit closer to her and pulled her against him. That was all that was needed for her to fully weep on his shoulder again.

“You will.” He whispered softly to her. “You will Marinette. In time.”

“I-I don’t want to cry a-a-anymore.”

“Shhh. It’s okay.”

“I...I don’t!”
“It’s okay.” He repeated, tightening the embrace.

“No.”

“It’s okay.”

“I can’t. I d-d-on’t…”

“I know. I know. It still hurts.”

She nodded against him.

“But you were feeling better yesterday weren’t you?”

Again she nodded.

“Then you’re moving forward Mari. You’re doing better. Soon there will be more good days than bad ones. But for now the bad ones will stick around for a while and they will suck.”

“They do.” She agreed with a short laugh. “They suck really bad.”

“You know what makes it better?”

“No?”

“Love and support from your friends and family.”

“An original answer Kitty.” The dark haired girl sniffled forcing a smile.

“I know it’s cliché. But it’s true. Around the time mom disappeared...well...I had Nathalie to help me through it all to some extend and after that I met Plagg and he was a good distraction. It wasn’t a lot, but it helped.”

“I could use a distraction.” She muttered. “I’m growing so t-t-tired just...thinking about...stuff.”

“Stuff?”


Adrien gave a small nod.

“My mind just starts wandering to dark places and then...I just can’t seem to stop myself from crying.” Marinette continued. “I hate it. I hate it because that isn’t me.”

“You hate it because you can’t push it away.” He added. “But that makes you human Marinette. You don’t have to lock away all your feelings. You don’t have to and you shouldn’t. Don’t make the same mistake as my father.”

She flinched slightly under his touch at the mention of the man.

“I’m nothing like him.”
“I know. I mean….” He huffed, trying to find the right words to say as to not make the girl more upset. “I mean you shouldn’t crop up all your frustrations and feelings like he did. That’s not to say you would turn out as bitter as he is now if you did. Just that it would be...something heavy to keep carrying with you. Does that make sense?”

“I...guess?”

“Sorry. I’m not great at explaining these things.”

“No. No you’re trying to make me feel better right?”

“Emphasis on trying.” He laughed sheepishly.

“But you’re trying and...weirdly enough it helps a little.”

“Are you feeling better then? Less numb?”

It took a few seconds before she answered. “I don’t know about feeling better. But I do feel a little less numb.”

“Good. That’s a start.” He nodded. “Are you hungry? Want some food?”

“Not sure. I just...want to sleep some more.”

Adrien frowned a bit with worry.

Her mother had told him that she had been sleeping, or at least stayed in bed, for the majority of the day. Wasn’t she well rested by now?

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Thanks though.”

“Okay.” He leaned forward, leading her body back down on the bed. “Get some rest Marinette. I’ll drop by tomorrow.”

He wasn’t sure why he did what he did or if it was something done on instinct, but his brain only registered what he had done after he had softly pecked her cheek.

Wide, bluebell eyes, looked at him in surprise.

“S...Sorry. I…” Adrien began to apologize.

“No. It’s okay. It’s just...it’s been a while. Since you’ve kissed me on the cheek I mean.”

“Before I left for New York.”

“Yeah.”

“I still should have asked. Sorry.”
“It’s okay. I don’t mind.”

“Okay. Good. Great. Euhm...” For a moment he was at a loss for words. “I am...going to...go downstairs. Keep your mother company for a little bit and head back out.”

“Okay.” She gave him a tired smile which, in turn, made his heart skip a beat.

“Okay.” He repeated. “Raincheck on getting that hot cocoa?”

His partner nodded. “Maybe next week?”

“Cool. I’ll bring you a cup personally if you’re not feeling up to leaving the bed again.”

She laughed. Probably unaware that he wasn’t really joking.

“I’ll leave you to rest Mari.”

“Okay. Thank you Chaton. For being there for me.”

“For you? Anything Princess.”

Carefully he moved off the bed, leaving the baker’s daughter to rest.

Adrien was met with Sabine’s worried gaze the moment he descended back down from the girl’s room.

“Well?”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I tried, but she doesn’t want to eat.”

“Oh Marinette.” Her mother sighed.

“She’s going to be fine.” The blonde assured her. “We talked. She cried. We hugged it out. She...She’s just taken a step back for now.”

“I guess that is only normal. Things like this don’t disappear overnight.”

“If I had to make a uneducated guess, it’s because she is only letting all of it go now, that it’s just hitting her a lot harder then when her father just passed away. Like a timebomb. Or something.”

“Or something.” Sabine agreed. “Thank you. For being there for her. For both of us.”

“Marinette would do the same for me. I am only trying to be a good friend. Besides. I...may have found a solution to your problem.”

The woman took a seat at the dining table and he followed her example. “Okay. Let’s hear it.”

“First of all, this might not be ideal. Or the best idea. But...I’ve been looking for a place of my own and I’ve seen this apartment that’s for sale.” She frowned at his words but held her tongue as he continued. “It has enough room for you and Marinette too. The easiest thing to do would be to cut your losses, sell the place and live with me. Temporarily. Or not temporarily. I don’t mind.”
“Adrien we--”

“Marinette could go back to design school. You don’t have to worry about anything.” He quickly added before the mother could fully protest.

“That is very sweet of you to offer. But I am afraid that is not an option dear.”

“Not having a roof over your head isn’t an option either.” He argued.

“We can’t sell the bakery.”

What other option did they have?
It was either sell it and keep a roof over their heads, or keep it and be forced to sell it in a couple of months anyway.

One way or another the place wasn’t going to last.

“Why not?”

“Let me explain it this way. Imagine your father’s company. Imagine you taking it over and at some point it’s on the verge of bankruptcy. All the hard work your father put into it. All the love, care, long hours. His legacy, just dying and you’re forced to sell it. How would you feel if that happened?”

“Relieved. Happy. Ready to throw a party.” Sabine frowned once again. “But… I get it. Monsieur Dupain put everything he had in this bakery for his family. It’s hard to let that go. Just because I have no problem selling my father’s company, that doesn’t mean that you wouldn’t have trouble giving up the bakery.”

“It’s the last part of him we have Adrien. I’m not ready to give that up just yet. I’m not ready to let that go. Not without trying whatever we can to keep it.”

“I understand. Then...Then let me still do everything I can to help you guys out.”

“If you have another plan, I’m all ears.” Sabine nodded. “And...perhaps we’ll take you up on that offer to temporarily move in with you, when there’s no way back anymore.”

“There is always a way back madame Cheng. Now. Tell me. What would be the main problems with the bakery be right now?”

“Aside from the decreasing amount of customers and the overdue bills? One of our ovens broke down so we’re not able to bake our popular products fast enough. Several of our suppliers don’t want to deliver our ingredients to us anymore because we’re behind on payments. But most of all...” She sighed deeply. “Most of all I’m worried that Marinette is overworking herself.”

“Being up at five, about six days a week isn’t easy.” Adrien agreed.

“She wakes up at five, then goes to bed at eleven because she’s doing all the cleaning up and most of the paperwork. She’s...she’s making sure I’ve got room to grief and not worry. But I do. I do worry about her.”
“So do I.” He admitted. “So...sounds like most of your problems are finance related?”

The woman gave a small nod. “All of it come to think of it.”

“Then...Then I might know how to fix this.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve got finances to spare.”

“Adrien. No.”

“No. Please listen. What if, and this is a temporary situation, I become your business partner. I’ll arrange all your finances, repairs and whatnot. All you and Marinette have to do is keep the place running and when everything is financially stable and healthy again, I’ll back off and leave everything to you once again.”

“But if we don’t make a profit then...”

“We will.” He assured her. “I know some basic marketing tricks. We’ll have this place buzzing with paying customers again before you know it.”

“Okay. I believe you.”

“It will be alright madame Cheng. Everything will turn out alright. I’m going to do my best to make sure of that. If you agree to it of course and otherwise we’ll have plan B and you’re both very welcome to live with me.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“You can think it over if you need to.”

She shook her head. “No. No I don’t think I need to. I don’t even know what other solution there is. I’ll take you up on that offer Adrien. Anything to keep the bakery.”

“Okay. Okay good.”

He felt optimistic about plan A.

His father was paying him too much anyway.
He had funds to spare on his savings account too.
All coming from his father.

What better way to spend it than to help a dying business.

For a brief moment he wondered how Marinette would react knowing that he was going to help them out with their problems.
Problems she tried to hide from him when he had spotted the overdue bills.

Adrien wasn’t sure if it was pride that prevented her from accepting the help, or that her current state of mind just didn’t allow her to think logically for now.
But knowing his partner, there was a big chance that she wouldn’t be too happy about it.

“So eh…” He started. “Maybe we should keep this from Marinette for now? Just until everything is final and I can contact my lawyer and whoever is responsible for setting up these sort of things for us.”

“As a surprise?”

“Sure. That too.” Adrien was starting to feel a little nervous. “But most of all because I don’t know if Marinette is going to accept my help. Not this kind of help. Since I’m her friend and all.”

“As much as I value her opinion, I am afraid my daughter has no say in the matter.” Sabine’s voice was soft and gentle when she told him that. “I own the bakery and as it’s owner, I get to decide if we’ll accept your help or not. No matter how much my daughter will protest.”

He gave a small nod in understanding.

“This is for the good of the bakery. Tom’s legacy. And since you are the one offering this whole business deal, I am willing to accept it. Because I know you Adrien. Because I trust you and so does Marinette.”

“I know. I just...want you guys to not have to worry about anything. To stay happy as a family.”

“So do I. But, if you’re that worried about what my daughter will think of all of this, I will keep things quiet.”

“I just don’t want to lose her madame Cheng. Not because I’m trying to do the right thing and she might not agree to it or something.”

“I will talk to my daughter if she is giving you a hard time for it.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you hungry? Have you eaten yet?” The mother suddenly pouted and frowned. “I have already asked you that haven’t I?” She then laughed.

He couldn’t help but give the woman a smile back. “You have and no. I haven’t eaten yet.”

“Would you like to join us for dinner?”

“I’d love too.”

Sabine Cheng let herself slide off the high kitchen chair and made her way to the stovetop where several pots and pans were already placed. Waiting to have it’s contents cooked and served.

“Can I help you with something?”

“You can help me cut some vegetables if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all madame Cheng.”
It wasn’t until they had shared a bunch of idle chit chat, reminisce about the ‘old’ days and he was halfway through his first serving of potatoes and vegetables, that Marinette quietly made her way down from her room.

She had put on a robe and a fresh shirt.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” She greeted back tiredly. Her voice sounding raw and worn out.

He suspected that she hadn’t completely stopped sobbing the moment he left her room.

“Marinette sweetheart.” Sabine wasted no time walked up to her daughter and pulling her into a big hug a hug the girl returned with a gentle embrace of her own.

“Hey maman.”

“Are you feeling okay?”

“Better.”

“You hungry now Mari?” Adrien asked her.

“Not sure.”

“You have to eat Marinette. Please? Just try to have a couple of bites.”

“Okay.” She eventually sighed in defeat at her mother’s pleads. “Okay a couple of bites.”

Her mother practically pushed her on the set next to Adrien as she hurried along to prepare her daughter a plate of food before she had a change of heart.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t heat it up this time.” Adrien playfully told the girl. “It should be more than edible.”

“Thank heavens for that.” She joked back with a roll of her eyes.

He couldn’t help but give her a wide smile.
One she returned with a smile of her own.

“I’m coming home.”

That wasn’t something Adrien was prepared to hear at the end of a, otherwise normal, Monday. Especially after he had been diving deep through internet site after internet site.
Looking for tips on how to help someone through the stages of grief, looking for apartments and information on the how’s and what’s he needed to do to to be a business partner.

His mind was just not ready to process the sudden news.

“What? Why?”
“She’s impossible to work with.” Nino complained over the phone. “I’ve been here a week. I’ve shown her at least a dozen audio samples. But they weren’t the ‘sound’ she was looking for or some shit like that.”

“Dude. Seriously? You’re not going to push through?”

“Nah man. Maybe it’s for the best. I might be too busy if this thing becomes a hit.”

“Wasn’t that the point of the whole collab?”

“It was. But…then Alya…we kept talking to each other through the weekend. I can’t stop thinking about her.” That wasn’t exactly news to the former model. “I’m going to do better this time. If Monique doesn’t like the samples I’m showing her today, I’m flying back home.”

“And if she does?”

“I’ll keep working with her until the song is done and after that I’m taking a break and work things out with Al back in Paris. There has to be a way for us both to get what we want and stick together you know.”

“I know. Just…do what you think is right Nino.”

“The right thing is putting her needs before my career.”

“Pretty sure those two can coexist. For both of you.”

“Maybe. Eh. I’ll just talk it out with Alya. We both need to make changes if this relationship is going to work.”

“And if it does?”

His best friend didn’t answer right away, but Adrien could almost feel the boy smirking on the other side of the line. “If it does, then I’m going to marry that woman and never let her go.”

“Dibs on being the best man.”

“Dude. I was going to ask Mari to be my best man.” The DJ snorted. “Speaking of our favorite pigtailed girl--”

“She doesn’t have pigtails anymore.” He quickly corrected him.

“What?”

“She cut it short. It looks really cute actually.”

“Short? Really?”

“Yep.”

“Good thing I didn’t get her girly hair thingies then.”
“I’m sure she would have loved them either way. But what did you get her?”

“That will ruin the surprise man.”

“I won’t tell. I promise Nino.”

“Oh, Okay. I got her this huge stuffed cat plush I found in a store somewhere in Queens and a bunch of chocolate and some fabric and stuff.”

Adrien frowned hearing that. “She’s not designing anymore. I told you that right?”

“I know. I just...figured it would reignite a spark y’know? She’s been making her own stuff for as long as I can remember. It’s part of her. Maybe it’ll bring back some of that passion? I don’t know. If not I’m sure she’ll have a use for it eventually.”

“Maybe.”

“You don’t sound like you like the idea.”

“Aaaah. Don’t mind me.” Adrien quickly waved off. “Just thinking about too many things at the moment. I’m sure it’ll cheer her up at least.”

“What’s on your mind dude?”

“A...lot of things actually. Can I...ask you something?”

“Sure bud. You can ask me anything.”

“Would you hate me if I said that I was to blame for our friendship being put on cold ice like that?”

“What?”

“I told Alya this already.” He clarified. “But I found out a couple of years ago that father is...was...Hawkmouth.”

“Dude! Serious?!”

“Yeah. I arranged a deal with him. He would give up his Miraculous and I would take over the company.”

“So the trip to New York?”

“Unplanned but nothing I could do about it. It’s just...if I didn’t take the deal...he would have never forced me to go there and we would have stayed friends for a lot longer. I could have helped Marinette sooner I...I...”

“You don’t know that. For all we know your father would have destroyed the city at some point. We could have drifted apart anyway. Dude. Not your fault that we did these past few years. What’s done is done and you’re still my best friend man.”

“Now I’m the one starting to tear up.” He tried to joke.
Yet he did feel his eyes burn and sting and he tried his best to not let his emotions take the upper hand.

“About time I got you back for that.” Nino laughed. “We’re all shitty friends man. Might as well be shitty friends together.”

“You’re not a shitty friend. A garbage friend sure, but not a shitty one.”

He could clearly hear the sarcasm in Nino’s voice. “Wow. Thanks. I feel so validated.”

“You’re welcome.” He laughed. “Hey, let me know when you drop back on Parisian ground. I’ll come pick you up from the airport.”

“Will do my dude.”

“You look like shit.”

Adrien groaned at the comment of one of the members of his team. Marcel was his name, if Adrien remembered Paul’s speech correctly. Or whatever vague details of it were still lingering in his memory.

“No offence by the way.” The raven haired young man quickly added.

“None taken. Been doing a lot of research yesterday and haven’t had much sleep. Looking like shit was to be expected.”

“Well. It’s the opposite with me. Thanks to you I can fall asleep again without having to worry customers are going to yell at me the next day.”

“Oh. Eh. You’re welcome?”

“Hey. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“What’s your last name anyway?”

The mediocre coffee he had just been drinking suddenly had a very bitter taste to it.

“My..” He coughed slightly. “My last name? Does that matter.”

Adrien already knew it did. If anyone here would find out he was the son of Gabriel. Well…

The young man shrugged. “I guess not. But I was trying to flirt with Angela from designing the other day and she mentioned that she was so sure she had seen you from somewhere before.”

“I have one of those faces I guess.” He lied. “She might have mistaken me for someone famous or
something.”

“Maybe.” Marcel muttered. “But I do have to admit you have a familiar looking face.”

“Again. Probably just a person with one of those generic faces.”

“Nah. I’m pretty sure I’ve seen you somewhere before too. It’s on the tip of my--- Oh hello!”

Marcel’s gaze suddenly jerked towards the entrance of the office.

In had walked the angel that had mercifully distracted the man from his conversation with him.

On one hand, Adrien was glad.

He wasn’t ready yet to reveal to everyone that he was, in fact, an Agreste.

On the other hand, the angel that had kind of saved him, was Marinette.

Why she wasn’t at the bakery and carrying a big white box in her arms, he didn’t know, but she had clearly caught his colleague’s attention.

“Oh shit! She’s coming my way.” Adrien heard the raven haired man whisper before he turned towards him once more. “Please don’t say anything embarrassing. I’m going for a good first impression here.”

“Sure you are.” The blonde grinned as he gave his friend a small wave.

Much time to get a remark of any kind back wasn’t given as Marinette made her way towards him.

“Hey.” She greeted, while looking at Adrien.

“Hi.” Marcel greeted instead. “Never seen you around here before. I would have remembered if I had.”

“Ehm...hello? And...no. No this is my first time here.” She politely answered back.

“What even brings you here Marinette? Didn’t even know you would drop in today.”

Once again she turned her attention back to her partner after he spoke. “Maman insisted I’d bring this to you.” She held out the white box in her hands.

“Pastries?”

She nodded.

“Could you even find your way? It’s a maze around here.”

Marinette raised a brow at Marcel’s question. “Yes. It took some time, but I found my way.”

“Ah. Well. I’d be happy to escort you back to the front of the building. Just in case you’re afraid you’ll get lost.”
“I...I eh…”

“You’re just here to make a delivery right Marinette?” Adrien suggested, trying to steer the conversation away from a pit filled with awkwardness.

“Yes. Yes I am. And...well...I was hoping we could talk Chaton.” Her eyes darted to Marcel for just a split second. “In private?”

“Of course Princess.”

He stood up from his seat and took the box from here, which he shoved into the dark haired man’s arms right away. “Mind passing these around?”

“Eh...no. I don’t mind.”

“Cool. Thanks Marcel.”

Placing a hand on the small of her back, he gently guided her towards the hallway.

“Sorry about that my Lady. Marcel is a bit of a flirt from what people have told me.”

“I know flirts Adrien. That guy, wasn’t a flirt. Now Chat Noir. That’s a flirt.” She grinned.

“Not that that ever worked.” Adrien laughed. “But seriously. I didn’t expect you visiting today.”

“Like I said, maman insisted I’d bring you those pastries. As a thanks, for helping us out through this difficult moment in our lives.”

“You would have done the same.”

She nodded. “Also…”

“Yes?”

“I...I wanted to apologize.”

“Apologize?” He asked bewildered. “For what?”

“For acting so...odd last Sunday. That wasn’t me and I realize that wasn’t me but...I just couldn’t stop thinking....and crying and it was hard pushing that off.”

“Marinette. You don’t have to apologize for that.” He reached out and held her hand, gently squeezing it. “I know what it’s like. I’ve been there too.”

“Even...this bad?”

“I can’t feel what you’re feeling right now. I don’t know how bad you’re experiencing all of this. But I do know this won’t last and you will feel like yourself again. You will feel like you’re in control of your emotions in due time. You’ll be fine.”

“Okay. Okay. It’s just...weird. It feels weird. I feel weird. Is that normal?”
“That’s normal. You lost someone who was a huge part of your life. Who you loved. It would be weird not to feel weird.”

A smile curled on her lips.

“Thank you. I know I’ve said it over and over again these past days. But thank you. For your help.”

“Thank you for going out of your way to surprise me. Gabriel’s HQ isn’t exactly near the bakery.”

“Couple of minutes with the subway. I think maman just wanted to kick me out for a while. So I can get some fresh air.”

“How did that work out?”

“Bad?” She laughed sheepishly. “I just want to crawl back to bed right now and start bawling again.” Marinette sighed. “Can’t believe my younger self was a lot more stronger than I am right now.”

He squeezed her hand some more.

“Remember what I said last Sunday?”

“That I will come out stronger after this?”

Adrien nodded.

“I hope so.”

“You will.” He once again assured her. “You just need to get that grip back on your life.”

“Understatement of the year.” She sighed deeply. “Still feels like it’s slipping away from me sometimes.”

“Give it time. Be patient.”

“Right. Be patient. Don’t be afraid to cry. It’s okay to feel like this. Don’t skip meals. Don’t work so hard and think about yourself. Anything I’ve missed?”

“Accept help.”

The young woman nodded. “Accept help. From the people close to me.”

“From the people who care about you.”

“Does going out for drinks count as accepting help?”

“It might.” He felt himself grin. “Are we going out for drinks?”

“Alya invited me to just let loose and go out this Saturday. Do you want to come with us?”

Even though the thought of dancing and throwing back a couple glasses of alcohol sounded like a fun way to spend a Saturday night, however with Marinette away from home, he could actually
discuss business details with her mother.

“Nah. I don’t want to intrude on your girl’s night out.”

“It isn’t specifically a girl’s night out.” She corrected. “I’d still love it if you were to join us.”

“Maybe next time Princess. You deserve to spend some time with just your bff. Besides, I’ve been seeing you almost every day since I got back.”

“Don’t tell me you’re getting sick and tired of me.” She pouted.

“Of you? Not in a million years Bug. How about we go out for dinner on Sunday? Just you and me.”

“If I’ll survive the girl’s night out, then yes. Yes I’d love to Chaton. I think, getting out of the house more actually helps a little. It’s a good distraction.”

“If it’s a distraction you want, I’ll make sure I am going to be one for you.”

“It has always been one of your specialties.” The baker’s daughter smiled. “So I’m counting on you.”

She held out her fist and he gently bumped it with his own.

“I’ll do my best my Lady. Now...do you need help getting to the exit? It really is a maze around here.”

“I think I’ll manage. Thank you though.” She gave his hand a light squeeze back. “See you around?”

“Absolutely.” He bent forward to peck a light kiss against her cheek.

Marinette gave him a smile, her skin tinted a light pink and mouthed a short ‘bye’ before walking back towards the elevator.

"I'm sorry man." Marcel apologized the moment he stepped back into the office. "I didn't know that was your girlfriend. I wouldn't have started to flirt with her if I knew that."

Adrien made no attempt to correct the man and merely gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

“Plagg! I got you your favourite. A big hunk of stinky camembert!” Adrien called out when he entered his hotel room. Holding up a plastic bag filled with a couple rounds of cheese.

He half expected the tiny God to fly at it, demanding to eat his treat right away.

What he didn’t expect was to hear a deep, wishful sigh, from the small creature.

While he hadn’t done much besides sleeping and eating the past few days, it wasn’t like him to just sigh.
“You okay?”

“No.” Came the short reply.

“Do you miss Tikki.”

“Yeah.” Plagg admitted. “I was hoping we wouldn’t be apart for that long anymore, but now that I’m wrong...well...I miss her. A lot.”

“I hope you’re not still mad at Marinette for giving Tikki away again.”

“No. No I’m not. I believe her when she said that Tikki suggested it. It’s something she would.”

“You sure a piece of cheese won’t cheer you up?”

“I do love cheese. But I’ve eaten every piece of it that was in the mini fridge and I still don’t feel better. Never figured this was something camembert wasn’t able to solve.”

“We...could go visit her?”

The Kwami’s ears perked up. “Visit?”

“Yeah. At master Fu’s. You know where he lives right?”

“I do!”

“Then let’s go you lazy cat.”

“Cheese first!”

With a laugh and a roll of the eyes, he put the plastic bag on the bed for the small creature to dive in and gobble up the cheese inside.

Going by the constant rustling of the bag, he assumed that Plagg was feeling a little better.

It was around eight in the evening when they arrived at master Fu’s apartment.
He felt the creature stirring restlessly in the pocket of his coat.

“Calm down Plagg.” He whispered. “We’re here. No need to wiggle around so much.”

“Sorry.”

Knocking gently on the door, he waited for the elderly man to answer it.

Adrien didn’t have to wait long before the door opened and the guardian’s face peeked through the crack.

“Good evening master Fu. I’m sorry to drop by this late. I hope it’s okay.”

“Adrien.”

Finally someone who recognized him right away.
The door opened further.

“I haven’t seen you in years. Marinette told me you were going to school in New York.” The blonde gave a nod in confirmation. “To what do I owe this visit Chat Noir.”

The man stepped aside to let Adrien in.

“A couple of things actually.”

“Not a social visit then.” Master Fu sounded a little disappointed.

“Well. Yes. That too. But I also need some advice and words of wisdom.”

“And Tikki.” Plagg flew out of his hiding spot. “We’re here to visit Tikki.”

“Nice to see you again Plagg.” The old man nodded. “Wayzz should also be around here somewhere. Why don’t you go join him while I’ll release the Kwami of creation.”

The cat’s tail twitched restlessly, but he gave a nod anyway before flying off, calling out to the turtle Kwami. “Wayzz! You better not be hiding in your shell!”

“So...ehm...I know it’s been a while.” Adrien began.

“It has. But I am aware that it was not your choice nor your fault to go to another country. Nevertheless, it has been a while since I’ve had any visitors.”

“Marinette visits doesn’t she?”

The old man nodded and motioned for Adrien to sit down on one of the pillows on the floor.

“She does. From time to time. But her visits have been less frequent these last few months.”

“Has she told you why?”

The guardian took hold of the box on the dresser in the back of the room. Carefully he put it on the floor and allowed the mechanism inside to open it.

As Marinette had told him, her earrings were sitting right on top of the tiers. Right where they should be.

“She has. Her father wasn’t well the last time she visited. Marinette told me she was trying to take care of him.”

The black spotted earrings were placed in the guardian’s hands. “Kwami of creation. Awake.”

A small, pink, orb floated from the Miraculous. Draining the colors from the jewels and turning them black.

After a few seconds Tikki emerged, suppressing a small yawn.

“Adrien?”
“Hey Tikki.”

“Adrien!”

She flew up to him to snuggle against his cheek. “I missed you!”

“I missed you too.”

“Oh but…” The red creature looked passed him, “Where is Marinette? Didn’t she come with you?”

“No. No she didn’t. Not today. She doesn’t even know I’m here. But Plagg is dying to see you again.”

A smile appeared on her face and her body wiggled slightly.

“He should be in the back somewhere.” Master Fu added.

“Okay. I’ll...I’ll be back Adrien. Don’t leave okay. Not before I say goodbye”

“I promise Tikki.”

Away she floated towards the kitchen area.
He could hear a faint shout of glee coming from Plagg soon after.

“While they are having their reunion, tell me Adrien. What kind of advice did you need from this old man.”

“Well….gee….Where to even start.” He nervously rubbed the back of his neck.

“At the beginning would be a good place.” The man joked.

“The beginning happened a long time ago. When I left for New York. But...no...I...I need advice on how to get Marinette back to her normal self.”

“Her normal self?”

“She hasn’t been feeling well lately. Says she’s feeling broken and like a complete mess. But...she’s grieving so that’s expected. It’s just that...I want to help her feel more like her old self. Get more of her confidence back you know. It seems like she’s so absorbed in helping her mother out, that she’s lost a bit of her old self.”

“Then. I assume her father is still ill.”

“He...passed away a while ago. Mari’s been dealing with the aftermath for a long while now. I wish I would have known that sooner. So I could help her the moment she needed it.”

“What happened in the past can not be changed.” The elderly man tapped his chin thoughtfully. “What is important now is that you are here for her now.”

“I wish I could do more for her than that.”
“It is the most anyone can do. Eventually she has to overcome her grief herself. Offering support will make that easier for her.”

“The more support the better right?”

Master Fu nodded.

“Then may I ask for a favor?”

“That depends on what kind of favor.”

“To let Mari have her earrings back? Let her have Tikki beside her again. Even if it’s just to get her through this. I think it might do her good.”

The older man chuckled. “I never intended for her Miraculous to be back in my care so soon. Of course I’ll gladly return it to her.”

“Can I give it instead? I mean… It would be a nice surprise.”

The master merely gave a nod and a smile.

“Thank you.” Adrien let out a relieved sigh.

“We might need Ladybug back at some point either way. It would be wise to be prepared beforehand.”

The former model frowned. “Because of the peacock Miraculous?”

“Going by your question, I take it Marinette has informed you that it’s still missing.”

“Y-Yeah. But…” He took a sharp breath. “It’s not missing. My father has it. He…He is using it as a bargaining chip of some sort. To keep me working for his company? The whole reason he sent me away in the first place.”

“That would make retrieving it difficult. Since your father is familiar with how the Miraculous work.”

“I’m not going to get it back without Marinette’s help either. And she’s not able to do that with her like this.”

“We might need to. Depending on how soon your father will use it, or how soon an opportunity to retrieve it will surface. Planning this out will be difficult.”

The young man frowned.

Master Fu was right of course.

While he could hold back his father somewhat, by doing his job and whatever he demanded of him, taking back his trump card wouldn’t be easy. With or without a plan.

With or without her help.
They had to be careful.

“We made a deal. If I do what he wants me to do, he will refrain from using the Miraculous.”

“What if he will ask you to do something you can’t or shouldn’t do?”

“He... He wouldn’t. He just wants me to be part of the company, so I can take it over. It’s not what I wanted to do. But since it keeps everyone safe... well... it’s not that bad of a deal then. Is it? And at the end of the day he is still my father and if I keep my end of the bargain everything should be okay.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but your father had no issue putting you in danger in the past. Has he changed that much that you can be sure he’ll keep his promise?”

“I… I don’t know. Marinette never seemed to trust him. But what more can we do to keep him from turning into a super villain again?”

Master Fu let out a hum as he pondered about the situation. “The best thing we can do now is wait and observe. Keep an eye out on your father and when he leaves the house, we might be able to steal the brooch back if we remain careful and vigilant.”

Adrien nodded in agreement.

If he had to look back at the days he left behind, there weren’t many highlights.

Aside from getting Tikki back from master Fu, he had shared a few online games and conversations with Nino.

Who had been excited to let him know that his collab partner finally knew what she wanted for her song and he had a direction he could work to.

Sadly that meant he wasn’t coming home to Paris for now.

But Adrien was proud of his best friend nonetheless.

The couple of lunches he had with Alya were a nice break, as were the dinners with Chloé.

He had looked at two more possible places to call his own.
Both didn’t really speak to him and with plan B in mind, he was starting to lean towards the huge appartement he had been show the prior weekend.

The distribution department had said goodbye to Paul.

Tears were shed.

Hugs were given and at the end of the day Adrien felt guilty for replacing the man who these people seemed to love so much.
Even when it wasn’t his choice to do so.
All this time, he kept Ladybug’s earrings in his hotel room. More so to have Tikki keep Plagg company. Which had done miracles for the little cat’s mood and he was now certain that it would do the same to Marinette when he would give her the earrings after their dinner that Sunday.

It would be perfect.

They would enjoy their evening. He could try to flirt with her like they did when they were younger. It would make her laugh like she always did and at the end of the night he would confess his feelings to her and ask her to be his partner once more before giving Tikki back to her.

Yes.

It would be perfect.

Not as romantic as being under a starlit sky somewhere in Italy. But close enough.

But first, now that it was Saturday night, he needed to get the most important thing out of the way. Keeping the Dupain-Cheng women from being homeless.

Accompanied by his lawyer, Adrien and madame Cheng went over the paperwork at the kitchen table.

Paperwork he had set up and figured out with Georgio Verona’s help during the week.

“So this one here…” He slid a piece of paper towards madame Cheng. “Pretty much states that monsieur Agreste is going to be a co-owner of the bakery and he is entitled to ten percent of the monthly profits.”

Adrien groaned at that. “I legally couldn’t ask for less. But you don’t have to pay it madame Cheng. It’s just there in the contract for formalities.”

“No.” She disagreed. “Ten percent is fair and you should be rewarded for your efforts Adrien.”

“My effort is literally to put money into the bakery. I don’t want to earn from it.”

“Please. I don’t mind. Besides. You’re family to us too and this is a family business. It has been since Tom started it and I want you to benefit from you helping us too.”

“Well…” He sighed. “When you put it that way. But I don’t mind if you pay me in cookies and croissants instead either.” The blonde tried to joke. Earning a soft chuckle from the other two.

“All we need now are two signatures. Here--” Georgio pointed at the bottom of one of the document pages. “And here. Twice. So you both have a copy.”

Sabine nodded without hesitation and took the pen the dark haired man offered her. With a fluid movement, she signed her name on the contracts and passed the pen over to Adrien who did the same.
“I will sort things out with the bank.” He assured her. “They need to know you have a business partner now and I will pay all bills before the end of the month so we can have a clean slate to work with.”

“Thank you Adrien. Really. I...I don’t know what we would have done without you.”

He shot the woman a warm smile. “Things will work out madame Cheng. We will all make sure of it.”

“Again. Thank you.”

“I eh...am also going to be needing any medical bills that haven’t been paid.”

“Medical…. Oh… Oh Adrien no. I...you shouldn’t…”

“A clean slate. I promised you a clean slate and those bills are part of that. So please. Leave them to me.”

“I can’t… That’s too much.” She shook her head. “Those are our personal problems. They don’t relate to the bakery.”

“But they affect it.” Georgio added.

The blonde gave his lawyer a grateful nod in agreement.

“I...I can’t.”

“Tell you what. I still need to sweeten up my team. Especially since their manager left yesterday and I’m still not sure how they are going to respond to me being in charge. So….how about we make a trade.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“I’ll pay those medical bills, in exchange for a box of free pastries every week for the next six months or so?”

“A year.”


“All this talk about pastries makes me crave for some suddenly.”

Sabine turned to the lawyer. “Perhaps we should celebrate with some cake?”

“I know it’s almost midnight. But I could go for a slice. How about you monsieur Agreste.”

“With a cup of coffee to keep ourselves awake? That sounds good actually.”

“Cake and coffee coming right up.”

Marinette’s mother had barely slipped from her seat when the door to the apartment opened. Revealing two giddy girls, laughing and hanging off each other.
Alya leaning more so on Marinette than vice versa.

“Mariiiiii!” The reporter called out. “You ‘ave such a beauti house!” She slurred.

“You’ve been here. I think.” Marinette giggled.

“Oh! Look! It’s Adrien! Hiyyyyy Adrien!”

He waved back sheepishly as Alya waved her hand back and forth like her life depended on it. The angry frown on Marinette’s face however wasn’t something he missed.

“Seems like you two girls could go for some coffee too.” Sabine laughed. “Did you have fun.”

“So much! I drank that t--t-- hussy! Under the table!”

“Alya could use some coffee. I’m okay...I am...really. Just tipsy. Just a little.” Marinette muttered. “Don’t need coffee.”

All fear that the girl might have been really angry was washed away. Clearly she wasn’t just tipsy from whatever alcohol she had consumed and her frown might have been caused by her loud friend at that moment.

“Are you sure sweetheart? I can make you some. It’s not trouble.”

“No It’s fine mom.” She glared at Adrien with angrily. “But what’s he doing here?”

“Adrien? Oh, he just--”

“I came to help.” He was quick to interrupt.

“Help with what?”

“The bakery Marinette.” Her mother started to explain.

She exchanged a quick look with Adrien, who merely gave her a nod. His partner would find out about it eventually. Especially now.

What was he even thinking keeping this from her.

“He’s going to help us pay all those bills. To fix up the place and get more customers.” The older woman continued. “He’s going to be a business partner to the bakery.”

Her blue eyes widened. A hint of anger showing inside of those pools of blue.

“You! I told you!” She yelled, letting go of Alya who wobbled on her feet until she found her balance again.

“Marinette I--”
“No! I told you we would be fine! We don’t need your help!”

He tried to remain calm. “You do.”

“We don’t!”

Without speaking a word, Sabine ushered Georgio and Alya out of the living room and down to the bakery. Leaving the two to their heated argument.

“You do. Maybe your mother hasn’t told you, but you’re close to losing the bakery. Your home.”

“Don’t you think I don’t know!” She called out, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. “Do you think I’m stupid?! That I don’t know how much in debt we are!”

“No I…”

“That doesn’t give you the right! I told you we would be able to handle it and you go behind my back and meddle with our affairs anyway?! Meddle with shit that doesn’t even concern you!”

“Marinette. You’re drunk. Let’s just talk it over in the morning okay.”

“No! Fuck no! This is my problem! Not yours! I didn’t ask for your help! Why can’t you trust me when I said it would be fine!”

At this point he couldn’t keep calm anymore.

Couldn’t she see, that he was doing this for her sake?

“You needed my help! If I did nothing then you and your mother would be out in the streets! Do you want that Marinette?!”

“We would deal with it!”

“Don’t pretend you can! You guys are in deep shit and I’m going to help you out of it!”

“That doesn’t give you the right to just do whatever you want to do behind my back!” At this point she started pacing back and forth and he slid of his chair.

“Would you have accepted my help if I talked things over with you?”

“No! No I wouldn’t!”

“Then it’s not that strange that I went to your mother instead now is it?” He shot back. “Besides! This doesn’t concern you either! This is between me and the owner of the bakery! And that isn’t you! That’s your mother!”

“Fuck you!” The dark haired woman shouted in anger. “Fuck you Adrien Agreste! You should have trusted me! You should have trusted me and just deal with your own shit first!”

“Hard to do when both you and your mother are about to be homeless! You’ve left me in the dark for too long Mari! I couldn’t be there for you then, but I can now and I will damnit!”
“Why! Why would you even do such a thing?!”

“Because I love you!”

She didn’t reply right away, but he could see that his words had given her some food for thought as her face relaxed for a short moment.

“I love you.” He repeated in a calmer and softer tone. “I love you and because of that I’m not going to let you and your mother go through all of this alone.”

“Get out.”

That was not the answer he was expecting. “What?”

“Get. Out.”

“Marinette I’m sure we can talk--”

“Out!” She pointed at the door, the anger returning in her words. “I don’t want to talk to you anymore! Get the fuck out of my house!”

He let out a sigh in frustration. “Fine.”

Grabbing his bag and his copy of the document, Adrien made his way to the door.

“I’ll be back tomorrow.”

He hadn’t even put his hand on the crutch of the door, before he heard her stomp up to her room behind him.

As he walked down the stairs, he could hear Alya chatter away happily. The alcohol still having a full effect on her.

Perhaps Marinette’s sudden outburst was related to the alcohol too.

Perhaps he had made a mistake and shouldn’t have done this behind her back. But then again. This was Marinette.

The same Marinette who seemed to take on the burden of the entire world on her shoulders every time.

A burden he could help her carry.

He wasn’t in the wrong.

He wasn’t.

This was for both of the Dupain-Cheng women’s sakes.

And it was only temporary anyway.
“Are you okay?” Sabine asked when he walked down the stairs.

He could see Georgio and Alya munching on a big piece of cake at the same table he had first seen the unpaid bills.

“I’ve never heard Marinette this angry before. I’ll sit her down and talk to her in the morning.”

“Thank you.” Adrien muttered.

“Adrien! You have to try this. It’s sooooo goooooood!” Alya held up her fork to him as if she was asking him to try a bite.

“I’m good Al. It’s all yours.” He turned his attention back to Sabine. “I’ll be back tomorrow. I just hope I’ll be able to talk to her then. To tell her why I’m doing this.”

“Why we’re doing this. Don’t forget I agreed to your proposition Adrien. We both have her best interest at heart.”

“Maybe she had too much fun to see it that way tonight. Or...maybe she really didn’t want me involved for whatever reason.”

“I’ll talk to her.” She once again assured her. “I’ll see you tomorrow and we’ll go over the bills and the plan for the bakery.”

He gave a nod. “Georgio? Thank you for being here. I know it’s late to be working on a Saturday. So I appreciate it.”

“No worries monsieur Agreste. I am just stumped as to why this bakery is failing, because this cake is to die for!”

“You’re welcome to take some home with you?”

“Can I? I mean. It's not too much to ask madame Cheng?”

“Not at all.”

“Okay. I’m going to leave you guys for the night. Alya.” The girl in question looked up. “If you want to yell at me, do it tomorrow okay.”

“Okidoki” The reporter grinned.

“And eh...get some sleep okay.”

After giving Marinette’s mother a quick goodbye hug, Adrien found himself, once again, standing in the pouring rain. The words they had yelled at each other still running fresh through his memory.
It was still raining.

It had been since he had left the Dupain-Cheng household that previous night.

The large drops of water ticking gently against his umbrella.
Creating a soothing melody as he walked down the street and back to the bakery.

Adrien hadn’t slept much.

The argument with Marinette still racing through his mind.
Doubt swimming through his head by the time dawn arrived.

Did he really do the right thing or was Marinette just being stubborn and unreasonable the previous night?

He wanted to know.

He needed to talk things out with her.

Let her know that it wasn’t forever and that he was just trying to help her out.

She would do the same for him is she were in his shoes.
He was sure of it.

They just needed to have a good, sober, long talk and work things out.

Pretend that he did not confess his undying love for her right in the middle of a heated argument and hopefully have a do-over when he would take her out for dinner that night.

If she was still in the mood to go.

If not…

Well he had Tikki with him.
Sleeping in her Miraculous and tucked away in the box master Fu gave him.

He would just give the Kwami to her and leave her alone if she wasn’t in the mood for a romantic dinner.
At least a happy reunion with the little creature would be sure to lift her spirits somewhat.

Right?
The moment he noticed the look on Sabine’s face when she opened the door however, he feared that he might not even got the chance to talk to Marinette. Let alone give her the earrings back.

The woman looked tired, sad and worried.

Instead of a short greeting there was but one string of words that passed his lips. “What happened?”

“Marinette. She...she stormed out of the house this morning. About two hours ago. She doesn’t have her phone with her and I’m starting to get worried.”

“Maybe she’s at Alya’s?”

She shook her head. “Alya is still passed out and sleeping in Marinette’s bed.”

“She must still be mad then. About yesterday.”

“I talked to her after your lawyer left. I told her that it wasn’t forever, that you’re only trying to help us. She...she said she understood. But now I’m not so sure if she’s also agreeing with it.”

“She couldn’t have gotten far right?” Adrien sighed. “I’ll go look for her.”

“I’m not even sure where to look in the first place.” Sabine admitted sadly.

Come to think of it...

Neither did he.

Nino wasn’t home so she couldn’t go to him to let out her frustrations.

Alya’s was already crossed of the list.

Which left all the places he knew they used to hang out when they were younger.

Places they used to talk, think and simply unwind at the end of a busy day.

Regular place she couldn’t reach now because they were too high up.

There was but one place that she might be able to go.

How unlikely it would be that she could be there.

But in a way it would make sense.

He had talked to the sky and his ceiling the first few weeks his mother had disappeared.

Wishing for her to come back.

Telling her how much he missed her.

It wouldn’t be a far fetch to think Marinette would do the same.

The only difference being that she had a place to, somewhat, talk to him directly.

“It might be a long shot but...was monsieur Dupain buried or cremated?”
“Buried.”

“Where exactly?”

“De Passy.”

Adrien gave a short nod. “I’ll try to look for her there. Let me know if she comes home before I find her. Alya should have my number.”

“I will. Thank you Adrien.”

Everything moved too slow for his taste.

The subway.

The people walking in front of him.

The traffic lights flashing that red signal for far too long.

It felt like an eternity before he finally reached the de Passy cemetery.

Thankfully, it wasn’t the biggest one in Paris, but it was large enough to not immediately spot the dark haired woman.

If she was even there in the first place.

There was no other option but to go through each line of graves and keeping an eye out for her.

Walking as fast as his legs would allow him, he walked passed an older woman picking weeds around an worn looking tombstone.

He tried to walk faster.

Only slowing down ever so slightly to glance at a burial in progress and a younger man which, if he had to guess was only slightly older than he was, muttering something to the grave in front of him.

There was no sight of Marinette for, what felt like, a long time.

Not until he noticed someone curled up, sitting in front of another gravestone.

Completely soaked because of the rain.

If it wasn’t for her hair and her blue eyes, he would have never recognized her.

The young man released a breath of relief he didn’t even realized he was holding in.

Fishing out his phone, he quickly sent a text to Alya as he did not have Sabine’s personal number.

“I found her. Please tell Mari’s mom too. Thanks.”

Marinette didn’t seem to notice him approaching her.
She didn’t notice how he held the umbrella above her head and not when he kneeled down beside her. She didn’t flinch or move, but he wouldn’t doubt it that she actually did know it was him beside her either way.

There they sat for a few moments. Gazing towards the new gravestone where Tom Dupain’s name was neatly cut into.

He wanted to speak.

Say something that would cheer her up.

But he could not find the right words, nor the right moment to start speaking.

“I didn’t cry.” She suddenly muttered.

“What?”

“I didn’t cry.” Marinette repeated. “When papa was buried.”

Adrien wasn’t sure how to respond to that. But it seemed as she wasn’t expecting one, as she continued her story.

“I cried when he told me he was sick. When I noticed he wasn’t able to walk anymore. But by the time I took over most of the work in the bakery, I didn’t feel anything. I felt numb. So I didn’t cry at the funeral. I couldn’t. Even if I wanted to.”

“Bugaboo…”

“How horrible of a daughter must I be, to not cry at my father’s own funeral. Only to not be able to stop crying when maman needs me the most.”

“That’s not…” He sighed deeply, looking for the right words to say.

“I’m not who I used to be Adrien. I’m not able to find solutions anymore.”

“You’re still you Marinette. You’re still one of the strongest people I know and this just isn’t something you can MacGuyver your way out of like you normally do.”

“I still don’t feel strong. Not like before.”

“I know Bug. I know. But it’s a slow process. You’ll climb over this hurdle and you will come out stronger than you’ve ever been. I told you that already didn’t I?”

“I want to believe that…but…”

She pulled her legs closer to her chest in an attempt to make herself as small as she possibly could. In a way it worked.

She looked so small right now.
Even smaller than she had seemed the first time she had cried against him.

“Let me help.” Adrien pleaded. “Please. Let me help you and your mother in any way I can and you’ll see you’ll feel stronger again soon.”

“I...I didn’t...I never wanted for you to take on my responsibilities Adrien.” She muttered softly. “The bakery...our finances...that’s my problem. Not yours.”

“And it will be your problem once more, when the bakery is financially stable again and I don’t have to worry about you or your mother losing your home or your father’s legacy.”

“That’s what maman told me too.” The dark haired girl shivered slightly, letting out a shuddered sigh. “And...she’s right. I have no say in if she should accept your deal or not. But...I...you...you have so much to deal with right now. I can’t ask you to put your time and effort into my problems too.”

“That’s why I’m helping your mother. That I’m helping you out too in the long run is an added bonus.” His lips curled up to give her a warm smile. “Besides. I still owe you.”

“You really don’t.”

“I do. You’re...putting so much of yourself into this to help us out.”

“As if that’s any different from what you’ve been doing for your mother and for me.” He was quick to reply. “You gave up your dreams of becoming a fashion designer, you stuck with me for the longest time while I was in New York and even before that I could always come to you when I had bad days or had a full blown argument with my father again.”

“You gave up your dreams too.” She reminded him. “For the sake of everyone.”

“Yeah...but...that’s how life goes Mari. Chasing your dreams isn’t always possible for everyone. No matter how good of a person you are or how hard you work for it. Sometimes you have to let go and that’s what we had to do. That doesn’t mean you have to go through all these difficult times alone.” She gave a small nod in understanding before he continued.

“You have this admirable quality of carrying the burdens of everyone on your shoulders. But at some point you have to realize you might need some extra help to lighten that burden. To give yourself and your mother the room the heal and feel like yourself again. That doesn’t mean that, right now, you’re not strong either. It actually makes you one of the strongest people I know.”

“I...I suppose you’re right.”

“I know it’s rare for me to be right.” Her partner tried to joke. “But trust me when I say that I only want you to be happy. No matter what the cost. And if it involves me, investing most of that ridiculous salary my father is giving me into something worth saving, then so be it.”

“Are we really worth all that effort Adrien?”

He leaned forward, wrapped an arm around her soaked shoulder and pressed her against him. Leaning his cheek against the top of her drenched head. “You both are worth a lot more than that to
me Marinette.”

“You sap.” His partner laughed for a brief moment.

“Hey. I would have helped you out even if your father didn’t pass away. Or if the bakery wasn’t in trouble.”

“Because you love me.” She concluded with a melancholic tone coated over every words.

Initially Adrien didn’t think she would bring it up at all. Or that it even registered at all the night prior. To hear her mutter those words, came as a surprise.

“Because I love you.” He repeated. “Because you’re one of my closest friends. Because I want to help you.”

“So...this really wasn’t something you offered because you felt obligated or...or because it would be a way for you to get a piece of your dream back.” Marinette turned her eyes away from the tombstone and focused more on the hands she had curled up into a tight fist on her lap.

“Do you really think that badly of me?” Adrien asked in a joking manner. “I let go of that dream a while back. Besides. I’m not sure how much help I can be in the bakery when it comes to the actual baking part. It’s been ages since I even tried to make anything myself. No. You’re the expert on that field so I don’t intend to meddle with that.”

She remained silent, only giving a small nod and clenching her fists even tighter together. Letting the knuckles turn white instead of the bright red hue the cold rain had turned it into.

“And no. I don’t feel obligated to help. But I want to and frankly I would feel bad not trying to do my best for you.”

“You don’t have to. I couldn’t....I couldn’t do the same for you.”

“That was a different situation. The safety of everyone was at stake and you did everything you could to help me Princess. Even if it doesn’t feel like it, I can assure you, you did everything you could then and you’re doing everything you can now.”

“I know...it just...never feels like I have done enough.” She sighed. “That I’ve made the wrong choices.”

“Mari.” He sighed once more. “Please...don’t think like that. Things would have turned out much worse if you hadn’t made those choices you know.”

“I’m sorry...I know...I shouldn’t think like that but...”

“It just happens. I know.” Removing his head from her own, he pecked a short kiss against her cheek. The skin felt cold to the touch. “God. You’re freezing Marinette.”

“I’m a little chilly.”

“How about we find some place to warm up before you come down with the flu or something?”
Reluctantly she gave a nod and he stood up from the soil.
Dirt staining his new jeans.
But he didn’t care.

“How have you eaten yet?” A hand was offered to her, which she took without hesitating. With ease he pulled her back on her feet.

“No. I...I kinda skipped breakfast and just stormed out of the house after I woke up. Alya must be upset that I just left her in my room.”

“I’m sure your mom is taking care of her. Besides, knowing the state she was in, I doubt Alya is going anywhere this morning.”

“She did have a lot to drink. I would be surprised if she woke up before noon.” He gave her a smile and took her hand, wanting to pull her away from the cemetery. “Wait. Just...let me say goodbye before we go.”

He let go of her cold hand. “Take your time.”

Putting her fingers against her lips, she planted a soft kiss against them before placing them on the top of her father’s tombstone. “I’ll come visit soon papa. Thank you for listening. I’ll do my best to take care of maman. I promise.”

Marinette stood before the grave of her father for a couple more moments before turning to Adrien with a small smile.

It was then that it occurred to him that she hadn’t looked directly at him during their entire conversation.
It didn’t seem like she had been trying to hide any potential signs that she had been crying, since there didn’t seem to be any.

Her eyes were clear, her nose just a little red from the cold rain.

But it didn’t seem like she had shed any tears before he found her.

Perhaps...perhaps she was still angry at him and that would be why she had refused to look at him directly.

Perhaps he was just overthinking it.

“You okay?” He asked her softly.

“Better.”

“Ready to find a place for a late breakfast?”

She wrapped her arm around the one he used to hold up the umbrella. “Yeah. Yeah I am.”
Adrien couldn’t help but study her face every time she took a sip of her hot cocoa. Her eyes closing, her shoulders seeming to relax and after every sip she seemed to cheer up just a little bit.

Enough to finally ask that question he had burned on his lips.

“Hey. Can I ask you something.” She gave a small nod. “Are you still angry with me? For what I did last night.”

The young woman shook her head and put her cup down. Wrapping her hands around it to keep them warm. “No. I...I realize that was unjustified. We should have talked things out as regular adults. I am sorry I yelled at you Adrien.”

“And I am sorry for not telling you about this sooner.”

“Be honest. We both knew I wouldn’t have let you talk to my mother if we did.” She laughed. “You did the right thing. Maman did the right thing.”

“You did the right thing too.” He added. “And you both will pull through this together and I’ll do my best to help you with that.”

“What about you?” She took another sip from her hot drink.

“What about me?”

“How are you going to pull through the shit that man has put you in?”

“I...was hoping spending time with you would be enough of a distraction to help me get through it. Until we find a solution for the peacock problem.”

“Right. That pesky peacock.”

Adrien nodded in agreement. “That damn peacock.”

“Do you think he’ll really use it?”

“At this point? I don’t think so. Not as long as I’ll keep my end of the deal.”

“He is going to find an excuse you know. No matter how much you try to keep your end of the bargain.”

“Probably.” Adrien sighed before grabbing the untouched slice of toast from her plate.

“Hey!”

“Oh. Did you still want this?” He grinned at her.

“No.” She laughed. “But you could have asked first.”

“In that case. May I have the last remains of your breakfast my dear Princess?”

“Hmmmm. Let me think….euhm….yes. Yes you may. But only half.”
Putting the piece of bread on his plate, he cut it in half and smeared a thin layer of butter on both before giving the woman her piece.

“You seem to have cheered up a little.” He suddenly noticed.

“Yeah. I feel a bit better too. Thanks to you.”

“I’m glad.”

“Hey. Can I ask you something too?” Marinette turned her head to him.

Her eyes were clear, shining with a passion he hadn’t seen in years.

“Sure.”

He watched as she took a deep breath, visibly trying to gather courage to ask him whatever she wanted to ask.

Adrien noticed her doubt for a few moments before shaking her head. “Nevermind.”

“Not important?”

“No. Not important. Just a silly thought I had.”

“Well let’s hear it.” The blonde tried to encourage her.

“I...I just….well...nevermind. I forgot what I was going to ask.”

“Okay. Well...you can always ask me when you remember it.”

A suddenly buzz from his phone pulled him away from his focus on her. Looking on the device, he noticed a reminder of his appointment with the real estate agent flashing on his screen.

“Shit.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah. I’m just going to be late for an appointment if I don’t get going now.”

“Oh.”

“Hey. Do you...wanna come and look at an apartment with me? I could use a second pair of eyes.”

“I’d love to.”

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Even seeing the spacious, penthouse apartment for a second time, he wasn’t convinced it was
really...for him. Then again, he needed it for plan B. Just in case plan A would go down the drain.

“This place is gorgeous!” Marinette gasped as she wrapped her arm around his own once again.

“With a little love, care and some paint, it can turn into whatever you want it to be.” The agent explained. “From a modern studio apartment, to a cozy family home.”

“And that view! Holy shit! Adrien!” She turned towards him. “Why haven’t you jumped on this place yet?”

He gave Marinette a shrug and a smile. “I wasn’t sure if it will be a good fit for me.”

“What would be then?”

“Not sure. Something that doesn’t scream that I’m showing off I guess.” Adrien shrugged.

“I might sound like Chloé right now but...who cares? If you think you’ll be happy with this place you should go for it.”

“That still doesn’t sound like something Chlo would say.” He snickered. “But...I don’t know. I’m not sure yet. But...I might buy this place anyway regardless of how I feel about it.”

“Feel free to look around you two. I’ll wait here.” The agent motioned towards the back of the living room, which gave access to the other parts of the apartment.

He gave the woman a nod and dragged Marinette with him to one of the potential bedrooms.

“I am so confused. Why would you buy this place anyway then?”

“Plan B.” He simply stated.

“What?”

“Okay so...being a business partner to the bakery wasn’t my first idea. My first suggestion to your mother was to sell the bakery and have you both live here. With me. I...I could help you get back into fashion designing. You both wouldn’t be homeless. I would have some company. A win-win right?”

“You’re lucky I wasn’t there when you proposed that to maman. Because I would have yelled at you so much.”

“I know. I know. Your mom explained it to me. The bakery is everything to you two right now and I understand. But....in case that first plan fails...plan B would be a backup at the very least.”

“It’s...a plan.” Marinette shrugged. “I just hope it won’t come to that.”

“We’ll do our best so that it won’t. But that aside. Would this be a place you’d like to live in?”

“You mean...with you?”

“No. Nooooo.” He laughed. All the while mentally kicking himself for not immediately answering
with a confident ‘yes’.

Then again, he didn’t want to freak her out either.

“Just in general. I mean...would you pick this place if you were me?” He clarified.

“I think I would.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s so high up, nobody would even notice if you left this place for patrol.”

Adrien nodded in agreement.
He had the same luxury when he was living in New York.

Of course it helped that his suit was as dark as the night sky itself.

“How many bedrooms does this place have?” She suddenly asked.

“Four. I think.”

“That’s perfect.” The woman sighed happily. “Just perfect.”

“Perfect for.....?”

“Oh. Nothing. Don’t mind me. Just...thinking I guess.”

Despite dancing around her answer, a happy smile had crept on her face.

A smile he couldn’t help but mirror since it has been a while since he had seen her this happy.

“Care to share your thoughts Bugaboo?” He asked in a teasing manner.

“No. No it’s too embarrassing.”

Marinette let go of his arm and walked to the window in the back of the baren bedroom.

“Can’t be that embarrassing.”

“I was just daydreaming a little.”

“Ah. I see.” His smile widened. “So if this place starts making you daydream, then that means that you wouldn’t mind living here. Right? That you would pick this place if you were me.”

“I think I would. Yeah. It’s big...really big...but there’s room to grow too. Make it a family home or something. But this isn’t about me. This is about you. Do you want to live here?”

“Temporarily maybe. Until I’m sure I don’t need this as a backup plan. Then, I can move to something smaller, because this just seems too big for me alone.”

She gave a nod in understanding. “You have Plagg though.”
“Plagg doesn’t need that much room either.” Adrien laughed. “But I have to admit, that it’s a good location. It has enough space at least.”

“Maybe...you can find a roommate at some point. If it really is too big to your liking.”

“Would you like to be that roommate?”

The words were out of his mouth before his brain could even stop him.

“I thought you said you didn’t want me to move in with you.” She laughed.

“Okay so I lied. I...just didn’t want to pressure you. Not when you’re…”

“Broken.”

“Not in control of your emotions.” He corrected. “Not when you’re still mourning. I’d love it if we could live together someday. Maybe. If you want to.”

“Someday.” She nodded. “Maybe. When I feel better again. When I feel ready to move out.”

His heart skipped a beat.

That wasn’t a no.

She didn’t flat out told him she disliked the idea of sharing a home with him.

That was a good thing.

Wasn’t it?

“Take your time. Just let me know when you’re ready or...when you rather just find a place just for you. Free of any roommates.”

She let out a heavy sigh before throwing her arms around his neck and burying her face against his shoulder.

“Why do you keep doing that?” She muttered against his coat.

“Doing what?”

“Pushing your own needs away for me. First you’re trying to help me get back on my feet, then the bakery and now...now you’re just...just this. You’re willing to maybe buy something you don’t even want to live in...just to help me and maman out. Even if we might not even need it as a backup plan. Even....even when I’m not sure if I’ll end up living with you. Why...why are you like this?”

Putting his arms around her waist, he hugged her cold body back. “Mari. We give and take. We always have Bug.”

“I know...it’s just...”

“I know. It’s hard to accept help sometimes. But...if I could, I would give you the moon and the stars just to see you smile again.”
“I would do the same for you.”

“I know you would.”

“Adrien.”

“Yes?”

“I...ehm...I...” She pulled away from him, but kept her arms around his neck. “I...I need to tell you that...I...I’ve...”

“Is everything alright in here?” The voice of the real estate agent asked them as she peeked into the room. “Is everything to your liking?”

The girl in his arms pulled away entirely. A blush began to form on her cheeks. “It’s very nice. I have to admit.”

“I still think it might be a little too big for me. But it might feel smaller if I just...don’t use those other rooms. Right?”

Marinette gave a small nod. “You can always do something with them when you need to. Like your backup plan.”

“Right.”

“So does that still mean I can put you down as a maybe monsieur Agreste?”

“It means I’m buying it.” He told her with a grin. “I can’t stay in the hotel forever anyway. Let’s make an appointment to sign some papers shall we.”

“You still feel cold.” He remarked the moment Marinette’s hand brushed against his own. “I’m fine. We’re almost back at the bakery anyway.”

“And then what?”

It took a few seconds before she answered. “Take a hot shower and crawl back into bed I guess?”

He gave a nod. “Do you...still want to go out for dinner tonight?”

“I...I’m not sure. Not because I don’t want to...it’s just...”

“You’re tired right?”

She gave a slight nod and once again wrapped her arm around his own.

At this point Adrien wasn’t sure if it was to keep herself warm, or if she just needed the extra support, but he really didn’t mind.
It felt a lot nicer than when Chloé did the same. At least Marinette didn’t just do it to chain herself onto him and drag him from one place to the other.

“Then...how about I drop by tonight? We can watch a movie, cuddle. Like old times.”

“I vaguely remember we did that the night before you had to leave too.”

“And pretty much every other week before that happened.” He reminded her. “So why break tradition now?”

“Tradition?” The young woman snorted.

“Well. You know. As far as there are traditions between us.”

“Like midnight snacks after a patrol night.” She sighed wistfully.

“A fistbump after every fight.”

“Playing tag on the rooftops.”

“Playing videogames in your room.”

Suddenly he felt her arm slipping away from his own and with it her warmth vanished from his side.

“Mari?” Turning to face her, he noticed that she had stopped walking. “Hey. Come back under here Bug. You’ll get soaked again like that. Don’t want you getting sick.”

“I...I’m sorry.”

“Sorry about what?” He asked before moving towards her again. Once again putting her under the protection of his umbrella.

“Yelling at you yesterday.”

“You already apologized for that.” The blonde gently reminded her.

“And I’m sorry for dragging you into this mess.”

“You never dragged me into anything.” Putting his hand against her cheek, he let the coldness of her skin travel through his fingertips.

She closed her eyes and leaned into the touch, letting out a tired sigh.

“It just feels right to say. Even if I have been saying it a lot recently.”

“You know, we should try to get you back in that positive attitude again. It feels like you’re beating yourself up lately. While there is nothing to beat yourself up for. You did your best. You did all you could. You’re still doing that.”

“It feels like I could have done more. Keeping you here. Dealing with the bakery and papa being sick.”
“Let’s not dwell on what you could have done. What both of us could have done. Let’s focus on the now and what will be. Together.”

“Easier said than done.” The young woman gave him a small smile.

“I know. But you won’t have to go through it alone. You know that.”

“I know.” Marinette sighed once more. “I know. It’s just...hard to accept it. To get used to not dealing with this alone anymore and you’re right. I should try and keep my spirits up from now on it’s just…”

“Difficult?” Adrien suggested.

“That too.”

“You’ll be fine Bugaboo.” He leaned forward to give her a light peck on the tip of her nose, earning a soft giggle from his partner. “I’ll help you keep that smile on your face.”

“You’re helping me too much already and I can only imagine in what way you intend on keeping a smile on my face.” She gently peeled his hand from her cheek. “Please don’t tell me it involves puns.”

“It might.” He grinned. “Although it seems like I need to dust off my pun skills a little.”

“Keep them dusty. Please. We’re not teenagers anymore. I’m sure you can find other ways.” She laughed.

“I can. But puns are foolproof and you know it.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head, yet the smile remained on her face. A smile he could only answer with one of his own.

She looked...happy.

Content.

Despite being soaked through and through, he hadn’t seen her this happy since he came home again.

A part of him felt proud, that he was the one who managed to make her smile like that.

Another part of him felt relieved, getting some kind of reassurance like this that the love of his life would be okay in the end.

“Thank you.” Marinette suddenly muttered.

“For what?” He asked with a chuckle.

Taking a step forward, she wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him as tightly as she could.

“For not giving up on me.”
He didn’t even realize how cold it actually was outside, until he stepped back into the warm bakery.

The warmth melting away the icy cold the rain had left on his skin.

“I...I didn’t even realize how cold I actually was.” Marinette suddenly remarked as he put his umbrella in a corner of the hallway.

“I told you that you were freezing. Not all that odd seeing as we’re slowly moving towards the end of October.”

“I know. It just didn’t feel like it was that bad.”

Her hands rubbed against each other, attempting to keep them warm.

Their skin a fiery red.

“Do they hurt?”

She gave a nod.

“Come here.” Reaching out to her, he took her hands into his own.

Enveloping them as much as he could to warm them up a little quicker.

“That’s not really helping. But thank you for trying.”

“Maybe I just wanted to hold your hands.” He shot back with a smirk before planting a soft kiss against her fingers. “And kiss them until you’re all warm again.”

The young woman let out another soft giggle and opened her mouth to speak.
Only to be interrupted by Sabine Cheng, who rushed down the stairway.

“Marinette!” The baker’s daughter pulled her hands away from him before the mother could continue. “Oh sweetheart! I was so worried!”

She pulled her daughter into a tight embrace.

“I...I’m sorry maman. I just needed to get some air and clear my head. Think about yesterday?”

“You could have told me. Or at least tell me where you were going before storming out of the house!”

“I know. I know. I should have...but...there were just too many...things after last night...I wasn’t sure how to deal with it all.”

“Oh. Sweetheart.” Sabine started to rock the young woman back and forth in her embrace.

“I’m fine maman.” Marinette assured her softly. “I talked to papa. I talked to Adrien. I’m fine.”

“You’re freezing. You feel cold.”
“Yeah. That too.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing a hot shower can’t fix Mari.”

She released her mother and gave the former model a nod.

“Then go. Get warm again. We’ll wait for you to get ready before we start.”

“Before you start?” She frowned slightly in confusion.

Madame Cheng turned towards the young man. “Well...I assume you still want to discuss things for the bakery right?”

Adrien nodded. “That was why I came over for in the first place.”

“I hope you’ll also agree that Marinette should be included in such meetings?”

“Absolutely!”

“What? But...why?”

“Because you’re also part of this.” He explained. “True, you might not be directly involved in major decisions. But that doesn’t mean that you’re not involved at all Mari. You’re still the heart of the bakery and your input and ideas should matter too. We’re a team.”

“Right.” She gave him a confident smile “A team.”

“A team Adrien and I are leading in this case, so you can have some room to breathe again. Just leave the difficult stuff to us darling.” Her mother gave her a short kiss on her cheek. “But first, go get warm again. We can’t have you getting a cold.”

“Right. I’ll...I’ll... just run up to get a quick shower then.” She shot one last look at him. A look that showed a bit of guilt.

Guilt towards what? He wasn’t sure, but he made a mental note to ask her if she was doing okay before he would leave the house.

Before he would press Tikki into her hands.

Seeing as his original plan to give her back the magical earrings, wasn’t going to happen tonight.

But that was okay.
He could work around it.

Once Marinette was out of sight, Sabine turned towards him.

“Adrien. Thank you. I was so worried about her when she didn’t come back after a couple of minutes. Thank you for finding her and looking after her.”

“No problem at all Madame Cheng. She actually just needed some time to herself I think.”
The older woman nodded in understanding before she spoke again. “Did you find her at the cemetery?”

“Yeah I did. It was the only logical place I could think off where she would run off too. Seeing as Alya was still here.”

He was lucky in that regard.
If his hunch had been wrong he wouldn’t have known where to look at all.

Maybe having Tikki in his pocket actually added helped his luck in his search?

He wasn’t sure, but he wasn’t going to question it either.
The most important thing was that Marinette was home again.

“Alya is still here. She woke up an hour ago, you already found her by then. Going by the message you sent her.”

“Yeah. I did. I eh...took her out for a late breakfast after I found her. To get her warm again. After that we took a look at our backup plan.”

“One I don’t hope we’ll need.”

“I hope so too. But I intend to buy it anyway. Even if it’s too big to live in for just one person. Just in case y’know?”

“Won’t you be too lonely dear? All by yourself.”

Technically he wasn’t by himself.
But Sabine didn’t know that.
“Maybe. If so I can always get a cat or something.”

Plagg restlessly moved on the inside of his coat at the mention of another feline.

“Well. Whatever the case will be. You’re always welcome to join us for dinner.” The mother told him with a broad smile. “Now. Shall we go upstairs as well? I’m sure we have a lot to discuss.”

“And you have a lot to give me. Don’t think I’ve forgotten that stack of overdue bills I promised I would pay off.” Adrien added in a joking manner.

He took a sip of his second cup of coffee of the day, while he waited patiently for Marinette to return from her hot shower.

Next to him, Alya, who didn’t look as much as a zombie as he expected her to look.
Knowing how much trouble she had standing up on her own the night prior.

“Nino isn’t coming home.” She suddenly announced with a sad tone in her voice.

“Then I guess things worked out with that collab he’s doing then?”
The reporter gave a slight nod.

“I’m sure he’ll be back soon Alya.” Sabine assured her, filling her cup with a second serving of coffee. “I know it’s hard that he’s not around right now, but time flies by so fast. He’ll be home before you know it.”

“I know...it’s just...I miss him. I miss him and the more we’re talking, the more I want to just kiss him silly and press him against a wall and--”

“Whoa! A little too early for that kind of talk isn’t it Al?’’ Adrien asked with a chuckle.

She rolled her eyes, shook her head and gave her friend a mischievous smirk. “It’s passed noon Sunshine.”

“Still too early to hear about your, less than pure, intentions with my best friend.”

“Oh I have pure intentions.” Her smirk widened. “I plan on asking him to marry me when he gets back.”

“So soon?” Sabine asked, a hint of bewilderment coating her words.

“I’m done with dating madame Cheng. That clearly doesn’t work for us. We’ve been going back and forth when we were younger, but now that I’m older and everything feels more secure, I don’t want to just date him. I...I want to be with him forever. That’s what marriage is right?”

“That’s the end goal I think.”

The older woman nodded in agreement with him.

“I just love him. I’ve been falling in love with him all over again this past week and I don’t want to lose him ever again. So...I’m going to make sure we talk, we compromise and make things work if he gets back. If...If Nino wants that too.”

“Last time we spoke, he let me know he wants that. He still loves you too and I think you know that by now.”

“Yeah.” Alya nodded. “He’s told me as much. We’re going to make things work this time around. We’re not teenagers anymore.”

“I know you guys will.” Adrien smiled.

“So. When are you going to marry our girl?”

He almost choked on his coffee at her question.

“W-What?”

“Oh! So you’ve noticed it too!” Sabine added as a mischievous smile appeared on her face.

“Notice what?”
“That you’re smitten with Marinette.” Alya’s smile had now turned into a grin. “I vaguely remember you shouting something about loving her last night? Then again that might have been the booze playing tricks on me.”

“No, he shouted it.” Madame Cheng confirmed. “Quite sincerely too.”

“Can we go back to discussing your rekindled love for Nino?” He groaned. “Or the plans for the bakery?”

“But teasing you about your less than obvious crush on Marinette is so much more fun!”

“Alya. You are horrible right now.”

“Sunshine, I’m horrible all the time.” She snorted, taking a big sip of her drink.

“Who’s horrible?”

“Your bff.” Adrien was quick to reply as Marinette stepped into the living room.

Her cheeks were still red, but this time he was sure it was because of the hot shower.

She was wearing a fluffy looking sweater.

Not one of her creations.

Adrien couldn’t see her logo on it anywhere.

Despite that, the light pink sweater, decorated with a cute grey cat face, looked absolutely adorable on her.

More importantly, she looked warm, cozy and just as content as she had looked in the little café they had just visited.

“Al. What did you do?”

“Oh. Nothing. Just teasing Adrien about the fact he wants to ki--”

She wasn’t able to finish her teasing as he was quick to change the subject back around to Alya. “Be the best man at Alya’s wedding! But she isn’t letting me! How mean of her right? Did you know she’s planning to propose to Nino?”

“Really? Oh, Alya that’s great! I’m sure he’ll accept! If you want help getting a wedding dress let me know! I’ll gladly design one for you! I know it’s been ages since I did that, but you’re my best friend and it would be such an honor!” She rambled.

“Whoa! Slow down girl. I haven’t even asked him yet. I’ll let you know if I’ll need your help with anything after he agrees to waste the rest of his life with me.”

“Why wouldn’t he? You’re amazing Al!”

“Thanks Mari.”

“I am sure things will work out just fine.” Madame Cheng assured the girl. “But now that Marinette
is here, lets focus on the current issue.”

Adrien nodded. “The bakery.”

“The bakery.” Marinette repeated with a sigh. “So. Adrien. What do you suggest we do to turn things around?”

“To be honest I have been too busy to work out the finer details. But, I think, with the added competition from the surrounding bakeries, we would stand out to offer something they don’t.”

“Like?”

“Well...you see madame Cheng. When I was in New York, there were several bakeries who make custom made cakes for their clients.”

“You guys do that too right?” Alya remarked. “Oh. Do you want me to move my ass by the way? I know this is strictly business talk right now but if I can do anything to help out…”

“Please stay Alya.” The mother insisted. “It might be good to have some input from someone with an outside view of things and yes, we do make custom cakes. But it has been a long while since we made one.”

“Then we need to advertise that more.” Adrien suggested. “Marinette is talented and creative. I’m sure she makes beautiful cakes if the tiny cupcakes up front are anything to go on.”

“How do you plan we advertise such a thing?”

“Let’s start easy madame Cheng. It’s going to be winter soon. It would be very alluring to customers to have some kind of seasonal window display. With a custom cake or something to go with it. We’ll leave it in the window purely for decoration, but it can lure in potential clients too.”

“Then that means we’ll have to change the display every few weeks. Otherwise the cakes will start to go bad and moldy.”

“Not if we coat them with something maman! Like a silicone or glue or something. I’ll have to look into the specifics of it. But it will protect the outer layer for a while longer right? Otherwise the frosting would just melt away when we move back into warmer weather.”

It seemed that his suggestion had sparked something inside of the designer. A spark he had not seen in a long while.

“You do that. If you need something special let me know Marinette.”

“And I can help you with that research girl!”

“Thank you Alya.”

“Okay. So. That’s a start. What else do you suggest Adrien?”

“I know this might sound drastic...but changing up the things we offer might help? Add some new things we could sell or bring back old things you haven’t sold in a few years.”
Marinette and her mother exchanged a look that got him slightly worried.

“No? Bad idea?”

“It’s not that Adrien. Everything papa made. Everything he put his heart and soul into. That’s what we sell. That’s what I...try to replicate. To change that just feels wrong.”

“Then...how about renewing what we have. Enhancing the flavor. Putting a bit of ‘Marinette’ next to ‘Tom’. It would be the same things, but at the same time different and new too.”

“Progress seems to be the way to go sweetheart.” Her mother sighed. “Maybe we should start with that and slowly make some new pastries to sell over time. When we can afford to no longer play it on safe.”

“You don’t have to worry about that.” He assured them both. “We can take risks.”

“How? Are you going to rob your father?” His partner asked in a joking manner.

“Now there’s an idea Princess!”

Alya was quick to offer her support. “Oh! I’ll help!”

All it did was earn them a scowl from Sabine.

“But...euhm...joking aside. We can take risks, but if you’re both more comfortable finding out if what we have now will work just as well, we’ll stick to that. I just have one more suggestion though.”

“Please tell me it has something to do with smaller portions.”

“Well...yeah actually.” He was taken aback by his partner’s suggestion. “We have to downsize some things we sell. The mini cheesecakes for example. They weren’t small enough. People these days are busy. They don’t have time to sit down and take a few slices of cheesecake. They just want something small, good and easy to swallow.”

“Something you can just munch on while working or when you’re on the go. Something you can keep in your purse.” Alya added. “I know a lot of people who would buy some.”

“That makes sense.” The older woman agreed. “Alright. Let’s try that.”

“Let’s start with just that for now. If there isn’t any change in our profit after two months, we’ll change our tactics once again. See what works and what doesn’t. Do you agree Marinette?”

“Yeah. That sounds good. Maybe the display alone would do wonders. I don’t know why I haven’t thought of that.”

“Because you weren’t forced to attend boring classes about sale strategies and the like.”

“At least they come in handy right now right?”

“Thankfully they do and I fully intend to use what I have learned to help you guys out.”
“Thank you Adrien.”

“For you guys. Anytime madame Cheng.” He gave Marinette a reassuring smile before finishing the remainder of his coffee. “I will swing by to help you guys out wherever I can. Do Tuesdays and Thursdays sound okay?”

“What about your job at Gabriel’s?” The designer asked in a worried tone.

“Not to mention your father.” Alya added.

“He’ll just have to deal with it and I trust my team to be able to handle their department while I am out for a part of the day. Besides. Father doesn’t care how much or how little effort I spend doing my job. I swear he doesn’t really give a crap about that particular department whatsoever. As long as I’ll keep that running, I should be able to help you guys out too.”

“Okay...if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” He placed his hand on top of his partner’s. Hoping to take away some of her worries. “It’s going to be fine.”

“If you need an extra hand with anything let me know too girl. I know I’m busy with work, but I can pull myself away from it for a couple hours to help you out or clean up after hours or something. Okay? I expect to be paid in croissants by the way.”

“Okay.” She laughed. “Thank you...both of you.”

It wasn’t raining anymore when he landed on her balcony that night. Which was a good thing since he seemed to have forgotten his umbrella when he left the Dupain-Cheng household that afternoon.

The sun had long since gone down and the smell of moist autumn leaves hung heavy in the air. His gloved hand held the jewelbox tightly in his hand.

Butterflies danced around in his stomach, despite having done this dance more than once before in the past.

There was just something exciting about bounding over the rooftops and settling down in Marinette’s room for a movie, some hushed banter and a snack or two.

If they had some time left, he would absolutely ask if she was still up for their movienight. It had been long overdue anyway.

“Okay...I can do this.” Chat Noir sighed to himself. “I can do this. It’s just Marinette. It’s not even a real date I’m taking her on. It’s just an old fashioned patrol and I might try to confess my love for her...again.”

Well when he put it like that, it was no wonder he felt so nervous.

No.
No he shouldn’t shove his feelings for her onto her plate like that.

She was still dealing with the loss of her father and she wasn’t even comfortable with herself. Knowing that he harbored romantic feelings for her would only make things worse.

No.

This would be an old fashioned patrol sans the sequel of ‘confessing your undying love to this person and failing’.

“Hey stranger.”

The hero nearly jumped out of his skin at suddenly hearing her voice.

“Princess!” He gasped at the girl who had her head poking out of the skylight. “I think you startled one of my nine lives right out of me.”

“Oh!” She laughed. “So sorry Chaton. I didn’t think you were that much of a scaredy cat.”

“The only thing I am scared off, is not being able to spend time with you my Lady.”

“Well then it’s a good thing I have time to spare. Get in here Kitty. It’s cold out.”

“Actually. I was hoping you would join me.”

Marinette frowned in confusion at the suggestion. “Join you for what?”

“A quick patrol around the city?”

“Chat...Adrien. I can’t. Master Fu has my Miraculous.”

“Then it’s a good thing Plagg actually knew where he lives.”

He opened his hand and presented the small box to her. Her blue eyes widened in shock and she was left speechless.

“You...You didn’t.”

“I did.”

“But...Tikki….we agreed.”

“I know. But you need her support Mari. It’s going to be good for you, being Ladybug again. To forget the problems Marinette has for a few moments and just enjoy being a superhero.”

“Is that what you do as Chat Noir?”

“It’s pretty therapeutic and what can it hurt to try?”

“I...I don’t know....a real hero thinks with her head, not her heart.”
“Really? I always let my heart guide me instead of my head.”

“That explains a lot actually.” She laughed.

“I guess it does.” He laughed with her. “Marinette. Please be my partner again.”

He crouched down and offered her the box once more. Her delicate hand moving towards it before showing signs of hesitation.

“It would be nice to see Tikki again...but...I don’t know if I can handle being Ladybug on top of everything else.”

“Are there any supervillains around right now?”

“Aside from your father? No. No there aren’t. I haven’t needed to ask Rena for help in a long while now. A couple of years actually.”

“So what’s the harm in just keeping Tikki with you and get out every once in a while to get some air?”

“No harm I guess.”

“So...will you join me tonight?”

“Okay...okay I will. Just for tonight. I’ll...I’ll talk to Tikki tomorrow and decide what to do after that.”

Marinette moved to grab the box, yet he was quick to pull his own hand away.

“Wait. We’ll have to do this properly.” Chat cleared his throat. “Marinette Dupain-Cheng. This is the Miraculous of the Ladybug. It grants the power of creation.” The designer had trouble holding back a snort. “Bla bla bla. Something, something will you accept it and be my partner once more.”

“Yes.” She laughed. “Yes I will Minou.”

Gently he pushed the box towards her, before she opened it with trembling hands.

A pink light emerged from it, which revealed the red Kwami to them once it died down.

“T...Tikki!”

“Marinette!”

The small creature wasted no time hugging her chosen’s cheek.

“I missed you!”

“I missed you too!”

“I’m so sorry. I should never...I never wanted you to...”

“It’s okay Marinette. I know you wouldn’t. We can talk about it later. Right now I’m just happy to see you again!”
“I love happy reunions.” Chat commented with a small grin on his face.

“You planned this didn’t you. To get her back to me.”

“I sure did my Lady. I’m pretty sure she’ll help you feel like your old self again in no time.”

“So…that’s why. Oh, Chat!”

The girl pushed herself onto the balcony and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I could just kiss you!”

“Please do!”

She pulled away from him with an all too familiar smirk on her face. One he couldn’t help but mirror with a grin of his own.

“I see you haven’t changed one bit Chat Noir.”

Nevertheless her warm lips found their way onto his cheek.

“As if that’s a bad thing.”

“I never said it was.”

“Hey…do you still know the magic words?”

“Please and thank you?”

He shook his head in amusement and rolled his eyes. Tikki giggling in the background. “No. The other magic words.”

“Spots on. Right?” The baker’s daughter took the earrings out of their casing and carefully placed them back in her ears.

“That’s right Marinette!” The small creature chirped.

“Do you need to eat first Tikki?”

“No I’m fine. Adrien made sure I had enough to eat these past few days.”

“Past few days huh?”

“I wanted to make sure you weren’t too overwhelmed Mari. I was actually planning on giving them to you after our dinner tonight. But this works too. Not as romantic as that, but this works.” He stood up to stretch his legs. “Do you want to play tag or just race around the city?”

“Let’s…just take it easy for tonight Kitty. It’s been a while for me.”

“Of course my Lady.” He took a deep bow. “As you wish.”

“Tikki. Spots on.”
A warm, pink glow, washed over her to reveal his old superhero partner. Although not in her old suit.

As she once sported the black spots all over, now they only rested on her back and part of her legs. Sections of black interrupting the spotted design on her arms, legs and her neck.

“Loving the new look Bug.”

“I...didn’t expect to have a new look to be honest. Yours doesn’t seem to have changed one bit Chaton.”

He shrugged. “Why change what’s already perfect.”

“So you’re saying I didn’t even needed to change my suit either.”

“That’s exactly what I am saying.” The blonde gave her a wink. “I can’t believe how in sync we still are.”

Ladybug rolled her eyes while grabbing her yoyo. “Well...no turning back now. Let’s see if I can still do this.”

To say Ladybug was a bit rusty was the understatement of the year. Even though the added superpowers made things easier for her, from what he could tell, it took her at least a good hour before she was once again used to swinging on the string of her magical weapon.

She wasn’t as graceful with her landings as she used to be.

He had to pull her to safety on more than one occasion because she hesitated in her movements.

It was, as if part of that insecurity that seemed to have slipped into Marinette, didn’t vanish when she was Ladybug. Something, he hoped, would happen.

Then again.

Insecurities didn’t just magically melt away with superpowers.

It had taken years to overcome his own after all.

But even stil, there was progress.

As she was laughing loudly at her own clumsiness and mistakes.

“I am so bad at this.” She laughed once again as he pulled her away from a ledge of the building she was trying to land on.

“Give it time Bug. You’ve been out of your spots for the past few years. It’s only normal that you’re a bit wobbly now.”

“I guess.” She nodded. “It does feel like it’s my first day all over again. But...it doesn’t feel bad.”

“Good.”
“Can we take a break though? A short one?”

“As you wish. Right here or do you want to hop onto the tower first? The view up there is still amazing.”

The other hero pondered for a few moments before giving her final answer. “I think I can make it to the tower.”

The lights emerging from the buildings and cars below them, almost seemed to sparkle and shimmer in a magical way.
Chat watched as Ladybug just stood there.
Leaning on the railing on the top of the Eiffel tower.

Her chest rising and falling with every deep breath they took.
Taking in the sounds of the city and the comfortable silence between them.

“I missed this.” She suddenly whispered.

“So did I.” He admitted in the same hushed tone. “But I am glad I got to share my first night back as Chat Noir with you, my Lady.”

“You didn’t transform before tonight?”

“Not here. No. I ran over the rooftops of New York plenty of times. Not that I was that much help to the heroes there. I mostly just stopped petty crime if it crossed my path. But it was just nice to get out as Chat.”

Ladybug gave a small nod in understanding. “You know...I...I had things planned out for myself for the longest time.”

“That sounds like something you would do.”

The corners of her mouth curled up into a small smile for a few seconds before she continued.
“Things were actually going well Chaton. I kept contact with my best friends, I managed to get an internship at Gabriel’s. I was well on my way to get the job of my dreams, work hard and be better than your father. Then...everything derailed when papa…”

She took a deep breath and swallowed hard.

He could tell she was having trouble keeping her emotions in check again.

“Things like that happen Bug.”

“I know and I could deal with it at first. I hoped...that when papa would be better again, I could just pick things up where they left off and do my own thing again. But it just became too much too soon. Like...like…”

“Like drinking something too cold too fast?”

“Yeah. Something like that. Only with the added bonus that I just wasn’t sure of anything anymore
after that and that I felt numb on most days. My plans. The road I was taking...just didn’t work either and before I knew it, I felt like that insecure thirteen year old again. The one who felt nauseous every day, thinking she needed to deal with Chloé’s bullying again. But now I was feeling like because of other reasons...

“Princess…”

“It just feels like a mess Chat. But...since this morning...it feels a bit less like that. I feel more in control. You know what I mean?”

“I think I do.”

“So. I’ve decided to just keep helping maman out. Give up on being a fashion designer and instead use my talents in the bakery and do my best to make some unique pieces to display.”

“As long as you find enjoyment in what you’re doing. That’s important too.”

“I’m going to try to and...I’m actually looking forward to making some things of my own. Especially if it can help us stand out from the others and get more paying customers in the process.”

“We just have to see what sticks Bug. I’ll make sure you guys have a clean slate to work with, so you and your mom don’t have to worry about anything besides doing your job and giving yourself a little mental break.”

“That would be nice.”

“And the days I will show up to help out, feel free to delegate tasks to me. If I need to take out the trash or make a delivery or something...just tell me to do it okay. I want to take as much work pressure off your shoulders as I can.”

“Kitty...you...you don’t have to.”

“I want to see you smile again Bugaboo. Like before. The same way you wanted to see me smile again and be happy.”

“Okay. Point made Minou.” She laughed. “Let’s try to keep each other smiling then.”

“Yeah. Let’s do that.”

They once again fell into a comfortable silence. One that lasted until she tried to suppress a yawn.

Chat took that as a sign to take her back home.

But he was now more than ever convinced that she would eventually be smiling more again.
Chapter Summary

And thus a new week begins.

Chapter Notes

Maybe not a lot of plot progression but there is some more plot setup going on in this chapter.
Hope to update again soon!
Happy Holidays!

Taking over Paul’s work completely on his own wasn’t easy.
In the short time he had been shown how to do his job, he had noticed how much time he had spend checking orders, making phone calls and making sure everything just ran as smoothly as they could.

He made it look so easy.

But the moment Adrien took a seat in the large office chair, things just felt...off.
It felt wrong sitting there.

It felt wrong being the one doing all the paperwork and calling back clients.

Clients whom, immediately noticed the weren’t speaking to Paul Vienna.
Or a man with the same amount of experience.

As a result, he felt like a punching bag halfway throughout the day.
Absorbing complaints and dissatisfaction from their clientele just took the same amount of energy from him as taking a punch to the face from an Akuma.

And he would know what that felt like.
He had taken blows more than once.

“Mary?”

“Yes monsieur?” Mary’s voice sounded through the intercom on his desk.

“Do...do we have a copy of the La Rouge order from last year?”

“We should have.”
“Good. They want to receive a copy of that order. Not sure why. Maybe to get some administration stuff in order?”

“I’ll mail it to them the moment I can find it.”

“Thank you.” He shifted his gaze to his computer screen and noticed a notification from the email program.

Not the first of that day and certainly not the last.

“There is a young lady here to see you by the way.” Mary continued. “She says she has a delivery for you?”

“Delivery?”

“Baked goods again if I have to guess. She was here last week with a delivery as well. Euhm...what’s your name sweetie?”

He could faintly hear the girl answer with ‘Marinette’ from the other side of the intercom.

It was enough to get him out of the chair and bolt towards the door to open it.

There, standing in Mary’s little office space, stood the baker’s daughter. Once again holding a big white box in her arms.

“Eager to see me are you?” She teased.

“I am always eager to see you Princess.” He stepped forward and pecked her cheek to greet her. “I just didn’t expect to see you here at all today.”

“You didn’t expect me last time either, but maman insisted I’d bring you another delivery. Something about it being part of the deal?”

“I was joking about that. She didn’t need to actually pay my part in pastries.”

Marinette shook her head with a smile on her lips. “You don’t know her the way I do Chaton. Maman keeps her promises. So…” She handed the box to him. “I guess I’ll be around once a week to make a delivery.”

“Isn’t it easier for me to just...pick it up when I come to you guys?”

“In theory yes.”

“Shall I hand those our to everyone?” Mary asked as she nodded towards the box. “It’s almost time for a coffee break anyway.”

“Please and thank you.”

The pregnant woman pulled herself out of the chair and took the box from him before leaving her office.
“So…”

“So?”

“You...You’re looking better today Mari.”

“I feel better. I...I talked to Tikki too and I’m going to see master Fu after I leave here.”

“To bring back the earrings?” He asked with a slight frown.

He hoped that wasn’t the answer.
She had seemed so much more at ease the moment Tikki had popped out of the magical item.

“No. To ask him if I can keep them a while longer.” She sighed. “You were right. Tikki...I need Tikki in my life right now. She helped me keep positive back then and I didn’t even realize that until spiralled down. Y’know?”

Adrien gave a small nod in understanding. “Good. I’m glad having her back seems to help.”

“Being friends with Alya again helps too and...so does having you back.”

He couldn’t help but smile hearing that. “I am glad Mari. So glad. You’re really going to be fine Bug. Just like I told you.”

“I am. Eventually.”

He nodded in agreement. “Eventually.”

“So ehm...are you busy tonight?”

His heart started to beat faster at her question. Though he wasn’t sure why.

“Not really. Why? Had something in mind?”

“Yeah.” Her smile turned into a smirk. “I’ve been dying to kick your ass in Ultima Mecha Striker.”

“Oh no!” He laughed. “I know better than to compete against you on that front. Besides, we work way better as a team together.”

“So? Online co-op?”

“Online co-op.” Adrien confirmed.

He held out his fist. She didn’t hesitate to softly give him a fistbump.

“Eight-ish tonight?”

“Sure. That works for me.”

“I might be a really rusty though.” She warned him. “It’s been years since I’ve played.”
“I’m sure you’ll do fine and if not, I’ve got your back Bug. We’ll win.”

“We’ll have fun.” Marinette corrected him. “But yeah we’ll win too.”

“Do you have time for a cup of tea or something? To warm up? It’s still pretty chilly out.”

“I...I should probably go. Maman might need my help. But thank you for offering.”

“Okay. Then...I’ll talk to you again tonight.”

“Right. Talk to you tonight.”

The dark haired woman shot him a warm smile before leaving the office space.

All he could do was watch her walk back out.
Her back straight.
More confidence in her steps and her head held high.

It was almost like he wasn’t looking at the same person he had spend the day with yesterday.
The same young woman who had seemed so small sitting in the rain.

“Adrien? Adrien?!”

“Huh? What?” Mary’s voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

She held up the, nearly empty, pastry box to him.
Offering for him to take one.

“You were gone there for a minute.”

“Oh...eh...sorry I just. Got lost in thought.”

“Worries?”

“No. Not yet. I’m just...happy. For the first time in a long while actually.”

“Despite being stuck here?”

“Working here is not the worst thing in the world.” The former model admitted as he fished a cream puff out of the box. “I haven’t lost my friends when I thought I did, I’m helping one of my best friends get back on her feet, I’m getting my own place soon. Things are actually looking up again.”

Granted, it wasn’t the dream future he had envisioned for himself when he was younger.

There was no private island where Marinette and himself would have a hamster and live off fruit.
Away from controlling father’s and prying eyes.
Free from everything to just spend their days in the warm sun.
There was no job as a pastry chef.
No wonderful family to call his own.

But he still had some freedom left.
He wasn’t alone.

He got the occasional hug.

As far as Adrien was concerned, this was the happiest he had felt in a long while.

“Next week? Are you sure?” Chloé asked bewildered as Adrien cut his steak.

“Pretty sure. I’ve already made arrangements to sign the papers.”

The blonde woman put her wine glass down.

As she had been happily chatting away during their dinner, now her cheerful demeanor had suddenly turned a bit gloomy.

“You can stay longer if you want to.” She offered. “Like. It’s going to take a while before you have the place decorated right? No use living there if there’s no bed to sleep in. Right?”

“That’s true.”

“It’s just...I’m going to miss you Adrikins. It’s been forever since we hung out and now that you’re back you’re leaving again?”

“Not leaving Chlo. Not really. It’s not like I’m going abroad again or even be outside of the city.”

“I know.” Nevertheless she pushed her lips into a small pout. “I’m just...it’s just...I’ve been enjoying spending time with you again.”

Oh, so that’s why she was suddenly so upset.

“I’m not going to stop spending time with you.” He assured her. “You’re...really like a sister I never had.”

Hearing those words, Chloé suddenly straightened her back. Her bright blue eyes seemed to twinkle and a small smile returned on her lips.

“You’re family to me.” Adrien finished.

“And you are to me. Family I just don’t want to lose to anyone.”

He chuckled. “You won’t lose me. Don’t worry. We’ve lasted this long as friends, we can survive twenty more years.”

“I...I guess you’re right Adrikins.”

“Can I ask you for a favor though? Two favors actually.”

“Say no more. My hairdresser can work miracles. Even with your head of...well I wouldn’t call it hair anymore.”
“Wow. Thanks.” Adrien flatly replied. “Also that was not what I was going to ask.”

“Oh.” The blonde mouthed, yet showing no signs of embarrassment.

“You’re still organizing the charity gala in december right?” She nodded. “I wanted to ask you to consider ordering a eyecatcher for your dessert table. One made by the Dupain-Cheng bakery?”

“Why would I even consider such a thing?” Chloé scoffed. “I don’t owe that girl anything, so why would I?”

“Because you wouldn’t only be doing her a favor Chlo. You’d be doing me one as well.”

“Because you’re the one asking it?”

“No. Because I own half of that bakery now.” He explained. “It would be good advertising to be able to deliver something for such a grand event and you do know they donate their leftover goods to the homeless shelter about every two days right? So they are involved with the organisation you’re trying to raise money for.”

“So?”

“So….eh…”

“You didn’t have a point with that did you?” She asked with a smirk on her lips.

Happy she won their small argument.

“I’m just trying to say that they are known for helping out and that it could really benefit you to pick them over some ice sculptor who just wants to make money and doesn’t care about the charity itself. Look. I’m not asking you to do it if you don’t want to. You know they make good stuff Chloé and I know you’re not exactly friends with Marinette either. But…it could really help them keep their home. Please. At least consider it.”

The young woman was quiet for a few moments before nodding her head. “I’ll consider it. For you.”

“Thank you.”

“Why are you even an owner of that hopeless bakery anyway?”

“Like I said…it’s to help Marinette and her maman to keep her home.”

“You’re too good for her Adrikins. It’s ridiculous to think she even asked you for such a thing!” The mayor’s daughter assumed.

“She didn’t. I offered. Marinette was actually very much against me helping out like this. At first. She might still be a little I’m not sure. But there isn’t really any other choice.”

“There always is a choice.”

“Letting them end up on the streets is a wrong choice. I love her. You know that.”
“Yeah, yeah. You love her so much you would give her the world if she asked for it.” She rolled her eyes. “Are you sure she’s not taking advantage of your overly kind heart?”

“She wouldn’t. Mari isn’t like that. Besides...even if I wasn’t in love with her I would still help her. Because at the end of the day, she’s still a close friend of mine and I care about her. I would help everyone I care about and they would be in the same situation.”

“Okay.” She sighed. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I know what I’m doing.” He gave her a confident nod. “Besides, it’s temporary anyway. Once they can fully support themselves again, I’ll back off.”

“Good. It sounds exhausting anyway. Doing work for your father and running a business on the side. No thank you.”

“I don’t think you can really compare it to running a hotel.” He laughed.

“I...I don’t really run it. Daddy just put me in the position once I was done with hotel management, and I’ve been basically delegating people left and right. Like he told me I should do. Le Grand Paris actually already had competent manager. She’s doing most of the work really. It eh...actually makes me feel pretty useless sometimes.”

“Chlo.” Adrien sighed. “You know you’re not.”

“I know. It’s like...he doesn’t trust me.” A frown appeared on her face. “I know how to handle this. But...he just doesn’t trust me to do it.”

“You just need a moment to shine. Show him you can do this and much more.”

“That’s why the gala has to be perfect. That’s my project. My chance to show him I know my stuff. That he can trust me to run this place.”

Adrien nodded in understanding.

“I...I could use your help with that by the way. If you consider me as one of those friends you care about.”

“I just told you that you’re like a sister to me. Of course I care about you.” He laughed. “What do you need?”

“I need you to be at the gala. Just for support. Like...someone I can turn to if things get too difficult or something, you know. You can even bring Dupain-Cheng with you. I don’t care. I just need you to be around.”

“As long as you don’t invite my father, I’ll be there.”

“I think you should be the one to tell him that he doesn’t need to come this year. Daddy always invites him as you know.”

Adrien nodded. “I’ll try to convince him, that I’ll be making sure Gabriel’s is represented properly. So he can just sulk in his office like he always does.”
Chloé snorted, almost spitting out her wine in the process. “He still does that?”

“Oh yeah.”

“No offence, but your father needs to get a hobby or something.”

“No offence, but I’d rather he didn’t.” Adrien knew what hobbies the man had kept in the past. If you called trying to kill teenagers and Akumatizing the city a hobby. “He’s good where he is now. Married to his job and just...staying where he likes to be. In that huge mansion, all alone with only Nathalie to keep him company.”

“God how does that woman do it?” She asked in a joking tone.

“That’s what I’d like to know too. Nath is a saint for sure.”

“Will she be okay by the way?”

“Nathalie has her ways of dealing with father.”

“No.” Chloé shook her head. “I meant Dupain-Cheng. I mean...it can’t be easy dealing with all this shit at once right? First her father, now her home.”

“Didn’t know you cared.”

“I don’t. I mean...I shouldn’t. But contrary to what she, and others might believe, I don’t hate that girl. Dislike her? Absolutely. But I am not *that* heartless that I don’t sympathize with her situation. A little.” She gulped down the remainder of her drink.

“Do you sympathize with her enough to buy a pretty cake for you gala from her?”

“Don’t push it Adrien. Now what was that second favor you wanted to ask for?”

Oh. Right.

He almost forgot there was something else he needed her help with.

“Well, with the miracles father expects me to pull off and helping the Dupain-Cheng bakery, I don’t know if I’ll have time to actually decorate my new apartment.” He chuckled nervously. “On top of the fact that I don’t know a thing about interieur design. Knowing me I’ll just mash together things that don’t match at all. What I’m trying to ask is...would you be willing to help me pick out furniture and stuff like that? You’ve always had a keen eye for that.”

Chloé’s eyes seemed to light up at his question.

“Leave everything to me! We can look at home magazines to find out what you actually want and if you leave a budget with me, I’ll make sure your new home will be turned into the perfect bachelor pad, while you’re busy with work.”

“I don’t need a bachelor pad.” He laughed. “Just something presentable and easy to clean. I’ll doubt I’ll even use most of the rooms.”

“Ugh. You’re a bachelor Adrien. By definition, no matter what kind of apartment you’ve bought, it’ll be a bachelor pad. Besides, you’d want to have a nice place. Trust me.”
“So...a dining table, couch and a bed won’t be enough? It’s been enough up in the hotel room and I’m not sure if I’ll even end up staying there for long.”

“No that’s not enough. You’d want something presentable and inviting. Something that says, ‘yes this is a comfortable and safe place to spend the night and I’ll make you breakfast in the morning’.”

“Why on Earth would--”

“Don’t question me on this alright. If you want Dupain-Cheng to stay over after a date, you’d want to have a nice place to live. Someone’s home is the gateway to the soul. An open gateway.”

“Pretty sure that’s windows. Or...eyes.”

“No. I’m pretty sure that you can be nice, charming and all that to her, but if you bring her to an dump of an apartment, she’ll bolt it out of there before you can even blink and then you’ll never get to kiss her! That’s what you still want right?”

“Yeah of course! I...I want to spend my life with her. She makes me happy and I love her. You know that.”

“Of course I do. That I know she makes you happy is the whole reason I don’t hate her guts.” The mayor’s daughter rolled her eyes. “I’ve been watching you two gush about each other for years. It’s really hard to miss you’ve got a thing for her and it’s extremely tiring to watch. I still don’t get why you didn’t confess your feelings to her the day you left.”

“Because she wanted me to tell her when I got back.”

That much he still remembered.

“Well? Have you?”

Adrien started to move his food back and forth on his plate, turning her gaze away from his childhood friend.

“I...kinda yelled it at her? When we got into a little argument last night. But I don’t think it registered. Or maybe she doesn’t feel the same way? Either way I haven’t brought it up yet.”

“Oh my God!” Chloé groaned. “You’re a disaster. You both are.”

“So eh...how was your day?” He carefully asked thought his headset as he booted up Ultimate Mecha Striker on his laptop. “Did Master Fu say anything interesting?”

“No. But it was nice talking to him again.” Marinette answered back. “He gave me some herbal tea, to help me sleep better.”

Adrien frowned. “You have trouble sleeping?”

“Yeah. It’s gotten pretty bad in the last month or so. I’ve had a few decent nights of rest lately though, so don’t worry.”
“I’m trying not to Bug. But...geez. Are you tired now? Should we even still play?”

“I’m okay.” She laughed. “A little tired, but not sleepy at the moment.”

“Okay. If you’re sure. Just let me know when you’d want to call it quits okay?”

“Okay. So...how was your day?”

“ Weird.”

“ Oh?”

“It just feels weird sitting somewhere I’m not supposed to sit. That and I haven’t told my team about the good and bad news yet.”

“What good and bad news?”

“Ah...well...that they don’t have to worry about sales numbers for the next couple of years. That’s the good news. And eh...that their former manager was kicked out of his seat because I’m an Agreste and my father wanted me there?”

“They...don’t know you’re an Agreste?”

She sounded surprised and he couldn’t blame her.

His name and likeness had been all over Paris in his teenage years. But now, when he stopped modeling, when it had been ages since his last photo was taken. Now that he had apparently changed so much even his friends didn’t recognize him right away, it felt liberating to have others not be aware of that fact too.

“No. No they don’t.”

“You lied to them?”

“More like...they never asked and I never told them. Do you know how bad it could be if my team found out my father fired their old manager just to make room for me?”

“I can only imagine. But...will you tell them?”

He remained silent for a couple of seconds. “Maybe. Eventually.”

“I think you should at some point. They are going to find out eventually. Especially if your father drops by to check on you.”

“As if he’d ever leave the house.” Adrien snorted. “Nah. I’m good on that front. Don’t worry. I just need to earn my place there before I’ll tell them. Show them that I’m better than my father.”

“Speaking of that man. Has he given you any trouble?”

“Not since we negotiated my contract. Thankfully. Although Nathalie texted me earlier. She said father wanted to speak to me tomorrow morning? So I’ll swing by then before heading to the office.”
“But tomorrow is Tuesday.”

“It is.”

He could almost imagine the woman pouting on the other side of the screen. “You said you would work with us in the bakery on Tuesdays.”

“I’ll drop by in the afternoon.” He promised his partner. “Everyone is trying to clean up the mess that’s left over from the order fiasco. There’s a lot of phone calls to make and orders to double check. Not to mention that I need to check up on designing and see how they are holding up under the extra work pressure. So I might not have as much time to spare for the bakery this week as I want to have.”

“Sounds like you’ll have a busy day ahead of you.”

“Yeah. But don’t worry. I can handle it.”

“If Plagg doesn’t make it more difficult for you.” She laughed.

“Nah. Not Plagg. I just leave him in the hotel room where he can sleep and eat cheese all day. He’s been on his best behaviour lately.”

“You can always drop him off here. To keep Tikki company?”

“You really don’t mind?”

“Not at all.”

“Do you hear that Plagg?” Adrien called out to the sleeping cat. “Mari says you can visit Tikki when I’m at work!” The small lump of black grumbled slightly on the large bed before curling himself up even more.

“Plagg is grateful for your offer.”

“Really? I didn’t hear him?”

“He’s asleep. But trust me he’s grateful. So...eh...co-op tonight?”

“Yeah. I’m all booted up over here. You?”

“Waiting for the game to finish an update. Then I’m good to go.”

“There...there’s an update?”

“Says so on my screen.”

“Wait a second.”

He could hear her click and move her mouse around.

“Adrien.”
“Yes my Lady?”

“I’m going to have to postpone our online match.”

“Why’s that.”

“Seems my computer is trying to download updates for the game. Two years worth of updates. Might take an hour or two...maybe three.” Marinette sighed.

“Shit.”

“Yeah. Shit. I really didn’t think about that to be honest.”

“That’s okay Bugaboo. We can just chat if you want?”

“I’d like that. Oh! Before I forget. Nino sent me something? Do you know anything about that?”

A smile curled on Adrien’s lips, though she could not see it. “I do! He told me he would ship you a care package from New York. What did he get you?”

“I...don’t know. I haven’t opened it yet. I thought you would know? In case if there’s something in there I have to prepare myself for.” She laughed.

“Sorry. No clue.” He lied.

“Oh you so do know something!”

“Maybe a little. But I’m not sure if he actually bought you what he said he would.”

“He didn’t have to buy me anything in the first place.”

Adrien leaned back into his seat. “He wanted to show you his support too. I know it’s not much but he’s still your friend too. He just wants you to know that he’ll be there for you if you need him.”

“You...all of you...you’re too much.”

“Nah. Just paying you back for all the times you were there for us.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“No. But we wanted to.” He assured her.

“Thank you.”

“You can thank us all in your own way when you’ll feel better again and when things are...back to normal.”

“As far as normal goes for us.”

Adrien nodded in agreement. “As far as normal goes for us.” He repeated. “Then, we can figure out what to do about my father.”
“Right. I almost forgot about that little predicament.”

“As long as I’ll keep doing what I’m obligated to do, things will be fine. You’ll have the time to recover, mourn and we’ll kick butt after that.”

The baker’s daughter let out a string of soft giggles. “Sounds like a plan Chaton.”

“I can come up with plans.”

“Never said you couldn’t.”

“So. Here’s another one.” The sound of something sharp ripping through cardboard filled his ears.

Was she opening Nino’s package?

It sounded like it.

“Yes?”

“Chloé is hosting and organizing that charity gala thing the mayor always does at the start of december right?”

Marinette gave a confirming humm.

“So. She wants me to be there. To show support.”

“Yeah.”

“And she basically said I could bring a plus one.”

“Basically?”

“Okay so her exact words were ‘You can bring Dupain-Cheng if you’d like. I don’t care I just need you to be there as support’.”

“Wow.”

“She means well Mari.”

Adrien could almost hear her roll her eyes after he had said that. “Sure she does.”

“I don’t suppose you would be willing to go with me to the gala?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“You should Marinette!” Tikki’s voice chirped from somewhere in the background. “It can be fun and you can dance with Adrien!”

“I can’t dance Tikki!”

“Bullshit.” He was quick to counter. “You’re a great dancer.”
“That aside. I don’t even have anything to wear either. I’ll stand out like a...like a red stain on a white shirt.”

“We can shop for a dress? I mean...I know nothing about fashion, but I don’t mind being dragged along.”

“It’s fine Adrien. I always have a specific idea of what a specific dress has to look like and of course nobody sells that so I always make it myself.”

“Also not a bad idea.”

“I can’t...I don’t have a lot of time to spend on designing these days. I told you that didn’t I?”

“Yeah. But on the other hand, you’ve still got two months?”

His partner let out a big sigh. “You really want me to go to this thing don’t you?”

He made no effort denying it. “I really do. Besides. Even Cinderella got to have a little break from her hard work to enjoy the ball. Why can’t you?”

“If I’m Cinderella in this scenario, does that make you my Prince Charming?” Marinette asked in a joking manner.

“Well. You’re already my Princess.” The smile on his lips turned into a sly smirk. “Do I need to say more?”

The young woman burst into laughter on the other side of the line. “You--” She gasped. “You’re horrible.”

“Ah. But you’re laughing Cinderella! That counts for something.”

“Oh shush you!” The girl continued to laugh.

“If I do, I won’t hear your angelic laughter anymore.”

“Minou.” Her laughter died down. “You’re something else you know that.”

“Something good I hope?”

“Absolutely.” Marinette answered without a trace of doubt coating her words.

“Good. I’m glad you’re laughing again Mari.”

“Feels good too and---Oh my God!”

He straightened his back at her sudden outburst. “What? Did something happen? Is everything okay?”

“Nino…”

“Yes?”
“He got me the cutest little hamster plush I’ve ever seen! I’ve always wanted a hamster!”

“Oh. Thank goodness. I thought something bad happened for a second.” He sighed. “You know, hamsters aren’t expensive. You could just get one.”

“And give the people from the health inspection a field day? No thanks.” She chuckled softly before the happy tone slowly disappeared. “No. No this is fine. The closest I’ll ever get to owning a real one.”

“Mari.”

“Hmmm?”

“You sound a little sad again. You okay?”

“Yeah….Yeah. It’s just.” He could hear another sigh from her. “Just one more dream I have to give up on.”

“At least Nino gave you a cute substitute?”

“There’s that at least. He must have remembered me rambling on and on about the things back when we were little.”

“What else did he get you?”

“Your replacement.”

“What?”

“It’s another plush toy. A black cat one with a pink bow. It’s cute.”

“Cuter than I am?”

“Oh yeah.” The joking tone was back in her voice. “No competition. This thing is waaay cuter than you are.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Ah...he eh...put something else in here too.”

“Candy? I told him to put some sweets or something in there.”

“Fabric.”

“I...did tell him you weren’t designing anymore.”

“He means well and it’s nice fabric. Really nice. I’m already getting ideas on what to do with this.”

“Maybe you can find some time on Sundays to make something with it? It’s your only day off.”

“Maybe.” Marinette muttered.
Adrien could tell from the tone in her voice that she was dwelling too much on what she couldn’t do anymore. The dream she had to give up. The new life she was leading now.

“Did he put anything else in there?”

“Marshmallows?”

“Then I’m absolutely going to come over soon so we can make some s’mores.”

“What are s’mores?”

“An American thing. You take two biscuits, chocolate and marshmallows. Smush them together, microwave them for a few seconds and you’ve got yourself a snack.”

“Sounds...like something.”

“It’s not that bad. I promise.”

“Guess that’s why he put some cracker brand I’ve never heard of in here too and two bars of chocolate.”

“Oh no. My best friend has fallen victim to non-European snacks! Whatever shall we do!”

“Serve him chips and cake when he comes back?”

Adrien chuckled. “Besides that. I mean. A welcome back party is the least we can do.”

Marinette didn’t answer right away.

“You still there?” He asked after a few seconds of silence.

“Yeah. It’s just...we haven’t thrown you a welcome back party yet.”

“It’s okay. I wanted to sneak back into the country anyway. No need for a party.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay...if you’re sure. Hey euhm...I’m getting a little tired...I hope you don’t mind if I--”

“No! No of course not. You get some sleep Princess and eh...let me know if you’ll be my Cinderella for the charity ball okay? If you don’t want to that’s fine too.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Okay. Sleep well Marinette.”

“Goodnight Adrien.”
“Goodnight.”

He wasn’t sure where it came from, but something inside of him told him to whisper those three little words to her. Those three words that he wanted to tell her over and over again ever since their argument.

The moment he opened his mouth to even do so, a soft ‘pling’ ringed in his ears. His laptop showing him that the call had been disconnected.

The first thing he was greeted with, when he stepped into the bakery, was a big hug from Sabine. One he returned automatically, while his brain still seemed half asleep.

“I didn’t expect you to come by so soon.”

“Wasn’t planning on it. But I figured I’d let you know that I’m going to pay off all the bills today and I wanted to get a look at your broken oven. See what kind of brand it is and if we should fully replace it or just get a mechanic to fix things.”

The woman gave a small nod in understanding. “I’m not an expert when it comes to mechanical things. All I know is that it just won’t heat up anymore.”

“But it turns on?”

Again, Sabine nodded.

“Might need to play it on safe then and just replace the whole thing. Could be cheaper in the long run too.”

“I’ll leave that up to you dear. That aside. Have you had breakfast yet?”

“Eh...no. Not yet. I rushed out as soon as I could this morning. Father wants to speak to me and I have to be at the office one time. I’ll try to arrange some things for this place between phone calls and stuff like that So...yeah. Got a busy day ahead of me and it doesn’t leave much time for breakfast.”

“Marinette?!” The mother shouted towards the kitchen.

“Yes maman?!”

“Are the croissants done sweetheart?!”

“Pulled them out of the oven a minute ago!” He heard his partner shout back. “They are cooling down now.”

A small smile curled on the older woman’s lips as she motioned for him to follow her to the back again.

“Let me get you some croissants at least. It’s important for you to eat properly Adrien. Especially
when you’re working so hard.”

“Oh.. well.. if you insist madame Cheng.”

The moment he stepped into the kitchen, his eyes met bluebell ones. He couldn’t help but mimic the smile that appeared on her, flour covered, face.

“Hey.” She greeted softly when her mother walked passed her and straight towards the baked goodies.

“Hey.” Adrien greeted back. Swinging one arm around her shoulder and pressing a firm kiss on her cheek.

The young man’s hand slipped into his pocket to bring out the sleeping cat Kwami. It didn’t take long before she noticed the little creature and opened up the front pocket of her apron. Letting him know that the cat should be just fine in there.

Before Plagg could even wake up to object, Adrien had handed him over to Marinette’s care.

“I hope you stocked up on cheese?” He asked in a whisper.

The baker’s daughter replied with a quick nod.

“Here you go Adrien!” Sabine pushed a large bag in his hands. “That should be enough to get you through the day.”

The warmth of the pastries within it, immediately managed to chase away any lingering cold in his hands from walking outside.

“Thank you madame Cheng. I will be on my way. But I’ll be back at the end of the day to keep you two posted on the how’s and what’s with the oven.” He nodded towards the broken device.

“Do you want to have dinner with us?” His partner suddenly asked. “I mean... that’s okay right maman?”

The older woman merely nodded.

“I’d love to Marinette.”

“Oh! Wait! Before you go, I need you to try something. Something I’ve been working on.”

“Already coming up with new ideas?”

“No. I’ve thought about what you said. About... adding something of my own to papa’s recipes”. She turned her attention back to the counter and grabbed a cookie off one of the trays. “Here. Open. Tell me what you think.”

Adrien wasn’t sure why, but she seemed to be absolutely glowing. A glint in her blue eyes and a happy smile on her lips.

He hadn’t seen her this happy in a long while.
What else could he do but comply as Marinette pushed the tiny treat into his mouth.

“Hmmm...not bad. Really not bad at all.” The blonde muttered, the flavor of cinnamon mixed with buttery goodness dancing over his tongue.

“Really? Do you think it’s good enough to sell? I used papa’s butter cookie recipe and added a bit of cinnamon sugar. To make it a bit more suitable for the cold season.”

“Put it on the counter. It can never hurt to offer some samples of something new and if people are into it, we can just sell them a batch.”

“Oh, that is a good idea Adrien!” Sabine praised.

“Let me know how it went tonight okay? I...I really need to go. My father will flip if I’m not on time to meet him.”

“Okay. Have fun at work Kitty.”

“You too Bug. Thanks again for breakfast madame Cheng.”

“We’ll see you tonight dear.”

Something was...a little off the moment he walked up the long driveway to the Agreste mansion. He didn’t have to ponder too long on what exactly made everything feel off.

The unfamiliar sports car parked right in front of the house was definitely the cause of the unnerving chills running down his spine at the moment.

It wasn’t his father’s car.

It sure as heck wasn’t Nathalie’s.

Did father have company?

That would have been a first if that was the case.

Nevertheless, the first thing he greeted Nathalie with, when he stepped into the mansion, wasn’t just a simple ‘hello’.

“Hey Nath. Who eh...who’s car is that in the driveway?”

“Good morning to you too Adrien.” Came the woman’s flat reply.

“Good morning. Again. Who’s car is that?”

“Yours.”

“I...don’t have a car.”
“Now you do.”

She reached into the pocket of her jacket and fished out a key before throwing it into Adrien’s direction. He caught it with ease.

“What?”

“A gift from your father.”

That answer made him even more confused. “Why?”

“A late graduation gift from what I understand.”

“Again. Why? He knows I usually take public transport anyway.”

The woman shrugged. “Maybe you should ask him that yourself.”

“I suppose I will.” Adrien sighed. “So...any idea what father wants to talk to me about.”

“He’s been keeping quiet recently. Doesn’t talk too much. If I knew I would tell you of course.”

“Of course.”

“Now go. Monsieur Agreste is already waiting for you.”

“Right. Shouldn’t make father wait.”

“No. You shouldn’t.”

Pocketing the car key, he made his way back to Gabriel’s office. As always, the mere sight of the large, wooden door, was enough to make him feel nervous and uncomfortable. As always, he doubted a few seconds before knocking on the door.

“Come in.” His father’s voice called out in a monotone voice.

“Good morning father.”

“Adrien.” The older man gave a nod towards his son the moment he stepped into the room.

“You wished to speak to me?”

“Yes. It has come to my attention that you’re planning to find a place of your own. Correct?”

“Y-Yeah. Who told you that?”

“Mayor Bourgeois told me a little about it during our conversation about the charity gala a couple of days ago.”

“Ah. I see.”
Once again, it seemed Chloé had forwarded information to her father that he actually did not want to reach his own father. He was going to have to make sure that she would keep certain things a secret.

Specifically the fact that he was helping Marinette.

Adrien could only imagine what his father would do if he found out he wasn’t completely devoted to the company.

Not that, in reality, should be any of the older man’s concern.
But having a magical piece of jewelry in play did complicate things and he just wanted to be careful.

One misstep and his father could do something unexpected and crazy.
With, possibly, disastrous consequences.

He didn’t want to risk that.

“I have taken the liberty of renting you a excellent apartment in the city. You can move in whenever you like.”

“No offence father but...I have already found an apartment. I’m planning to move in there soon.”

For the first time since he stepped into the room, Gabriel looked up from his work to look his son in the eyes. “Oh.”

“It’s a big place with a nice view. Not too far from work either.”

“I see.”

“You sound...disappointed?”

“No. I am not. It’s just...I try to give you something nice--”

“Like the car out front?”

He shot him a look of disapprovement as his son interrupted him before he continued. “And help you out. But you seem to reject it.”

Adrien frowned at that statement.

Was his father really implying he was ungrateful?
It wasn’t like he was asked if he was okay with a home being rented out for him.

He never asked for it in New York and he surely didn’t ask for it now.

“I am not a child anymore.” The blonde calmly reminded the older man. “I can arrange and take care of things myself. I tie my own shoes, cook my own food, choose who I want to hang out with. On my own. Is it really that strange that I don’t want to accept things from you anymore?”

“I suppose not.”

“I...I’m not sure why you bought me a car either.” He pulled the key out of his pocket and put it on
“Don’t get me wrong. It’s a nice gift but...I don’t really need it.”

“You do. Taking public transport is below your class.”

Adrien rolled his eyes at that. “Weren’t you ‘below class’ when you first started out? You always told me you had to work your way up to get where you are now.”

“I did. I worked hard so you don’t have to now.”

“I do work hard.” He frowned. “You have no idea how hard I’ve worked just to make you proud. You have no idea much time I put into fixing the shit that could have been prevented with a simple system update. I’m still fixing it! I never chose to be born into a wealthy family. I don’t want my future family to be born into it either. I...I just want to be free father. Free to make mistakes, get married, supply for my own basic needs. Is that too much to ask?”

“Is that all? No further ambitions?” The older man asked while raising a brow.

“Not anymore.”

He was very tempted to add something along the lines of ‘thanks to you’, but he held his tongue. Just like Marinette, he just had to make peace with the fact that his dreams were just going to stay dreams.

“Very well. I will cancel the apartment I picked out for you.”

“Thank you. What about the car?”

“Yours to keep if you wish.”

“Like I said. I don’t really need it.”

“Maybe not now.” Gabriel countered. “You might need it in the future. To drive to work or to get to the fashion show at the end of december.” He shoved the key back in his son’s direction.

“Fashion show? My department sells things for regular consumers and I’m not going to model anymore.”

His father nodded. “I know. I don’t expect you to. But at the end of the year, before Christmas, there will be a fashion show held for our new consumer line. A line, which I expect will have twenty five pieces this year.”

“They aren’t going to make that y’know. There just isn’t enough time and not enough staff. They are barely able to make their twenty piece deadline.”

“Not my problem.” He focused his gaze back on his work. “Sales haven’t been going great, so we need to supply more to our clients to lure them in.”

“I disagree father.”

“Oh?”

“We don’t need more. We just need something different. Something that’s fresh, new and
appealing.”

“That is something I disagree with.”

“Father...you...the company...we’ve been setting less trends the past ten years and following them more and more. We should take risks to stand out again.”

“Then take risks.” The patience in his father’s voice began to disappear. “If you think you know better, take risks. Let the company fail! Let all my hard work get flushed down the drain!”

“Sometimes you just need to take those risks to move forward! Why can’t you see that we can’t stay stuck in our old ways!”

There they went again.

Screaming.

Yelling.

Their conversation echoing through the large office space and no doubt through the entree hall as well.

“Do as you wish with that department! It’s yours to manage! Just don’t mess things up! That’s all I ask! All....all I ask is that you don’t waste what I tried to build for you.”

“Fine. I’ll do my best. But I don’t think we’re going to make that deadline with the amount of pieces you want. Two months....two months is just not enough.”

“That was part of the deal Adrien. It’s up to you to keep your end of it.”

“I know. You don’t have to keep reminding me. I’m trying my best.” He hissed through gritted teeth.

An uncomfortable silence fell between them.

He needed to change the subject.

He didn’t want to yell anymore or talk about work.

He needed to calm down.

He wouldn’t be able to change his father’s mind anyway.

“I eh...I was also invited to the mayor’s charity gala by the way.” He grumbled beneath his breath. “I would appreciate it if you’d let me represent Gabriel’s at the event.”

“There would be no need. I will be attending myself.”

At that moment, he understood perfectly where Chloé’s frustrations came from.

“Don’t you trust me in this?”

Gabriel didn’t answer right away. “No. No I don’t.”
“Well...the feeling is mutual.”

“I am well aware Adrien. Nevertheless. I only want what’s best for you and at this time, you are just not ready to represent the company.”

“Sure. Whatever you say father.”

He didn’t believe him.

How could he.

After all he had done in the past.

All the times he hadn’t listened to what he wanted.

“I think we are done talking here.”

“I guess so.”

“I do insist you take the car as a gift from me. I know you don’t want it, but I would appreciate it if you took it regardless. It might be useful.”

The former model quickly grabbed the key from the desk and once again stuffed it in his pocket.

“Fine. But only so I can finally get to work. I’ll leave it on the driveway here until I’ve moved.”

“That’s fine.”

“Good day father.”

Adrien faintly heard his father mutter a quick goodbye before he, once again, stormed out of the mansion.

The conversation with his father had left him in a foul mood.

Looking back, he felt like he might have acted like a spoiled brat for not accepting the sports car as a gift.

Any sane person would.

But to him, both the apartment and the car, felt like bribes.

Means to keep him bowing down to his father’s wishes.

Something he might have seen as acts of endearment when he was younger, but now that he was older...now that he knew what kind of man his father was...he had a harder time accepting those gifts as anything besides a method to keep him on a leash.

Hopefully he was dreadfully wrong.
But a feeling inside of him told him otherwise.

Adrien tried to distract himself.

He had spoken to madame London, who had in turn screamed and ranted with the two other girls on her team on how ‘ridiculous and unfair’ it was of his father to demand such a thing so late in their designing process.

She wasn’t wrong of course and he promised he would try to find a solution to monsieur Agreste’s demand.

What that solution was going to be?

He had no idea yet.
But it had been enough to calm the older woman down a little bit for the time being.

For now, that was just one more thing to put on his, ever growing, to-do list.

The only positive side of the entire morning was the bag of croissants Sabine had given him.

The same croissants he was now eating for lunch, while scrolling on his computer looking for that specific brand of oven that the bakery needed.

He became invested in the description of a particular model, when the ringing of his cell phone called for his attention.

“This is Adrien.”

“Hey bro.”

“Hey Nino! What’s up man?”

Nino’s voice sounded tired.
Raw.

“Well...eh...I’m not sure how to say this but…”

“You okay?”

“Not really.”

“Did something happen?”

“Yeah. Yeah something did.”

He hope it wasn’t with Alya.

From what he understood, the two were making good progress getting back together.

“Do you...wanna talk about it?”
“That’s why I called.” He heard him chuckle softly. “It’s eh...it’s Monique.”

“Yeah?”

“She eh....she kinda....well....she suddenly kissed me. In front of the press. When we were announcing our collab.”

“Dude.” He gasped.

“I got mad at her afterwards. I told her she shouldn’t pull that shit because I have a girl waiting for me back in Paris and we didn't agree on kissing anyway.”

Adrien wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Thankfully it was just a small thing. But eh...she absolutely didn’t like my response. Or when I shoved her off when cameras were flashing all over. She told me that I could kiss my career or my music goodbye if I didn’t go out with her to gain publicity or something. So...I’m cancelling our collab. Filed a complaint with her record company and I’m going back home in a couple of days.”

“You did the right thing man.”

“Alya was right. I should never have…”

“Don’t say that. You couldn’t have know she was that kind of a person.”

“I just hope Al won’t think worse of me after this. It could be all over the entertainment news by now.”

“Let me check for a second.”

Adrien stuffed his food in his mouth before typing some search words into Google. Immediately he was shown video’s, news articles and headlines about ‘upcoming dj Nino Lahiffe repulsed by kiss from singer Monique’.

“Yeah...you’re on the front page buddy.” He replied eventually while chewing.

He heard Nino sigh on the other side of the line. “Fuck. How am I going to explain this to her?”

“You don’t. It clearly says that you’re repulsed by the kiss in the headlines here. I think you’re good man. They’re just slandering you for rejecting her advances at this point I guess. Or slandering her I’m not sure until I read the articles.”

“She’ll hate me.”

“I’m sure she won’t.”

“We’re going to fight and end back to where we started.”

“Nino.”

“I can’t deal with that dude! I love her! I still love her so much!”
“Nino. I’m sure she won’t be mad at you. I just talked to her the other morning and she can’t shut up about seeing you again. She loves you. Don’t worry.”

“Adrien. Dude. Bro. I’m drank like four beers, it’s early in the morning. I am worried okay.”

“I can try to talk to her and do some damage control. Do you want me to do that?”

“Would you?”

Adrien nodded, although nobody was around to see it. “Of course.”

“Thanks man.”

“Get some sleep okay. I’ll call you tomorrow when you’re not over emotional and half drunk.”

“Yeah...yeah okay.”

“Hey. It’s good to hear you’re coming home though. Do you want us to arrange a party or something?”

“Nah. I just...want to hang out with you guys when I get back. If that’s okay.”

“So...dinner and some drinks?”

“Sounds good. Are you eating by the way? It sounds like you’re eating?”

“Hmmmm? Yeah just having lunch and working at the same time. Marinette’s mother shoved some croissants in my arms before I had to bolt out of the bakery again.”

“How’s Mari doing? Did she get my package?”

“She did. She loved what you sent her and she’s doing...better. Not great but better.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“Now quit stalling and get some sleep.”

“Yes mom.” The DJ tried to joke.

“I mean it young man.” Adrien added with a chuckle, playing along.

“Okay mom.” Nino laughed. “I’ll go to bed. Let me know if my babe is still on speaking terms with me after this.”

“Will do man.”

“Thanks.”

He had just disconnected the call when the door to his office slammed open and madame London barged in.

“Eh...good afternoon to you too?”
She didn’t greet him back but slammed a couple of designs on his desk instead.

“We need those approved by monsieur Agreste so we can start working on the prototypes for the fashion show.”

“I eh...I don’t think we’ll get enough time to do that even if he sends back the approved designs later today.”

The older woman took in a deep breath. Her red lips pushed into a thin line. “I know that. You know that. But he…”

“I know. I know. Well...he did say I have free reign over this department. So let’s compromise.” Adrien picked up the designs and handed them back to the woman. “You seem like you’re as experienced as monsieur Agreste himself. Maybe even more so. I’ll let you pick out the designs we’ll showcase. But pick out the very best. I know we’re short on everything, but that doesn’t mean we should lower our quality standards.”

“In that case we might as well give up. These are only twenty designs Adrien. We’ll never be able to make the extra five. I told you that. We’re only three people in there.”

“So we need more people.”

“That will take months!” She threw her hands up in the air. “We don’t have time to go through that process!”

“I...I do know someone who might be willing to help out. But you’ll have to promise me that you’ll guide her where needed. She hasn’t been designing for a while.”

“We don’t need a retired designer!”

“She’s not. She was supposed to be an intern here a couple of years ago. Mademoiselle Dupain-Cheng? Does that name ring a bell?”

Bettina London’s eyes grew wide. “It does.”

“I’ve seen the things she created. I think it might just be what the company needs to lure in new clients. Something new. Unexpected. For a new generation. Something...not Gabriel’s. Who knows. If it’s a success we could just give new and upcoming designers a change to put something out for the company.”

“Adrien. Monsieur Agreste...he will never--”

“I’ll deal with him. Now eh...how about you go over these with the other two girls and go with what you’ll think would be the best.”

“Okay. Alright.”

“And...take a break every once in a while too okay. I know it’s stressful working in the fashion industry, but your own wellbeing does come first.”

“Paul used to say that too.” Bettina chuckled. “Alright. I’ll make sure at least twenty designs are
going to be chosen by the end of the day.”

“Good and don’t fret about what Gabriel will think. He’s not going to be a problem and I doubt he cares enough about this department to even worry about it.”

“That sounds about right.” The older woman sighed. “I’ll be heading back to work. Thank you for trying to find a solution Adrien. I hope mademoiselle Dupain-Cheng is willing to provide some designs for us.”

“I know her personally. I might be able to persuade her in some way.”

If he could, at the very least one of them would have a part of their dream back.
Adrien wasn’t sure if Alya had already seen the news on Nino, or if she was just too busy to notice that he had tried to call her several times throughout the day.

Whichever the case was, it was slightly worrying him.

“Hey Alya. This is Adrien. Again. Could you give me a call when you get this? Thanks.”

He tapped on the screen of his phone before entering the bakery for the second time that day. Aside from the bell above the door which had rung loudly, it was quiet in the small shop.

Which wasn’t too strange so close to closing time.

The smell of baked goods still lingering in the air. A comfortable warmth surrounding him to chase away the cold on his skin.

Madame Cheng didn’t seem to be at the front desk.

Maybe she was preparing dinner or getting some groceries?

“I’ll be with you in a moment!” He heard Marinette shout from the kitchen.

“Don’t bother!” He shouted back. “It’s just me!”

“Hey Adrien!” Came the cheerful reply. “I’m in the back!”

“I figured as much.” Adrien laughed as he made his way passed the counter.

When his eyes laid upon Marinette, there was something different about her. She looked tired and was covered in flour once again, but she seemed genuinely happy and cheerful.

A glimmer in her eye and a big smile on her face when he approached her and proceeded to hug her back.
“Bad day?”

He gave a confirming humm and let his head rest on her shoulder. The young woman moved slightly under his touch and gently pecked his cheek to greet him.

“Want to talk about it?”

“It’s fine. Just had another argument with father is all. Nothing a good hug can’t fix.”

“Is that why you’re clinging onto me right now?” She asked with a laugh.

In response he smiled against her skin. “You know it. Besides. You give the best hugs.”

“I’m not really giving you a hug right now though.”

“That’s just a insignificant detail.” Turning his head, he planted a soft kiss against her cheek. Earning a happy humm from the baker’s daughter in return.

“Well. Whatever helps you feel better.” She shifted under his embrace and pressed a firm kiss on his own cheek.

“I might feel even a bit more better hearing about your day? It looks like you had a good one. You seem happy.”


“Keeping busy helps.”

Adrien released her from his arms, but not before nuzzling the nape of her neck affectionately.

“We sold a few batches of those cookies I let you sample this morning and I left Plagg with Tikki in my room. Together with a plate of snacks and my tablet logged in to Netflix to keep them entertained.”

“Sounds amazing actually. We should do that again sometime soon.”

Marinette nodded. “I also managed to design a few cakes for the display too. I’ll need your help picking one out.”

“Of course Bugaboo.”

“So that was pretty much my day. How was your work?”

“It was...work.”

“Really?” She frowned. “That bad?”

“No...just stressful. Apparently we have this fashion show to do at the end of the year and we don’t have enough people to actually reach my father’s ridiculous demands.”

“Have you tried talking to him?”
“Yeah. This morning. Didn’t help.”

“No surprise there.” She huffed.

“I tried.”

“That’s all you can do really.”

“I’m just afraid...very afraid...that if I don’t meet his demands on this, he’ll think it’s a breach of contract of something.” Adrien sighed, letting himself lean against the counter.

“He might as well think that. I don’t doubt he’ll use anything he can as an excuse to use the peacock miraculous.”

“Yeah.” He let his head hang down as that one burning question kept lingering in his mind.

Something that didn’t go unnoticed by his partner.

“There’s more to this isn’t there?”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “I...I need to ask you something and I feel guilty for even needing to ask in the first place.”

“Why’s that?” She calmly asked, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Because you’re already putting up with a lot.” Adrien answered in a whisper. “Because you’re still healing.”

“Adrien. Just ask me what you need to ask me.”

“I...I’m pretty sure we’re not going to make that deadline.” He started. “There are only three designers on the team and they are barely able to make twenty pieces each season for a new collection. Now father wants twenty five and...I was hoping...”

He didn’t even need to finish his request before she pulled her hand back and shook her head.

“I can’t. Not because I don’t want to. If there’s anything else I can do for you, anything at all, just ask me. But not that.” A shuddered sigh escaped her lips before she explained herself further.

“There’s the bakery and I haven’t designed clothes in so...so long and I feel good today but I have no idea what tomorrow is going to bring and--”

He cut her off by pulling her back into a firm embrace.

“I know.” He sighed before kissing her forehead. “I know Marinette. That’s why I feel guilty asking you that in the first place. I know you’ve got a lot going on at the moment and I know it isn’t even fair to even ask for your help right now and put this much pressure on you so soon. But I really don’t know what else to do.”

“I...”

“Mari. Despite being desperate for a solution, I’m not going to pressure you into helping the team.
No matter what my father says. No matter how much I want you to give you back a part of your dream. You come first.”

“Chat…”

“For me, you come first.” The blonde corrected himself.

She shook her head. “I can’t. I want to but I don’t know if I can.”

“I know. But...I would appreciate it if you could think it over this week and give me a definitive answer on friday...or saturday? It’s absolutely okay if you feel like you’re not able to deal with the added pressure and stress. But I need to know for sure if I need to find another solution or not.” Adrien explained. “Like I said. It would be great if I would be able to give you a piece of your dream back to you, but the last thing I want is to burn yourself out by designing with a extremely tight time limit.”

“How tight?”

“A little over two months. The showcase is supposed to be around Christmas time.”

“I’ll...I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you.” He pressed another kiss on her forehead. “I’d appreciate that.”

“Thank you for being honest with me.” Marinette pressed herself closer against him. “I know it must be difficult for you too and I want to help...I’m just not sure if I’m able to. I’m not sure about a lot of things. Not anymore.”

“I know the feeling Bug.”

“So It’s normal?”

“Par for the course I guess.” He shrugged. “Could be different for others. I don’t know.”

She nodded before lifting her head to meet his gaze.

He wasn’t sure why, but something within him stirred.

Maybe it was the comfortable embrace they found themselves in.

Maybe it was the sudden silence or how she was now closely pressed against him.

Maybe it was because of how warm she felt.

But he really.

Really.

Really just wanted to kiss this woman right now.

Assure her that everything would be okay.

That he wouldn’t be angry if she decided she couldn’t help him out.
“Is it just me or have you been really affectionate today?” The baker’s daughter muttered to him.

Her arms slipped from his hip up to wrap around his neck.
One of her hands running through his untamed locks.

Such a soothing feeling.

“Like that’s a bad thing.” He whispered back with a smile.

She smiled back.
Her pink lips ever so slightly pursed.

But maybe he was just imagining that.

Would she even mind?

Just a quick peck.

Nothing more but a light brush against her lips.

“Not at all.” Her hushed voice answered back as she slowly closed her eyes.

Before a voice could even stop him, scream at him that he was moving too fast and that this wasn’t the time nor the place to kiss her senseless, he had closed his own eyes and started to move towards her.

His heart started racing once he noticed the scent of vanilla, cinnamon and butter cookies on her skin.

Every thought that had been swimming in his mind was just gone in an instant.
All he could think off was that he was about to kiss the love of his life right now.

“Marinette! I’m back!”

She gasped and buried her head against his chest before their lips even met.
Hiding whatever look she currently had on her face.

His own mind was still drawing a blank.
Ears ringing.
Skin glowing.
It took a few seconds before he even registered that Sabine had called out to her daughter.

“H-Hello madame Cheng!” Adrien managed to greet back.

“Adrien! You’re early sweetheart.” The woman noted as he could hear her footsteps coming into the kitchen. “Did you-- Oh! Was I interrupting something?”

“No maman.” The blue eyed woman in his arm mumbled against his coat. “We’re just hugging.”

“Yeah. Just hugging and talking about our day.”

Sabine gave a nod in understanding. “Are you done finishing up Marinette?”
“Almost.” Her daughter muttered. “I was just about to wipe down the counters and clean the floor. Then we’re done for the day.”

“If you do the counters, I’ll do the floors for you.” Adrien suggested.

“Sounds like a plan.” Madame Cheng smiled. “I’ll get started on dinner then. Oh! Don’t forget to show him your cake designs dear!”

Her footsteps echoed onto the tile floor as the older woman walked back out of the kitchen.

“I won’t maman!” Marinette called out after her, as she let go of Adrien.

He instantly missed her embrace.

“Where are the brooms?”

“I’ll get you one. Just put your coat anywhere.” Her hands gestured vaguely towards the one large preparation table in the room.

Before he knew it, she had handed him a broom and silence once again fell between them as they worked to clean up the bakery.

It wasn’t an awkward silence by any means.
In comparison, it didn’t feel much different from them just sitting after a patrol to look out over the city.

The only difference was that there was an obvious elephant in the room.

One he wasn’t sure if he should even adress.

Maybe he was just imagining her leaning up for a kiss and he acted on desire and impulse. Marinette didn’t seem too embarrassed when her mother interrupted them.

Being able to actually answer her without stammering.
Unlike what he was able to do.

Would it really be that bad to ask her if he really was imagining it?
Even if he was, would she be okay with him kissing her for real.

No longer just lovingly pecking her cheek or the top of her head.
Would that change anything between them?

“Hey Marinette?”

“Just tell her.” He told himself.

“Hmmm?”

“You’ve gotten through an argument. You’ll get through this. Just tell her you love her. Tell her you want to kiss her!”
“I-I eh...just euhm....wanted to..” He started.

"Tell her!” Adrien internally screamed at himself.

“I wanted to tell you...that...I am grateful.”

Marinette tilted her head slightly. “Grateful?”

“For letting me vent about my day. For listening to it.”

“That’s not what you were supposed to say!”

She gave him a smile that he could only describe as radiating. “No need to thank me for that Adrien. That’s what friends are for.”

“Adrien Agreste. You are a fucking idiot.”

It wasn’t until after he had enjoyed Sabine Cheng’s wonderful cooking, as well as a cup of coffee after the dessert, that his phone rang and Alya’s name was displayed on his screen.

He gave the designs Marinette had handed him back to the girl with an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry Mari. I have to take this.”

“Work?” She asked with a frown.

“Alya.” With a quick swipe he answered the call. “Hey. Thanks for getting back to me.”

“Hi Alya!” The designer called out from her place on the couch.

“Mari says hi too.” Adrien added, just in case the reporter wasn’t able to hear her best friend.

“Put me on speaker then Sunshine.”

“Are you sure? I have to warn you that I wasn’t calling just for a nice chat.” He carefully asked her.

“Yeah I’m sure.”

“Okay, if that’s what you want.”

He tapped on the speaker icon on the screen and he was immediately greeted with the sound of someone typing away on a keyboard.

“You’re on speaker.”

“Hey Alya.” Marinette greeted once again.

“Hi girl! Quick question. Are we still on for next saturday?”
“Yeah I think so.”

“Aweesooooome.” The other girl sang. “Let me know when that changes okay.”

“Of course.”

“Now Adrien. What was so important that you had to call me four times and text me like five times?”

“It’s about...Nino.”

“Nino?” Alya repeated with confusion in her voice.

“Yeah Nino. Look...are you sure you want to stay on speaker? Mari’s mom is in the same room and depending on how you look at it--”

“Quit stalling! Tell me what’s up with Nino. Is he okay?”

It seemed she hadn’t heard the news yet.

“He’s...okay. He’ll be home soon.”

“Really? He is? That dork didn’t tell me anything about that when we talked the other day!”

“Was it supposed to be a surprise?” Marinette suddenly asked as she gave him a disapproving look.

“Was it? You spoiled my man’s surprise?!”

“No!” Adrien responded in defence. “No he wasn’t planning on coming back until this morning. He called me and something...happened. He’s really out of it and worried that he’ll lose you forever.”

Alya didn’t have an immediate reply for that as she remained silent for a good few seconds. It was his partner who eventually dared to ask the question that was no doubt on the reporter’s lips.

“Adrien. What happened?”

“There was a press statement. He was going to announce his collab with this singer he’s working with.”

“Monique.” The voice on the other end sounded bitter as she mentioned the name.

“Yeah. Monique. It should be all over the entertainment news sites.”

Again he heard the sound of someone frantically typing away on a keyboard.

“To put it like this. There wasn’t any communication from her part, from what I understand. So what happened actually came as a surprise and Nino reacted accordingly. Needless to say he’s pretty peeved and he’s also afraid that her actions actually--”

“You aren’t exactly explaining what actually happened.” Marinette pointed out.

“I don’t know how to bring it delicately okay.”
“That bad?”

“That bitch!” They suddenly heard Alya shout from the other side of the phone line.

“I take it you found the video?”

“You bet your ass I did! I…! She…! Argh!”

“Nino actually asked me to do some damage control. Well actually…I offered to. It’s not his fault Alya. They never told him she was going to do that. She threatened to ruin his music career when he wasn’t cool with it.”

“I can see he isn’t cool with it.” Alya huffed. “He’s pushing her away after she kissed him!”

“She did what!” The girl next to him gasped.

Adrien looked up to see Sabine looking at them both with a shocked expression on her face.

“That’s why he’s coming home Al.”

“Yeah. I would do the same if I were him.”

“Maybe you should call him?” Marinette suggested suddenly. “Sounds like he’s worried more that he’s losing you over this thing than he’s worried about his music career.”

“You should.” He agreed. “He never agreed to the kiss from what he told me and he filed a complaint with her record company.”

“You’re right. I should call him. Hey...Adrien. Thanks for letting me know beforehand. I would have found out eventually I guess, but still. Better to hear this from you than from Entertainment Today.”

“Sure. No problem. I’m sorry this had to happen in the first place.”

“Me too.”

“Are you still at work by the way? It sounds like it.”

“Nah I just got home. Forgot my personal phone this morning and I’m just making the final edits for a piece I have to turn in tomorrow.”

“Say hi to Nino for me when you talk to him okay?”

“Will do girl. It’s about time you get a new phone by the way so you can call him yourself.”

“New battery.” Marinette corrected her friend. “And I’m still contemplating it.”

“I wouldn’t have to think twice about a thing like that but do what you think is best Mari. I..I need to go give Nino a call. Thanks again Sunshine.”

“Anytime Alya.”
The call was disconnected and a weight was simultaneously lifted off his shoulders.

“Well. That certainly sounded complicated.” Sabine noticed. “But I’m glad she’s not angry at him.”

“Of course not. This is Alya I’m-Going-To-Marry-Nino’s-Ass Césaire we’re talking about.” Marinette laughed. “And if it’s clear that he wasn’t into Monique’s advances, why should se be mad at him?”

The blonde shrugged. “Because she could have still seen it as him kissing another woman? But that aside. What’s this about not getting a new battery for your phone?”

“Oh...eh...that.”

“You really should.” Her mother commented before continuing putting away the dishes.

“Maman insisted I bring my phone with me again, in case I decide to walk out of the house like last time. She had no way of reaching me. But...the thing doesn’t charge anymore so I figured it just needs a new battery.”

“Sounds like it.” He nodded in agreement.

“The thing is. I haven’t needed it in a long time. I don’t see the point in suddenly needing it now.”

“The point is that I can reach you if you decide to go out. That you can call me if there’s something wrong and you’re not here.”

“I’m always with someone when I’m not here.” Marinette pouted. “And by someone I mean Alya and she’s practically glued to her phone.”

“She just said she forgot hers this morning so.....”

“Don’t tell me you’re siding with my mom on this Chaton.” She sighed.

“Absolutely.”

“Great.”

“It can’t hurt to be on standby if you go out and I can send you messages again. Who knows. A nice text might be the thing keeping us both sane for a day.”

“I shall mentally prepare myself for the onslaught of cat memes then.”

“Good. Because I have a whole folder full of them I’ve been dying to share.”

She laughed. “Of course you do.”

“Hey if it’s the price you’re worried about--”

“No! No it’s not. So don’t you dare do what I think you want to do.”

“It’s not a big deal. Really.”
“No!” She repeated. “I’m good Adrien. Really.”

He wasn’t going to push it if she didn’t want him to.

“Okay. If you say so.”

“I do say so.”

“I’ll just get you a whole new phone as a Christmas present.”

He absolutely wasn’t prepared for the pillow she hit his arm with. “Don’t you dare!”

“I won’t if you buy yourself a battery for your phone!” He laughed.

“You drive a hard bargain monsieur Agreste.”

“Bargaining was one of the subjects I excelled at in business school.” He joked, sticking out his tongue. “But in all seriousness Mari. I would feel safer knowing there is more than one way to reach you.”

The fake angry scowl she had given him melted away.

He didn’t need to explain himself further as what he meant by that.

She knew.

Their experience with using their personal numbers for superhero related emergencies had, taught them that much over the years.

“Well. If you put it that way. You’re right. I should.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you kids want another cup of coffee before we decide on a design?” Sabine suddenly asked.

“Sounds good madame Cheng.”

“Adrikins!”

Adrien let out a tired sigh as his childhood friend came running towards him the moment he entered the hotel again.

“Hey Chloé.”

“It’s about time you got back!”

“Sorry. I was busy at work and then I had dinner with Marinette. I guess I lost track of time a little.”
“It’s fine. Come. Come. Sit with me, we have a lot to discuss.”

The blonde woman practically dragged him to an isolated corner in the lobby. A simple small table and two chairs were sitting there.

On the table a big pile of magazines.

Home decor magazines he quickly noticed.

“Right now? Can’t this wait until morning?”

“No it can’t! You’re moving soon and I need all the time I can get to figure out what you want and where to get the things you need.”

“You haven’t even seen the place yet.” He argued. “Can’t we make a plan after I get the key.”

She rolled her eyes. “I will make the plan after you get the key. Right now I need to know what your interior taste is.”

“Simple.” Adrien plopped down on one of the seats. “The basics.”

“You’re hopeless. Please just work with me. You wanted me to do this for you right? So at least show a little cooperation won’t you.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry Chloé. I guess I’m just a little tired.”

“That’s okay. I understand. I’ll make this quick I promise. We’ll just go through a couple of these.”

She patted the pile of magazines. “I’ll mark the styles you think you’ll like and work with that when you get the key to your apartment.”

“Oh...yeah. I might have told daddy something along those lines. But I wasn’t aware he directly told your father about it.” She frowned. “What a gossip.”

“Say no more. My lips are sealed Adrikins. I know how strict uncle Gabriel can be. I knew about that even before auntie Emilie...you know.”
“Yeah. I know.”

“I won’t tell. He probably won’t approve of you throwing your money at a bakery of all things, knowing him. Not that I would blame him in this case. But I remember that I had a hard time convincing him to let you go to a public school with me and he hardly approve of that idea alone.”

“He’s difficult. I’ll admit to that.”

“You have my word Adrien. I won’t tell daddy and I won’t tell your father either.”

“Thank you Chloē.”

“You’re still good for the gala too right?”

“I will. Father will be there unfortunately. But I will be there. For your sake.”

“Thank you.” She smiled. “Did you ask Dupain-Cheng to be your date?” She turned the page of the magazine so she could show him the first layout of a decorated room.

“I did. She’s thinking it over.”

“How typical that she even needs to think about such a thing.” Chloē scoffed. “It’s a high end gala! Probably the fanciest event she’ll ever get to attend. She should be lucky to even get to go!”

“She’s just being careful I guess.”

“Why? It’s a party.”

“A huge party. One that might pressure her too much.”

“I think you’re overthinking things.” Chloē pointed out. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. She would be crazy not to go on a date with you anyway.”

“I didn’t exactly specify that it was a date.”

The blonde woman groaned. “How am I supposed to support you in this, if you don’t fucking make it clear to her you want to date her!”

“Because I don’t want to put more shit on her plate Chlo! How hard is that to understand?! She’s grieving. The last thing she needs is to spend time and energy in a relationship with me of all people. I can be needy for affection and she knows that.”

“Then don’t be needy.” She stated matter of factly.

Adrien pouted. “Like I can help it. Besides. I like hugs.”

“Don’t I know it. Oh! Hey! How about this.”

A well manicured finger pointed at a photo of a living room setup. The walls were a soft yellow with brown. Dark brown, leather sofas decorated the room together with a fluffy white carpet.
“Pass.”

She turned the page. “This one.”

Black leather, modern looking, couches placed against a patterned wallpaper and next to dark wooden furniture.

“Hard pass.”

“Okay. Let’s change our working method. I’m just going to turn pages and you stop me when you see something you like.”

“Okay. That could work.”

Two hours and a heavy discussion about curtains versus shutters later, Chloé told him that she had enough to work with and practically ordered him to get some rest. Something he wasn’t going to argue over.

“So? How was your day?” Plagg asked innocently from Adrien’s pocket when he closed the door to his hotel room.

“Busy. Yours?”

“Amazing. Take me back there again tomorrow?”

“I’ll ask Mari.” He laughed. “I guess you got caught up with Tikki?”

“A little. It was nice.”

“I can imagine that.”

“You should try it sometimes with Ladybug. Who knows. Hanging out, watching movies and eating cheese might just be what you need to get you to relax a little more.”

“I am relaxed.” Adrien frowned.

“Uhuh. Dealing with all the crap your father throws at you, on top of the crap the work throws on you and you throw on yourself...yeah that helps keeping your stress level low.”

The black cat moved out of his pocket and floated onto one of the pillows on the bed. “Don’t forget to care about yourself too kid. Ladybug isn’t the only one wanting to carry the burdens of the world.”

“Right. Whatever.” He yawned. “Move over, I’m going to get some sleep.”

“I’m comfy.”

“You’re sleeping right in the middle of the pillow!”

“Take the other pillow.”

“I always sleep on the left.”
“Then sleep on the right to spice things up. Goodnight.”

“Plagg.”

All he got in response this time was a fake snore. “Fine. But if I can’t fall asleep we’re going out for a run on the rooftops.”

Chat Noir increased his sprinting speed before leaping forward as far as he could. With a thud he landed four rooftops further.

It wasn’t his record.
He had jumped more before.

But he felt tired so he wasn’t expecting to break any records.

He just didn’t feel tired enough to actually be able to fall asleep.
Adrien wasn’t sure if it was actually because he couldn’t sleep on the left side of the bed or because Plagg began snoring for real at some point that had kept him from falling into slumber.

But here he was.
Out in the rain.
Jumping and running over rooftops.

Once he reached Marinette’s neighbourhood, he noticed something off.

The light in her bedroom was still turned on.
For a girl who had to get up extremely early every morning, being up in the middle of the night was strange to say the least.

Trying not to make too much sound, he jumped onto her balcony and peered down the skylight window.

She wasn’t in the bed, but he could see Tikki sleeping on the large cat pillow she had.
So at the very least she was still home.

Carefully he opened the hatch and dropped down on her bed.
His eyes immediately fell on his partner hunched over at her desk in her pajama shorts and an old Jagged Stone shirt her remembered giving her for her sixteenth birthday.
A pair of headphones were snuggly placed over her ears and he could faintly hear a beat coming from them.

An idea came to mind.
A mischievous idea.
One that might end up with him getting punched if he wasn’t careful.

Slowly he climbed over the edge of the bed and onto her floor before he sneaked over to her sitting form. Wrapping two arms around her shoulders, the hero pressed a firm kiss on her neck. Earning a small shriek from the girl in surprise.

“Chat! You’re wet!” She hissed annoyed.

“Sorry Princess. I couldn’t resist.” He chuckled.

“What are you even doing here?!”

“I couldn’t sleep. Figured I’d go out for a jog but then I noticed your lights were still on. What are you doing up this late?”

“Designing.”

His ears perked up at the word. “Really? That’s great! I mean...you’re getting back into it...that’s good isn’t it?”

“I...don’t know.” She frowned. “All I know is that I’m going to be a wreck in the morning and it’s your fault.”

“My fault?”

“I was thinking about how I could still help you out. Then the next thing I knew, I was discussing with Tikki how and what I would design for you, if I still could and then I was suddenly sketching out ideas.” She gestured to her sketching pad in front of her. “So yeah. That’s your fault.”

“You know you can sleep in tomorrow. The new oven is going to installed. No way that you’re going to be able to work around that.”

“That’s tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Made an appointment yesterday actually. They had an opening for tomorrow. I talked it over with your mom and she was okay with closing the bakery for a day.”

Again Marinette frowned. “I don’t know if it’s a good idea. Maybe we can be open for half a day?”

“Not when they’re going to be coming somewhere between ten and one. No worries Marinette. Take the day off and relax okay.”

“Maybe I should.”

“You should. You deserve it.”

“I don’t know about that.” She laughed. “You worked hard.” He pressed another kiss against her neck. “You deserve it.”

“Being able to wake up at eight would be nice for a change.”
“It would.” He nodded in agreement. “You could go out for a walk. Get some coffee and fresh air. See a movie. We could get lunch together if you’d like.”

“I’d like that.”

“Want to meet up at that little bistro two blocks from here? The one with the amazing smoothies.”

“Sounds good. I haven’t been there in ages.”

“Good. I’ll meet you there around noon-ish.”

“Okay.”

“Now get some sleep Princess. It’s late.”

“Look who’s talking.” She snorted. “You should be sleeping too.”

“I told you I couldn’t sleep.” Chat Noir groaned, leaning his chin on her shoulder.

His gaze fell on the dress she was designing before he surprised her. “That’s pretty.” He muttered.

“Thanks. I already, roughly sketched out two outfits. Maybe you can take it with you and show the designers? See if it’s something they are looking for? I...I think I’m able to help you out if I can do most of the designing at home.”

“You could? You would be a lifesaver Marinette.”

“I don’t know if I can make time to sew things together, but I can design at least.”

“I think I might know of a solution for that.”

“Oh?” She let herself lean against him. “Do tell.”

“The days I help out in the bakery, you go to Gabriel’s. Your maman can do the baking and I’ll manage the front. That way you’ll have a whole day to just focus on designing and nothing else.”

“Are you sure? I mean...it won’t be easy.”

“Nothing has so far my Lady. But if you’re up for it, then so am I.”

“Can I think about it?” She muttered.

“Absolutely. I’m just glad you’re actually designing again in the first place.”

“Me too. It feels good to put my ideas on paper again. Although I’m not sure if it’ll be up to ‘Gabriel’s standard.”

“It doesn’t need to be. You just do your own thing. My father won’t be the one approving the designs anymore.”

“Why?”
“We just don’t have the time to. Not with all the ridiculous demands he is making and the deadline. Who actually has time to wait for him to tell us nothing is good enough.”

“And that man is just okay with that?”

“Not sure. Haven’t told him.” Chat shrugged. “But this works so we should go with it.”

“Going against his wishes. You rebel you!” She laughed.

“Ah you know me. Besides, it was my idea and if he has a problem with it, I’ll be the one taking the heat. Not the team or the designers and if you decide to help out, certainly not you.”

“Well...I hope they still like it.”

“I’m sure they will. I might not know a lot about the finer details of fashion, but that dress looks very appealing.” He nodded towards her sketch.

“Thanks. It’s eh...actually a dress I want to make for myself. I’m not sure about the sleeves yet. It’s a first concept.”

“I like it. The dark blue and black looks very nice.”

“If I can find out if I still have some rhinestones left, I could put them on the bottom. Make something fancy out of it. But not too fancy. Not the kind you would wear at a cocktail party, but also not so fancy that it would count for a super formal event. You know.”

“I think I get what you mean.”

“I can use the fabric Nino gave me and maybe get some nice silk for the second layer of the skirt. Or maybe a nice chiffon. Maybe see-through sleeves and part of the neckline? I’m not sure yet.”

It was endearing to hear her ramble on and on about her designs again.

“Well. Whatever you’re deciding, I’m sure it’ll look amazing. But. You should get some sleep.”

“Right. Sleep. Try to get some rest too Chaton.”

“I’ll try. Maybe I’ll go for another run and head back to bed.”

“Do you want to stay over for the night?”

“You mean...like before?”

She nodded without a second thought. “I’m sure I’d fall asleep sooner with you next to me.”

“You do know I’ll probably end up cuddling you to death right?”

“And you know I’ll just kick you off the bed if you do.”

He laughed. “Well. If you’re sure. Claws in.”

The familiar, green glow washed over him.
Leaving Adrien in the place of his superhero self.

“Yeah I’m sure.” His partner pushed herself up from her seat.

“I just want to know if you’re really sure. It’s not like we’re kids anymore Marinette.”

“Afraid the bed will be too small.” She joked.

“No. I’m afraid I’ll never want to leave it.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. It’s not like you’ve never slept in my bed before and the last time we did we weren’t exactly children anymore either.”

Adrien watched as she made her way up to the loft where her bed was.

“True.”

“So? Come up here and get some rest Kitty.”

“Yes please.” Plagg muttered suddenly.

The black cat floated upwards and let himself fall somewhere on the bed.

“Okay. Hang on I’ll be right there.”

He wasn’t sure why on Earth he was having doubts about this.
She was right.
He had slept next to her before.

So why was he feeling so nervous about it now?

Nervous feelings he had trouble pushing aside as he slowly made it up to stairs leading to her bed.

Chloé’s advice about stopping to be needy, echoing through his mind.

The moment he laid down and she let her hand get tangled in his hair, all doubts were washed away.

“Close your eyes and get some sleep.” She muttered as she cuddled up against him.
Her face buried against his chest.

“Okay.”

He felt how her warmth seeped through his skin and at that moment he decided that this was fine.

Familiar.

Safe.

This was what he missed the last four years.

So what if he was needy and clingy.
He needed it.

They both needed it.

Was that really so wrong?

Something was off when he woke up the next morning and he was sure it wasn’t Plagg who decided to sleep on his face at some point during the night.

No.

It was the forced smile Marinette gave him when he opened his eyes.

“Good morning.” She muttered.

“Morning. What time is it?”

“Not sure. Early?”

“You feeling okay?”

“I don’t know. Worse than yesterday.” At least she was being honest with herself and with him.

“Are you still feeling numb?”

“No. Just... heavy. Tired? Does that make sense?”

“Absolutely. But you don’t feel numb. You’ve had a good day yesterday. It’s still progress Princess.”

“It was a really good day. I might have pushed myself too much. Designing the cakes and the outfits.”

Adrien gave a slight nod in agreement. “We also can’t just expect things to get better overnight Mari. Frustrating as it is, it doesn’t work like that.”

“I know. I don’t expect it too.”

“Will you be okay today?”

“I guess so.”

“Still up for lunch?”

“Not sure. I do want that smoothie. But I can’t say for sure if I’m able to leave the bed today.”

“Okay. Understandable. Plagg?”
The black Kwami grumbled in response.

“We need to go.”

“Just leave me here.” He whined.

“Can’t. My shoes are still at the hotel and I need you, so I can get there.”

“You can stay here?” Marinette suggested in a whisper. “You’re warm.”

“So are you.” The blonde leaned forward to plant a soft kiss on her cheek. “But I need to get to work.”

“Stay?”

“I can’t.”

He started to move. Ready to pull himself up, transform and start the day. A warm feeling brushing against his cheek stopped him dead in his tracks however.

“Stay. Please. One more hour.” Marinette pleaded as her fingertips gently touched his skin.

How could he say no to those bluebell eyes.

“I’ll be late but…” Adrien let himself plop back down on the bed. “If it makes you feel better.”

“Thank you.” Just like the previous night, she snuggled closely against him. “I needed this.”

“You could come with me you know.” He muttered. “Keep me company. Work on designs or whatever.”

“I’m tired Adrien. So…so tired.”

“Okay. I get you Bug. Get some more rest then. I’ll sneak out in an hour if you’re asleep.”

The dark haired woman let out a soft hum.

“I’ll come and check up on you in the afternoon.”

“With a smoothie?”

“With a smoothie.” He laughed. “Anything else I could get you?”

“No. No a smoothie is good. You’re good. You and a smoothie. That’s all I need.” She sighed letting her eyes fall shut again. “And a hamster.”

“I think you’re half asleep already Princess.” He lightly chuckled.

Even still, he tightly wrapped his arms around the woman and waited until she was asleep. He had no idea how much time had passed when he decided to wiggle out of her grasp and rush back to the hotel with her designs in hand.
An hour?

Maybe even more?

It really didn’t matter going by the looks his colleagues gave him the moment he rushed into the office.

“I know! I know. I’m late. I overslept and I’m late.”

“Two hours late.” Veronica muttered loud enough for him to hear.

“I know.” He replied. “I’m sorry. I had a meeting with monsieur Agreste.”

Several pairs of eyes were suddenly fixated on him as the lie left his mouth.

“You did?” Someone asked. “What did he say?”

“Well...nothing much. I just convinced him that there was no way we were going to be able to get the numbers he wants.”

“You got that right.” Marcel grumbled. “We would be lucky to end up even and the end of the year.”

“That’s why I told him to shove it.” Adrien stated rather proudly. “Not exactly in those words of course, but we have five years to increase sales now and not one. I...I still need a plan on how the we’re going to do that, but I bought us some time.”

“How did you manage to do that and not get fired?”

“Eh...conversation techniques I learned in New York.” He gave as an answer to his colleagues question. “We still need twenty-five pieces made though. So I wasn’t super successful. But it’s something at least. So everyone chill. Breathe and continue doing your job the best you can. That’s all I can ask of you.”

Adrien took a few steps towards his office, trying to ignore the murmurs of the team that had flared up.

“Everyone chill?” Mary asked him with a smirk on her lips and a raised eyebrow.

“I’m young. It’s still hip when I use it.” He joked. “Any calls for me?”

She shook her head. “No. But let me remind you that I’m going on leave in three months.”

“Right. Need to find an temp while you enjoy your little bundle. Thanks for reminding me.”

“It’s either that or you take your own phone calls for two months. Your pick boss.”

“A temp it is. Not that I wouldn’t mind doing that. It’s just that I have too much on my plate already.”

“I can tell. You seem...stressed.”

“Maybe a little. I’m sure it’ll pass soon.”
“Your father really isn’t making things easier or you is he?”

“I think he’s actively trying to make things worse actually. I don’t think he even cares about this part of the company. I mean...I know it’s not the haute couture he designs, but we’re part of Gabriel’s too.”

“At least you care.”

“That’s the least I should do.”

“Hey. Get some coffee Adrien. You look like a mess.”

“Haven’t had much sleep, so I feel like it too. I’m sure I’m not the only one here. After the fashion show is over, we should all take a paid vacation or something.”

“Company trip maybe? It’s been a while since we did one of those.”

“How long is a while?”

“At least five years. It was a three day trip to Milan.”

“Doesn’t sound like something my father would allow to be organized.”

“He didn’t. Paul did. I’m not sure how, but he got away with it without your father noticing.”

“Maybe Nathalie allowed it. Father never really took too much interest in what his employees were doing. I mean...there were times I sneaked away from a photoshoot and he never seemed to notice. Although the Akuma attacks made for a great excuse.”

“I don’t miss them.”

“Me neither. They were a pain in the ass.”

“Adrien?”

Madame London’s voice pulled him away from the conversation with Mary.

“Yes?” The blonde asked as the older woman stepped into the small office space.

For a moment he wondered how much she had actually heard. Did she know he was an Agreste? Was his conversation with Mary that transparent?

“Have you asked that girl...Marinette was it? What did she say?”

He let out a breath he didn’t even realize he was holding in the first place. “She said she’d think about it, then proceeded to sketch these in the middle of the night. I picked them up this morning. Part of the reason I ended up being late.”

“Oh, is that baker girl the other reason?” Mary asked with another smirk on her face as Adrien handed over the sketches.
He felt a rush of warmth rising up to his cheeks. “Surely I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you don’t.”

“You are just as horrible as one of my friends you know.”

“Monsieur Adrien. I’m merely observing what I see. You’re smitten with her.”

“Can we not discuss this? I’m not awake enough to discuss this.”

“Just ask her out.”

Adrien sighed at madame London’s advice.

If he could even call it that.

“I wish it was that simple. But what do you think of her work? It’s a rough sketch now but she’s planning on refining it at home.”

“This is good. A classic pattern well mixed with comfortable fabrics. It’s nothing new, but not something we’ve done in the last decade. It screams luxury, without it being too much.” Marinette’s work was handed back to him. “Ask her to come over soon. I’d love to talk about her other designs. There are some things she could improve, but it’s not bad at all.”

“Seeing as she feels extremely rusty as a designer, I’m sure she’ll take that as a huge compliment madame London.” Adrien grinned. “I’m going over to her place during lunch. I can ask her when she can drop by.”

“No need. I’ll come with you. I’d love to see her older designs as well.”

Adrien blinked a couple of times. “Well...if you’re sure.”

“I am.” Bettina nodded.

“We’ll have to drop by a bistro on our way though. I kind of promised her a smoothie.”

Unlike the previous day, he wasn’t met with silence when he stepped inside the bakery. Instead he was greeted with a tired smile from his Princess as she seemed busy decorating a cake on the counter.

“Hey.”

“Bonjour my Lady! I’ve come bearing gifts.” He held up the cup filled with the drink.

Marinette squinted her eyes and the more he walked towards her, the more he noticed that they were red.

Had she been crying again?
“What’s that?”

“The smoothie you wanted me to get you. Remember?”

“I...I don’t? But I’ll take it anyway.”

She reached out, ready to take the cup away from him. Their fingers brushed against each other as he handed her the drink.

“You can’t remember? Wow. You were really out of it this morning.”

“Shut up! You know I haven’t slept much.”

“That isn’t good dear.” Adrien almost forgot madame London walked in right after him until she spoke up. “A designer should remain sharp and well rested.”

“Ah. Marinette. This is madame London. She’s the head designer of the department I work at..”

“Pleased to meet you Marinette.”

A bit surprised, his partner took the older woman’s outstretched hand and gently shook it. “P-Pleased to meet you.”

“I was rather impressed by your sketches and I wanted to see some of your finished pieces.”

“Oh...I...I eh don’t...really have any finished pieces at the moment. I threw most of them out when I....Well.....” The young woman fell silent.

“Have you kept your portfolio Mari?”

She nodded to Adrien. “Yeah. That’s the only thing I couldn’t throw away just yet.”

“Show me dear.” Bettina demanded. “We’ll wait.”

With a short nod the girl left her place behind the counter and rushed upstairs.

“Do you think she’ll be able to do it?”

Adrien blinked a couple of times. “Do what?”

“Make five outfits. All on her own.”

“Maybe not all on her own. She’s dealing with some things right now. But if you’re able to help her when she needs it, I’m sure things will turn out alright.”

The woman frowned slightly. “I hope you’re right. She...doesn’t seem like she can handle it.”

He felt something within him boil. “How so?”

“She’s clearly unfocused.”
“I just told you that she’s dealing with a lot right now.”

“That shouldn’t keep her from doing her job.”

“It’s not. It’s just that her job isn’t designing at the moment.”

“It will be.” She corrected. “And if she can’t focus on that right now, how much help can she really be.”

“I have faith in her.”

“Just because she’s your friend?”

“Because I know her and I know what she’s capable of.”

“She has talent. I must admit. I’m just worried she won’t be able to handle the work pressure. That’s all. The last thing I want is for her to burn herself out helping us.”

The feeling of anger that had been rising up inside of him subsided.

So she wasn’t doubting the girl’s abilities. Not really anyway.

In hindsight he should have known, with the way she had been so eager to get Marinette on board the moment he had dropped her name.

“You and me both. I’ll...I’ll keep an eye on her madame London.”

“As will I. I know at this rate your father will work us all until we’ve let out our last breath. I don’t want the same to happen to this young woman because she couldn’t handle it in the first place. She needs to know what she’s getting herself into.”

“Y-You know?”

She turned at him with a frown and a confused look on her face. “I’ve been in the business for almost twenty years Adrien. Of course I know how the fashion industry works.”

“No. I mean….you know my father? You know who I am?”

“Of course. I’ve dressed you for several of your photoshoots when you were younger. Don’t you remember?”

“No madame. I...never really took the trouble to remember the faces of the people I worked with back then. I just wanted the modeling gigs to be over as soon as possible.”

“I figured as much. You always seemed more eager to get off set than to be on it.” A small smile appeared on her face. “But do not worry. I haven’t told anyone else you’re Gabriel’s son. Although Lucille is starting to suspect she has seen your face somewhere before.”

“Well...I guess it was just a matter of time.”

“You’re not going to tell them?”

“Not yet. Let’s...just get through the first season and if I’m being asked...I’ll tell the truth.”
“I’m back!” Marinette rushed back to the counter, two large portfolio folders in his arms. “This was all I could find. I’m pretty sure I have more somewhere in my room.”

“This is fine mademoiselle. Is there somewhere we can sit and discuss your work?”

“Oh...eh...I would recommend the kitchen, but it’s a mess in there.”

“Did they finish up already?” He asked, referring to the people who were supposed to install oven.

Marinette gave a nod. “Yeah. I’ve just been too busy making the cake for the display to clean up just yet.”

“Or close the front of the shop.” He added with a grin.

In response she just shook her head with a slight smirk. “Maybe we can look at them upstairs with a cup of tea instead?”

Bettina gave a short nod. “That would be lovely.”

“Is your mother home too Mari?”

“No. Maman went out to visit papa. She left around the same time the guys who installed the oven left.”

Putting her portfolios down on the counter, she made her way to the front of the door and fished a key out of her apron. The soft click that was heard when she turned the lock, echoed throughout the room.

“Are your parents divorced?” Madame London suddenly asked.

“No.” The baker’s daughter muttered under her breath. “Papa...passed away.”

“Oh. I’m...I’m so sorry dear.”

The room fell quiet once more and that worried him.

The last time she had admitted that to anyone, the girl ended up in tears.

“Mari?”

“I-I’m okay Adrien.”

“Are you sure Bug?”

“Y-Yeah.” She turned around and forced a smile their way. “I’m okay. Shall we go up?”

Marinette pushed passed the two and disappeared into the back.

“Will she really be okay?” Bettina asked with worry in her voice.

“We’re working on it. But I think she will be and who knows, designing might be a good distraction for her too.”
The older woman gave a small nod and followed the girl up to the apartment.

He was soon to follow suit. All the while madame London’s concerned words danced around in his head with every step he took. Was he really asking too much of Marinette? Would she be able to even handle it when she had trouble getting out of bed that morning? Maybe she would. Or in the worse case….she would think she would but end up in a worse state than she was right now.

No. No he didn’t want that.

Consequences be damned. He’d rather face whatever his father had planned with that peacock brooch, than to let the most precious woman in his life fall victim to his father’s impossible demands.

Although.

The more he thought about it….

The more madame London and Marinette happily discussed the designs in her portfolios and the more she seemed to genuinely smile. The more he realised that he was dragging her with him into his own problems. Problems he had created for himself, just so she, as well as the city, would remain safe. Would she still be, while indirectly working for the same man she had come to despise over the years?

“Adrien?”

A soft hand touching his cheek pulled him out of his thoughts. Bettina was nowhere to be seen in the living room. Two cups stood empty on the small coffee table. The third cup still filled with tea. Cold now, if he had to guess. “Are you okay?” His partner gently asked. “You haven’t said a word since you sat down or when madame London left.”
“Sorry. Just...I’m sorry. I never should have asked you to help me out like this.”

She frowned. “What do you mean? You need my help don’t you?”

“Yeah but...I don’t want you to…”

“You don’t want me to?”

“No! No! I do! I just...I’m worried....with all your bad days...that being on a deadline and a lot of pressure you wouldn’t be feeling better at all.”

“Adrien.”

“I want you to feel better. I want you to feel like yourself again. I want you...I want you to live your dreams but not at the expense of your wellbeing. Does that make sense?”

Leaning forwards, she planted a short kiss against his cheek. “You said the same thing yesterday. So that makes perfect sense.”

“So...are you sure you should be doing this?”

“No.”

“But you’re going to do this anyway aren’t you.” He sighed.

“You know me too well Kitty.” Another peck was placed on his cheek. “More tea?”

“No. I...I just need you to absolutely sure you’ll be able to handle this Bug.”

“Adrien. Have you not heard what madame London said about my work?” She asked with the biggest smile on her face he had seen in a long while. “She loves it! She gave me tips on how to improve some aspects of the sketches I gave you, but she loves my work! How can I pass up this opportunity you’ve given me. This one last chance, to put my heart and soul into something I love.”

“I’m glad you’re excited about it...but...I’m just worried--”

“I know. But I want to try. I want to help you.”

“Marinette…”

“I’m sure. I can do this Adrien. I’m going to try.”

“Just...promise me you won’t push yourself too much okay?”

“I promise.” She nodded.

“And come to me if there’s something you’re struggling with or need okay?”

“I will.”

“Also let me know if you’re having a bad day and you’re not able to design. That’s okay. Just....take care of yourself first.”
“Don’t worry about that. I’ll do my best. Pull all nighters if I have to.”

His eyes grew big and he shook his head. “No. Please don’t. I know I need your help but it’s absolutely not worth pushing your own needs away for it. Especially sleep. See what a late nighter did to you this morning. You woke up dead tired Bug.”

“I know.”

“And I think you’ve been crying today too.”

“I have.”

“So are you sure you’re able to handle this?”

“I didn’t think you would doubt my word on that.” She frowned. “I feel like I can handle it Adrien. I know you are looking out for me and want to do everything to make me feel better. But shit happens and life goes on. I can work and grief at the same time. I have to. Everyone has to. You did.”

“So did you and look where it got you now. Besides, I didn’t have a choice.”

“Exactly.” Marinette sighed. “I...I appreciate that your doting on me when I need it Chaton...but I’m already doing a little better. Strangely, the crying helps. Having people show interest in my work helps. Helping you...helps. So please let me do this for you.”

The blonde fell quiet for a good few seconds before finally giving a response back. “Okay. If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

“Then. Thank you Marinette. Thank you for your help.”

“Anything for you mon Chaton. Can I get you some more tea now?”

He shook his head. “I’m fine. I need to get going anyway.”

“Right. Back to Gabriel’s.”

“Back to Gabriel’s. Unless...you know...you need help with something?”

“Well there is this dusty mess in the kitchen.”

Adrien nodded. “If you let me handle that you can continue with whatever it was that you were doing when I walked in.”

Her eyes lit up. “I was making the display cake. Alya helped me look up some things online. Turns out it isn’t even a real cake I need to frost and decorate. It’s styrofoam. So that’s different to work with. But it’s fun and I can just prick in any type of decoration without being worried the cake would collapse under its weight.”

“Ah. That’s clever.”
“It’s been...a good distraction for today. I couldn’t fall back asleep after you left so…”

Reaching out, Adrien grabbed her hand and pressed a soft kiss against her knuckles. “I understand.”

“Come on. Let’s get to work. Maybe we’ll be done by the time maman comes back.”

When he was done cleaning up the dust and from the new oven being installed, it had started to rain again outside.

Madame Cheng had returned from her visit to the cemetery a few minutes before the heavens opened up and Marinette was almost done decorating the fake cake as he wiped the last part of the kitchen clean.

He couldn’t help but marvel at the artwork she was working on every once in a while.

Isomalt leaves glistening in the light.
White details she had piped on there, contrasted perfectly with the dark buttercream frosting.

It absolutely screamed ‘fall’.

It was perfect.

Adrien figured it was a good thing the cake wasn’t real to begin with, because it looked too pretty to take a bite out of it in the first place.

If this wasn’t going to be the eyecatcher that would lure in more customers, he wasn’t sure what would.

“I’m done back here Mari.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“I...suppose I should go back to the office.”

“I suppose so.”

“I’ll see you first thing in the morning okay? To drop Plagg off. If that’s okay with you.”

The baker’s daughter gave a small nod. “Is he at the hotel right now?”

“Yeah. He just fell straight back to sleep this morning.”

“Typical Plagg.” Marinette laughed.

“Let me know if you need anything okay.”

“Okay. Let me just…” She whipped her hands off on her apron. “Let me walk you out.”

“If you want. But I’ve been here before.” He tried to joke. “I think I know my way around about now.”
“I know. But it’s the polite thing to do and I need to make sure you take your umbrella with you.”

“Ah. Don’t need it.”

“You do.” She argued with a smile curled on her lips. “It’s coming down real hard out there. See.”

She motioned towards the nearest window. Raindrops ticking gently against the glass before sliding down to the ground.

“Alright point made my Lady.”

“I also need to give you something.”

“A kiss?” He asked. The joking tone still in his voice.

“I don’t think you’ve earned a kiss.”

The smile turned into a slight smirk. A smirk he knew all too well.

“I brought you a smoothie and helped clean up. That isn’t worth a kiss?”

The dark haired woman took a step forward and reached up to let her finger brush beneath his chin as she walked passed him.

He held his breath. His heart started racing.

Was this woman actively trying to kill him? If so, she might even succeed in doing just that.

“Nope. But nice try Kitty.”

“Then what did you want to give me?”

He started following her until she came to a halt near the front door. Reaching up, Marinette took something small from her coat pocket.

“Here. This is for you.” Her warm hand took hold of his own and turned his palm upward before letting a key drop into it. “So you can come in whenever you like.”

“Is this for the shop?”

“No. The front door.”

“The front….oh. Are you sure?”

“Yeah. That…that one was papa’s. Maman suggested that you should have a key to this place and since the bakery and the front door are practically part of the same building…”
“Thank you.”

“Don’t lose it. It’s important.”

“I won’t. Don’t worry.” His fingers clutched around the piece of metal and before Marinette could object, he had wrapped her arms around her and pulled her into a warm hug.

“Thank you.” She muttered softly, letting her arms be wrapped around his own waist to return the embrace.
Frosty, cold air lingered in the empty apartment. Which wasn’t that strange seeing as October had already shifted into November. The days were getting shorter, darker and chillier at night. Of course it couldn’t do anything but seep into the barren walls and floors.

“So this is it?” Chloé asked as he watched her eyes scan the living room.

“This is it.”

“It’s nice. You’ve got good taste Adrikins. I can work with this.”

“I don’t doubt you can.”

“Okay so I was thinking.” He responded with a short hum. “The plasterwork is nice, let’s get some color on that. Then some light drapes in front of the windows. Wooden floors and a fluffy rug right here.”

She walked over to a spot in the living room area and motioned with her hands on the floor.

“Sounds good.”

“And since your kitchen is practically in the middle of the living room the dining area should be….” Her heels clicked loudly on the baren floor as she walked towards another spot in the room. “Here. With a good view of the sunrise when you get up for breakfast. It’ll be very romantic.”

“I am a sucker for romance.” The former model chuckled.

“What’s over there?”

His gaze followed to where she pointed. “Two bedrooms with a bathroom in the middle.”

“And the other doors?”

“Also two bedrooms with a bathroom in the middle. Slightly smaller than the other two.”

His childhood friend nodded in understanding and he could practically hear her planning and pondering on what to do with those rooms.

“They don’t have to be bedrooms right?”
“No. I guess not. But it’s not like I have much use of a study or anything. I haven’t needed it at the hotel either and I can just use my laptop on the dining table.”

“Barbaric. But if you want that.” She sighed. “I’ll leave the other two rooms empty then until you know what you want to turn it into. I don’t think you need four bedrooms to begin with.”

“Can’t disagree with you there. I mean...even if the bakery falls down...technically the other rooms aren’t needed. Assuming Marinette has no problem sharing a bed with me.”

“Bold of you to assume that.”

“It’s not like we’ve never slept in the same bed before.” He shrugged.

A large smile suddenly appeared on the woman’s lips. “You have! Holy shit Adrien when?! You know this is huge progress right.”

“Euhm….last week. I slept over. It’s not the first time we end up cuddling before falling asleep.”

“Wait what?”

“We did it all the time before I had to go to New York.”

“Your father allowed that?!”

“Of course not. I sneaked out most of the time.”

“Ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous. I would have just walked out with him knowing it. It’s not any of his business where and who you hang out with. You’re allowed to have sleepovers.”

“You know father. Worried more about me smudging the family name than my own wellbeing. He’d have me dragged back before I could even reach the front door.”

“It’s still progress though. You’re not kids anymore. The cuddling isn’t just friendly cuddling.”

“That was what I was afraid of too. But no. It’s still very platonic cuddling.”

Again she rolled her eyes. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. You’re hopeless. You both are.”

“The more I get to spend time with her, the more I am actually starting to think she doesn’t like me in the way I like her.”

“Ridiculous! Absurd!” She huffed. “A blind person can see that isn’t true. You just have to make a move since, clearly, she isn’t going to.”

“And I’m not going to until I’m sure she loves me the same way I love her. So...eh...let’s just keep it at two bedrooms for now.”

“Ugh. Okay. Fine. Two bedrooms it is.”

“But thanks for the pep talk I guess?”
Was it even a pep talk?
Unsolicited advice maybe.

Although Adrien found some truth in her words.
Maybe he would need to make the first step.

It…couldn’t hurt to ask could it?

She hadn’t fully agreed to go with him to the charity gala, but if she did, they could turn it into a date.

Go for a stroll after the party, maybe watch a movie in his new apartment and cuddle up on the sofa.

Maybe he would find the courage and the right timing to confess his love for her all over again and do it right this time.

“Yeah, yeah it’s fine.” She waved away his thankful words. “Help me measure up the windows so I’ll know how long the curtains need to be.”

“I don’t think I can reach that far up Chlo.”

“Neither can I.” The girl bit her lip. “What if you lifted me up. You’re strong right?”

“I hope so.”

“Come on. Let’s try it.” The blonde kicked off her white pumps and pulled a measuring tape out of her coat pocket.

“If you insist.”

Bending down, he took hold of her legs and lifted her up so she could, somewhat, sit on his shoulder.
She wasn’t heavy, to him.
Or maybe he had just gotten stronger and hadn’t realized it.

“Can you reach it?”

“No. Not yet. Maybe you can stand on your toes or something? I can almost reach it!”

“Yeah. No. With my luck I’ll lose my balance and you’ll fall or something. Let’s just wait measuring that until we can get our hand on an actual ladder.”

“Okay. Fine. Let me down then.” She huffed in annoyance.

He did as she asked. “You okay?”

“Why do you ask?” She mumbled as she slipped her shoes back on.

He wasn’t sure if the question was the cause of the turn in her mood, or because she couldn’t get a head start on the curtains.

“Not sure. You seem a little…agitated.”
“Don’t mind me. It’s just….mommy and daddy are arguing again. It’ll fix itself like it always does so don’t worry. Mom will go to New York for a while and daddy will get all mopey before they reunite again. It’s just ridiculous.” The woman sighed deeply. “Taking this as a project really distracts me from that you know. I know it sounds absurd but it helps.”

Adrien nodded in understanding. “Then it’s a good thing you’re going to have dinner with us after we pick up Nino from the airport later. It might help your mood even more.”

“God no. I’ll just be in your way. I don’t know why you guys are okay with me coming with you in the first place.”

“So you were planning to bail on us?”

“Yeah. It’s not like I’m close friends with the others. The only person holding the group together is you because you’re friends with all of us. I don’t want to be that one person everyone else gets annoyed at and ruins everything.”

“Please Chloé? It’ll be fun. I’m sure you’re able to just get along with everyone if you tried. Alya and Marinette are honestly not that bad and Al was the one who invited you in the first place.”

“Okay...fine...since you’re so persistent.”

“It’ll be fine. It’s just food and some company. Who knows, maybe you’ll find yourself getting along with them now that we’re all older.”

“Maybe.”

“You know, we do have some time left to go to the salon before we have to be at the airport.”

“Now there’s an idea. We all know you need a haircut. Badly.”

“Yes I know.” He rolled his eyes. “And you could use a manicure.”

“It has been two weeks since my last one.”

“That’s almost a whole year.” He joked.

“I know right!” His childhood friend laughed. “Okay let’s measure up the bedrooms and the bathroom and get ourselves pampered for a few hours.”

As expected, Alya was the first one waiting at the arrival terminal. Her hair was pulled up. Fabric of a dark, purple dress or skirt peeking out from underneath her coat. It was clear to him that she had been doing her best to look as nice as she could.

Even though, the last time he saw Alya all dressed up, had been on that dreadful night he had yelled at Marinette, Adrien had to admit her normal preference for sneakers and jeans suited her just a tad better.
But he understood.

She wanted to look nice for their dinner together and of course for Nino.

“Hey Al!”

The reporter turned in his direction and gave Chloé and himself a smile.

“Sunshine!” Opening up her arms she pulled him into a firm hug. “Chloé! You made it too.”

“In my defence, I wanted to let you guys be, but Adrien convinced me to come anyway.”

Alya let go of him to give the blonde woman three pecks on her cheeks to greet her. The mayor’s daughter seemed a little taken aback, but returned the gesture nonetheless.

“Well I was the one who invited you.” Alya laughed. “Of course you’re welcome to join us.”

“Why did you invite me?”

“Because I feel like I owe you for setting me up with that interview and helping me get back in touch with Adrien. So. Dinner’s on me tonight. You don’t have to pay anything.”

“You don’t owe me anything you know.”

“I know, I just feel like I do. Humor me Bourgeois and let me treat you to dinner.”

“Everyone is so persistent today it’s just ridiculous.” She huffed with a smile on her lips. “But if you’re sure. Fine I’ll join you.”

“It’ll be fine Chloé.” Adrien assured her once again. “When was the last time you hung out with friends anyway?”

She didn’t answer right away, but the smile on her face disappeared in an instant.

“I guess it’s been a while.” She eventually muttered.

“Marinette didn’t come with you guys?”

He shook his head at the reporter’s question. “She told me she was going to meet us here after she closed the bakery.”

“Knowing Mari she’ll arrive in the nick of time.” Alya chuckled.

“Did you two have your night out last week by the way?”

“We did! Nothing special though just a movie and getting some junk food. She wasn’t feeling up to go bar hopping like last time. She told me she’s been designing again too so that’s good.”

“Yeah she’s helping me out actually. There’s been some stressful days at work recently and we’re on this tight deadline. I’m not sure if we’re going to make it but having Marinette to help out a little helps a lot actually, even if she’s dealing with a lot of things herself.”
“Good.” Chloé added. “I mean...the her helping out part. Not the dealing with a lot of stuff part. Oh...never mind. I’ll just shut up.”

“We get what you mean Chloé.” Alya assured her with a patient smile. “I didn’t know she was doing that for you?”

“I was desperate. I still feel kinda guilty for even asking her in the first place, but I’m keeping an eye out. Just so she doesn’t push herself too much.”

“I’m sure she knows her limits.” the mayor’s daughter nodded.

“She doesn’t.” He and the other woman replied almost at the same time.

“She’ll burn herself out before she even realises it.”

Adrien nodded in agreement.

“Keep an eye on her Adrien.”

“Way ahead of you Al. Way ahead of you.”

“So eh...what have you been up to?” Chloé asked, awkwardness coating her words.

“Oh the usual. Running around, gathering stories for the newspaper. I don’t suppose you know anything juicy I could use?”

“Hmmm...no sorry.”

“Darn. I’ve been scraping the bottom of the barrel lately. It’s hard finding the good stuff.”

“Well I heard someone’s seen Ladybug and Chat Noir again.” Adrien shrugged. “Maybe you can look into that?”

Alya’s eyes grew wide. “They have? They are?”

“Yeah. Someone from the office mentioned it. Saw them bouncing on the rooftops just last night.”

Technically it wasn’t a lie.

He had plucked Marinette away from her designing to go for a short game of tag on the rooftops in the middle of the night. Hoping to wear her out enough so she would get some sleep after he brought her back home.

Unfortunately it had the opposite effect on both of them and they ended up watching a movie and a half before falling asleep against each other.

But still...Chat Noir and Ladybug were out and about.

“My sisters didn’t pick up that newsbit for the blog. I wonder why nobody has reported them in yet.”

“Maybe they aren’t out stopping crime? Hard to notice them if they are just loitering on rooftops.”
Chloé nodded in agreement. “Besides, it might not be the same Ladybug and Chat Noir.”

“Also true.”

“Should we be worried though? I mean...if a Ladybug and Chat Noir are out there again...does that mean Hawkmoth will come back too?”

“Doubt it.”

“I would have Akumatized three people already if he was back.” The blonde woman joked. “I’ll probably be one of the first people in Paris to even know if he shows his ugly face again.”

Adrien couldn’t help but let out a snort as he mentally pictured the woman yelling to Hawkmoth...which by extension was his father.

All he got were two confusing stares his way.

“Sorry. I’m just...imagining Chloé calling Hawkmoth ugly directly to his face.”

“I would!”

“You totally would.” Alya grinned. “But since he hasn’t shown that he’s active again, what does the return of our heroes even mean?”

“Maybe it’s just a rumor and nobody actually saw them.”

“Could be Chlo. Or they are out there just waiting for something to happen.” Adrien shrugged.

“I’ll have to dig into it.”

“Dig into what?” Marinette’s voice suddenly asked.

The glasses wearing woman was quick to give her best friend a hug.

“Mari!”

“Hey! Am I too late? Did he land already?”

“No not yet.” Adrien informed her before planting a kiss on her cheek and wrapping her into a tight hug.

“Thank goodness! There was this one client in the bakery who wouldn’t leave. He just kept on talking. You know how old people can get.” She let go of him and he instantly missed her touch. “I see you’ve gotten a haircut.”

She let her hand run through his golden locks. “It looks good.”

“Thanks. Chloé actually insisted I’d get one. Since it was long overdue.”

A short moment of silence fell as the two women acknowledge each other’s presence.
“Marinette.”

“Chloé.”

“I ehm...I don’t know how much this is worth coming from me but...I’m sorry for your loss. It must be difficult for you.”

His partner blinked a couple of times, clearly not really expecting such a greeting. “T-Thank you. It does mean a lot...coming from you. I never figured you would...care.”

“I sympathise with your situation. With what happened and eh...I don’t know...I feel bad not knowing about it sooner.”

“Would you have be there for support?” Marinette asked with a snort.

“Hell no. But I would have send my condolences at least. It’s the polite thing to do.”

“If it makes you feel any better, none of us were in the loop.” Alya assured the blonde.

“I know. Adrien told me as much. I don’t know why you kept your friends on the outs, but I suppose you have your reasons or something.”

“Or something.” Marinette muttered sadly.

“Whatever it is. You have my condolences Marinette.”

“Thank you.”

The blonde woman shot a proud look towards him.
Adrien merely gave her a nod in approval.

Honestly this was more than he was expecting from her.
From both of them.
Especially considering their history together.

“Oh! Nino! Nino! Over here!”

Alya started to frantically jump up and down as she noticed a familiar looking face walk into the terminal.
She waved at him as enthusiastically as she could.

The others followed her example with a little less energy to spare.

The DJ grinned widely as he spotted the curly haired woman and sped up his pace.
Dodging the other travelers moving about.

“Alya!”

“Nino!”

“Alyaaa!”
“Ninoooo!”

Before he even realized it, she had sprinted forward as quick as her heels could carry her and almost tackled the poor man who had his hands full with his luggage.

Even still, he dropped them all without a second thought, to hug the woman he loved as firmly as he could.

“So eh...do we walk over or…? What’s the protocol with these sort of things.”

“Let’s give them time Chloé.” Marinette suggested.

It was a good thing she did too as the couple wasted no time planting kisses on each other’s lips. The kind he had only seen in old war movies, when the hero would return home after the battle and his love would pepper his face with as many kisses as she could give him.

It was actually a sweet sight to behold in real life and nice to know not everything in the movies was portrait as fake as it looked.

As they waited patiently for the lovers to be done with their reunion, Adrien wrapped his arms around his partner and pressed her back against him in the process. Letting his chin rest on top of her head as he enjoyed the hug.

“Bad day?” She asked him with a soft voice.

“Nah. Just felt like hugging you. You?”

“It was okay. The bakery was busy. Finished up the sketches Bettina wanted. You can take them with you later this week.”

“You are amazing Marinette Dupain-Cheng.” He let his head tip forward to plant a small kiss against her soft hair.

“That is sickenly sweet.” The mayor’s daughter suddenly remarked.

“Well they have been apart for a while.” Marinette muttered.

“No not those two. You two.”

“Yes you two.” A sly smirk appeared on her lips. “If I didn’t know any better I’d say you two were married. Or at least dating or at the very least madly in love with each other.”

“It’s nothing like that Chloé.” His partner giggled. “We’re just really close friends. Right Chaton?”

“R-Right.”

Adrien knew exactly what she was doing. Tactless as she was handling it, the blue eyed blonde was trying to find out if the girl in his arms had any romantic feelings towards him.
Well...she had an answer at least.

Although going by the look on her face, she didn’t really believe a word from what Marinette had said.

He wasn’t sure why.

She had stated before that they were just friends and as much as he wanted that to change, maybe it was time to just let that go once things had calmed down again and she had healed completely.

“Uhuh. Just friends. Okay then.”

“Is that so hard to believe?” The woman he was hugging asked with a frown.

“No. Not at all. It’s just...the odd nicknames and you two are so clingy. Is that normal?”

“We’re not clingy.” Marinette muttered.

Nevertheless she moved away from Adrien’s embrace, looking slightly embarrassed.

“Hey if you wanted a hug Chloé, all you had to do was ask.”

“Ugh. Please Adrien.” She scoffed. “I’m not that desperate for physical attention like you...or...those two.”

She nodded into the direction of the two lovers who were still in each other’s embrace. Planting soft kisses against each other’s lips.

Adrien could see tears rolling down Nino’s cheeks and happy smile on his face. It was a heartwarming sight to behold.

“They’ve been through a lot.” The baker’s daughter muttered. “It’s not weird that they just want to be close to each other.”

“I think it’s weird.”

“That’s because you haven’t been in the same kind of relationship as they have.” He told his childhood friend.

“Who’s got time for relationships anyway?”

The answer Marinette then gave made his heart feel light.

“If you really love someone, you find a way to spend time with them.” She said matter of factly. “And even if you can’t, the people who really love you back will understand that. The past few weeks showed me that much at least.”

A small smile appeared on the mayor’s daughter’s face. “You sound like a cheesy kids cartoon spouting morals left and right.”

“Maybe. But that’s how I’ve experienced it. It’s the same for you right? You’re still friends with Adrien despite not having seen him in a while.”
“I guess.”

Adrien nodded in agreement. “It’s the same for those two.” He nodded towards the couple who had finally pulled themselves out of their hug and made it to the small group.

“Nino!” Marinette shouted with glee as she made her way to the DJ.

“Mari! You made it! Holy shit!” Laughing he wrapped his arms around the young woman.

“I missed you! How was New York?”

“Crappy. I mean. The city was great but my visit was crappy.”

“At least you’re home again.”

“I am.”

“Good to see you again man!”

“Adrien! Bro! Dude you’ve gotten taller!”

“So I’ve been told.” Adrien laughed before giving his best friend a tight, short, hug. “Good to have you back Nino.”

“Good to be back.” He nodded. “I can’t wait to surprise my parents tonight. They didn’t even know I was coming home today.”

“You can surprise them tomorrow and stay at my place tonight? I’ll bet you’re exhausted.” The reporter offered.

“I am babe.” He laughed.

“As an alternative, I can offer you a discount if you want to stay at Le Grande Paris instead.” Chloé suddenly spoke up as she outstretched her hand to greet him.

“Eh...Chloé. Thanks for the offer but eh...I honestly didn’t even expect you to be here.” Shyly he took her hand and shook it gently.

“It’s okay Nino. I invited her.” Alya assured him. “She’s joining us for dinner tonight. I kinda owe her.”

“No you don’t.” The blonde woman was quick to reply. “It’s not too late to change your mind. I can boot myself out of this airport to let you guys enjoy your dinner without me.”

“I’m okay with you joining us dude. The more the merrier right?”

Adrien nodded in agreement. “You know I’m okay with it.”

“I invited you so you know I don’t mind.”

“And you Dupain-Cheng?”
“It’s fine.”

He wasn’t sure if she really didn’t mind her joining the group. But he could tell that Marinette was probably just too tired to argue.

“Okay! Let’s get going then. Our reservation is in an hour.” Grabbing one of his bags, Alya used her other hand to practically drag Nino with her to the exit.

The mayor’s daughter followed them as her heels clicked loudly on the tiled floor.

“Hey.”

Marinette let out a short hum.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Just...tired.”

“Bad day?” The blonde carefully asked.

“That too.”

That’s all he needed to hear.

Warm fingers gently brushed against her own before he let them slip into her palm.

“Let me know if things get too much for you okay? I’ll take you home.” He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

Bluebell eyes turned to him and gave him a grateful smile.

“Thank you.”

“Hey slowpokes! Move your butts or we’ll leave you behind!” They heard Chloé suddenly yell out to them.

The three others had stopped moving, looking at them. Waiting for them both to catch up.

“And then I heard she got married to Juleka the day after!”

Alya let out a gasp as Chloé shared gossip with her about their former classmates. If any of it was true he didn’t know, but it was at least enough to keep some kind of conversation going on the table after their dinner had ended.

A conversation Marinette wasn’t too keen on jumping into he noticed eventually.
The dark haired woman mainly focused on her cup of coffee, listened and occasionally nodded and smiled.

All the while he was having his own conversation with Nino on the small table they were eating at.

“Are you sure you don’t need a lawyer?” Adrien asked with a tone of worry in his voice.

“Nah man. It’s okay. I filed a complaint with her record company and they just kicked me out of the building. Because, how dare I insinuate that one of their biggest money makers is harassing colleagues.” The DJ sighed. “I’m a nobody Adrien and I’m not going to make a big fuss out of this. The video is proof enough I think and my manager advised against taking legal action.”

“I still think you should open up about it.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. It’s not like it would help me much if I do. I just...want to focus on other things now.”

“Like?”

“Oh. I don’t know. Picking up directing again maybe? Play in small clubs. Just tone it down and settle down y’know.”

Adrien nodded in understanding.

“I know. Wish I could do the same man.”

“Your old man still bugging you?”

“When isn’t he.” He grumbled as he picked up his glass of wine to take a large gulp.

“Point made my dude.”

“He got me a car recently.”

“What kind?”

“Don’t know. Some...black...sleek thing. I didn’t get a good look at it, but at first glance it seemed like a Ferrari of some sort.”

“Dude! Nice!”

“Could have been a Jaguar too. I’m not sure.” He shrugged. “And I don’t care. Father is only buying me things to keep me on a leash. It feels like that anyway.”

“If you had a better relationship with your old man things would have been so much easier.”

“If I had a better relationship with him, I would have been a pastry chef and Marinette a designer.” He frowned.

“Dude. Don’t blame yourself for that. I’m sure Mari not being a designer has nothing to do with the crappy relationship you have with your dad.”
Oh, if he only knew.

“I...guess. But I could have been here. Been there for her sooner.”

“We’re here for her now. Even if I have no idea what to do to help her out.”

“I...might have an idea.”

“Oh?”

“Do you still have your vlog setup stuff?”

“Yeah? What are you planning?”

“Hopefully a way to get more customers in the shop. But I’d need you and Alya to help out with it. I’m not sure about the details yet, but we’ll probably need an extra push to get a bigger profit out of the bakery again.”

“What about advertising?”

“We’re going to need do much more than simply that. But again. I need to work out the finer details.”

“So what are the not so finer details?”

Adrien shrugged. “From what I’ve learned, exploiting social media these days is key in making sure a business is being advertised.”

“So what? You need to advertise through twitter or something?”

“I was thinking way bigger than that.”

“Bigger how?”

“I am not sure yet. All I know is that I am going to need your help exploiting my social media followers.”

“Dude!”

“I might not be that active as a model anymore, but I do still have a lot of fans.”

“So do I.” Nino nodded. “Well maybe not that much compared to you, but I’ll help you advertise whatever it is you’re planning with my vlog camera. Wait...bakery vlogs? Is that what you’re planning?”

“Something along those lines. I need to talk to madame Cheng and Marinette about it first. I’d need their help too and it might be a fun distraction for all of us.”

“Whatever it is, I’m in.”

“Thank you.” He shot the other man a grateful smile.
“Hey can I talk to you at the bar in private by the way. I need to ask you something and I don’t want Al to hear.” Nino suddenly whispered.

Adrien gave a nod and stood up from the table. “Anyone else in the mood for some alcohol?”

“Oh! A martini for me please Adrikins!”

“I could go for an Irish coffee Sunshine.”

He nodded and turned towards his tired partner. “Anything for you Mari?”

“I’m good. Thanks.”

Before any of the women at the table could even protest or offer their help instead, Nino had already quickly pushed him towards the long bar in the restaurant.

There weren’t many patrons enjoying their drink there he noticed. An older man and at the far end two younger ladies laughing and happily chatting with each other.

“Okay. So what did you want to talk to me about that you couldn’t do in front of your girlfriend?”

Adrien climbed on one of the tall barstools and the other man followed his example.

“Well...this.” Reaching into his pocket, the DJ pulled out a small, black, box.

Opening it, he briefly showed the golden ring. A small, clear, gemstone resting on top of it.

“What do you think?”

“Nino. Bro. I love you and I would love to marry you in a heartbeat. But you can’t do that to Alya.” He answered with a joking tone in his voice.

In response he was given a playful shove. “Not that you dork! I mean...do you think the ring is good enough for her? Do you think she’ll say yes?”

Adrien knew for a fact she would, but it couldn’t hurt teasing his best friend a little further.

“With a bigger diamond maybe.” The blonde shrugged.

“Dude!”

“I’m just kidding man. I’ll bet you could propose to her with one of those candy-pop rings and she’ll still want to marry you.”

“I hope so. I mean...we haven’t exactly been...y’know...on great terms.”

“That was back then. This is now and from where I was standing at the airport, things are going good between you two again.”

The DJ nodded and put the small box back in his pocket. “I know and I hope that it’ll last this time. Because damn. I’ve had it with this on and off thing between us. I just want us to be stable.”
“I get it man.”

“But I’m also afraid that we’ll fall back into what used to be. That we argue over petty things and break up again.”

“Only time will tell Nino. Maybe you shouldn’t propose to her tonight though. Wait a few months and see how things go. We’re older now and...things have changed. We look at each other with different eyes too I’ll bet and you’ll know soon enough if you’ll fall back into the old routine.”

“When did you get so wise?” He snorted.

“I’m not. I merely observe and give advice. Doesn’t mean I’m right though.”

“Bonsoir.” A gruff, male voice suddenly greeted them. “Can I get you gentlemen something to drink?”

“Good evening. Uh...yeah. One martini, an Irish coffee and...uh...something you want Nino?”

“I could go for a cappuccino.”

“Two cappuccinos please.”

The bartender gave a small nod reached down to get the glasses and cups he needed for the drinks.

“How are things with you and Marinette by the way?”


“Because I know you’ve been in love with her since forever.” He chuckled. “Have you taken her out on a date yet?”

“Does breakfast after a breaking down count?”

The DJ raised a brow. “Of course not, what kind of date even is that!”

“Just checking.” He shifted uncomfortably on the stool. “In that case, no. I haven’t taken her on a date yet.”

“Don’t you think it’s about time?”

“Not you too.” He sighed. “You sound like...well almost everyone else.”

“Because they see what I see dude.” He laughed. “She’s into you, you’re into her. What’s stopping you two? What’s stopping you?”

“You don’t know if she...loves me like that.”

“Dude, where have you been looking all these years! She adores you. Trust me man.”

“I do trust you. It’s just...not fair to go into a relationship when she has so much to worry about and I’m still not entirely convinced she loves me either.”
At this point he felt like he was having a déjà vu. Didn't he had the same conversation with Chloé earlier that morning?

“Okay my dude. Whatever you say. Just don’t come crying to me when she ends up with someone else.”

“Oh you know I will.”

“Two cappuccinos. One martini and an Irish coffee.” The bartender once again interrupted as he put the drinks in front of the two men.

“Thank you.” Carefully they took the cups and glasses in their hands and made their way back to the table.

Although he was more grateful that, for now, the subject of being pushed into a relationship with Marinette was dropped.

That was not to say he didn’t want to.

He was still itching to confess his feelings to her.

But...the more he thought about it, the more likely it seemed they were just destined to stay friends for the time being.
Perhaps they could sit down and talk about it once she felt a lot better and they didn’t need to worry about what his father would do with the Peacock Miraculous.

The more he pondered about it, the more he was convinced that he would put too much weight on her shoulders by declaring his love for her at this moment in time.

He could and should wait.

No matter how much his friends and colleagues seemed to tease him about his feelings for her.

“Here you go.” Carefully Adrien put the martini glass down in front of Chloé and returned to his seat next to Marinette.

“No.” He heard her mutter.

“Oh come on. Surely you’ve dated someone in all these years?” The blonde woman asked.

“I haven’t. I was too focused with my studies and after that, helping my parents. I just didn’t have the time to let myself fall for someone.”

“How about you Sunshine? Met someone special in New York?”

Alya folded her hands under her chin as Nino served her the drink, clearly interested in his answer.

“Nobody special. I actually tried my best not to make any friends there. Otherwise we would just lose touch once I got back here anyway. So why bother.” He shrugged. "Sure it was lonely but still.."
“Are you sure? Not even a drunk kiss or a one night stand?”

He shook his head in reply.

“What about you Alya?” Adrien asked to put the attention back to someone else, not really in the mood to discuss one of his biggest regrets from the last four years.

“I tried dating other people. Didn’t really work out.” She shrugged. “I kept thinking about that dork over there.”

A big smile appeared on Nino’s face as he exchanged a look with his girlfriend.

“I don’t get where you guys even find the time for hooking up with other people.” Chloé rolled her eyes. “I can’t even remember the last time I kissed someone.”

“The graduation party.” Marinette reminded her. “You were kissing with a girl from one of the other classes.”

“Was I?”

She nodded. “Pretty girl, tall, freckles, dark hair.”

“Noëlle!”

“Wasn’t her name Chantelle?”

“Right! Chantelle! That’s what I said. God. It’s been forever since I’ve seen her.”

As Alya proceeded to bombard the mayor’s daughter with questions, Adrien turned the saucer of his cappuccino to find a decent size, heart shaped chocolate resting against the cup.

Taking the candy with one hand, he carefully pried Marinette’s fingers from the cold cup to put the chocolate in her palm.

“I give you my heart my Lady.” The blonde told her with a warm smile on his face.

For a moment, he could have sworn he saw her eyes sparkle as she smiled back at him.

“It’s so cold!” Chloé complained the moment she stepped back out.

“Then it’s a good thing the hotel isn’t that far from here.” Alya noticed. “You can walk with us, we’re headed in that direction anyway.”

“Yeah okay. I guess I could stand to be in your company for a while longer.”

“I’m going to walk Mari home.” Adrien announced.

The girl in question had already slipped her arm around his own.
Just like when he had walked her home after finding her crying at the cemetery.

“Okay man. Let me know when you know the details about whatever it is you were planning okay?”

He gave a nod. “Sure thing Nino. Al?”

“Yeah?”

“Take care of my best friend okay?”

“Don’t I always.” The reporter stated with a grin.

As the group parted ways a comfortable silence fell between him and Marinette. One only interrupted by the occasional shifting sound of Plagg moving on the inside of his coat pocket.

“This was nice.” Marinette suddenly whispered.

“It was. It’s...been a while since we all spend time together.”

“I was surprised that even Chloé behaved...well as far as she could anyway. I...I guess things do change when you get older.”

“I guess so. But we...we feel the same. Don’t we?”

“I guess? I don’t know. I haven’t really given it much thought...I’m just happy you’re still in my life.”

“Me too.”

“I’m sorry you felt lonely there. In New York. Without any friends.”

“Not your fault Mari. We’ve been over this.”

“I know. But I still feel guilty for not being able to do more for you.”

“As do I for not being able to be there for you when you needed me.”

“Are you...have you...ever felt upset because I just broke all contact between us?”

“I would lie to you if I said I didn’t. But not because of what you did...I was just afraid I lost you. That you never wanted to talk to me again.”

“I’m so--”

“Don’t.” He stopped walking and turned towards the woman he loved. “That was then, this is now and now we are talking and we haven’t lost each other. You’ve told me you’re ‘sorry’ way too many times already Mari. At this point there’s nothing to apologize for.”

“I know. But it feels right. It’s just a reminder to myself that I have regrets and I’m not ready to get over those regrets just yet.”
They started moving again.

“Regrets are better left burned and buried. But if you feel like you should take your time getting over those feelings of guilt and regret, then take your time. Just...let them go at some point. Otherwise they might feel too heavy.”

“You are starting to sound like Master Fu.” She laughed.

“Just trying to look out for you Bug. Like you looked out for me when I’d turn all mopey.”

“I know. I appreciate it Adrien. Thank you.”

“And thank you for everything you do for me too.”

She pressed herself closer against him as they continued their way. Once again letting a comfortable silence fall over them like a fuzzy blanket.

The cold, night air, was something he hardly noticed until she let go of his arm and he realized they were back at the bakery.

They didn’t exchange a word as Marinette carefully opened the door.

Not a sound escaped them as she motioned for him to come in or when she led him up to the apartment.

It felt familiar and he wasn’t sure why until he realized something.

She was leading him.

Just like Ladybug had always leaded him.

She was taking charge and he was, once again, blindly following her.

Surely that must be a good sign.
A sign that she was feeling stronger?
Perhaps their occasional rooftop patrols really did help on that front.

Eventually he found himself in her room again.

“I need your help with something.” She muttered softly as she took off her coat.

He followed her example and carefully placed it on her pink chaise as not to disturb his Kwami. “Of course Bug. What do you need?”

“Could you take your shirt off?”

At her request he found himself grinning. “Why Princess. If you wanted me to strip you should put on some music so I can do it properly.” Nevertheless he started unbuttoning his shirt as she had requested.

In response she rolled her eyes and shook her head, taking something from her desk, she held up a measuring ribbon to show to him. “Don’t get any ideas Kitty. I need your measurements.”
“Not sure why, but if that is a turn on for you...by all means...” He outstretched his arms. “...go right ahead.”

She once again shook her head in response, yet the small smirk on her lips was enough of an indicator for him to know that she was at least a little amused by his antics.

Marinette reached for something on her desk before walking up to him. A small notepad and a pencil, he noticed more she approached him.

The moment she started getting to work it felt weird to him.

This was by no means the first time she had taken his measurements, but for some reason he was now hyper aware of how her fingertips brushed against his skin. How a pleasant warmth was left after every brief touch.

The numbers she muttered, before writing them down, sounded soothing, yet the way the words left her lips sounded slightly sad to him.

Neither of them spoke a word to each other as he just let her do her thing. Not until the ribbon was looped around his chest area and she had stopped muttering numbers.

“Mari?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s on your mind Bug?”

“Oh...eh...just thinking I guess.” She muttered, not looking at him but keeping her eyes focused on the two ends of the ribbon in her hands.

“About?”

“It’s just...” She let out a soft sigh. “A customer came into the shop today and...she hasn’t been here in a while so...she asked where papa was.”

“Oh.”

“Maman was up front so she told her but...she had to cry halfway through her story. So I pulled her to the back and handled the front but...I broke down too after that. I’m just...remembering what she said.”

“What did she say?”

“That papa was always so nice and up for a chat and helpful.”

“Well...he was.”

She nodded in agreement. “She also said we should probably close shop since papa made the bakery what it is now.”

“Never.”
“Adrien.”

“I’ve got a plan and we’re all going to help you and your maman get through this.”

“I think...I think that old lady might be right. I haven’t seen the sales of this month yet, but...it didn’t seem like we sold a lot more despite the new cookies and the display.”

“The display hasn’t been up there for that long. Same with your cookies. Give it time.”

“We don’t have time.” She tried to argue.

“I bought you time remember. Don’t worry.” Dipping his head down, he placed a long, soft kiss against her forehead. “Things will work out.”

“Okay. Okay if you say so Kitty. I trust you.”

“And I trust you. But I do have to ask why the Hell are you taking my measurements?”

A small smirk curled up on her lips. “Surprise.”

“I do love surprises. But please don’t overwork yourself my Lady. You’ve already got so much going on. The bakery, designing to help me, the other thing if everything works out.”

“Other thing?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“I hate surprises. You know that.”

He pressed another kiss against her forehead. “You’ll like this one. It’ll be a group thing.”

“A. Group thing?” She asked with skepticism in her voice.

“Yeah! It’ll be fun! Trust me and it would only take an hour each week.”

“O...Okay. I guess I’ll wait and see what you’ve got planned then.”

“What other choice do you have?”

“When it comes to your surprises? Not many.” She let go of the measuring ribbon. “I’m done. You can put your shirt back on.”

“I could...but the question would be...should I? Do you want me to?”

“All the same to me.” His partner shrugged.

“Are you implying that these muscles...” He flexed his arm to emphasis his point. “Aren’t enough to impress you?”

“It wasn’t the last time and it sure isn’t this time. Sorry Chaton but a six-pack just isn’t a turn on for me.”
“Not even when I do this?” He asked in a joking manner as he tried his best to strike a pose and tighten his muscles at the same time. “Because I distinctly remember you getting flustered last time.”

“Oh! You’re right! I am feeling something!” The woman dramatically exclaimed. “My heart’s a flutter! Oh I don’t think I can handle it!”

A small giggle suddenly sounded from somewhere up Marinette’s bed. Tikki’s, he recognized.

“Maybe you should lie down then and let me smother you in kisses.” He walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her belly before pressing a few pecks against her neck.

“Sorry Chaton. Also not a turn on for me.”

“Damn. What is then?”

She leaned back, letting her head rest against his chest. “Considerate partners who know I don’t like surprises and tell me what they’re planning?”

“I...suppose I could give you a hint.”

“Please do.”

“Okay so...it has to do with the bakery.”

Marinette nodded. “I figured as much. What else?”

“Hopefully it’ll be a way to lure in new customers.”

“And?”

“And I might be exploiting my social media followers to help with that.”

The raven haired girl frowned. “That still doesn’t really tell me anything.”

“It’s not much of a surprise if I spoiled all of it.” He grinned.

“Okay. Fine.” She sighed deeply. “I’ll just wait and see then.”

“Do you still want me to put my shirt on?”

“What shirt?” Mischief coated her words as she pulled herself from his embrace, walking towards the discarded piece of clothing.

Bending down, she picked the cotton piece of fabric of the floor and hugged it close to her. “It’s mine now.”

“What are you even planning on doing with it?”

She shrugged. “Holding it hostage until you stay for the night? I...was hoping we could cuddle again. It...it helps.”
“Marinette. You don’t need to hold anything hostage if you want to get cuddled.”

“I know. But now I am. So...what are you going to do about it?” She taunted.

Taking two large steps, he had already closed the distance between them. With one fluid motion he scooped her up in his arms before she could even protest.

When she let out a small shriek in surprise, Adrien was already carrying the baker’s daughter as if she were his bride. The small notebook slipping from her hold and falling onto the floor.

Left to be forgotten.

“What are you doing?” She laughed.

“Complying with your demands ‘madame hostage taker’. If it’s cuddles you want then cuddles you shall get.”

“Oh no. I’ve been defeated.” Marinette giggled in his arms as he walked up to the loft where her bed was.

“And I shall be the one to deliver a fitting punishment.”

Without warning he dropped her on the bed, earning another laugh from the young woman.

He crawled next to her, wrapped an arm around her waist and pressed butterfly kisses against her cheek, accompanied by the sound of his Lady’s giggles.

__________________________________________________________________________________

“Adrien.”

A familiar voice pulled him out of his slumber the following morning. But it wasn’t Marinette’s voice. That much he knew.

“Adrien?” The voice repeated.

“Five more minutes.” He muttered.

“You don’t have five more minutes. Your phone has been going off.”

The voice didn’t sound too pleased.

“Hmmm...wha?”

“Your phone!”

“Ugh. Let’s just turn this off Tikki.” He heard Plagg suggest. “Let the kids sleep.”
“What if it’s important?”

“It’s Nathalie. How important can that be?”

At the mention of his father’s assistant’s name, he shot up. “I’m up. Gimme…”

The small cat sighed, picked up the phone and dropped it on his lap.

Next to him, Marinette stirred in her sleep.

With a tap of his finger he picked up the call.

“Hey Nath.” Adrien greeted with a groggy voice.

“Adrien.”

“What does he want from me this time?”

“Nothing. But miss Bourgeois is at the front door, demanding to be let into your room. Something about seeing what she can use in there?”

“Oh! Oh yeah. Just...let her do her thing. She probably wants to see if she can move some old furniture into my new place. She’s doing the decorating.”

“I see.”

In the background he could faintly hear Chloé scoff before entering the house.

“Everything going okay there?”

“As alright as can be. How are things on your end?”

“Busy.” He muttered, glancing at his slumbering partner. “But good.”

“I’m glad.”

“I think I might even be able to meet father’s demands this year.”

“It won’t be easy.”

“I know. But the team is dedicated. I do know that I do need a vacation after this mess.”

“So do I. Which reminds me, I am taking one around Christmas time. Don’t expect me to be back for at least two months.”

“You’ve earned it.” He nodded, even though the woman couldn’t see it. “Where to?”

“I am not sure yet. I was thinking about booking a cruise to the Bahamas or something of the sorts.”

“Let me know when you figured it out. It’ll be on me.”
“Adrien--”

“No Nathalie. Let me finish. You deserve that vacation and father sure as Hell isn’t going to give it to you. So let me. As an early Christmas present or something.”

“Even if I say no, that isn’t going to stop you is it.”

“You know it won’t.”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll fill you in on the details once I found a nice trip. Just...keep an eye out on your father while I’m gone okay? He’ll have nobody to look after him when I’m out.”

“I’ll...drop by once a week.”

“Adrien...”

“Fine...twice a week for an hour. Final offer.”

“Deal. I’ll book in two diners a week with you when I’m gone.”

“Great. Awkward silence moments. Looking forward to it.”

“I can hear the sarcasm in your voice you know.”

“Wasn’t trying to hide it to be honest. Forward me the details?”

“Of course.”

“And don’t let Chloé throw out my computer. Most of the photos I have of mom are on there.”

“I’ll make sure of that. Don’t worry.”

“Thank you Nathalie.”

“Enjoy your Sunday Adrien.”

“Same to you.”

The moment he hung up, Marinette began to mutter. “Who’sdat?”

“Nathalie.”

“Everything ‘kay?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry Bug.”

“Oh good. You’re both up. Finally!” Plagg didn’t hesitate curling up on one of the pillows.

“We need to talk.” Tikki added.

“About?” His partner sighed.
“The peacock Miraculous of course Spots! You two still haven’t come up with a plan and it’s high time you did.”

“We’ve been busy.”

“I know Adrien. That’s why we need to talk about it now. You two have been working so hard, but what you’re doing is just delaying the inevitable.” Tikki started to explain. “The deal you have with your father. You do realize trying to uphold it is going to get harder and harder at some point. I’m afraid he might be waiting for you to slip up and use his powers to get your Miraculous.”


“You guys played Valkyrie Rising right?” Plagg asked. “That’s the game with the mages and the magic and the unrealistic spells isn’t it?”

“Yeah? What about it?”

“Well I remember in the game you can summon spirits to help battle you. That’s what the Peacock Miraculous does. It summons spirits. Creatures. Whatever.”

“Like the Butterfly Miraculous, the wearer was meant to provide backup to other holders. But more directly involved than Nooroo let’s his chosen be.” The red Kwami continued. “In theory, your father could overpower you in a heartbeat!”

“Has he used it?”

“Not that I know off Mari.” Adrien shook his head. “But I’ve been so busy avoiding him, I don’t know if he’s been wearing the Miraculous in secret to practice.”

“And we’re awfully out of practice too. I mean...I am.”

“You’ll swing back into it soon Bug. The patrol runs are going better every time. I hardly have to pull you up on a ledge anymore. And we’ve only had like...three patrol runs so far?”

“Yeah. That is going better. We should do one tonight too.”

“Are you up for it?”

“I am. You?”

“I’m okay with playing a game of tag tonight.”

“I’m not.” Plagg complained.

“You never are.” Adrien shot back. “But if this Miraculous is really that dangerous, we should prepare ourselves just in case.”

“What if...we just confront him and kick his ass.”

“Also a good idea my Lady, but we’d have to wait for the right opportunity. That and I’m still not sure how to deal with the aftermath. You know?”
“You’re still hesitant having him been thrown into jail aren’t you?”

“No. Not anymore. I’m just...worried I might feel guilty for putting him in there.”

“Well he is a criminal. He got away without paying for his crimes as Hawkmoth last time.”

He expected her to add an ‘thanks to you’ after her sentence. But she never even muttered the words or something similar to it.

That didn’t stop him from feeling a pang of guilt.

Neither of them would have been in this mess if he talked things over with her, before blindly agreeing to his father’s proposal.

Yes it was the easiest way out, but now they were dealing with so much more because of it.

“If you don’t want to put him in jail you can always consider murder.” The spotted Kwami proposed in a joking manner. “I know ten ways to dispose of a body.”

“Ugh. Tikki. Murder is so messy.” The small cat joined in, a cheshire grin on his face. “And if you’re gonna do it you need to frame someone else for it.”

“Have you two been watching murder mysteries again?” Marinette laughed.

“Maybe.”

“We’re not going to kill my father.” Adrien chuckled. “Kick his ass and take away his powers? Absolutely.”

“Maybe put him in jail if we have the chance?”

Reluctantly the blonde gave a nod.

“Then we’ll live happily ever after!” His partner threw up her arms above her head and stretched them out. Trying, and failing, at the same time to suppress a yawn.

“That we do.” Adrien leaned towards her and pressed a short kiss against the corner of her mouth. “Want to get up and make breakfast?”

She shot him a wide smile, moved to lay on her side and closed her eyes.

That was a no then.

“Okay. I’ll make breakfast in bed for you and your mother. If she isn’t already awake that is.”

“Two lumps of sugar in my tea please. Thank you Chaton!”

“I know how you like your tea.” Adrien chuckled as he pulled the piece of clothing she had held hostage from under her. “Toast?”

“Hmmmhmm.”
“Eggs too?”

“Soft boiled.”

“I’ll do my best for you Princess.”

The corners of her mouth tugged up into a smile.
Her eyes cracking open ever so slightly.

“You always do Kitty.” She sighed softly. “You always do.”
The things we give

Chapter Summary

Adrien has a new plan to help the bakery.

Chapter Notes

An extra long chapter for you lovelies!!!!
Lot of plot progression and some time skipping too.
Also some people get engaged somewhere I think. I forget.

Making breakfast should have been easy enough.
He had made some for himself many times before in New York after all.

Although he never soft boiled his eggs.

Undercooked them?

Sure. Plenty of times.

Hard boiled?

Easy.

Soft boiled however, was new to him.

So when the boiling water started making the eggs jump up and down in the small pot, Adrien was scrolling through his phone in search of information.

How long were these things supposed to do their thing anyway?

Three minutes?

Four?

Surely going by his gut feeling this time wouldn’t help that much.

“Good morning Adrien.”
He looked up from the screen to see Sabine Cheng walk up to him. Dressed in a fluffy robe. “I didn’t know you slept over again.”

“Oh...eh...well...that kinda happened after I dropped Marinette off last night. I was hoping making you two breakfast would at least be a nice ‘thank you’ for letting me sleep over in the first place.” The young man chuckled.

“If anything we should be thanking you.” The mother smiled. “You’re taking such good care of us both. I wouldn’t even know where we would have been without your support.”

“You’re….you’re family to me and I think you know I love Marinette dearly. I’d do anything to help you two out.” Turning around, he grabbed a plate from one of the cupboards behind him and placed some pieces of toast on it before offering it to Sabine.

Gratefully she took the small plate and seated herself at the kitchen table. “Still. You didn’t have to. But we’re grateful that you are and so is Marinette. Even if she yelled at you about it at first.”

“That was partially my fault too. I shouldn’t have gone behind her back. I just thought...I was doing the right thing at the time and I’m just glad she’s not angry with me anymore and actually seems to enjoyed working on the display and stuff.”

The woman nodded. “She was very committed to it this week. As she was with designing things for you. It seems that she is doing a little better again and...I’m happy that she is. I was afraid she might fall into something of a depression with everything she forced on herself.”

“Honestly. I was afraid of that too madame. I’ve never seen her cry that much. Or...so frail.”

“But she’s smiling again. Thanks to you.”

“She does the smiling all on her own madame Cheng. Me, her friends, you. We’re just giving her a push in the right direction. Speaking of a push in the right direction, I have a new plan for the bakery. It might take a few hours of our time, but I think we can make this work!”

“What plan sweetheart?”

He turned down the fire on the stove, stopping the eggs from dancing in the water. For how long they had been boiling, he wasn’t really sure. It had to have been longer than three minutes at this point.

Right?

It felt longer than three minutes.

“Exploiting my social media followers by giving them some kind of content to lure them into the bakery.” Adrien explained.

“I...I’m afraid I’m not exactly sure what you’re aiming at.” The woman chuckled.

“We’re going to make short videos. Marinette will be the main host and I will be the secondary host to attract views. Since I still happen to have a fanbase for some reason, despite not having modelled in ages. We can do little baking tutorials and promote the bakery at the same time. Should be fun to do too and I’ve already got Nino on board in helping us out. In a way. We’re using his camera.”
“Do you think that’ll work?”

“Worth a shot don’t you think? We might reach a wider audience with that than with regular advertising.” He shrugged. “You’re welcome to join us too of course. Show the people the dedicated women running the whole thing.”

Sabine let out a small chuckle. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe I will at some point. It sounds like a good distraction for both of you.”

“I don’t need a distraction.”

“You do. I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but you seem stressed Adrien. Anyone probably would be dealing with so many things at the same time and now this on top of it all.”

“You two are also dealing with a lot of things.” He pointed out. “I don’t think it’s that much different for me. Besides. It’s only temporary. I’ll be able to relax more after January.”

“Why after January?” He heard another voice ask.

Turning around, he noticed Marinette standing on the staircase.

“Hey. It’s not a breakfast in bed, if you’re out of bed.” Adrien chuckled, successfully avoiding in answering her question.

She really didn’t need to know that he was worried his father would think it would be a breach of contract, if the showcase was even a little bit of a flop.

“I just wanted to make sure you didn’t undercook the whole thing.” She shot back with a grin.

“It’s not undercooked. Don’t worry Princess.”

“May I remind you, that you weren’t able to reheat premade soup in one go last time.”

This earned him a short laugh coming from Sabine.

“Minor details! I got it right eventually and I didn’t burn down the house. In my book, that’s a win.”

He felt how she slipped an arm around his waist and pressed a short kiss against his cheek. Instinctively, he pulled her closer to him and leaned in to give her a side hug.

“It’s still very sweet that you’re making breakfast in the first place Adrien. Thank you.”

“Probably won’t be the last one I’ll make for either of you.”

“I’ll be looking forward to your joined efforts on mother’s day then.” Madame Cheng added with a broad smile.

“Oh man. It’s been awhile since I’ve celebrated a mother’s day.” He muttered, draining the water from the small pot with eggs before letting a stream of cold water run over them. “Not since before mom disappeared.”
“I remember that me and papa would get up early every mother’s day...every Sunday too for that matter and make maman a special breakfast.”

“Every Sunday too?”

“Tom was a romantic.” Sabine added with a nod. “Every Sunday he would make breakfast for me and when Marinette was still very little, she would help him out by pouring me a glass of milk or putting a little flower on the tray. It was very cute.”

Adrien nodded in agreement. “That sounds very sweet.”

“And on mother’s day, we would go all out!” Marinette continued. “We’d make something different every year. From crêpes with strawberries, to little heart shaped tarts.”

“Remember when your father almost burned the kitchen down one time?” Sabine asked her daughter with a fond smile on her face. “He tried to make me something new for me, but you were trying to do your own thing and when he went over to help you, he forgot the chocolate cake in the oven.”

“And it burned so badly the whole kitchen filled up with smoke and woke you up! I remember! That was a disaster and a half.”

As the mother and daughter started reminiscing about all the fond memories they had of Tom Dupain, Adrien remained focused on making them breakfast.

Admittedly, he started to feel slightly envious of the blue eyed woman.

The relationship she had with her father sounded as something he could only dreamed of having with his own.
Thinking back, he wasn’t sure if they had shared any happy memories together in recent years. Or the years before that.

On the other side, he had some pleasant memories of Tom himself.

Questions he had asked the man, when he couldn’t ask his father.

The time they ended up decorating cupcakes and the baker had explained how much of a science baking actually was.

They had joked together, laughed together.

In all honesty, next to his former bodyguard and to an extend Nathalie, Tom Dupain had been the closest thing he had to a parental figure in recent years.

Something he’d always be grateful for.

Maybe…

Maybe that’s why he felt the need to take care of Marinette and her mother in their time of need. Because it felt like he owed it to them.

To be there for them.
It was the least he could do.

“Adrien?”

“Hmm?” The blonde looked up to Marinette’s concerned face.

He also noticed Sabine was gone from the table and that her plate was empty. Somewhere in the background he could hear water running.

A shower.

Marinette’s mother must be taking a shower.

“You okay?”

“Sure. Why? Didn’t I look okay?”

“You zoned out a little.”

“I just have a lot on my mind. Don’t worry.”

“You know you can talk to me if something is bothering you right?” Her warm hand carefully intertwined with his own. Giving his fingers a light squeeze.

“I know Bug. I know.” Bringing her hand up to his lips, he gave her knuckles a soft kiss.

Looking up, he noticed something soft in her eyes and smile. If he had to describe the look on her face, adorable would come close to it.

Adorable and full of adoration.

She really looked beautiful to him like that.

So at peace.

So...happy.

“Maybe it’s a good thing we’re going for a patrol tonight. Running around on the rooftops might do you good.”

“For both of us.”

She nodded in agreement. “For both of us.”

Marinette leaned forward, wrapping her arms around his neck, pulling him into a hug.

“You shouldn’t be the only one looking out for us either.” She whispered. “We should look out for each other. So...if something is bother you...tell me. Don’t keep it in. Don’t do what I did to you.”

Adrien sighed deeply before burying his face in the crook of her neck as the woman continued to hug him.
How did she even manage to break him like this?

To want to spill all of his woes to her.

“I’m...just worried about my father...about our contract. I was so sure I would be able to prevent him from doing anything bad as long as I did what he wanted me to do. But now...now I’m worried that if he even thinks I’ve failed for a small bit...he’d....”

“I know. I’m worried about that too Adrien.”

“I’m trying Marinette. I really am. It’s not that I don’t like my work...or my team. It’s just...that he isn’t making it easier for any of us.”

“Then stop. Rip up that contract.” The baker’s daughter moved away from him to gently hold his face in her hands. “We’ll deal with him. Together. With help. One way or another, we’ll deal with him.”

“Mari. This is the safest way and you know it.”

“It’s temporary.”

“I know but...”

“No. Adrien. Listen to me Chaton.” She pressed their foreheads against each other. Her thumb gently caressing his cheek. “You might be able to get through the first thing that man wants you to do right. Or the second. Heck even the third. But you and I both know that won’t last. Who’s to say he won’t demand you to have thirty pieces done for the next collection? Or a hundred for the one after that.”

He closed his eyes and sighed deeply once again.
Letting her words seep through him.

Those soft spoken words which held a bitter truth to them.

“No matter how hard you’ll try, this will keep going in a circle. You will slip up eventually. He will push you hard enough to slip up and...and I can’t watch you go through that...”

“I need to try. I don’t want anyone getting hurt. This is the easiest and safest way Marinette.”

Soft lips planted a short kiss against his cheek. “Not safe for you. Adrien...I...I..” Her hands moved from his face to his own again. “I don’t think you should go through this for much longer. It’s hard for me too...seeing that you...that you are just going through all of this and I can’t do a single damn thing to help.”

“You are helping.”

She shook her head. “Designing a few pieces so you can meet a deadline doesn’t solve the problem. I’m helping you postpone the inevitable. That’s all. You’re...you’re doing more for me than I’m doing for you.”

“Mari...”
“And you’re doing so much for us. Too much. It’s tiring you out already.”

“No. No it’s fine. I just need a good break after this shit it over and I’ll be good to go Bug.”

“Until that time you’re just wearing yourself out.” She argued.

“I’ll. Be. Fine.” Adrien leaned forward to place a kiss against her forehead. “I promise.”

She merely responded with a tired sigh.

“Besides.” He continued. “I’m not the only one who is dealing with way too much for their liking.”

“Well…."

“Am I wrong?”

The dark haired woman let go of his hands and playfully shoved his shoulder. “Shut up.” Marinette laughed.

“So we’re in the same boat. Again.”

“Then we should just watch out for each other.”

“I’m planning to. Don’t worry.”

“That’s….that’s good because...well...there’s something I wanted to tell you too actually….I…”

Before she could continue, Adrien’s phone started ringing.

On the screen Alya’s name was shown.

“Hold that thought Princess.” With a fluid swipe of his finger he answered the call. “Hey Alya. You’re on speaker.”

“Good! Hey. So. Are you at Marinette’s by any chance?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Good. Because my girl still hasn’t replaced her phone battery and I need to tell her that....”

He heard the reporter taking a deep breath. “I’m getting married!”

Alya started to squeal, followed by a short yell of excitement from the girl next to him.

“You’re getting married?!’

“I’m getting married!” Alya repeated her best friend.

“Congratulations! I’m also sure you just woke Nino up, but congratulations!”

“Nino’s fine Sunshine. He’s knocked out cold. I made sure of that.”

He could almost see the smug look she was probably wearing on her face.
“Way too early in the morning for this Al.” Adrien groaned.

“Duly noted Agreste. Anyway! Marinette?”

“Yes?”

“Will you be my maid of honor?”

“Oh...eh...I want to but. I really do but--”

“Don’t worry girl! We don’t have a date set just yet. Nino wants to wait a little longer before we fully commit ourselves. Just to see how we hold up now that we’re older y’know. So relax, I don’t need your amazing best friend skills for this just yet.”

Adrien could hear his partner let out a sigh of relief.

“Let me know when you do need it.”

“Of course.”

“So eh...how did Nino propose anyway?” Marinette then asked.

“He didn’t. I did.”

He couldn’t help but smile.

Nino did have some slight doubts the previous night and Alya had already made it clear some time ago that she wanted to marry him.

Being engaged for the time being was a good compromise for both of them.

If anything it would be a good sign for both of their futures.

“I know he was planning to.” The blonde suddenly said. “He showed me the ring last night.”

Marinette gasped loudly. “Why didn’t you tell me!”

“Didn’t think it was that important.”

“Not important?!!”

Alya started laughing at the other side of the line. “It’s fine girl! Because I’m still getting married!”

Again the reporter let out a happy squeal and once again Marinette joined in the euphoria. Through all the happy noises, Adrien could only barely hear someone in the background of wherever Alya was.

“Hmm? Yeah I’ve got them on the phone babe.”

Seemed like Nino wasn’t such a heavy sleeper as the other woman assumed.
“Adrien.” His best friend called out in a sleepy voice.

“Hey man. Good morning.”

“I assume Alya told you the news?”

“She sure did.”

“Don’t suppose you wanna be my best man whenever we decide to plan this thing?”

“I’d be honored!”

“Cool man. Cool. Thanks.”


“I would but...I need to get up anyway.”


“No. No. I need to bring you my camera. For the thing you wanted to do.”

“The thing?” His partner suddenly asked.

“Yeah. Didn’t Adrien tell you? He’s planning this video making thing to help out the bakery.”

“Oh! I’m in! Let me help too!” The future bride piped up.

“Well...it would be a fun group project if we all joined in.” He nodded.

“Join in on what?! You still haven’t told me.”

“It’s a surprise Marinette. I told you.”

Adrien shot her a wink which made her pout in response.

“You know I don’t like surprises.”

“And you don’t like waking up this early on a sunday morning either, yet here you are.”

“Kitty!”

“Okay, okay.” He laughed. “I’ll tell you guys.”

“Please do. I’m getting curious myself.” Alya laughed.

“I was hoping to attract more customers, by creating a video channel where we showcase small tutorials and advertise the bakery.”

Next to him Marinette frowned.

“Oh! I get it! Then we forward the links to the vids on our socials and that’s how our followers will
know about the bakery.” Nino sounded much more awake all of a sudden. “Dude! If that works that would be awesome!”

“That’s the plan.”

“It sounds stupid.” His partner muttered next to him. “Stupid enough to work maybe.”

“We’ll reach a wider audience this way compared to normal advertising. Which is also more expensive by the way. We can’t afford to waste funds we might need later.”

She gave a slight nod. “Okay. So. What do we exactly do?”

“Let’s set things up first Mari.” Alya quickly responded. “Will next week work? Sunday is my day off.”

“Next week will be perfect. Thanks guys.”

“Cool. Since you don’t need me until then, I’m going back to bed.” He heard the DJ yawn and shuffle around.

“And I am going to get some coffee in my system.”


“Yes! Yes I’m sure! I’m sure and I’m hyper and so happy! Talk to you later!”

“Bye Al.” He laughed before hanging up the phone.

A moment of silence quickly fell between them.

“Do...do you think it’ll actually work?”

“I’m pretty sure Princess. I’ve still got a little bit of a following as a former celebrity. Even got seven marriage proposals last week. It’s twenty less than it used to be, but that would be at least seven people I could manage to redirect to buy their bread here.” He joked.

Thankfully she didn’t frown as his attempt at humor.

No.

Her lips even curled in the same soft smile she had given him earlier that morning.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Help me host it?” He explained quickly. “I’d think you would be perfect for it.”

“I’ll….I’ll do my best.”

“You always do my Lady.”
Whatever rhythm he had built up over the past few weeks was gone in just a few days.

Partially thanks to five of Marinette’s designs being approved by madame London.

Which meant that he would no longer be able to spend the entire week at the office.

That had been the plan when he had asked for her help anyway.

He would help out in the bakery, when she was needed to sew her pieces together at Gabriel’s.

And even though she had first said to him that she would think about it, he couldn’t help but feel that she was a little bit pressured to join the team with the way Bettina London had practically begged her to help them.

Though it didn’t sit completely right with him, initially, Adrien figured it would be fine as the head designer had promised to keep an eye on her.

He had picked Marinette up for her first day, showed her a little more around his department and left her in the care of madame London and her team, before he hurried back to the bakery and help madame Cheng with customers.

Why wouldn’t it be fine?

His partner seemed pretty happy with the arrangement after that first day.

Plagg was overjoyed that he could spend two whole days of the week with Tikki, as Adrien manned the register.

Overall, it should have been a win-win situation.

He was fully convinced it would still be fine when Marinette rambled on about how amazing her day had been that very evening.

After the second day however, he was less sure things were actually working out.

Again, she had happily chatted about the progress she made and how nice madame London was, but there was a certain sadness in her voice that didn’t go unnoticed by him.

That made him worry again.

It wasn’t until Chloé had dragged out of his bed that Saturday to go shopping for furniture and he ended up contemplating his choices in life, while testing out a mattress, that he realized there was a simple solution to easing his worries.

“She’s going to yell at you.” Plagg warned him the inside of his coat as he made his way to the bakery that following afternoon.

“Possibly.” Adrien grumbled softly.

“You know she didn’t want you buying her one. But you bought her one anyway. She might get mad at you for that.”
“It’s for a good cause and I’ve given her plenty of time to get a replacement battery on her own.”

Even if that was the case, he was still half tempted to return the box he was carrying under his arm.

The last thing he wanted was to make Marinette upset.

She had been upset too many times already.

“True. But you could have just gotten her a battery instead of a whole new phone. She probably
would have accepted that easier than this. You know that.”

“Probably.” He grumbled again. “I just want to make sure I can reach her and she can reach me in
case she needs my help.”

Adrien reached into his other pocket to fish out the key she had given him.
After three more steps he reached the side door of the building, put the key in the lock and slowly
turned it.

It felt almost weird to come in through this way.

“Marinette?” He called out before closing the door.

“In here.”

While he expected to hear his partner’s voice, it was in fact Tikki’s that had called back to them.

“Tikki? If you’re out here then I assume Mari’s mom is--” He stopped dead in his tracks as the first
thing he saw when stepping into the kitchen, was Marinette trying to hold back a sob and her Kwami
desperately trying to calm her down. “Out.”

Without a second thought, he placed the box on the cake decorating table and wrapped his arms
around her shoulders.
The moment she was pressed against him, the sobs became louder.
Tears going down her face once again.


In response the girl wrapped her arms around him, pressing her face tightly against his chest like she
had done a couple of times before.

Her shoulders shook violently with every sob and all he could do was rub her back tenderly and let
her cry.

“What happened?” He softly asked Tikki as Marinette was in no state to speak right now.

“Nonna Gina came to visit and Marinette was already having a bad day emotion wise. Well...let’s
just say nobody could really stop crying once the subject of her father came up. Madame Cheng and
Nonna Gina just went out for dinner.”

“Well. Then it’s good that you’re letting it out Bug. Just cry okay.”
“I m-miss him s-s-so much.” She managed to gasp between sobs.

“I know. I know. I miss him too Mari.” His grip on her tightened and he started to rock her body back and forth a little to help calm her down.

Out of the corner of his eye, Adrien noticed Plagg flying out of his hiding spot in a black blur.

“Just cry it out Spots. We’re here for you.” The small cat assured her as he snuggled against her, purring lightly.

“All of us.” Tikki added, hugging her cheek lightly.

There the four of them stayed. Caught in a comforting embrace until her sobbing slowly subsided. For how long that exactly lasted, he wasn’t sure.

Eventually her breathing seemed to calm down enough that he expected her to be able to answer him again.

“Better?”

She let out a shuddered breath and a slight nod.

“Good. Take deep breaths Bug.” Leaning forward he planted a kiss against the top of her head. “Deep breaths.”

“I’m fine.” He heard her exhale deeply. A wave of her warm breath ticking against his fingers. “I’m fine now.”

Despite of that, he didn’t let her go just yet nor did Plagg stop purring.

“Are you sure?”

“I think so. Just...tired.”

“Will you be up to record anything today?”

“I don’t know. I want to try. You...Alya and Nino. You’re all going out of your way to help me. I need to give it my all too. Even if it’s for a few hours.”

“We can postpone it if you’re not up to it.”

“No.” She pulled away from his embrace. “I feel better. I...I needed a good cry. It’s been a few days since the last time.”

The blonde nodded in understanding and leaned forward to place a kiss on the salty remains that her tears left on her rosy cheeks. “You’re amazing Marinette. You’re so strong.” He muttered lovingly. “You’re getting better. I can tell.”

“I can’t.” She tried to laugh but it quickly died down to be replaced by a short sniffling sound instead. “Hey.”
“Yeah?”

“Could you do that again?”

“Do what again?”

“Kiss my cheek. I...I know you kiss it all the time but...I don’t know...it feels...really nice...now. Is it weird to ask for more? You don’t have to if--”

He cut her off by placing another soft kiss against her glowing skin. “I’ll give you as many kisses as you need Princess.”

From somewhere next to him he heard Plagg groan in disgust. “Ugh! Are you two getting all gross again.”

“Let them Plagg. She needs it.”

“I swear Tikki, those two can be like needy little kittens sometimes.”

“Like you’re not one yourself.” The other creature laughed. “Come. Let’s leave them alone. Nino and Alya should be here soon anyway. They can’t see us.”

“I’ve got some cheese in my room for you.” Marinette muttered softly as he pecked her skin once more.

“It’s nice to know at least someone is also considering my needs.”

“Come on Plagg.” Tikki groaned.

Adrien pulled away from Marinette to see the one dragging the other through the ceiling.

“I’m really glad to have Tikki back.” The woman in his arms muttered. “She’s been a huge support for me. I can tell her anything and she knows exactly what to say to make me feel better.”

“I’m glad.”

“All thanks to you.”

“I just did what was right Mari.” He reached up to brush his thumb against her the remains of her tears that were left on her face. “I’d do anything to see you smile again.”

“You do too much for me.”

“As do you for me.”

“Lies.”

“I’d never lie to you. Now...how about you tell me what you prepared for our first online episode tutorial together.”

“Oh. I eh...I was thinking about making chocolate and orange cupcakes.”
“Sounds new.”

“It’s not. It’s one of papa’s recipes. It’s pretty much a chocolate cupcake with some orange zest mixed in. It’s pretty nice. He’d always make me some around the Christmas season with a cup of hot cocoa. Oh! He made maman these raspberry filled tarts too. She loves those. She...he...” Marinette sighed deeply. “We had a lot of traditions around baked stuff. I...I guess that’s over now too.”

Her mood seemed to slowly shift back into a happy one the more she spoke about her father and what he used to do for his family.

“Maybe. Maybe you can take charge of some of those traditions?”

“How?”

“Maybe we...or you...could make your mom those tarts around Christmas time and we can bake those cupcakes for ourselves. Keep a bit of the tradition alive.”

“I...I don’t know.”

“Doesn’t have to be this year Bug. Just focus on yourself for now. You can worry about traditions later okay.”

She gave a slight nod. “Okay.”

“That aside. I’m sure I’m going to mess it up. It doesn’t sound like an easy thing to make.”

“You’ll be fine.” Her lips curled up into a small smile. “I’ll explain everything to you and I guess by extension the camera.”

“I’ll try to listen and not mess things up too badly then.” He flashed her a grin. “You’re the expert here Mari. Not me.”

“Don’t worry Kitty. I’ll teach you all of my baking secrets someday. You’re good at following my instructions.”

“I’ve had enough practice in that department.”

“In that case. Could you hold me a little longer?” The dark haired woman leaned against him again. A soft sigh passing her lips.

He didn’t hesitate to do as she asked of him. Pressing her as close to him as he could. “As long as you want me to.”

“Forever. I want you to hold me forever.”

“Forever is a long time Princess.”

“You have no idea how warm you are Adrien. So warm. I don’t want to let go.”

“Then I won’t.”

“Don’t go.” Those weren’t the words he half expected to hear. “Don’t go.”
“Marinette. Hey. I’m not going anywhere and you know it.”

“What if he makes you.” She muttered against his chest.

“I’m not leaving you. No matter what my father wants me to do.” He placed a hand on top of her hand and gently started to pet her hair.

She had done the same to him plenty of time before in the past.
To him, it had always been a soothing sensation and he hoped it would be enough for her to calm back down again.

“Promise?”

“I promise Marinette. I promise with every fiber of my being, that I will not let my father send me away for a second time. My home is here. It always has been.”

“Here with you. ” He mentally added.

Adrien felt how she shifted under his touch and wrapped her arms around his waist.
A happy sigh escaped her lips.

“Home wouldn’t be the same without you either Chaton.”

“Home wouldn’t-- Oh. Oh I said that last part out loud didn’t I.”

He could feel her smile against him. “You did.”

“Oh well.” Once again he pressed a kiss on top of her hair. “I didn’t think you would be that worried about that.”

“I wasn’t. At first. But...since you came back I’ve been having some...dreams. That he made you leave again and I couldn’t do anything to stop him or you.”

“Mari…”

“I had the same dream last night but...it didn’t end so well.”

“Hey. Call me next time you have a nightmare like that okay. No matter what time it is. I’ll be there for you.”

“Chat...I can’t do that.”

“It’s no problem. Really.”

“No...I mean…” The designer pushed herself away from the embrace. “I still haven’t replaced my phone’s battery.”

“Aren’t you a lucky little lady then.” Adrien released her from his hold, instantly missing her warmth.

With a smirk on his face he walked over to where he left the small box with her new phone and
proudly offered it to her.

“Happy Birthday.”

“It’s not my birthday and you know it.” She laughed.

“Happy almost Christmas then.”

“We’re not even in december yet.”

“Happy anniversary?”

She crossed her arms and rolled her eyes with a smile on her face. “Of what exactly?”

“I’m sure we’ve defeated an Akuma on this day at some point. It’s an anniversary of that?”

“Adrien.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m just...worried you’re pushing yourself too much helping me out. I know madame London is keeping an eye on you--”

“And kicking me out at five sharp because of it.” The designer added.

“Right. But...what if you need something or...what if you need to talk or want me to come to you. Or you have a bad day like just now. I...I would feel a lot less worried if I know you can contact me or your mom properly.” He offered her the box once again. “Marinette. Would you do me the honor of becoming an active contact in all of our contact lists again?”

He expected her to object in some way. Scream at him like Plagg had predicted.

At the very least reject his gift or ask to have time to think it over.

“I will.” Was what she answered instead.

“Then place your hand on the box.”

“What?”

“Place it on here and raise your other hand.” He tapped a couple of times on the black cardboard.

Reluctantly she did as she was told.

“Do you, Marinette Dupain-Cheng, swear to call me or one of your contacts if anything goes wrong and you need help?”

“I swear.”

“Are you prepared to receive an onslaught of cat memes from me whenever you need cheering up?”

“No.” She laughed. “But I’ll suffer through them like before.”
“Perfect.” Again he kissed her cheek.

By now he had lost count as to how many times he had done that since he came in. But at least she was laughing again.

“I’m actually pretty scared of opening this.” Delicate hands took hold of the small box.

“And I was afraid you would be angry with me for getting you one.” He admitted. “I mean…”

“No. No I would have. Under normal circumstances but...I’ve got myself to blame for this. You gave me enough time to find a replacement battery and I just keep forgetting to order one. So it would be unfair to be mad at you for this.”

“I just want you to be able to reach out to anyone who can help make you feel better when you need it.”

“I know. Thank you.”

“Besides it’s wasn’t even that expensive so don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t even want to know what you consider not expensive.” She laughed.

“My dearest Marinette.” Dramatically he let himself drop on one knee and too hold of one of her hands. “The moon, the stars, the world. I’d give it all to you if they would make you happy. Because that is worth more to me, than the most precious gem in the entire world.”

“Adrien.” She sighed with a smile. “You don’t have to give me the moon or the stars. You just have to give me you. Your friendship is more than enough to make me happy. You know that.”

Even if he had spoken his words with a joking tone, he couldn’t help but feel his cheeks starting to glow as she spoke her’s with a sincerity that made him realize once again why he loved her so much.

“Marinette there’s been something that’s been on my mind a lot since I left and I...I wanted to tell you something important for so long...”

Marinette gave him a patient smile. “Yes?”

Somewhere in the background he heard a door open, but he didn’t care who was coming in. He needed to tell her now.

Even if she didn’t feel the same way, he needed her to know at the very least.

“Princess...my Lady...Bugaboo...I--”

His second attempt at declaring his love for her was suddenly interrupted by a loud shriek.

“Are you doing it!” Alya squealed. “Are you proposing? Oh! Are we interrupting? We could leave! Come on Nino!”

“No! No!” The baker’s daughter was quick to answer. “Adrien was just being an dork, trying to cheer me up.”
“Yep. That sounds like something Adrien would do.”

“Isn’t that my job Nino?” He asked with a smirk as he stood back up again. “Being the dork of the group.”

The DJ shook his head. “We’re all dorks here man.”

“Well...that’s true. I’m just the dorkiest here.”

“Okay but...if you weren’t proposing, what’s in the box?” Alya asked as she walked over to her best friend.

“He got me a new phone.”

The glasses wearing woman blinked a couple of times after Marinette’s answer, then looked at the blonde with somewhat of a shocked expression.

“You.” She started. “You are amazing. Marinette! I can text you again!”

“So you can.” The baker’s daughter laughed.

“I mean...if he proposed to me with that, I would have accepted it too. Just saying. It’s a missed opportunity Adrien. We could have had a double wedding.”

The blonde shook his head in amusement and rolled his eyes at the other woman’s jesting words. “When I’ll propose to Marinette, it’ll be with something much classier than a phone. Maybe a nice car or a house.” He shot his partner a wink and a small smirk.

Even though he had meant it in a joking manner….

Well...half joking.

If she felt the same about him at some point he would absolutely marry her.

But for now he only meant to cheer Marinette up some more with his reply.

The dark haired woman didn’t grace him with a smile, or a chuckle. Not even a snort.

Instead a dark pink started to appear on her cheeks and she quickly dragged her best friend to the front of the shop under the guise of ‘needing help setting the phone up’ before he could even ask if she was doing okay.

Or apologize for maybe making her uncomfortable with his flirty attempt at comedy.

“Dude.” He heard Nino sigh.

“Did I mess up?”

“Nah man. I think you almost broke her though.”

“That’s a...bad thing right?”
“Not always.” His best friend gave him some pats on his shoulder. “Help me set things up so we can start shooting.”

“Yeah, sure. Just tell me what to do.”

To say that recording a silly baking tutorial had been a nice change of pace was an understatement. It was fun. Really fun.

He tried to joke around, both to entertain their possible viewers and to keep Marinette laughing.

In the end, he did try his best to execute the instructions she gave to him, while Nino handled the camera work and Alya made sure the sound was recorded perfectly.

Apparently, the reporter had taken some initiative and set up a video channel ahead of time. Though he wasn’t sure if ‘Marinette’s baking corner’ would catch on, he was happy that it focused more on her than on him.

He was only showing his face to provide some semi-celebrity endorsement afterall.

Alya and Nino also ensured both of them that they would be managing the channel and editing the video material to help them out.

“It’s the least we can do for you guys.” Nino had said.

For once, Adrien wasn’t going to argue with that. He had enough on his hands already.

Before he knew it, another week had flown by.

Another week where both nothing special seemed to happen and at the same time a lot of small things did as well.

Marinette managed to finish up the first outfit for her part of the collection.

His social media had blown once he shared the video link to the baking tutorial, which was exactly what he hoped would happen.

Throughout the week he also made good on the promise to send Marinette some cat related memes. In turn she send him cat videos of cats doing stupid things, or merely responded with an emoji or a ‘thank you’.

To top it all off, he send a token of his appreciation to his staff that thursday.

How could he not?
They worked hard, they were stressing out over the deadline too and it was just criminal that he found out the cafeteria food was both overpriced and not very good. Of all the things his father skipped on in his company, this was probably one of the worst things.

So he arranged to have a big lunch delivered to his department.

Nothing over the top.

Just some fresh made soup and sandwiches.

But it sure would be much more edible than the meal he had in the building earlier that week.

He really needed to talk to his father about that.

When it was the last day of the week, he was surprised to see Chloé bursting through the door of his office around the end of the day.

“Come with me.” The blonde demanded with a smirk on her face.

“Why?”

“It. Is done.”

“It?” He tilted his head in confusion.

“Ugh! Yes! It! Your apartment. The thing I’ve been busting my perfect ass over for the last two weeks.”

“Oh! Really?” Adrien shot her a exhausted smile. “Thank you! I can’t wait to see what you made of it Chlo.”

“Then come with me.”

“But…I have work to do.”

“Then take a break. You look like you need one and a drink. Maybe even a good nap afterwards.”

She wasn’t wrong.

All of those things sounded very tempting and just what he probably needed.

If he ended up napping, while cuddling Marinette again, it would be perfect.

“Okay. But just for an hour. I have a ton of things to arrange.” He gently patted the pile of paperwork next to him.

“Two hours. We’ll go out for an early dinner too. I want your opinion on some ideas I have for daddy’s gala.”

“But…”

“Adrien. Take a break. You’re the manager here right? You can do whatever you want.”
“Not true. But...I guess I could work from home on a good chunk of this.”

“Yes! Whatever you think is best. Just let’s have dinner and let me show you your new home!”

The blonde woman firmly took hold of his hand and practically dragged him out of the office.

“Chloé. Wait!”

“No. No we won’t. It’s rude to let my chauffeur wait.”

“Since when is that a problem for you?”

“Since we have a reservation in an hour. So we’re on the clock Adrikins!”

“Let me just grab some things and we’ll go okay.”

Reluctantly she let go of his hand. “Alright. Just make it quick.”

“Thank you.”

He quickly got his coat and some paperwork, bid his team a swift goodbye before being pulled out of the building by his childhood friend.

The ride to his apartment was pretty quiet as the mayor’s daughter decided to focus more on her phone screen than to actually try and engage in a conversation with him.

Adrien didn’t mind.

It was a welcome break from everything.

Even if it would only last a few minutes.

Just a few minutes of nothing.

Just the car ride and the silence letting his body and mind rest and feel warm.

He was almost drifting off to sleep when the woman next to him nudged his arm. “We’re here.”

Looking out of the window, he could see the large building looming over them.

“You’re going to love the place. I’ve tried my best to take all your preferences and make it into something you’d like.”

“Sound like it should either be promising or a complete disaster.”

“If it’s a disaster it should suit you just fine as well.” She joked.

“Because I am one?”

“Your words, not mine.”
Adrien let himself out of the car and followed her up to the penthouse apartment. During the elevator ride, she told him about some minor mishaps that she managed to solve during for him.

Things about not having the right shade of paint to cover the plasterwork with at first. A miscalculation when it came to ordering tiles for the bathroom.

Nothing too serious thankfully.

“Well.” Chloé opened the door for him and handed him the key back. “I hope you like it.”

When he stepped inside, he no longer stood on barren concrete.

A nice, light, wooden floor was placed in the open space that housed the living room, the dining area and the kitchen area.

The sofa he had picked the week prior stood right in front of a large television. The one from his childhood home, he recognized.

There was some color on the walls.

Some basic lights here and there.

Overall, it was nice.

It wasn’t awful, it was in the direction he wanted the place to look.

But it was far from feeling like home.

That it still smelled of paint and new carpet didn’t help much either.

“Well?”

“It’s amazing. Thank you Chloé!”

“Isn’t it? I mean...I’m sure you can improve it here and there, but I think I did a good job getting the basics ready for you.”

“Absolutely!” He gave her a short, but firm hug. “Thank you.”

“It was a fun project and you’re welcome.” She pulled away from his embrace. “Oh. And before I forget. I left a little present for you in your nightstand too.”

“A present?”

A almost devious smirk appeared on her lips. “I have a feeling you might need it.”

“Chloé. What is it?”

“Go and look for it. You haven’t seen the bedrooms anyway.”

“Am I going to regret looking for it?”
“Goodness no! It’s nothing special really. It’s perfect for a bachelor pad. But...just in case you do get angry with me, I need to ask you for a favor too. A tiny one.”

“Well...since you’ve done such a nice job on the place and I’m not sure how much I’ll be paying you...shoot. What’s the favor.”

“Paying? Oh no you don’t have to pay me.” She chuckled. “What I need you to do is help me convince Marinette to make a huge cake for the gala.”

Adrien couldn’t help but smirk at the request. “Really now?”

“Don’t look so smug.” Chloé scoffed. “The ice sculpture guy totally ripped me off and isn’t going to finish the sculpture on time for the gala and ran away with my down payment. I’ll pay her of course, but seeing our history...it might be better if you convinced her instead?”

“I will.”

“Really?”

“But you’ll have to ask her to do it. I’ll back you up of course and try to reason with her that she should do it in the first place. But you need to ask her.”

“Do I have to?” She groaned. “She wasn’t very talkative during the dinner last week either. I’m not sure she’s forgiven me and she totally shouldn’t because I was such a bitch back then.”

“Glad you’re aware of that.”

“I’m not looking to be friends with her. I’ll take being on neutral terms.”

“The more reason you should ask her personally. Besides, we need to know how you want the cake to look like and how big it needs to be. Can’t do that without you.”

The grimace on her face told him that she probably wasn’t to keen on doing that. “Fine. I’ll drop by tomorrow and ask her personally.”

“Awesome. I’ll mentally prepare her beforehand.”

“You know. I was actually thinking the present I left you would have been in bad taste, but I don’t think that anymore. Because you’re just being ridiculous right now.”

“Just pushing you in the right direction Chloé.”

“Absolutely ridiculous.”

He wasn’t sure how late it when he got to his apartment after dinner with Chloé, or when he started on the paperwork he brought home, but it had to be very late when Plagg just chose to plant his tiny body right on top of the papers.
“Plagg.” He sighed.

“Adrien.”

“What are you doing?”

“Being a cat.”

“Well...besides that.”

“Forcing you to go to bed because you can’t work when I’m blocking your view of whatever it is that’s written on there.”

The man groaned. “I can’t. I have work to do.”

“You work too much. You need to get some rest and relax for a change.”

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead.” He tried to joke.

Plagg frowned as his response. “With the rate you’re going, that won’t be long I’ll bet.”

“Fine. What should I do then.”

“Sleep. Wake up tomorrow to finish this. Or don’t...postpone it if you can.”

“But my father…”

“Your father can jump from a cliff for all I care. You need sleep. Don’t neglect yourself because of others kid.”

“Okay. Fine...I guess. I’ll go to bed.”

“Good.”

He waited until the Kwami was going to make a move, but it seemed like he wasn’t even planning to.

“You’re...You’re not going to come to bed?”

“I will. Once you’re actually out of this room. I know you. Once I get off this piece of paper, you’ll just start working again.”

“No I won’t.”

“Yes you will.” The cat argued with a smirk on his face. “You’re turning into a workaholic. Just like your old man.”

That was enough to make him stand up and leave the room.

“I refuse to be like him.” Adrien muttered under his breath.

“Then get some rest. Care about yourself too. Don’t make me call Spots to force you to sleep. You
know she’ll come bursting through that window when I do.”

“Don’t bother Marinette.” He took off his shirt and closed the bedroom door. “She needs her rest more than I do.”

“Nah. You both need it. You’re just too stubborn to see it.” Plagg remarked as he floated in sight. “But hey. Now that you’re here. Shut up and get some sleep.”

“Might be difficult. It’s a new place and all.”

“Stop making excuses.”

He sighed deeply. “Okay. Okay. I’ll try.”

“You don’t need to try sleeping. It’s easy!”

“Because you do that most of the day.” He snorted.

“Yeah! Hey. Didn’t your friend say she left you something in your nightstand? Maybe it’s cheese! I could go for some.”

“Doubt it.” Adrien muttered as he opened up the drawer of the small nightstand.

Aside from a wrapped object, nothing else was inside of the drawer.

The colorful present was enough to spike his curiosity though and he took it out to inspect all sides of it.

“Well. Are you going to open it or what?”

“I’m not sure. She wrote ‘you’re welcome’ on it. Knowing this is from Chlo…it almost seems…like it’s a bad idea to open this.”

“Or! Or she figured it might be something you’d use. Sometimes it isn’t that deep kid.”

Deciding to tempt fate, he carefully peeled off the wrapping paper to reveal a pocket sized, purple colored book.

“That’s eh…wow.”

“Yep. Absolutely something she thought you could use. Shame it isn’t cheese.”

“A ten step guide to asking someone out on a date.” He sighed. “What was she thinking?”

“That if you ever get the nerve to ask Ladybug out, that you can at least be prepared!” The cat laughed.

He let himself drop on the bed and groaned loudly. “She doesn’t like me that way.”

“You must be more exhausted than you look then.” Plagg chuckled. “Relax Adrien. I’m sure it’s just a joke. No need to feel embarrassed because even that blonde girl thinks you should hurry up and ask Spots on a date.”
“Easy for you to say.”

“True. That’s why I love teasing you about it.”

“Good night Plagg.” He made himself comfortable and turned away from his Kwami.

“You aren’t really embarrassed are you?”

“I said good night Plagg!”

The moment Chloé stepped into the bakery the following day, he shot her the meanest look he could muster.

“Going by that look on your face, I assume you found my gift.”

“I did.”

“You don’t like it? I hope you know I didn’t mean any harm with it. It was just a gag gift. Google it. You’ll know what it means then.”

“I don’t need it.”

“Doubtful.” She snorted. “But I’m not here to discuss that on my Saturday afternoon. Dupain-Cheng! Where are you?”

It didn’t take long before Marinette walked out of the kitchen.

“Chloé?”

“You seem surprised. Adrien? Why is she surprised to see me?”

“Yes Adrien. Why am I surprised to see her?” Marinette asked him with a honey sweet tone. “Was I supposed to know she was coming over?”

“No. No Marinette you weren’t. Because, as you know, I just got here ten minutes ago, so I haven’t had the chance to tell you she was.”

The woman shrugged. “Fair enough. What can I get you Chloé? Something sweet maybe?”

“Help. I need your help.”

“Help with...what exactly?”

“A table piece for the charity gala.” Adrien quickly explained.

“A big one? Like...six tiers? Maybe seven?” The blonde woman carefully added.

“That’s a lot of work.”
“You still have two and a half weeks. That should be enough time right?”

“I...I don’t know.” His partner muttered.

“Mari. Mari think about it. A huge event. For a charity the bakery is involved with too. The name of this place displayed right in front of the cake. It can really benefit in helping our sales grow.”

“But...the tutorials...they are helping too. We actually had a bit of a rush yesterday,”

“I know Bug. It’s great but...it would be even greater if Paris’ elite would know how amazing this place is too.” He argued.

“I’ll pay you double what it usually costs!” Chloé quickly threw up. “No. Triple!”

“I don’t know. Doing you a favor…”

“I know. I know. I wasn’t...I am not the greatest person alive and I know I haven’t been exactly nice to you either. But I am trying to do better and I’m not asking for a second chance, all I’m asking is that you do business with me and bake make something amazing for the gala.” She pressed her hands together and brought them up to her forehead. “Please Marinette.” Adrien and Marinette exchanged a look with each other.

She frowned while he gave her a gentle smile.

“You know she’s practically begging here.”

“I am!”

The dark haired woman let out a deep sigh. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

“Really?” Chloé gasped.

“Really.”

The mayor’s daughter let out a happy shriek and rushed over to give her a unexpected hug.

“Thank you! Thank you Marinette! You have no idea how much you’re helping me out with this!”

“C-Could you please let me go?”

“Oh. Oh of course. I’m sorry. I have no idea what came over me.” She let go and straightened the fabric of her coat.

“It’s...it’s fine. Let’s just go in the back and discuss what you want for the cake exactly.”

“Okay! Yes! Of course.”

“Did you have anything in mind yet?” Adrien asked her as he followed the two towards the bakery kitchen.

“Something themed after the charity. Like with the logo colors maybe? But not over the top.”
“So...maybe a white outer layer with blue, red and green details?”

Chloé nodded. “Sounds good. Oh, but...I want to have the logo somewhere on there as well. So it really catches everyone's eye and makes it obvious we're doing this for 'homes for hearts'.”

Marinette sat down at the large table and gave a nod. “I can work that in. Adrien? Could you get me a piece of paper and a pen or something.”

“Absolutely.” He left the kitchen and came back a few moments later to Chloé and Marinette chatting away peacefully.

He carefully handed his partner the items she requested. “Here you go Princess.”

“Okay so.” She clicked the pen he had handed to her and started to sketch out the rough lines of the cake. “Seven tiers. That means supports here and here.” She drew some lines between the layers she had sketched out. “I can cover them up with some nice sugar work.”

“Sounds good.” Chloé muttered. “I’m going to go for lillies as the main flower theme for the gala. In case it’s something you can use.”

“I can. Now how about flavors? Any kind you want specifically.”

“Chocolate and vanilla. Like I said it doesn’t have to be super fancy with all kinds of cake flavors or anything. That’s just too much.”

“I agree.” Marinette nodded.

“Maybe...and this is just a suggestion.” Adrien interrupted. “You can do chocolate and vanilla in one layer.”

“Like a marble cake?” She asked with a frown.

“Yeah.”

“Uh...no way. I’d want people to be able to pick one or the other. Like one layer chocolate and the other vanilla.”

“We could mix it up?” He shrugged.

“One tier chocolate, the other vanilla, then marble and maybe even one that has the top vanilla and the bottom chocolate?”

“Exactly Marinette! I mean...the outer layer is going to be covered in buttercream anyway. There is no way to tell which layer is which without cutting it first. If you’re going for both, why not make it a party and mix it up?”

“Hmmm.” The blonde woman frowned. “I like that. Let’s do that. As long as it looks as pretty as the one in the window.”

“You think my work looks pretty?”
“Too pretty to even eat.”

“Not that you can since it’s only for display.” Adrien chuckled. “But I agree, your detailing on it is amazing Marinette.”

A hint of pink started to appear on her cheeks.

“Think you can do that?”

“Yeah. Yeah I guess I could. I mean...we’d have to start working on it a full day in advance I think.”

“We could close the bakery early.” He suggested. “If me and your mom help out we should be able to do it.”

She gave a small nod. “Yeah. I think we could.”

“Awe|sone! Thank you! Now what do I owe you for this?”

“Oh...I don’t know yet. I’d have to calculate how much ingredients we’ll need to use and you have to agree to the final design first and…”

“Okay stop. I get it. let me give you my number and you can contact me when you need me for something okay?”

Again she nodded. “Sure.”

Chloé scribbled down her contact information on the rough sketch Marinette had made and offered her hand to the baker’s daughter.

“Pleasure doing business with you Dupain-Cheng.”

He noticed his partner hesitating for a split second, but she eventually did took hold of the blonde’s hand to give her a firm handshake.

“Likewise mademoiselle Bourgeois.”

“Very well. I’ll get out of your hair. Keep in touch?”

“Of course.”

“Wonderful! Oh, in case you aren’t Adrikin’s plus one yet, I hereby officially invite you to the gala too.”

“You know he asked me?”

“It’s a given.” She scoffed rolling her eyes. “But just in case you want to arrive alone, you’re officially on the list from here on out.”

“Oh...I eh...I’m not even sure if I’ll go.”

“Think about it.” Chloé leaned forward and pressed two hasty goodbye kisses on the girl’s cheeks, then moved to Adrien to do the same. “I have to run. I’m glad you agreed to make this for me.
You’re really helping me out.”

“It’s..business right?”

“Absolutely Marinette.” She nodded. “I’ll talk to you both later. Toodles!”

Neither of them spoke a word to each other for a good few minutes after the mayor’s daughter had left.

“So...eh...that went surprisingly well. I don’t think I was even needed as a mediator.”

“You were.” His partner assured him. “I probably would have declined that assignment and chewed her out if you weren’t here.”

“Are you sure? I’ve never seen you agree with her as much as you did right now. Heck! I haven’t seen you two get along as well either.”

“It could be because I’m...kinda stunned that she even came to me in the first place. Or that she is actually treating people kindly. Well...kindly compared to how she treated me in the past.”

“People change Mari.”

“Yeah...I guess so.”

“And you don’t have to like her either. Nobody is expecting that of you. But just acting normal to each other, neutral, it’s nice to see.”

She raised a brow. “Is it?”

“Yeah. My bestest friend ever getting along with my childhood friend is a nice thought. Who knows. I might be able to take you two out for lunch at some point without being afraid of a cat fight happening.”

“First of all...what about Nino? I thought he was your bestest friend forever and ever? And second of all, you are the expert in cat fights. Not me or her.” She joked.

“Well. First of all.” He walked over to her, wrapping his arms around her waist. “First of all, Nino is my bestest friend. You are my bestest friend ever. Big difference.”

“Uuhh. Sure it is.”

“Second of all, not the kind of cat fight I was talking about and you know it.”

“I know.” She threw her arms around his neck. “Just trying to tease you.”

In response, he pulled her just a little bit more closer against him.

“I assume you’re good today then?”

Marinette gave a small nod. “Very good. The whole week actually.”

“I’m glad. I told you that you would get better.”
“That you did.”

“But...eh...Mari. Promise me one thing.”

She tilted her head ever so slightly. “And what might that be?”

“That if things are turning bad again, that you go see a doctor okay. I can do only so much to help you and if that doesn’t help—”

His partner let out a joyous laugh. “You sound like maman.”

“Oh. So she talked to you about it already?”

“She did Adrien. She worries for me too you know.”

“I know.”

“And I understand why. Especially since I’m working hard again. Helping you...the bakery...my own projects. But...I’m doing better. I’m doing good. You don’t need to worry about me anymore Adrien.”

Leaning forward, he planted a soft kiss on top of her head. “I don’t mean to worry. I just...I just care about you.”

“I care about you too. I always will. I’m sorry...I’m sorry if that wasn’t that obvious these past few years.”

“Hey. What did I tell you about apologizing for those sorts of things?”

A short moment of silence fell between them as she didn’t reply right away. “It still feels right to.”

“We’ve moved passed that Bug.”

“I know.”

“So?”

“So I shouldn’t apologize for it any more than I’ve already done.”

“Exactly.” He gave her another kiss. This time in the middle of her forehead.

“Can I still give you the gift I made for you? It eh...it was to make up for...our fight and...me going off the radar and now also because you gave me a new phone.”

“Do you like it by the way?”

“I love it. Alya loves it too since she’s way too happy being able to text me again.”

“I share that sentiment.” He laughed.

“As if all the cat memes you send me weren’t enough of a hint of that.” She rolled her eyes. “Now
come with me upstairs. I need to make sure it fits before you can take it home.”

She moved away from his embrace and made her way towards the stairs.

“Fit what?” He asked curiously as he followed her like the loyal partner he was.

“Surprise. Remember?”

“Vaguely.” He admitted. “You...You haven’t been pulling all nighters just to make me something have you?”

“What? Me? No! No, no!” She paused for a moment as she opened the door to the apartment. “No. Just...late nighters. Not all nighters.”

“Marinette.” He groaned.

“There was a time limit okay. I...I figured you might want to wear it to Chloé formal gala thing. I mean...I would be honored if you would wear it to the gala. You don’t have to.”

“Don’t tell me you made a suit for me.”

“Not a whole one. No.”

If his curiosity wasn’t peaked already, it certainly was now. “Two thirds of a suit?”

“More like...two pieces that could be used in a whole three piece ensemble.”

“Now you’ve lost me.”

She pushed the hatch to her room open and climbed through. “I mean you’d have to buy the rest of the suit yourself.”

“Ah. I see.”

“I would have made you the whole thing, but there was just not enough time with everything going on right now and I wasn’t able to work on it every night.”

“Hey. It’s fine Marinette. You didn’t even need to make me anything in the first place.” He assured her as he stepped into her room.

It was still as pink and cozy as the last time he visited. Only this time there was a tad more fabric laying around here and there.

“But I do!” She argued. “You’ve done so much for us...for me. I wanted to repay you somehow.”

“You’re letting me eat all the pastries and giving me all the hugs I could ever wish for.” Adrien chuckled. “So how exactly aren’t you repaying me already?”

“That’s different.” She waved off, making her way over to one of her dressing mannequins.

On its shoulders rested a suit vest.
The front neatly embroidered with graceful grey swirls and the occasional flower she was known to work into most of her designs.

“Could you take off your coat so you can fit it?”

He did what she asked of him. Being careful not to throw the piece of clothing too harshly onto the floor so Plagg wouldn’t wake up.

Once he had buttoned the piece of clothing up, the designer walked around him with a uncertain look on her face.

“Not happy with the design Bug?”

“No. Not the design.”

“I think it’s beautiful by the way. I would be honored to wear this to the gala in a few weeks.”

She gave him a warm smile. “I’m glad you like it.”

“But you’re not happy with the result?”

“No. I am. I’m just...getting this feeling I’m missing something.”

“Really? It doesn’t feel like it. It fits great actually. Very comfortable.”

“Your tie. I forgot the tie.”

“You made me a tie too?”

“I know it’s not much--”

“Marinette. It’s plenty. It’s more than I even expected.”

“You should know me better by now Chaton.” She laughed. Walking away to look for the mentioned tie. “I always give more than you expect.”

He laughed with her. “I should know that by now shouldn’t I.”

“Here.”

She threw a string of fabric his way which he caught with ease.

A soft and smooth piece of fabric.
Not embroidered or light grey of color like his vest was, but still very nicely made.

There was only one downside to it.

“Is it bad that I really wish that this thing was a clip-on?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never put on your own ties before?”

“A few times.” He admitted shyly. “But I never got the hang of it.”
“Here. Let me help you then, you dork.” Marinette giggled.

“Please and thank you.”

Adrien paid little attention how exactly she was tying the piece of fabric around his neck. All he could focus on was how she had went out of her way to make him a gift.

A gift she had, most likely, made by hand.

Because that’s how she was.

That was one of the many things he loved about her.

“There.” Her hand traveled down his chest to smoothen out the fabric in one swift move.

Taking a step back, she continued to look at her creation with a critical eye.

“Not to toot my own horn or anything.” Adrien grinned. “But I look good in this.”

She grinned back. “Not to toot my own horn. But that does make you look handsome.”

“Handsome enough to be your prince charming for the ball my dear Cinderella?”

The grin on her face instantly fell. “Oh...eh...I’m...I’m not sure.”

“I can work out some more if you like your princes a little more beefier?” Adrien asked her in a joking matter.

“I like you just the way you are Chaton. You know that. Never change for anyone.”

“Then why, my dear Princess, are you still unsure if you’d like to go then? Even Chloé personally invited you just now. It’s not like you’re an unwanted guest or something.”

“I know...it’s just...”

“Is it the outfit? Because I’m sure there are some unused prototypes at Gabriel you can borrow.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s not that either.”

“Then what?”

“I’m just not sure I’d fit in at such a high class event you know.”

“Is that all you’re worried about?”

“It’s silly I know.”

“No. No Mari. It’s not silly. Not at all. I still get nervous attending official events. But I assure you, it’s nothing more than having a drink, a hors-d’oeuvre or two, maybe a dance and standing in a corner looking pretty and you’re already pretty so I’m sure you have no trouble with that.”
“As flattering as that compliment is...I’m still not sure I should.”

“Well...there’s still time to think about it. Just...let me know when you’re sure okay?”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I’m not. I...I just…” He started to vaguely gesture with his hands.

How to explain it to her that he just really wanted to take her out on a date. That he wanted to make sure she was going to relax and have a fun night.

“I just hoped we could do something fun together again. Something not work or superhero related. Just us two.”

“Point made Chaton. It’s been a while.”

He nodded. “A long while.”

A short silence fell between the two before she spoke up again.

“Okay. Okay I’ll go with you to the gala.”

“Really? Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I think so.” She once again shot him a smile. “If things become too much, we can always leave right?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Besides...then the dress I’m making might be used for something after all.”

“What dress?”

She pointed at the other dress mannequin which was partially covered by a large discarded towel. Dark, blue fabric, decorated with rhinestones, peeking out from the bottom.

“I used the fabric Nino gave me for it.” In one fluid motion, she removed the towel to show off the rest of her work. “I decided against the sleeves and have a high neckline and an open back. I just need some more rhinestones to get that, night sky look in there that I was going for.”

It was beautiful.

It was simple, yet elegant.

And while his Lady looked amazing in red or pink, he could already imagine her wearing the darker color and looking stunning regardless.

“Woah.” He sighed. “You...You really went all out.”

“You like it?”

“It’s perfect. It’s....It’s you.”
“I hope it suits me just as well as it seems to look.”

“I’m sure it will Cinderella. You’ll probably be the best dressed at the ball.”

Before he went home, he made a quick pit stop at his father’s mansion to pick up the car that was given to him.

Now that he was going back and forth between the office and the bakery more often than not, public transport was just a tad too slow for his taste.

Not that he actually expected to use the car all that much either way.

On his way to his apartment, he couldn’t stop grinning.

She was going to go with him!

He had a date with Marinette!

“You seem stupidly happy.” Plagg groaned as he came out of hiding.

“Why wouldn’t I be!” He let himself drop onto the large couch. “I have a date with Marinette!”

“Eh….no you don’t.”

“Yeah I do.” Adrien argued. “She agreed to go with me to the charity gala.”

“Exactly. She agreed to go with you to the gala.” The small cat grinned. “I might have been half asleep, but I didn’t hear you specify that you two were going out on a date. Just that you two were going out.”

The cogs in his head began turning.

Letting Plagg’s words sink in.

“Shit.”

“Exactly.” The black cat nodded. “I wanna bet my whole stash of cheese that she thinks it’s just you and her, going out, as friends. Like you used to do.”

“Fuck!”

“Which wouldn’t be the case if you actually asked her out. With words. Specific words.”

“Can I still fix this?”

The creature shrugged. “Probably not without maybe scaring her off. As far as she knows you asked her to go with you as friends. She might change her mind if you want it to be a date.”

“You’re no help.” Adrien groaned.
“You know what could help?”

“What?”

“That book your friend left here for you. The one you said you didn’t need.”

“I still don’t need it.”

“Uhuh.”

He really didn’t.

He could ask her out on a date at any time.

That he was skimming through the book before he went to sleep really didn’t mean anything.
“Charity livestream?” Marinette repeated Alya’s suggestion while still chewing on the little chocolates they had made for the tutorial video of that day.

“Yeah girl. Think about it. We’re close to gaining twenty thousand followers on the channel.”

“Twenty--!” Adrien could hear her gasp loudly. “Twenty thousand? We’ve only made like three videos so far!”

“What can I say Mari.” Her partner started with a smirk. “Aside from that Nino and myself are experts in hyping up our social media followers.”

“ Heck yeah man.” Nino held out his fist and he was quick to gently bump it.

“Twenty...thousand.”

“They all like you girl! The videos get all kind of comments like, how well you’re explaining things, how cute you look and that they’ve heard of the bakery too.”

“It has been getting a lot busier lately too. Especially since we’re selling what we’re making on video for a limited time.”

“Good strategy Adrien!” Nino praised.

“It was actually madame Cheng that came up with that.”

“And now it’s me who is coming up with the idea of a livestream.” The reporter proudly stated. “Think about it. You two could to a Q&A and be all adorable baking, while we raise money at the same time.”

“For what cause?” The blonde asked.
“How about we do something for ‘homes for hearts’ too?” The baker’s daughter suggested. “I mean...I know Chloé is throwing her huge gala event for them...but we’ve been involved with the organisation for years, donating our leftovers and stuff...it would be neat to pick them as our first charity.”

“That’s settles that then. Now the only question would be...when should we do it?”

“Okay team. Phones out. Let’s sync our schedules.” Alya ordered.

“I can’t do weekdays.” Adrien already mumbled as he took out his phone. “Way too busy with everything.”

“Me too.” He heard Marinette whisper next to him.

“Same for me.”

“I’m cool during the week.” Nino nodded. “But also for the weekends as long as it’s during the day. I might be dj-ing in a club or two again soon if certain things work out.”

“Babe! That’s awesome!” Alya grinned.

“I hope it’s okay we’d only spend the day together then Al.”

“Of course that’s okay hun.” The reporter leaned over to give her fiancé a peck on his lips. “You do you okay.”

“So that leaves us for the weekends.” Marinette sighed. “Uhm...I can do the day after Chloé’s thing?”

Adrien nodded. “Me too.”

“If we don’t make it too late we should be able to shoot something starting from the afternoon?” Nino glanced at his girlfriend with an unsure look on his face.

She merely nodded in agreement.

“We’ll leave her party around midnight. It starts at seven right?”

“We still need to get our official invites so I’m not exactly sure.” Alya laughed.

It then dawned on Adrien that the two were going to the lavish event as well.

“Oh! Oh she invited you guys too? That’s awesome!”

“She sure did Sunshine! Gave me a press pass and everything so I’m covering the event for the paper.”

“We’re going to spend the night together?” Marinette gasped. “That’s great!”

Well.
So far for it just being the two of them spending time together.

Maybe it was for the best.

Plagg was probably right when he said she probably only agreed because she assumed it was a friend thing.

Going by her reaction just now, Adrien was even more convinced that was the case.

Maybe it was a good thing it wasn’t actually a date-date.

“I don’t know if she wants something from us, but hey. I’m not complaining girl.”

“I think she’s lonely.” Adrien caught himself saying. “I mean...I haven’t heard her talk about her friends or Sabrina or anyone she might hang out with since I came back. So I think she is both trying to be a better person and trying to have some people near to talk to again.”


“I believe it.” Marinette spoke up. “She actually hugged me the other day. I...I think she’s genuinely trying to be nicer and she was actually not that bad to talk to either. She’s still...Chloé I guess...but I’d think I wouldn’t mind hanging out with her like we did during your welcome back dinner Nino.”

“Well. If you’re willing to give her a second chance Mari, then so am I. Want to invite her to our next girls night out?”

“Sure. Let’s see how that goes.”

“Promise me you won’t stay sober this time girl.”

The woman rolled her eyes and gave her best friend a smile. “But Al! Someone has to make sure you aren’t embarrassing yourself.”

“You can’t stop me after three shots even if you wanted to Dupain-Cheng.” Alya laughed. “You know that.”

“I can try. It’s my duty as best friend.”

“You never stop me from embarrassing myself.” Adrien joked.

“Because you don’t have to be drunk to do that Kitty.” She gave him a few pats on the shoulder. “I can’t help a lost cause. I’m sorry.”

The laughter of the group of friends echoed loudly through the kitchen.

It was a nice sound.

A sound that made him feel right at home.
He couldn’t help but smirk a little as he watched Chloé observe them with a anxious look on her face. He hardly ever saw her like that and honestly, it was kind of hilarious to see her semi-freak out.

On the other hand, he knew she looked like that because she was tense. This was her chance to proof to her father that she was capable to manage the hotel on her own.

“Maybe that one should go over there?” She carefully suggested as Marinette pricked a red, fondant lillie in the white outer layer of the cake.

“It’s fine where it is Chloé.” Marinette told her for the tenth time since they had started setting the dessert up. “Just like the one before that and the one before that.”

“Utterly ridiculous! This needs to be perfect Dupain-Cheng! How many times have I told you that?”

“Including just now? About twenty times.”

“It will be perfect.” Adrien assured his childhood friend. “It will be like Marinette designed it to be. We worked two days to make it as perfect as we can get. Just trust us, let us do our job and you’ll see things will work out.”

“No it’s not—”

“Chloé. No offence.” The dark haired woman sighed. “You didn’t help much screaming at me when I put the top tier on and you’re not helping much micro-managing our decorating plan. Please. I know you need things to be perfect, but like Adrien said. Trust us. I won’t ruin your eye catcher or the two days Adrien, my mom and myself have spend working on this.”

He nodded in agreement. “Why don’t you take a break Chlo? We should be done in ten minutes or so and you probably have a lot to still set up here right?”

Adrien nodded to the lavish ballroom they were in. Several people were walking around and about to prepare everything for later that night.

“I...suppose so.” The blonde huffed. “But if you wanted me gone, you could have just told me.”

“We don’t want you gone.” Marinette ensured her. “We want you to give us a little room to do our work. You’ve seen the sketch, you loved it. I can ensure you that the cake will look just as perfect. I didn’t ended up piping on details until two in the morning yesterday to not have this thing be perfect.”

“Okay. Okay I guess. How about I get you guys coffee then or something.”

Adrien’s face lit up. “I’d love some! Thanks Chlo.”

His partner gave a small nod. “That’s very nice of you. I’d love a cup.”

“I’ll be back in ten then.”

He could tell by her hasty footsteps, that she was still very much on edge.

Honestly, Adrien could relate to that as he was feeling the same the closer they came to that
important deadline.
Worst of all, there was really nothing he could do to get rid of that feeling, besides pestering
Marinette for an hour of cuddling as Chat Noir in the middle of the night.

“You okay?” Marinette suddenly asked him.

“Yeah. Why do you ask?”

“You have that look.”

Adrien frowned lightly. “What look?”

“The ‘I’ve got something on my mind and I’m not telling Marinette’ look.”

“Oh. That look.”

“What’s up Kitty? Something bothering you? Is it that man?”

“You could just refer to him as my father you know.” He chuckled.

“He’d have to earn that and so far he hasn’t and I doubt he ever will. So no. I’ll never stop calling
him ‘that man’.” His partner stuck out her tongue playfully. “So what’s on your mind?”

“I’m just...worried I’ll run into father tonight and we’ll end up yelling again. Like we always do.”

“You could try asking him to stay home again? It’s not like he’s going to be more than a big fat bore
at this thing anyway.”

“He usually goes to these things to talk up to some people and gain some new clients.” Adrien
sighed. “If we’re lucky, he’ll leave us alone. If we’re not lucky he’ll spot us and...well...let’s just say
you’ll have a front row seat to a shouting match between us.”

“I’ll bring Tikki with me then for some extra luck.” Marinette suggested with a laugh. “But don’t
worry Chaton. I’m sure he knows better than to cause a scene in the middle of a lavish event and
even if he does, we can just walk away.”

“We can’t. I promised Chlo that I would support her by being there.”

“And you will. We will. But not for the whole night right?”

“No! No of course not. We have to get up early for the charity stream anyway.”

“Exactly.” She nodded. “So. Think we’ll be able to avoid him for an hour or two?”

“I hope so.” He pricked the last of his flowers into the cake. “I’m done on my side.”

“So am I.”

Marinette took a few steps back to look at their work.

Seven layers, like Chloé wanted.
The logo of ‘homes for hearts’, cut and put together out of isomalt and shimmering in the light of the ballroom.

Red, blue and green colored flowers flowing down the tiers, giving it an elegant look. Every layer covered by a white fondant, dusted by hand with a shimmering, edible, powder to give it just that bit of extra glamor. The white layers of fondant, detailed in a way that it almost seemed that the lilies were placed on modern pillows.

Simple, yet elegant.

Just like his mother used to be and just like Chloé intended the party to be.

“Shit.” Adrien suddenly heard the blonde mutter as she approached them with two cups of coffee.

He took a few steps back from the dessert table as well and took his place next to Marinette.

“Something wrong?”

“Ugh. No. It’s just--” She pushed the steaming cups into both of their hands and folded her arms. Critically eyeing their work up and down for a few moments before continuing. “Shit. It’s...it’s perfect Dupain-Cheng.”

Marinette sounded both relieved and surprised. “Really? You like it?”

“Well...duh. I approved the design and I liked it then too. But...wow. Seeing it for real...it’s just ridiculously pretty.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Almost too pretty. What if nobody eats from it!”

“They will.” Adrien assured her. “Sure it looks pretty, but at the end of the day it’s still cake and almost everyone likes cake.”

“Besides. You wanted an eye catcher in the first place right? Even if nobody eats from it, you’d still have yourselves an eyecatcher.” Marinette reasoned.

“Yeah. That’s true. So...eh...what do I owe you.”

“Oh!” With one hand she held the warm cup, while the other slipped into the pocket of her apron to pull out a piece of paper. “Here you go and you don’t have to triple it like you said.”

“Ridiculous.” The other women scoffed. “I’m nothing, if not a woman of my words Marinette Dupain-Cheng. If I say I’ll do something, I’ll do it. Besides, this cake isn’t even the most expensive I had done for the gala.”

“So I take it your nails cost more than that?” Adrien tried to joke.

“Of course they do Adrikins! But that’s besides the point. Daddy gave me a sizable amount of funds to organize this event and I intend to take full advantage of that. That includes ending up spending less, even when it’s tripled, for this…” She gestured to the cake. “Than if I had paying for the ice
sculpture in full, so we could have ourselves some caviar tonight.”

“I thought you wanted to go for casual glamor or something.”

“Please Adrien. No gala is complete without caviar.”

He shook his head. “I’m personally not fond of the stuff, but I suppose it could be a deal breaker for the elite. Who knows, they might be in a better mood to donate because of it.”

“Now you’re getting it!”

“From. Caviar?” Marinette asked bewildered. “You rich people are weird.”

“I hope you understand that you’re now totally need to try some tonight.” Chloé told her with a smirk on her lips. “It’ll be a whole new experience for you, mark my words. I mean...you are going to come tonight aren’t you?”

She nodded in confirmation. “As support for Adrien. Who will be there to support you.”

“For a few hours.” He added.

“Thank you. Both of you. Having some familiar faces around will surely help me through the night.”

“Although. If your nails really costs more than the cake...I think I might end up being too underdressed.”

“Uhm. Like you are now? Absolutely.” The mayor’s daughter snorted.

“And like you will be tonight? Absolutely not. Your dress is amazing and you will look amazing in it Mari.”

“You’re just saying that because we’re friends and I slipped you an extra eclair yesterday.”

“All of those things are true, but you’ll still look amazing in that dress.”

“You haven’t even seen me wear it!”

“Puh-lease.” The other blonde scoffed again. “You can make last years fashion still look good. I mean...I have no doubt you’ll look fine enough.”

“Thank you Chloé. That’s nice of you to say.”

“I’m trying to be. It’s damn hard but I’m trying.”

“I know.” Marinette nodded. “I appreciate it.”

“Right. Now. Go. Drink your coffee and then scram. I’ve got a lot of stuff to do before tonight’s opening.”

Adrien raised his cup and gave his childhood friend a nod. “Noted. We’ll be out of your hair in a couple of minutes.”
“Please and thank you.” She sang, before pulling out her phone and leaving the room once more.

“You know.” Marinette began. “I’m proud of us.”

“Yeah. Me too. I didn’t think we would be able to even make such a beast of a cake!”

“No. I wasn’t talking about that.” She laughed. “I meant that I’m proud of all of us. Of Chloé doing her best to act kind for a change. Proud of Alya and Nino for taking the time and effort to make their relationship work again and I’m also proud of you Adrien. Proud because no matter how you see it...you reached out to help. You didn’t have to. But you did.”

“Of course I did.”

“No. It’s not something anyone would do. Be honest. How many people would go out of their way to rekindle after so many years apart and spend their money in helping them out, hardly asking for anything back in return.”

“It doesn’t matter how many people would. I chose to do that.”

“And I don’t think I can ever thank you enough for that Chaton.”

“That’s good. Because you don’t need to thank me at all Bugaboo.”

She gave him a warm smile as he took a sip from his coffee.

Something within him started to stir once again and it wasn’t until he had gotten to his office that he realized her smile had put butterflies in his stomach once again.

Butterflies he hadn’t felt since he met her for the first time.

“Can we do ourselves a favor and not speak to each other tonight.” He typed on his phone. “The last thing I want is for us go into another argument.”

Patiently, Adrien waited for a reply from his father.

Surprisingly it didn’t take too long before he got one.

“Finally something we can agree on.”

He let out a sigh of relief.

Feeling most of his worries for the night wash away as he exhaled.

“More tea dear?” Sabine asked him with a kind smile only a mother could give.

“Oh...eh...sure. I could go for another cup.” Carefully he shoved his cup her way as she refilled it.

“Are you nervous for tonight?” She suddenly asked.
“No. Why? Do I look nervous?”

“A little.”

“Oh.”

“If it helps any, Marinette has been freaking out while getting ready for the past two hours. So I think she’s just as nervous as you are.”

“Why would she be nervous?” Adrien asked while raising a brow. “I mean...I guess I get it. She did say it was her first gala event.”

“That’s probably it then.” The mother nodded. “Would you do me a favor and keep an eye on her tonight Adrien? She’s had a bit of a rough start this morning after working on that cake for twenty hours in a row.”

“Of course madame Cheng. Should I bring her home at a certain time?”

Sabine laughed. “Oh, goodness no! She’s old enough to decide when she’ll come home. But I would appreciate it if you, or her, would let me know if she decides to spend the night somewhere else.”

“Somewhere...else?”

“Well...yes. I have no idea how long you want to stay at this party and isn’t your apartment closer to it than the bakery?”

“Oh. Don’t worry madame Cheng, I won’t mind bringing her back home no matter how late we decide to leave and I’ll have her back at a reasonable time too. We do have that livestream to do tomorrow.”

The older woman gave a small nod.

“But if she decides to sleep over at my place, or anywhere else, I’ll have her give you a call or something.”

“I would very much appreciate that.”

He placed his lips on the rim of his cup, ready to take a sip, when the sound of footsteps making their way down the stairway to the bakery’s kitchen made him look up instead.

It wasn’t long until Marinette came into view and he had to put the cup down as his grasp on it seemed to slowly slip.

The black, transitioning into a dark blue, fabric of her dress swirling around her legs as she made her way to them.
Teasing him with a flash of bare legs, peeking out from a split on the sides every now and then.

A light, pink hue and a small smile on her lips.

The gemstones she had painstakingly sew on the bottom by hand, glistened in the light.

“Okay. I’m ready.” Marinette announced with a smile.
“Oh sweetheart! You look beautiful!”

She gave her mother a wide smile and turned around in place. Successfully showing off her whole outfit to them.

Adrien noticed the low cut back she had talked about. Her skin uncovered from her neck right down to her hipline and for some reason he couldn’t get that image out of his head once he had seen it.

The back of the dress was seemed to be ever so slightly longer than the front. Making it drag on the floor a little bit. Adding a whole new touch of elegance to the design he hadn’t noticed when it was on the mannequin a few weeks ago.

Together with the smile on her lips, she seemed to just be glowing. A glow he hadn’t seen on her in a long time.

“What do you think?” She asked him.

“I...I eh....I have no words.” Adrien laughed nervously. “It...you...just wow. You look...wow…”

She let out a giggle at his response. “I’ll take that as a huge compliment monsieur Agreste. You’re looking quite dashing yourself tonight.”

Marinette walked over to him and before he even realised it, her hands were fumbling with his tie. “Although, you haven’t perfected this whole tying a tie thing have you.”

“I tried.”

“I can tell.”

“And I thank you for fixing it.”

She leaned forward and pressed a short kiss against his cheek. “Anytime Chaton.”

“Marinette.”

“Yes maman?”

“I already asked Adrien this in case you’ll forget, but if you decide to stay the night somewhere, please let me know.”

“Okay maman.”

“And if you’re in trouble or anything. Let me know too.”

“Don’t worry madame Cheng.” Adrien assured her. “I’ll keep her safe.”

“He always does.” The dark haired girl confirmed before letting go of his tie. “There.”

“Thank you Mari.” He pushed himself up from the small stool he had been sitting on and
straightened his jacket. “Ready to go?”

“Almost. Let me grab my purse and coat and we can go.”

“Have fun you two.”

“Thank you!”

“We will maman!”

As Marinette walked out in front of him, Adrien couldn’t help but admire how different she looked compared to the first time he had seen her again.

No longer did she look frail and small. Her head was held up high, her steps confident and she was, once again, leading him instead of the other way around. The smile on her lips seemed genuine, as well as her excitement for the night ahead.

If he didn’t know any better, he could have sworn she had passed the state of mourning.

But he knew better.

He had been there before.

Just because she didn’t allow herself to be consumed by sadness and grief, that didn’t mean she had fully accepted her father was gone.

That she was pushing a lot of work onto herself, didn’t mean that she wasn’t doing that to just keep herself distracted either. She was enjoying parts of it as far as he could tell. Getting some of that enthusiasm for the things she loved doing back.

“All right?”

“Hmmm?”

“You’re staring.”

“Well. Can you blame me? You’re gorgeous.”

Marinette let out a soft giggle as a faint pink dusted her cheeks.

“Says the literal model.”

“Former model.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that you’re pretty Adrien.”

He gently placed a hand on her hip before pecking a soft kiss on her cheek. “That's all the appreciation I’ll ever need Bugaboo.”

“You do know I appreciate you for much more than just your pretty face. Right?”
“I know and I appreciate you for much more than your mere beauty my dear Cinderella.”

“Well aware Prince Charming.” She laughed as she stepped outside into the cold evening air.

Her heels clicked loudly on the pavement as she started to make her way down the sidewalk. His hand still on her hip as he easily kept up next to her.

“I wonder if Alya and Nino are already there?”

“Probably.” Adrien guessed as he came to a halt in front of his car. “We are fashionably late after all.”

Unfortunately, she didn’t seem to notice and continued walking until he called her back.

“Marinette!”

“Hmmm...Wha--” She stopped, turned around and frowned at him. “What are you doing?”

“Me?” He laughed. “What were you doing?”

“The subway is over there.” She pointed down the street.

Adrien shook his head and opened the passenger door of the black vehicle. “Are you really planning on taking the subway?”

“I mean...we could?” She shrugged before making her way back to him.

“We could.” He agreed. “But I can assure you this is more comfortable.”

He watched as she doubted for a few moments, before finally taking a seat in the passenger's side of the car.

“Adrikins! You made it!”

Initially he and Marinette had grabbed a drink and opted to find a quiet corner to hang out in while they waited for Alya and Nino to find them amongst the crowd of people.

Instead, it was Chloé who had found them first.

The blonde walked over to them, her hair put up in a bun and a warm smile on her face. Her black and gold party dress was simple, yet elegant.

Nothing too flashy like Adrien was used to see her wear at these types of formal events.

The diamond bracelet and necklace he had bought for her only completed the look.

He had to be honest, it was very reminiscent of how his mother used to dress.
His childhood friend was quick to wrap him in a short embrace before properly greeting each other with three kisses on his cheek.

“And you made it too Marinette! I’m glad.”

Before his partner could even object, Chloé had started to greet her in the same way she had greeted him.

“Have you two been here for long?”

“Eh...no. Maybe for twenty minutes so far.” Marinette muttered. “We’re waiting for Alya and Nino to find us and then we’ll go find a table and get something to eat.”

“I don’t suppose you’ve seen them yet have you Chlo?”

The blonde shook her head. “I’ve seen your father though.”

“Great.” He sighed, a frown appearing on his face.

“I know that face. I won’t tell him you’re here Adrien. Although I can’t guarantee he won’t spot you.”

“Thanks anywa--”

As if they had summoned the devil himself, his father’s face suddenly popped up between the crowd of people.

A face who was making his way towards him.

Immediately he felt on edge and the grip on his glass of champagne tightened.

“Something wrong Adrikins?”

“Father’s seen me and he’s coming our way.” He grumbled before taking a large gulp of his drink.

Internally cursing himself for not being able to down more than one alcoholic beverage, since he had to drive Marinette back home safely.

If he was going to survive a public conversation with his father, he would probably need more than just one glass.

To make matters worse, he could clearly see the Peacock Miraculous shimmer on his father’s black jacket.

Something warm brushed against his free hand, only to feel Marinette’s fingers gently intertwine with his own and giving his hand a soft squeeze.

“Uncle Gabriel! Are you enjoying the party?” Chloé asked him, her voice just a tad too joyful.

Gabriel merely gave her a small nod and focused his gaze back on his son.

His eyes didn’t seem the only ones fixated on Adrien.
A tall, tan, auburn haired woman appeared from behind the older Agreste. She was wearing a glittery, black cocktail dress which only enhanced the slightly sly smile on her red lips.

Adrien couldn’t help shake the feeling that he had seen her somewhere before.

“Adrien.”

“Father.”

“I would like to introduce you to someone.” His father motioned for the woman behind him to step forward. “This is mademoiselle Rossi.”

That name sounded familiar.

“She’s a model and was looking for work. So I decided she will be modelling part of the new consumer collection in a few weeks. Including the main piece of the show.”

He felt Marinette squeeze his hand a little tighter.

“I can’t wait to be working with you Adrien.” The familiar woman’s smile widened and she stepped in front of Chloé to put a hand on his shoulder.

On instinct, he leaned back just a little, hoping it would make it clear to her that he wasn’t comfortable in the slightest.

Unfortunately he wasn’t that lucky as she took another step forward to him. Ignoring the loud ‘ahum’ his childhood friend let out.

“It’s going to be amazing modelling with a professional again. The last time I modelled was in Italy and, don’t get me wrong, Dolliér makes divine dresses but all of their models are newbies. It was so frustrating.” The woman continued.

“Well…although I’m sure you mean well father…” Adrien carefully started, trying to ignore the clingy girl and Marinette’s firm grip at the same time. “We’ve got enough models for he show.”

“With the amount I asked for? I sincerely doubt that.”

“They can handle showcasing a few extra pieces.”

“I. Sincerely. Doubt that.” Gabriel spoke again, his words coming out just a bit more menacing that before. “In fact. I am pretty sure you will be one short soon.”

His green eyes widened at the implication. Was he really going to pull the same crap on one of their models as he had done with Paul?

“I’d rather have one extra.” Adrien quickly replied.

The older man smiled briefly. Seemingly satisfied with the answer he got.

“Excellent. I see you’ve also managed to dress appropriately for tonight. Although I can’t remember
when I designed that.”

“You didn’t. It’s a Dupain-Cheng original mixed with a Montreal designer suit.”

The blonde man took a step in the direction of his partner, which prompted mademoiselle Rossi to finally take a step back.

Bringing Marinette’s hand up, he softly kissed her knuckles and tried to give her a reassuring smile.

Although he wasn’t sure if he felt like the conversation would end on good terms himself. But so far he wasn’t too tempted to scream at his father.

“I see.” Gabriel started. “Excellent craftsmanship mademoiselle.”

She gave him the broadest, fakest smile she could give the man and muttered a overly sweet ‘thank you’.

“I don’t suppose you’re looking for work? Gabriel’s could use some talent like yours.”

“I’m not looking for work at the moment. But eh...I’d be willing to design a piece or two for you, in exchanged for that brooch. It’s quite beautiful.”

Any trace of kindness on his father’s face suddenly vanished. “Absolutely not.”

“Oh well. Then I hope you’ll find the talent you’re looking for then.”

“Hopefully I will. Now...Adrien.” He turned his attention back to his son. “I know we agreed to not speaking to each other tonight, but I do have my concerns about the collection.”

“Oh! Uncle Gabriel! Before I forget, daddy told me to tell you once I see you, that he would like to speak with you. I think it had something to do with the auction later this evening?”

He gave Chloé a small nod. “I’d better not let our mayor wait then. Goodnight Adrien. Lila, I look forward to working with you.”

“As do I monsieur Agreste! Thank you so much for the opportunity.”

The older man gave her a short nod. “I will leave you to get reacquainted. Have a nice evening.”

“Reacquainted?” Adrien asked once his father was out of earshot.

“Don’t you remember me Adrien? We went to school together. François Dupont?”

“Can’t say I recall.”

“And I can’t recall inviting you to my gala Lila Rossi.” Chloé remarked. “You have some nerve showing up here uninvited!”

“Oh, but you did invite me. See.”

Lila reached into her purse and pulled out her invitation.
On it the initials L.H Rossi written on a white card in a gold coloured, swirly font type.

“Or maybe it was meant for my mother instead? Not that she could make it anyway, she’s in Achu to oversee an important meeting with prince Ali himself.”

“Of course she is.” The mayor’s daughter growled lightly. “You better behave. This night has to be perfect!”

“Don’t worry. I will. But eh...maybe you should worry about some other unwanted guest huh?”

“What unwanted guest?” Adrien demanded to know.

Lila pointed at Marinette. “I’m pretty sure I saw her sneak in when I was at the front door. You’re not supposed to be here are you? Events like these aren’t for common folk like you and honey...that dress you’re wearing isn’t fooling anyone. You don’t belong here.”

“I personally invited her actually.”

He was quick to add on to Chloé’s statement. “And even if she wasn’t, she would have been here either way as my plus one.”

The iron grip she had on his hand lessened and he could hear Marinette breath out in relief.

“Even if she wasn’t, she would be my plus one. So please take your weak ass lies somewhere else, before I have you removed from the building.”

“Such vulgar language Chloé. But very well. I will behave for tonight.” She turned her attention back at Adrien. “I’ll be looking forward to working with you Adrien. Really looking forward to it.”

Lila shot him a wink before walking away and he felt a shiver going up his spine.

“Thank you. Both of you. For coming to my defence.”

“Listen Marinette. Like it or not, I consider you as one of my friends now and I stick up for my friends. I’ve lost too many not doing that so...yeah. Besides. I despise that woman.”

“I don’t exactly have fond memories of her either.” Marinette admitted.

He glanced over to the baker’s daughter, to see that she once again seemed so frail and small.

“Ugh. I can’t let one bitch ruin this evening. Excuse me but...please enjoy yourselves and I’ll go back to checking up on the guests after I’ve cooled off.”

“See you in a bit?” He asked.

Chloé gave a small nod before walking away with a angry huff.

This time it was Adrien who gave Marinette’s hand a light squeeze. “You okay Bug?”

“Yeah...no...I don’t know.” She sighed.

“That eh...was a nice attempt at getting father’s Miraculous though. Quick thinking too. Too bad he
didn’t fall for it.”

“Yeah too bad. But if anything, it confirms he’s wearing the real thing. Maybe we can get him drunk enough to pass out and steal it?”

“Father is not a lightweight Mari.” He chuckled, slowly leading her to one of the free tables. “What do you think he did when mom disappeared.”

“Oh.”

“We’ll get a chance someday. Don’t worry.”

“I do worry. I mean...Lila Rossi...he’s bringing in Lila and you agreed to it?”

“He would have brought her in anyway. At the expense of someone else. I refuse to let that happen again. So...yeah. I agreed to it. I don’t know what he’s planning or why she’s agreed to it or even going with it...but...we need to be vigilant.”

He let go of her hand and pulled out one of the seats for her to sit on.

“In that case...I need you to be there whenever she comes in for a fitting.”

“But...you’re not supposed to work with her right?”

Marinette frowned. “You heard your father. She’s supposed to model our headliner and three guesses who’s design madame London picked for that.”

“Yours?”

She nodded. “I don’t trust her wearing it. I didn’t trust her when we were at school and I don’t trust her now.” She took her seat at the table.

“Any ideas for a eh...a...preventive operation?”

“Make her only model the headliner. Your father won’t know. And...I’ll make two of that dress. Just to be safe.”

He frowned as he took a seat at the table as well. “Will you even have time to do that?”

“I will if I work on it at home.”

“Marinette.....”

“We’d need to make our patrols a little shorter too then.”

“I’d rather have you not work yourself to death Bug.”

“I don’t have another backup plan right now and time is running out. The fashion show is in three weeks Adrien.”

“I know.”
“Not to mention that there is a Christmas rush coming soon...hopefully. So the bakery will be super busy. I can only work on a backup plan after working hours.”

He let out a heavy sigh as he let her words sink in.

She was right.

He knew she was right.

He also knew that, with Lila being brought in for whatever reason, they had to be careful. The memory might have been vague and partially suppressed, but he did start to remember how manipulative she could be.

No wonder she and his father got along so well.

“Alright. Just...promise me...when this shit is over...you take a break. You and your mother. We’ll close the bakery for a week and you guys can get some rest.”

“What about you?”

“No rest for the wicked right?” He chuckled.

“You’re far from wicked Chaton and you need your rest too.”

“You sound like Plagg.”

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. Plagg might be lazy, but he is wise.”

“I guess but...I can’t rest. Not when he so shamefully parades that brooch around. I feel like he’s taunting us. Telling us that he can use it whenever he wants.”

“Knowing him he probably will.” Marinette muttered in agreement.

“So....what do we do now?”

“Not let him scare us? We’ve handled a lot of things over the years. We can deal with whatever he wants Lila to do for him.”

“It must be important if he was willing to fire one of the models over it.”

“Let’s...let’s try not to think too much about it tonight Chaton. Let’s not have our evening ruined by this.”

Adrien nodded. “Right. So....do you want something to eat or eh...another drink?”

“Some food would be nice.”

“Okay. Keep the table occupied, I’ll be right back.”

He stood up, pressed a quick kiss against her temple and made his way over to the buffet table.

The moment he returned to her, two plates stacked with hor d'oeuvres in his hands, Nino and Alya
seemed to have joined her at the table.

The three of them laughing, talking and joking.

Marinette herself seemed to be a little less worried, or at the very least more distracted. Maybe the night was salvageable after all.

“This is ridiculous.” Chloé muttered as she plopped down at their table with a huff.

A plate with a large piece of the cake Marinette and he had made in her hand.

“Utterly ridiculous.” The blonde repeated. “This is my second slice already. How is this so good?”

“Because Mari made it.” Adrien answered with pride.

“Dupain-Cheng. If we don’t have any left after tonight, I’m going to barge into your bakery and order a whole batch of this.”

His partner couldn’t help but laugh. “I’d be happy to make you more. But eh...we’re hosting a charity livestream tomorrow. So maybe after we’re done with that?”

“You’re free to come join us though.” Alya added. “It’ll be fun and messy.”

Chloé scrunched up her nose. “I’ll pass. I’m not going to risk ruining my clothes. Not even for charity.”

“You’re missing out Chlo. But feel free to drop by if you change your mind.” Adrien offered. “We’re just answering questions and baking cookies and stuff. It’s nothing too special.”

“If I change my mind, I will let you know.” She broke a large piece off her dessert and shoved it in her mouth. “But it’s not likely.”

“So when is this auction starting I hear everyone talking about?” Nino suddenly asked.

“Twenty minutes. Some of our guests have donated some lovely pieces for it and of course all proceedings go to the charity.” The blonde woman nodded.

Adrien took a small piece of cheese from one of the plates on the table and snuck it under his jacket while Alya and Nino kept asking questions about the auction. It wasn’t long until he felt Plagg’s grabby paws pull it out of his grasp.

“So like...jewelry and stuff?”

“Among other things. We’ve got some very nice paintings too. Some antique vases and whatnot.”

“I’ll think I’ll pass then.” Nino stated.

“So will I.” Adrien nodded. “Besides, it’s getting late and we have to be up early again in the
morning. Well...Mari has to.”

Marinette nodded. “The bakery opens at eight so I need to get things ready before that.”

Chloé pouted hearing that news. “It feels like you guys just got here.”

“It’s been three hours Chlo.”

“Really? Already?”

Adrien stood up from his seat and offered a hand to his partner which she gratefully accepted to lift herself from the chair.

“It was fun. Thank you for inviting us Chloé.”

“Thank you for coming. I mean... you guys are still staying right?” She turned towards Alya and Nino.

“Yeah we can hang around for a couple more hours.” The reporter nodded. “I’ve been dying to interview some more people too.”

“Babe. You’ve been doing nothing but that tonight.”

“I know...but...no. No. You’re right. Enough work.”

“You really need to learn to relax Al.” Adrien chuckled as he moved his hand from Marinette’s and placed it on her hip.

“We all do.” His partner added.

“Oh! I know! How about we go for a spa day soon! I could really use one after throwing all of this together.”

“A...spa day?”

Chloé rolled her eyes as if she had just heard the weirdest question in her life. “Yeah. You know. Massages, mani-pedis, mud baths and saunas. It’s a perfect way to unwind. Trust me Marinette.”

“Sounds fun. I’ve never been to a spa before.”

“Awesome! Let’s set up a date soon for our girl’s day out.” Alya practically squealed.

“Girl’s day out? So no room for us guys huh?”


“Don’t knock it until you try it Nino.”

“Eh...hard pass man.”

“Fine. We’ll hang out, drink beer and play video games while the girls get pampered. How’s that then.”

“We really have to go. See you two tomorrow and Chlo. Thanks again for inviting us.”

“Thank you for being here. It helped having someone familiar around.”

“I think it might be raining soon.” Marinette muttered as they stepped into the cold night, stopping in front of the hotel.

He looked up at the night sky. “How can you tell?”

“It’s been cloudy all day.”

“True.”

“And the weather report said something about having rain tonight. Maybe even a bit of snow.”

“So no patrol?”

“Hmmmm. I’m not really in the mood for a patrol even if the weather stayed good.”

“Didn’t enjoy yourself?”

She shook her head, but there was still a smile on her face. “I had fun. It was nice to just get out of the house again and chat with friends. I’m just slightly disappointed we couldn’t dance horribly tonight.”

“It’s not too late.” He grinned.

“What do you-- Hey!”

Without warning her, he lifted her up and spun her around a couple of times, earning a happy laugh from the treasure in his arms.

“Adrien! You dork!”

He chuckled lightly before setting her down on the ground again. “See? We danced.”

“That wasn’t dancing!” Marinette continued to laugh.

“But you’re laughing. You liked it.”

She didn’t reply, but there was something in her eyes. Something that made him feel warm and fuzzy.

Something that made him feel so lucky that he hadn’t lost her when he easily could have.

“Hey eh...do you...maybe want to go to my place and get some coffee? Maybe watch a movie?”
“Yeah. Sure. I haven’t seen the place decorated yet.”

“Great! Maybe you...if you want to...could st---”

“Adrien!”

He turned to the sudden voice calling his name and noticed Lila walking up to them.

“Great.” Marinette practically growled. “I almost forgot about her.”

“I thought she already left?” Adrien admitted.

“Quick! Let’s pretend we haven’t seen--- Oh. Hey. Lila.”

The auburn haired woman merely stuck up her nose at Marinette’s greeting and focused her attention back to him.

“Adrien! I’m glad I caught you before you left. I wanted to tell you that I’m so looking forward to working with you tomorrow! Although, it’s been a while since my last modelling gig. I don’t...suppose you could give me a refresher on what I need to do.” For a second, Adrien could have sworn she was giving his partner a mean glance. “In...private.”

“Well. I’m afraid I can’t be much help.”

“Of course you can! You’re so talented. You could be an excellent modelling coach.”

“What Adrien means.” Marinette suddenly spoke up. “Is that you won’t be working with him.”

“Oh come on. You have no idea how this industry works.”

“She’s right actually.”

The fake smile Lila had on her face dropped in an instance. “What?”

“I’m not sure what father told you, but I manage the regular consumer department. I am not involved, nor do I usually speak to or make contact with, any of the models. You, however. Will be working with Marinette.” He pulled her closer to him. “As she is one of the designers working on the next line.”

“And you know I’m rather clumsy so I apologize in advance if I prick you with a pin. I honestly don’t mean to.”

“Unless you provoke her. In that case she means to and I will absolutely let her.”

The tall woman started to laugh in the fakest manner he had ever heard. “You are so funny!”

“I wasn’t joking. I really have nothing to do with Gabriel’s modeling department.”

“Well. Your father assured me we would be working together.”

“We’ll be working in the same building. Maybe he meant that?” He shrugged. “Anyway. It’s cold
out here and I really want to get home so...see you around I guess?”

He didn’t really wait for a reply as he quickly turned around and escorted Marinette back to his car.

“You handled that smoothly Agreste.” She praised him as he held the door open for her. “Do you mean it by the way?”

“What?”

“That is if she provokes me, I get to prick her with one of my sewing pins?”

“Oh. Absolutely. I mean...it’s not like I could fire you. That would indicate you signed a contract and get paid for your work. And you haven’t. So I can’t fire you and neither can father.”

She gave him the most delightful grin he had ever seen on her. “Got to love volunteer work.”

The ride to his apartment was mostly filled with puns, jokes and her discussing the plans for the livestream they would be doing.

From the theme they would be working with, to the questions they might be getting from their audience.

“I’ve already prepared some cookies we could decorate.” She told him as he turned the key to open the door to his home. “Maybe we could even do a contest of some sort? Have the audience vote?”

“Sounds fun. Let’s discuss it with Alya and Nino. Maybe we can rope one of them in to join us too.”

“Yes! That’s a good idea!”

Adrien opened the door and stepped right into his living room. “Welcome.”

Carefully she stepped onto the wooden floor and looked around the room.

“I know it’s not much.” He stared. “I do really think Chloé did a good job laying down the foundation. But I guess it still…” He turned to look at her and that same warm and loving gaze she had given him before had returned. “Needs time to...eh…”

She took a step closer, biting on her lower lip as she averted his stare.

Maybe he was making her feel uncomfortable?

“To eh…” Adrien continued to stammer. “To get a homey feel to it. Yeah that’s what I was looking-”

Something warm and soft against his lips cut off his words and it took a whole second for his brain to realize that she was kissing him and another two seconds to register that he in fact, wasn’t dreaming.

Much time to enjoy it wasn’t given to him as she quickly pulled away. “I’m sorry!”
“M-Mari…”

“I’m so sorry! I don’t know what came over me! I didn’t meant to! Not without asking you!”

“Hey, Hey. Bug. Calm down. Breathe okay.” Gently he placed his hand against her cheeks and started to stroke her warm skin with his thumb. “Honestly. Out of all the things you’ve apologized for over the months, I can assure you, this is the absolute last thing you should feel sorry for.”

“No. No. I didn’t… Not like this… Not now…”

He leaned forward and gave a small peck against the tip of her nose.

“Marinette. I’ve… wanted to kiss you since forever… you know that right?” She gave a brief nod. “Would you allow me to kiss you back?”

“Yes.” She sighed lovingly. “I want you to.”

He leaned down slowly. Still continuing to caress her skin with his thumb.

His heart was pounding.

His ears ringing.

Her lips slightly quivering when he touched them with his own.

Their touch was soft, sweet and short.

But he didn’t mind.

When they pulled away from each other, he noticed a deep blush on her cheeks. He noticed all the little freckles on her nose and desire in her eyes.

Before he could even lean down to give her another kiss, she had thrown her arms around his neck and proceeded to kiss him fiercely.

The kind of kiss he had often dreamed of giving her.

The kind, where he had always imagined he could hear violins playing and fireworks going off inside of his head like romance novels and cheesy movies always told him about.

Adrien pulled her closer to him the moment she let out a mix between a sigh and a moan. It was then that he noticed the music.

It wasn’t the violins he was expecting nor were their fireworks.

Instead it was, what sounded like, jazz softly playing in the background instead.

He wasn’t sure how long their lips were touching, but when he pulled away from her he noticed two things.

The first being that the music didn’t stop playing and the second being Marinette’s peaceful smile.
“Adrien?”

“Yeah?” He whispered to her.

“Can we...sit down or something?”

“Yeah. Yeah sure. The bedroom?”

She gave a nod and he simply wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her up. Earning a short giggle from the baker’s daughter as he carried her to his room.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he noticed Plagg and Tikki floating in the air, dancing with each other to the soft music that came from his, now powered on stereo.

Something was...off the moment he woke up.

Maybe it was because of the lingering scent of perfume that he could still smell on his pillow.

Maybe it was the ghostly remains of someone’s body heat he could still feel on empty spot next to him.

Or maybe it was because of the sounds coming from the living room that things just felt off.

Like there was something wrong.

Slowly he pushed himself out of the bed and made his way to the living room.

There he found Marinette, with her back turned away from him, looking under the sofa. Fully dressed and only with one shoe in her hand.

He could already guess what she seemed to be looking for.

“Where is it?!” She hissed.

“We’ve looked everywhere.” Tikki sighed. “Maybe you should just go back to bed and ask Adrien to help look in the morning?”

“I can’t stay here Tikki.”

“And I can’t transform you when I’m this tired.”

He leaned against the doorframe and scanned the room in search of the woman’s shoe. Almost immediately he found it, peeking out from under the dining table.

The high heel probably slipped from her foot when he had carried her to the bedroom.

Adrien bent down to pick it up and examine the footwear.
A nice, suede pump that was obviously worn a couple times before the gala took place, going by the slight wear marks.

“You know.” He suddenly spoke, making Marinette jump and gasp in surprise. “A classmate of mine used to tell me that, when a woman sneaks out of your room after a one-night stand, that she regretted the night before.”

Slowly he approached his wide eyed partner and crouched down, shoe still in hand.

“Since making out for a few hours, is absolutely not on par with a one-night stand and since we’re not strangers, you do know you can be honest with me. You do know that right?” Carefully he slipped the shoe on her foot. “If you really want we...we can even pretend this never happened.”

He stood back up, waiting for a reply.
Some clarity.

Anything.

Anything to break the heavy pauze between them.

“Could you...could you take me home?”

“Sure Bug. Let me just...throw on some clothes first.”

Normally it would have taken him only ten minutes to drive from his apartment to Marinette’s house.

Even in the middle of the night, with hardly any traffic on their path, it still felt he had been drowning in a suffocating silence for hours.

The events of the night before running through his mind. 
Desperately trying to find something he did wrong so he could apologize to her.

She seemed upset.

She had to be.

Why would she try to leave in the middle of the night if he didn’t do anything to upset her? He had even fallen asleep while admiring the soft smile on her face the night before. So she didn’t seem unhappy to him.

What did he do wrong?

“We’re here.”

He turned off the engine of his car and leaned back in his seat.

Marinette didn’t move and for a few moments he just let himself be engulfed by his thoughts and raindrops ticking on the roof.
After a good minute she finally broke the silence. “I don’t regret it.”

“Hmmm?”

“Kissing you.” She elaborated. “I don’t regret it.”

“Neither do I.”

“I… I regret kissing you for the reason I thought I was kissing you.”

“What reason would that be?”

“Because I still feel like I owe something to you.”

He groaned softly. “We’ve had this talk before Mari. You don’t owe me anything.”

“I still feel like I do. I mean… how can I not?” A brief smile flashed on her face before she continued. “Without you I would have been homeless by now. You’re there when I need you. You gave me a piece of my dream back and a new phone. How can I not feel like I owe you in some way?”

He didn’t reply and waited patiently for her to continue.

“I... I felt disgusted when I woke up. Because I realized I was kissing you for the wrong reasons. That’s… why I kind of freaked out and needed some room to think.”

“I get that.”

“Strangely enough… I don’t think I need to think about this. Because I wanted to kiss you even before I felt I owed something to you. Before you left for New York. I wanted to kiss you senseless for so long now Adrien and I kept holding back.” Her lip started to quiver and her eyes began to water. “I’ve wanted to tell you too. At the airport. Then the video letter I made for you. But I was afraid you would come back if I told you and that man would do something horrible to you. So I kept my mouth shut.”

“Mari…”

“Then… when you came back… I wanted to tell you. B-But… I couldn’t say it. I couldn’t say how much you mean to me. How much I love you. Because you w-wouldn’t feel the same.”

Surprised by her assumption he unclasped his seatbelt and leaned over to her. “Why would you even think that?”

“Because I’m your partner. Because I’m your friend. Your bestest friend? You’ve made it more than clear that you... that you don’t like me like that.”

“Marinette. I do like you like that. I love you. I’ve always loved you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me then?” The dark haired woman sniffled. “We’ve known each other for years and you never told me? Or asked me on a date.”

“Because I was afraid too.” He quickly explained. “I was afraid I would ruin this great thing we
already had because I knew you didn’t love me back. Ladybug never loved Chat Noir so why should Marinette love Adrien? I respected that and...I did want to tell you when I left for New York. But you told me to wait until I got back.”

“And now you’re back…”

“I’m back and I found you grieving and struggling. It was not the right time to tell you Mari. That wouldn’t be fair to you. But I do love you. I meant it when I said I would give you the moon and the stars if I could. I’ve always loved you and I’m pretty sure I always will.”

“Adrien…”

“And our kiss. I really don’t regret out kiss. I haven’t regretted a single kiss I’ve given you over the years because they all came from a place of love.”

“We’re...we’re so stupid. We could have been together ages ago.” She let out a mix between a sob and a laugh as her tears finally rolled down her cheeks.

Only this time, he was certain it wasn’t out of sadness.

“Yeah. We’re stupid. I should have told you sooner.”

“I shouldn’t have told you to wait telling me until you got back.”

“You had a good reason.”

“So did you. I-I would have been scared ruining our friendship too if I wasn’t so sure you only ever saw me like your best friend.”

“I should have been more clearer.”

“I should have seen it sooner. You’ve been...lowkey flirting with me since we met. I just thought it was ‘our thing’?”

“It is our thing.” He laughed holding up her hands to kiss her fingers. “But I meant every cheesy flirt I ever threw your way.”

She smiled brightly through her tears and gave his hands a tight squeeze. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“I love you so much.”

She leaned forward as much as she could and kissed him.

It felt different than the night before.
Softer.
Warmer.
More precious.

“I love you.” He muttered against her lips.
“I love you.”

“I love you.”

“Uhm...excuse me?” Tikki’s voice suddenly spoke up. “Marinette. Maybe you should go inside? Get another hour of sleep before getting ready for the day?”

“Ah...yes...maybe I should do that.”

“You should.” He agreed with a nod. “It’s been a long day.”

“It’s been a good day.”

“Couldn’t agree more. Let me get the door for you.”

Adrien quickly left the car and first opened his trunk to pull out the umbrella which had been passed back and forth between himself and Marinette since he came back. Only then did he open the passenger seat and open the umbrella so she wouldn’t get soaked on the short walk to the front door.

“Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

“So eh...do you...maybe want to cuddle with me for the next hour? Or help me set things up for the day? I’m...not really sleepy anymore to be honest.”

“Me neither.” He chuckled, opening the door to the bakery. “But I need to catch up on some work in the office first. I’ll drop by in a couple of hours for the livestream.”

“Ohay.” The baker’s daughter stepped inside of her home, turned around and shot him a loving look that made him feel all fuzzy inside. “I’ll see you later then?”

“Yeah. Uhm...Marinette?”

“Yes?”

“If I may ask. With us knowing what we feel for each other...how...where does that leave us. Our relationship?”

“I...don’t know. I want to...I mean we should...but…”

“Not the right time?” He guessed.

“Yeah. Not with the Peacock Miraculous still out there.”

“Not with the deadline of the fashion show.”

“Or with me being the mess I am.”

He shook his head in disagreement. “You’re doing better.”
Marinette gave a small nod. “I am. But I don’t know if I’m better enough to be able to handle a romantic relationship on top of it all.”

“That’s exactly why I didn’t confess my feelings for you sooner.”

“I’m glad you did now.”

“I am glad you did as well.”

“Thank you Adrien. For...bringing me home. For loving me for so long.”

“And thank you Marinette. For...everything. Your friendship, your love, your loyalty. Everything.”

“I love you Adrien Agreste.”

“I love you too Marinette Dupain-Cheng.”
Deadlines and Down Times

Chapter Summary

More plot progression??? A little???
I think two or three more chapters and this story is done!

“It’s all in the wrist.”

He paid close attention to the way Marinette swirled the whisk through the glazing mixture.

“So...like this?”

Adrien tried his best to copy her, although he wasn’t sure he was doing it with the same finesse his girlfriend was doing it.

Girlfriend.

Was she his girlfriend now?

“Are you officially dating?” A voice in his head asked.

“No.” He internally answered back. “Not yet. We agreed to wait until all of this shit blows over.”

“Then she’s not your girlfriend.”

“Then...what are we?”

“Something between a friend and something else I guess?”

“Adrien?”

Her voice pulled him from his thoughts.

“Hmm?”

“You have to keep whisking.” She giggled.

“Sorry.” He flashed her a goofy grin. “I guess I just got mesmerized by your beauty.”

“Oh. Did you now?” Marinette asked in a teasing manner.

“I can’t help it. You just have that effect on me.”
“Sure I do.”

“It’s true. Even if you don’t believe it.”

“Dude. The chat says you need to step up your flirting game.” Nino chuckled.

“Yeah Sunshine. Clearly Mari is not impressed.”

Adrien put the bowl in his hands down and crossed his arms. “Is that true?”

“Oh...well...I’ve heard it all before and I know you all mean it, but it just doesn’t get me flustered in the slightest Adrien.”

“Is that a challenge I hear?”

A mischievous smile appeared on her lips.

“Depends. Do you want to make it a challenge?”

“You are on Princess! But let’s make things interesting.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Interesting how?”

“Let’s say, for every fifty. No! Hundred euros our viewers donate for ‘homes for hearts’, we get to flirt with each other. If I manage to get you blushing, I get to kiss you here.” He reached out to gently touch her cheek.”

“And if I make you blush, you’ll get all of us fancy coffee from next door.”

“Deal.”

“Well you better get started my man. Mechastrikerchamp733 already donated the first hundred euros.” Nino stated.

“Okay, Okay.” Adrien cleared his throat, looking for one of his best pickup line. “Shouldn’t you be up in Heaven? Because your smile is nothing short of angelic.”

Marinette didn’t blush, or laugh. In fact she hardly seemed to react at all.

“Weak sauce man!” Nino booed.

“Charming. But tell me. Did the Devil kick you out of Hell for being too hot? Because I’m getting warm just looking at you.”

“Sharp.” He complimented. “Very sharp Mari.”

“Thank you.” She grinned. “I’ve learned a thing or two from you over the years.”

“Keep going guys. We have three more people who donated!” Alya encouraged them in the background.
“Glad to hear I’m such a good influence.”

“Well...I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Me-ouch! Princess.” He grasped at his heart, pretending to be hurt. “Retorting to insults! I thought you loved me?”

“Only in your dreams.” She joked back.

“Then please never wake me up, so I can keep loving you back forever.” With a sly smirk, he leaned forward and took her hand to place a soft peck against her knuckles.

“I...I eh…” Marinette began to stammer.

Adrien glance up to see a bright, red blush dusting the host’s cheeks.

“Love you.” He mouthed.

“Love you too.” She whispered back.

“I guess we have a winner ladies and gentlemen!” Nino suddenly exclaimed. “Mister smooth himself! My bro Adrien!”


Adrien quickly pulled the girl next to him closer and gave her a big smooch on her red cheek. The sound of soft giggling immediately filling his ears.

“Well.” Adrien sighed. “That was fun. So...where were we with this whole cookie decorating thing again?”

“Whisking.” Marinette reminded him.

“Right. Whisking.”

“After we’re done mixing the glaze for our cookies, we carefully pour it into a piping bag like so.”

As he started to pick up the bowl again, Adrien heard the front of the bakery open.

Which was strange as it was the afternoon and the sign on the front was turned to indicate they were closed.

The only reason they had left the door open, was for Nino and Alya to bring in all of their equipment for the stream.

He looked passed Marinette and noticed a familiar looking blonde stepping in.

A blonde who didn’t look too happy.

“Chloé!” Marinette suddenly called out as she noticed the woman as well. “You decided to join us? That’s great!”

The closer his childhood friend got, the more he noticed the distraught look on her face.
“Chloé? What’s wrong?” He asked.

Marinette quickly put her baking tools down and stepped away from their makeshift recording set.

“Guys, the livestream.” Alya hissed.

“You take over.” Adrien suggested. “Just...give us ten minutes.”

He followed Marinette’s example and stepped out to the front of the store. “Hey. Chlo...you okay?”

She shook her head, trying to keep her tears from flowing. Her golden locks bouncing up and down as her shoulders began to shake slightly.

“Hey. Sit down. Take a deep breath.” The dark haired woman suggested as she led her to a stool her mother often used to sit on when manning the register.

“H-He hates me.” Chloé managed to tell them with a shuddered breath.

“Who?”

“Daddy. Daddy h-hates me Adrikins.”

“He doesn’t hate you Chlo. Why would he? The gala went great yesterday didn’t it?”

She nodded. “I worked s-so hard. To make everything p-perfect.”

“We know you did and it showed. I know it was my first gala, but I’m pretty sure every other I ever get to go too, will not be as amazing as yours was.”

Chloé smiled sadly. “T-Thank you M-Marinette.”

“So tell us. Why would your dad hate you?”

“He doesn’t trust me! H-He said, managing the hotel would be t-too difficult for me. A-After all my work, he still doesn’t t-trust me!”

“Oh...Chloé.” Adrien sighed before pulling the girl into a hug. “You would be able to manage it just fine. Last night was proof of that. It’s his own fault for not seeing it.”

“A-All I wanted was to make him proud. T-To show him I could be useful. But he s-still thinks I’m incompetent!”

Tears started to roll down her face.

“Chloé.” Marinette softly started. “I know we’ve never been as close as we are now, but you have showed me that you are more that capable of managing pretty much anything.”

He pulled away from the hug and nodded in agreement. “It’s true. You arranged everything for the gala, found solutions for any hiccup you encountered. You even managed to decorate my apartment nicely and made sure I got in touch with Alya again. I mean...you think in solutions, you give orders, you oversee every detail, you get things done. That’s a talent!”
“Really?” She sniffed as Marinette gently rubbed her back with one hand to calm her down.

“Really.” The other girl assured her. “Maybe...maybe it’s time to do something with that talent. Something you want?”

“Like what? All I ever wanted was to show daddy I can take care of myself and his hotel. A-And if he doesn’t allow me to...h-how can I ever show him?”

“Well with your skills you could be a event planner, interior decorator, personal assistant. You name it! You could start something of your own and show your dad you don’t need to rely on his credit card anymore.” He suggested.

“You could do what feels good for you and Adrien’s right you know. You have the skills and talent to delegate and organize and...put something together other people will enjoy.”

“You eh...you guys really think I could be any of those things you mentioned?”

“Honestly? Yeah.” Adrien smiled. “I’m pretty sure you can.”

“I know you can.”

“T-Thank you. Both of you. It’s...nice knowing someone doesn’t think I’m useless.”

“Feeling better?” He carefully asked.

“Yeah...a little.”

“I don’t suppose you’d want to help us decorate Christmas cookies? We’re planning on doing a contest to see which one of us can make the prettiest.”

“It’s for charity.” He added. “Your gala inspired us to do something for ‘homes for hearts’ too, so we’re live streaming a baking tutorial right now and doing a Q&A in between things. It would be neat if you could be our guest of honor today.”

“You know.” The blonde stood up from the stool and removed her coat. “I’m a mess anyway, so why not.”

“Guys.” Nino’s voice suddenly called for their attention, he made his way to him. “We’ve got a problem.”

Adrien frowned. “A problem?”

“People in the chat demand a rematch between you and Mari.”

“Nino. That’s the opposite of a problem.” He smirked.

“Rematch?” The mayor’s daughter asking in confusion.

“We had a little flirting contest before you walked in.” Marinette quickly explained. “I lost unfortunately, but we got a lot of donations from it. I hope anyway.”
“How could you even lose?” The blonde woman scoffed. “You of all people should know how to make him all flustered and mushy.”

“I know. But I’m not really sure if I should resort to puns just yet.”

“Princess. If you do and I lose, I won’t just be treating everyone to coffee. Takeout tonight is on me too.”

Surprisingly, she didn’t have to think that long about the offer. “Alright. Puns it is.”

“Oh no. Not my weakness.” Adrien laughed putting a hand on Chloé’s back to lead her into the kitchen.

He wasn’t sure what caused it, but when Adrien walked into the Gabriel building on Monday, he was in a genuinely good mood.

Maybe it was because madame Cheng insisted on closing the bakery for a day, so she could catalog their supplies and order more for the expected Christmas rush. Which also meant the older woman could get some rest herself.

It could also have been because Marinette had literally taken his breath away when he picked her up to escort her to Gabriel’s that morning with how brightly she smiled at him and how softly she kissed his lips.

Of course it didn’t help she was neatly dressed in a black pencil skirt and a pink blouse with, loosely tied, black bow tied under the collar. Making her look irresistibly cute to him.

“I can’t wait to get that last casual set finished so I can finally work on the final dress.” She sighed as they rode the elevator up. “I think we’ll be able to make this deadline.”

“I’m pretty sure Lila will be coming in today to have her measurements taken though.”

“I was in a good mood Adrien. Please don’t ruin it.” She pouted.

“Well...if she really is a professional model, she’ll do as she’s asked and stand perfectly still so you would have no trouble taking her numbers.”

“Emphasis on ‘if’ right? Because I have never seen her face in any of the fashion magazines over the years. So I doubt she actually knows what she’s doing.”

“I doubt that too. But hey, it’s not that hard to just stand still and lift your arms.”

The elevator gave a loud ding and the doors opened, allowing them to step out.

“Parting is such sweet sorrow. But I am needed on the other side of this hallway.”

Marinette leaned up and quickly pecked his cheek. “See you at lunch?”

“Oh yeah. Absolutely! And if you need anything before that, you know where to find me. Just walk
right in Bugaboo.”

“I will Chaton. Love you.”

“Love you too Marinette.”

She walked over to the door leading to the designer studio. One hand resting on the handle, but not opening it just yet.

She turned around and gave him a warm smile. “Have I ever thanked you for this?”

“For what?”

“You know. Giving me a taste of what could have been.”

“Do you miss it? Designing I mean.”

She nodded. “But I am happy where I am despite all that. So...thank you for letting me live my dream. Even if it’s for a couple of weeks.”

“It’s a small compared to everything you’ve done for me Marinette and eh...I’m glad I got to give you a little bit of that dream back.”

“Is it the same for you? With the bakery I mean.”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t feel different than when I helped you and your father out a couple of times. Honestly….I kinda have a feeling I’m in the way more than I am a help when it comes to the actual baking.” Adrien chuckled. “But I get to work with you. That’s really the best part of it.”

“You sap.”

“Just being honest.”

“I know.”

“I’d better get to work and so do you young lady.”

“Right. Deadlines and all. See you around lunch time Chaton.” She opened the door and slipped inside the atelier.

Through one of the large windows, he could see her smile brightly as she greeted the other girls in there.

She really seemed in her element and so...happy doing what she loved.

It was just a shame he couldn’t keep her there.

Not without spending money the bakkery couldn’t afford to lose on extra staff.

Maybe...someday.

Someday he would be able to either help her start her own brand or let her work next to him.
If only so he could admire how happy she would be.

As expected, the moment he opened the door to the office, Adrien found himself quickly fall back into his daily routine.

Checking his emails.

Making phone calls.

Double checking numbers and orders.

He wasn’t expecting anything going wrong today.

Not until loud shouting of several people just outside of his office, made him look up from his computer.

It wasn’t long until red door swung open and madame London, Marinette and Lila stormed inside. Aside from the displeased looks on their faces, he noticed a large stain on his partner’s pretty, pink, blouse.

“Adrien! You have to tell them to stop bullying me!” The new model demanded.

“Bullying?”

“You’re the one who can’t stand still for two minutes!” Marinette was quick to throw up. “And you tried to ruin my designs!”

“I did no such thing!”

“You dumped your coffee over it!”

“It was an accident!”

“How was it an accident when I clearly saw you knock your cup over on purpose! I could barely dive over my work to stop you from destroying it.”

“Adrien please!” Bettina pleaded. “Please try to reason with her.”

He opened his mouth, trying to say something, anything, to get some sense of order back between the three.

Instead Lila continued to argue.

“I am a professional! How dare you even insinuate that I tried to ruin your scribbles on purpose!”

“Maybe she wouldn’t if you actually did as we asked of you.” Madame London hissed at the green eyed woman.

“Adrien!” Lila tried again.

“Stop!” He yelled. “Stop. Just...Tell me what happened.”
“Well Marinette…”

“Bettina.” He quickly corrected, not trusting anything that would be told from Lila’s point of view. “Tell me what happened.”

“Madame Rossi came in to get her measurements taken. She refused to cooperate with Marinette and when she tried to ask me to back her up, Lila walked up to Marinette’s workstation and proceeded to pour her drink over the design sketches.”

“Oh my God! It was an accident!” Lila huffed.

“Lila. Go with madame London, get your measurements taken, get out and go on with your day.”

“But--”

“Go.” He sternly demanded.

“Fine. Let’s meet up for lunch later then. We absolutely have to catch up.”

She gave him a smile.
The same smile that made the hairs stand up on his neck the night prior.
A smile that gave him goosebumps right now.

“We absolutely don’t.” The blonde muttered. “Marinette.”

“Y-Yes Adrien?”

“Stay here for a bit please. We need to talk.”

“Okay.”

He didn’t miss the snarky look Lila gave the other woman the moment Bettina dragged her out of his office.

He half suspected it was because she assumed the designer was in trouble.

Once the door closed again, he let out a deep sigh and leaned back into his office chair.

“Sorry.” Marinette suddenly muttered.

“What for?”

“I...eh...wasn’t acting professional just now.”

“Neither was Lila and...I can’t really blame you. Did she really try to throw her coffee over your designs?”

“Yeah. I turned my back for one second and then I noticed her pushing her cup over on my desk. I practically jumped onto my papers to protect them, thankfully avoiding any serious damage to my work.”

“Forget your work!” He stood up from his chair and walked over to her. “What about you? Are you
okay? Was it hot coffee? Please tell me it wasn’t hot coffee.”

“It eh...it was. Scolding hot actually.”

He took hold of her arm and carefully lifted it, inspecting the large stain on the fabric.

“Show me.”

“Hmmm?”

“Your skin. I want to know how badly she burned you.”

“I’m fine. It’s not the first time some burning hot drink got spilled onto me. Mostly because of my own clumsiness.” She chuckled.

“Just...let me see Mari.”

“Okay but…” She carefully rolled up her sleeve to reveal bright red skin underneath. “I’m fine. Really.”

“That’s a first degree burn.”

Carefully he let his thumb move over the hot patch of exposed flesh.

“I’ll be fine.” She once again reassured him.

“Are you sure?”

“Give it a couple of days and it’ll be back to normal.”

“I still think we should ice it. Just to be safe.”

She shrugged. “If it’ll make you feel better.”

“I just don’t want to see my… Lover, partner, maîtresse? “My Lady hurt. That’s all.”

The corners of her lips tugged up into a soft smile. “That’s sweet of you Adrien. But I can assure you. Again. I’ll be fine. My new blouse not so much, but I’ll be fine.”

He walked over to the mini fridge under his desk and pulled out a can of soda.

“I’d still think it’s better if you cool it down for a bit.” He threw her the can, which she caught with ease. “Keep that against your arm and I’ll see if I still have one of my spare shirts here.”

“You could let me borrow Plagg and I’ll just swing back home real quick to grab something?”

“Plagg zoomed off the moment I stepped into the bakery this morning.” Adrien groaned, opening door one of the many drawers inside of his office. Hoping he’d remembered right and stored spare clothing in there.

“Makes sense. Tikki should be binge watching some new murder mystery show that came out last weekend. He must be joining her up in my room.”
“Those two have it easy right now.”

“They deserve to. We used to transform more than once a day remember.”

“Hard to forget. Ah! Here’s one!”

He pulled out the white cotton piece of clothing and held it up high.

“Thank you Chaton.”

“It might be a bit too big for you though.”

“I’ll manage.” Marinette walked up to him and took the shirt from him. The soda can clutched in her other hand.

“Bathrooms are at the end of the hallway.”

She gave a small nod. “So...what are we going to do about her?”

“Lila?”

“Yeah.”

“Stay vigilant? I can’t fire her without triggering my father to do...something. Besides, even if I could I can’t fire her to begin with. Modelling isn’t the department I oversee. I have no say in who does and doesn’t work there.”

“Pitty. Would making her sabotage us a lot more difficult.”

“You think she’s sabotaging us?” He asked surprised.

“She tried to drown my designs in coffee. I think it’s safe to say that she is.”

“Why would my father have hired someone to do that? He does know that this line benefits him too right? He’d be making an attempt to kill his own company screwing us over like that. That wouldn’t make sense.”

“Maybe he doesn’t care. Maybe he just wants a reason to use his Miraculous.” She muttered. “You’ve seen how that man pranced around with it at Chloé’s gala. Just...showing off how easily he could use it.”

“That’s why we have to remain vigilant.” He pressed a soft kiss against her hair. “We’ll be fine.”

“I hope so. I really hope so.”

With a grunt he put down another suitcase next to the front door of the Agreste mansion.
“Is this the last one?”

“Yes. Thank you for your help Adrien.”

“No problem Nath.” The blonde gave his father’s assistant a smile. “You’ve earned your time off after all these years of working for my father..”

“Almost eight years at this point. This vacation seems long overdue in hindsight.”

“That’s because it is.” He laughed. “And now you get to enjoy five whole weeks of Caribbean cruising. Sipping fruity drinks and enjoying the sun. I’m honestly jealous.”

“Perhaps you should take a break soon too then.”

“If only I could.” He sighed. “There’s a lot of things to arrange before the fashion show next month. No time to take a break.”

“At least take care of yourself Adrien.”

“Right. Right. Go to bed on time. Eat your vegetables. Don’t forget to do your laundry. I’ve heard it all.”

“Good.” The woman shot him a small smile. “Now you only need to do it.”

“I’ll try. But no promises.” He joked.

“Are you really leaving?” A voice suddenly asked.

He jerked his head into the direction the voice came from, only to see his father walk out of his office with a displeased look on his face.

“I am.” Nathalie confirmed. “I informed you of my vacation a couple of weeks ago sir.”

“I told you what would happen if you would take one.”

“You did.”

“Yet you still decided to leave?”

“Yes sir.”

Gabriel gave a deep sigh. “Very well. I’ll allow you to gather your things when you return.”

Nathalie merely gave a nod and although Adrien had trouble reading the emotions from her face, there was no doubt that there was some kind of tension between the two.

“Okay so...I feel you two have some things to talk out? So I eh...I’m going to put your bags in the car Nath.”

“Thank you Adrien.”

With ease he put one weekend bag over his shoulder and extended the grip on the two suitcases to
roll them out of the hallway and onto the driveway gravel.

The last thing he wanted to do was sit in between whatever was going on between his father and Nathalie.
Or stick around long enough to drown into another fight with the older Agreste.

He was just there to drive Nathalie to the airport with the family car, drop the car back off on the driveway and stock up on cheese, beer and snacks for the game marathon he had planned with Nino that afternoon and avoid his father as much as he could.

This was a day where he planned on relaxing and nobody stand in his way if he could help it.

It wasn’t long after he put the last piece of luggage into the car, that his father’s secretary walked out of the mansion.
Her steps were hasty and her posture reminded him of Chloé whenever she was annoyed with something.

“You okay Nath?”

“Yes...I’m.” She took a deep breath, her brows furrowing slightly before opening the passenger door. “I’m fine.”

When Marinette had uttered the exact same phrase earlier that week, he had been skeptical about her claim.
This time wasn’t any different.

What was different was that Nathalie was no Marinette.

He couldn’t just insist on the older woman to confide in him and tell him what his father had meant just now and why she seemed distraught in a way.

So he decided to keep his mouth shut when taking his place into the driver’s seat.

He didn’t mutter a word when starting the engine.
Not a sound was shared between the two when they came across the first intersection.
The silence did nothing for his curiosity as questions kept lingering in his mind.

“So...” He carefully started while waiting for a traffic light to jump to green. “You don’t have to answer...but...I’m kind of confused.”

“What?”

“When we left...it sounded like father was going to kick you out of the house when you would come back? I mean...I might have heard wrong but...”

“You didn’t.” She assured him. “When I informed monsieur Agreste about my time off, we got into an argument.”

Adrien frowned at hearing that.
In all the years Nathalie had lived with them and worked for them, he had never heard the two go into a full blown argument.
Then again…

It was kind of nice knowing it wasn’t just him being on the receiving end of Gabriel’s outbursts.

“I was told that I couldn’t leave and if I did, my contract would be terminated.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That after more than eight years of loyal service and putting up with his antics as Hawkmoth, he should have been happy I hadn’t quit long ago and that he should give me some time off.”

“So…you basically told him to shove it?”

The light turned green and he started driving forward again.

“Basically. Yes. I had hoped he would be in one of his moods back then. But it seemed he was serious about it as he made clear today..”

“That means…you’re out of a job now?”

“It seems so. Unless your father will be begging for me to come back next week.”

“I’ll give him three days.” Adrien chuckled. “He’s lost without you. What was he even thinking in the first place? He knows you’re like three-quarters of what keep him productive and on target.”

“I’m not sure what he was thinking either. To be honest…lately I’m not even sure about half the reasons your father is doing what he’s doing.”

“So you’re not sure why he’s putting me through this crap either huh?”

“Not entirely. I mean…I know why he wants your and Ladybug’s Miraculous. But I don’t know why he gave up only to start pursuing them again the moment he sent you away to New York.”

“So that was part of his plan. Whatever it might be.”

“Well…since I’m officially fired, I can tell you that the plan has and always will be, getting the Ladybug and Cat Miraculous. Why flying you all the way to New York was part of that plan, I couldn’t tell you, since he wouldn’t tell me. He wouldn’t even listen when I tried to convince him it was for the best to find you a place closer to home. He kept insisting your friends were a ‘bad influence’ on you.”

Of course he had said that.
Adrien knew very well his father always disagreed with the friends he had made.

The only exception being Chloé and Kagami.
The latter of which hadn’t stuck around Paris long enough to witness the bitterness towards his own father creeping into him over time.

But he had never cared what Gabriel would think about his friends.

They were his friends.
They meant everything to him then and they still did.

“Then you know more than I do. I don’t even know why he wants the Miraculous in the first place.”

“He never told you?”

Nathalie sounded genuinely surprised and that slightly made him worry.

“No. Plagg just told me that using them both was dangerous but father never told me why he wanted them to begin with. At the time, I was just happy that father gave up his ways you know.”

“He wanted to bring your mother back.”

Inside of his pocket, he could feel the small Kwami wiggle and move about.

“Back to life you mean.”

“Yes.” Nathalie paused for a moment. “You don’t sound too surprised by that. Did he tell you?”

He shook his head. “When father told me she disappeared, I was hopeful that she would be found. That she would come home at some point. Over the years, hope turned into realisation. He never had to tell me. One day it just became...obvious what happened to her. That she would never come home.”

“There...there is one more thing about your mother I need to tell you.”

“If it’s how she died, then I would appreciate that.”

“No. That’s not it. Unfortunately I do not know how your mother passed away. Your father never told me and as you might remember, I started working for him a few months after she was reported as missing.”

“Okay then...what did you need to tell me.”

Once again it became silent in the car.

A heavy silence that lingered for much longer than he would have liked.

“I’ll tell you if you park somewhere. I’m afraid you might not be able to focus on the road.”

“Nath. You just confirmed my mom died. That’s pretty Earth shattering news and I’m still able to drive. Just...tell me. Please.”

“Just stop the car. Right there.” She pointed at an empty space along a sidewalk.

Reluctantly he followed her instructions and the vehicle came to a complete standstill.

“There. We’re safe. What did you need to tell me?”

“Your father...He never told me why your mother died. Or how. But he did tell me where he’s keeping her.”
Adrien frowned. ‘Keeping her’?

What did that even mean?

“There’s a room beneath the mansion.” The woman continued. “A big room.”

Oh...

“Hawkmoth lair?”

“Yes...that’s there as well but...there’s also a underground garden of sorts. He keeps his butterflies, his Akuma, there and...he keeps your mother’s body in a casket.”

OH!

“He fucking what!”

“He goes down there often to mourn her. To talk to her.”

“You’re really telling me. That asshole. That fucking asshole! Has kept her right under my nose this whole time!”

Nathalie nodded.

“Why didn’t he tell me! I had every right to know that! Why did he keep that for himself! Don’t I deserve to know?”

“I...I really don’t know why he didn’t tell you. Perhaps he figured, since he wanted to bring her back, that it wouldn’t matter? That everything would return to normal for everyone anyway. I’m...I’m sorry I didn’t get to tell you sooner Adrien. He swore me to keep it quiet. Even after you found out he was Hawkmoth. I wanted to tell you...I tried to persuade him to give up on his plan.”

Adrien quickly felt his anger subside.

“I...I don’t blame you Nath. You’re...You’ve done all you can. You’ve been more of a parent to me since mom was gone, than father ever was. Gorilla too. Even if he hardly ever spoke.”

“I don’t know if it means anything coming from me but...I’m proud of you. I’m proud of whom you’ve become and I’m proud that you’ve done what was right. Even if that meant carrying a heavy burden on your shoulders.”

Proud.

Someone was proud of him?

That was such an odd thing to hear from anyone other than Marinette.

“Thank you.” He muttered, letting his anger simmer down. “Can I ask you something Nathalie?”

“Oh of course.”

“Why...why did you decide to stick around for so long? Anyone else would have left. I mean...it’s
really messed up when you know your employer keeps his dead wife somewhere in the house. I would have ran and never looked back.”

“I...I suppose I stayed because at one point I thought he did what he did for a noble cause. For love. Then...perhaps I stayed because I couldn’t leave you alone in that house with him. Not when you were practically still a child. Even after he gave you the Butterfly Miraculous, I felt a certain obligation to stick around.”

“And he just threw you on the curb just like that.” He shook his head. “You know. My own secretary is going on pregnancy leave soon. I know it might not be much but…”

“She’ll probably be back when I get back.”

He hadn’t thought of that.

“Right. I...suppose I could get used to having a P.A.”

“From what I’ve heard you’re doing fine on your own.”

“You could just be honest and tell me you don’t want to work for me Nath.” He tried to joke.

“Even if I want to. I can’t. It wouldn’t feel right. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be enjoying the cruise you got me and I’ll figure out the rest from there on out.”

“Okay. Just...let me know if I can do anything for you.”

“I will.”

Adrien bit his lip as he tightened the grip on the steering wheel.

Right under his feet.

If he had to believe the woman next to him...his mother had been right underneath his own two feet this entire time.

At least it made sense why his father did what he was doing back then.

But now…

He wished he could say the same about now.

Gabriel was hurting what was left of their father-son relationship, possibly even his company, just to get his mother back.

“May I ask you something else Nathalie?”

“Of course.”

“What do you know about father’s plans? The plans he has now I mean. I can’t wrap my head around to why he’s doing the things he’s been doing lately. Especially bringing in an inexperienced model, insisting she’d walk in our show next month. A model I think has been hired by father to sabotage us in some way. The car. The offer to get me an apartment. Not being able to normally
have a conversation with him. It makes no sense.”

“I...don’t know. I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around what he has been doing lately too and like I said, we’ve been having arguments as well and I haven’t been able to convince him to break your contract with him or tell me why he’s doing these things.”

“Shame. I had hoped you would be able to tell me more. So I could be prepared just in case the Peacock Miraculous would be used. I...I don’t know how long I’ll be able to keep my end of the agreement Nath. I try and try. But I fear he’ll be looking for any tiny mistake. Any excuse, to go loose and be a villain again. It’s only a matter of time before I screw up.”

“It is unfair isn’t it? That the faith of this city lies in your hands.”

“It is. But that’s the way it is now and I’m not alone. Ladybug will back me up.”

“I really wish I could tell you more. Perhaps if your father hadn’t started shutting himself off from the world, he wouldn’t have done all this. He would be a better person.”

“Where did I go wrong? I tried you know. To be a good son. To offer my support while he moped around because mom wasn’t there.”

“You did nothing wrong.”

“I…”

“Adrien. Listen to me. You did nothing wrong.” She repeated once more. “Your father is stubborn and he is clearly dealing with some demons of his own. But if he doesn’t want help, who are we to force it onto him?”

“Sometimes...you need to.” He muttered, thinking back to the moment where he went behind Marinette’s back to help her out.

“Sometimes we do.” Nathalie agreed. “But be honest, do you really care enough about him to help him?”

The blonde remained silent.

Now there was a question he couldn’t really answer straight away.

“Maybe…when I was younger.” He muttered eventually.

“When he was still showing he cared.” She added.

“When he was still someone I didn’t want to actively avoid.”

“When he was a kinder man. With a noble cause. Doing the wrong things for the right reasons.”

“So you see it the same way as I do?”

The older woman nodded. “I cared too much for your father at a certain point. That faded a while ago. There was no reason for me to stay by his side once you left the house to live on your own and we couldn’t have a normal conversation anymore.” She sighed. “He’s changed. I don’t know what
made him change like this. But he’s changed.”

“I’m glad we can agree on that.” Adrien muttered before starting the car again and driving back onto the road.

“So should we really reach out to help him Adrien? When he’s pushing us away like that.”

“No. I just…I just want to get his Miraculous so he can be powerless and I don’t have to worry about what he could do to the city. He can do fuck all after that for all I care. He put himself into this mess and I’m not going to help him get out of it. He should have known better from the start.”

Was that really what he wanted?

What if he could help his father?

Then again…it wasn’t like he hadn't tried before.

Many times.

For many years.

Maybe it was for the best to be done reaching out to him.

A short hum from Nathalie pulled him out of his thoughts.

“What?”

“You’ve changed too you know.” She remarked. “For the better. You’re not that timid boy I tutored a long time ago. I’m sure you’ll be able to convince him to give that brooch over somehow.”

“I hope so Nathalie. I really hope so.”

“Dude. What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.” Adrien grumbled as he watched his bot on screen getting drained from his last bit of health.

“Are you letting me win on purpose today or what?”

“I’m just…distracted I guess.”

How could he not.

After he had dropped Nathalie off on the airport, so she could fly to Spain and get on her cruise there, the thought about his mother lying somewhere beneath the Agreste mansion, kept haunting him.

Plagg had come out of hiding on the way back to ensure him that using the Black Cat and Ladybug Miraculous the way his father wanted to use it, wouldn’t work that way.

“It’s like that one anime you like with the suit or armor and the short guy and all the alchemy.”
“Fullmetal Alchemist?”

“Yeah like that one. The powers of creation and destruction can work together to do pretty much anything, but the law of the universe pretty much ties our powers down. If your old man would have tried to bring your mom back to life right from the get go, it could mean he would lose his own life...or yours...or your neighbours or Ladybug’s! A life for a life.”

“Equivalent exchange.”

“To gain something of equal value must be lost. Or however they said it in that show. That’s why it’s dangerous to use them at the same time! One wrong use of power and the whole universe could blow up! Or this dimension! Or even worse. All the cheese in the world would be gone!”

“Distracted by what?” Nino asked with a laugh as he pressed a few buttons to start a new match.

“Things. Work.”

“Your old man running you ragged?”

“Something like that.” Adrien shrugged. “There’s a lot of pressure put on me. So to get a chance to unwind like this is a welcome break. But I can’t seem to focus despite being able to let myself relax.”

“I can imagine work related stress hangs around like that. I’ve been there bro. Too bad I’m kicking your ass all the time anyway.” Nino laughed. “On the other hand, I’ve never been able to beat you so hey. I’m not complaining.”

“You’re horrible sometimes.” He laughed before shifting on his spot on the floor. “But I’ll happily give you the privilege to kick my ass in Ultima Mecha Striker whenever I’m distracted.”

“Me and Mari you mean.”

“You and Mari.” Leaning forward, Adrien took his can of beer off the small coffee table, taking a large sip. “The only two people in the world I’m okay with beating me playing video games.”

“I feel so special to be part of the exclusive ‘kick Adrien’s perfect ass in video games’ club.”

The blonde couldn’t help but let out a joyous laugh. Soon joined by Nino’s own laughter.

“Should we take a break? The girls should come over pretty soon right?” His best friend chuckled eventually.

“It’s almost six so they should be done by now. I’m still baffled you didn’t want to go with them.”

“Seriously Adrien? A spa? Dude. Getting pampered is not my thing.”

“I don’t know man. Those deep tissue massages are something else and few things can be more relaxing than sweating in a sauna.”

“Surrounded by old sweaty men wearing towels? No thanks.” He laughed. “That might be for you, but not me.”
“It’s not that bad. But fine. Your loss Nino.”

“Can’t lose it if you don’t know what you’re missing.”

“That...almost sounded wise.” Adrien chuckled before taking another gulp of his beer. “What should we get for dinner?”

“Dunno man. I’m kinda full from eating that bag of corn chips and salsa dip.”

“We can’t let the girls go hungry.”

“We still have another bag of chips right?”

“Dude.”

“I’m kidding man.” The DJ laughed, grabbing his own beer can. “Pizza maybe?”

“I could go for pizza.”

“Maybe Al wants to go for something healthy. Who knows what kind of mood a spa day puts her in.”

“So I guess something that includes a salad is on the table too?”

“I guess so?”

“I’m personally in the mood for a mixed grill or something.”

Nino merely gave a shrug at hearing the suggestion. “We could ditch the whole takeout idea and try to cook something up ourselves.”

Both men gave each other a look before bursting into laughter once again.

“Nino…” Adrien wheezed. “I just bought this place. I can barely cook an egg! Let's not set things ablaze okay.”

“Me too dude! Sandwiches for all! I can’t do better than that!”

“Oh God. I’d really have to learn to cook a proper meal soon.”

“Why?”

“Can’t live on takeout Nino.”

“Sure you can!” The DJ scoffed. “They deliver almost any kind of meal these days. You know that.”

“Yeah. Sure but...it seems nice to just be able to make something special for someone.”

“I...suppose.”

“You’ve never tried to make dinner for Alya?”
“Once. It didn’t end well.” Nino frowned.

“So...why don’t we take a cooking workshop for our next guy hangout? You can cook something nice for Alya after she gets home from work. I’m sure she’ll appreciate it.”

“I’d rather beat you at videogames. But learning how to cook has a step up from sweating in a sauna in my book. So why not.”

“Awesome!”

“But after Christmas man. I’ve got three gigs lined up and two Christmas dinners to get through. Not to mention New Year’s. It’s going to be a busy month.”

“December usually is.”

“Are you visiting your old man for the holidays?”

He had promised Nathalie he would. But that was before his father had fired her.

Before he learned what he had kept from him all these years.

“No. I guess I’ll go bother Marinette and her mom during Christmas. I remember the first one without my mother. It was tough until you guys showed up. I just want to make sure they’re holding up.”

“You ran away from home from what I could remember.” Nino chuckled. “Seriously dude, that was such a drama queen move.”

“Can you blame me? I just wanted to celebrate Christmas with my father but instead he locked himself in his office, like always.” The blonde sighed and let his head rest on the edge of the sofa behind him. “He hasn’t changed at all in that regard.”

“Well. If you’ve got no plans, you’re always welcome to join me, Al and Chloé on New Year's eve. I’m spinning in this high end club and you should be able to get in no problem. V.I.P booth and everything.”

“Maybe I will. I’m not sure yet.”

“If you do, drag Marinette with you. Alya says she’s been working too hard and it’s been ages since their last night out. She should relax a little on the last day of the year too. Like all of us.”

“I’ll try to convince her. No promises. You know how stubborn she can be.”

Adrien heard the soft click of his front door being opened in the background.

“As can you.” Nino reminded him. “But it would be awesome if you decided to join us.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Wait until you see the bathroom!” Chloé proudly exclaimed as she walked into his apartment. “The tiles I picked out are so cute and the tub is huge!”
“Was the rug your idea too? Because I just love it!” He heard Marinette ask. “It’s so soft Alya. It’s like you’re walking on clouds.”

“Of course that was my idea.”

“Hey girls!” Nino greeted. “All done pampering?”

“Hey babe!” Alya greeted back with a grin before she pushed herself past the other two women and leaned over to give her fiancé a kiss.

“You smell really nice.”

“We took a good soak after our yoga class. What you’re smelling is me after drowning in lavender and patchouli for a good half hour.”

He watched his childhood friend plop down in one of his lounge chairs. Not bothering to remove her coat.

“Adrikins. You have no idea how flexible Dupain-Cheng is. It’s ridiculous!”

“Oh I knew that! Mari is great at multitasking.”

“No Sunshine. We mean body wise. She killed it during yoga.”

“It was very sexy.” Chloé added with a nod.

Adrien turned towards his partner with a confused look on his face. Not really sure what to make of this new information.

She only rolled her eyes before making herself comfortable on the sofa. Sitting right behind him.

“Who’s winning?” Marinette asked.

“Not me.” Adrien muttered.

“That’s a first.” She snorted.

“Got a lot on my mind.”

He felt how she leaned forward to place her hands on the sides of his head. Guiding him backwards until he found himself looking up at her. His head resting on her lap.

The scent of lotus and something sweet radiating off her.

For a moment he forgot all his troubles.

“Do you want to share?”

“It’s ah...something I’m processing Princess. No big deal.”
“If you’re sure….”

“Adrien just has a lot of work stress build up.” The man next to him quickly explained.

“You should have come with us Adrikins.”

“I have to admit, it was very therapeutic spending the day at a spa.”

“I can tell Mari. You’re almost glowing.” He whispered softly to her.

She leaned down to place a small kiss on his forehead. “And you look tired.”

“I kinda am.”

“I’m guessing you’re kicking us out after dinner then?” Nino joked.

“No. No. After dessert for sure.” Adrien laughed, turning his attention back to the girl above him. “Except for you. You can stay as long as you want.”

“How thoughtful.”

“Adrien. I thought we were friends?” Alya asked with the saddest look on her face she could muster. “What if we end up watching movies until late huh? Are you going to kick us out then?”

“Fine.” He sighed. “You and Nino can take the guest room if you want.”

“What about me Adrikins? Are you going to kick me out?”

“The couch?”

“The couch is fine. I picked it out so I know how comfortable it is.”

“So I guess we’re having a sleepover then huh?” Marinette suddenly noticed.

A sleepover.

His first sleepover.

“Holy shit we are having a sleepover.” He gasped. “In my house.”

“Nice observation my dude.”

“My first sleepover!”

“You’ve slept over at my place all the time.” The baker’s daughter laughed.

“No. I mean...the first time I’m having friends over for the night. More than one! What should we do? Should I have gotten board games? More pillows so we can have a pillow fight? How does this shit work?”

His friends laughed at his sudden moment of freaking out.
“Adrien. Chaton.” Soft hands ran through his hair. “Relax. We’ll just hang out together and sleep over. There’s nothing more to it.”

“Who knows Sunshine. It might just distract you from whatever it is that’s stressing you out.”

“Then you can beat my ass again in Ultima Mecha Striker.” Nino laughed.

“Oh, I can do that for you. Give me the controller Adrien.” Marinette grinned as she tapped his shoulder to ask for the device.

Without resistance he handed it over to her and noticed her shift behind him. Probably to get more comfortable if he had to guess.

“Now that, that’s settled. Who’s in the mood for thai food?” Chloé suddenly asked.

The day before Christmas had been a busy one.

He had been working in the bakery almost non-stop to make sure early placed orders were ready to be picked up.

Christmas jingles happily filled the small shop as well as the scent of cinnamon and chocolate.

Along with Marinette’s new window display and the specks of snow falling from the sky, he couldn’t help but be in a Christmas mood.

Out of the three in the building, he quickly found out he was the only one as madame Cheng frequently needed to take a break after customers asked about her husband or if she was holding up. The woman he loved was the same as she prepared recipes her father had come up with and he could tell that she had trouble keeping herself from crying.

That the Dupain-Cheng women hadn’t put up any decorations in their own household, had been enough of a hint that neither of them were probably in much of a mood to celebrate this year.

Not that he could blame them.

When Adrien let himself into their home on Christmas day, it was eerily quiet. The only sound being heard were footsteps coming from Marinette’s room and the clock in the living room quietly ticking away.

Carefully he made his way up the stairs and opened the hatch to the pink bedroom.

“Hey.”

“Hey Chaton.” She softly greeted back.

Her voice sounded raw.

Had she been crying again?
“How are you holding up Princess?”

“Oh...well...hanging in there I guess.” She sighed as he closed the hatch.

“Is your mom out?”

“No. She’s sleeping. She’s been sleeping most of the day. Yesterday was...too much for her.”

“Too much for you too from what I can tell.”

“I want to say...it was? But...I have felt worse.”

He walked over to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and pressing a kiss against her temple.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Plagg zipping out of his coat. Most likely to look for Tikki.

“How about a break Princess. You’ve worked really hard lately.”

“So have you.”

“Yeah but right now isn’t about me.”

“You’ve been kind of out of it too lately.”

“Still processing some things.” He sighed. “Don’t worry about it.”

“So you keep telling me.”

“Want to pop in a movie downstairs and drown our negative emotions in hot chocolate and leftovers from yesterday?”

“I need to...” She gestured vaguely as the long, dark orange, formal dress resting on her dress mannequin. “You know.”

“Is that the spare?”

“Yeah. Been working on it during the evenings. Otherwise I’ll never get it done on time.”

“You still have two weeks. It’ll be fine.”

“Only two more weeks you mean.” She groaned. “With the way Lila has been bothering us...just...dropping by when we don’t need her and...did you know she took a pair of scissors yesterday and Lucille caught her trying to ruin my dress? I had to partially take it apart to fix it!”

“Okay. So. That means father is absolutely hiring her to sabotage us. But...let’s not think about that for now Bugaboo. It’s Christmas. Let’s relax for today.”

“I...I don’t know if I can.” She pulled away from his touch and started pacing back and forth.

“There’s so much to do. I have to make dinner and papa always made his special chocolate cake for Christmas. I need to make that too. Then I have to figure out presents because I totally forgot about
“Bug.”

“Do you think Alya would be happy if I made her a scarf or something? Maybe Nino would like a gift card. I can just e-mail him that. I can’t even begin to wrap my head around what Chloé would want.”

“Bug!”

She stopped dead in her tracks.

“Don’t worry about presents. Nobody is going to blame you if you skip the holidays for a year.”

“B-But…”

“Hey.” He once again walked over to her. Placing two hands on her shoulders to help her calm down. “It’s okay.”

“I’m so tired Chat.”

Her voice was but a mere whisper, but he could clearly tell that she was indeed drained.

“I know. It’s just for a couple more weeks Marinette.”

“No...not the fashion crap. I’m just...tired of me. Tired of...crying. Feeling sad. Tired of missing him all the time.”

“That’s all part of it. It’ll pass. It’ll get better.”

“I...I want to visit him. It’s been a while.”

Adrien gave a nod. “Right now?”

“Yeah. Do you...want to come with me? I just...need to see him for a little bit.”

“Sure. No problem.”

Even if she didn’t want him coming with her, he would have anyway. It was already dark outside as well as really cold.

The last thing he wanted was for her mother to worry about her daughter again. At least now he could assure her she was safe and be safely returned home.

That was how he found himself back at Tom Dupain’s grave once again. Listening to Marinette wishing her father a happy Christmas.

Telling him about what she had done since she had last visited him.

The clothes she designed, how well the bakery was doing.

How they raised over five thousand euros for ‘homes for hearts’ with their little livestream.
That she felt happy despite needing to still cry from time to time.

She talked about fond memories she had of her father.

How her mother still whispered ‘good night’ and ‘I love you’ to his pillow.

How much she still loved him.

He felt his eyes burn the more he listened.

And the more he listened the more he wished he could have done the same thing Marinette was doing.
The same thing his father seemingly had been doing for years without his knowledge.

He wanted to tell his mother everything.

He wished he could tell her remains...her spirit...how much he loved her and that he was happy now and that she didn’t need to worry about him.
Wherever her spirit might be.

It wasn’t until a hot tear rolled down his cold skin that he realized he still missed her as much as the day he lost hope of her every coming home.
“You know.” He huffed as he jumped out of the way of Ladybug’s aimed attack at him. “When you suggested that we should take a break and go out.” He gracefully jumped over her when he noticed her rushing towards him with great speed and a determined look. “I was thinking more about getting coffee and some food. Not trying to beat each other to death in the freezing cold!”

Ladybug let out a hearty laugh.

One that warmed his heart with its mere sound.

“We’ve been slacking for the last two weeks Chaton.” The hero reminded him. “Besides. I have a feeling we need to be prepared!”

He frowned as he twirled his batton a few times to deflect her yo-yo.

They weren’t really slacking. Not on the departments that needed their attention the most. But Chat Noir really couldn’t blame her. He was having the same feeling the closer they would get to their fashion show.

Especially after the talk he had with Nathalie he had grown worried that his father would pull something...anything...at either the show or just after it. Any tiny mistake on his part would, in theory, be enough of an excuse for Gabriel Agreste to use the magical brooch in some way.

If Plagg and Tikki’s explanation were something to go on, fighting summoned monsters was not on his most favorite things to do list and would bring certain doom on the people of Paris.

Sparing with each other would not be a waste of time in the slightest and prepare them a bit more for whatever would come on their path.

Although, if he could choose, getting a warm meal in a cozy place sounded way more tempting than training at this time of year.

“So I’m guessing that’s still a no on Nino’s invite huh?”

He watched as she fell out of her offensive stance and relaxed. Puffs of hot breath being visible due to the low temperatures of the evening.

“I still need to work on the spare dress and Master Fu suggested that we’d polish our fighting skills some more.”
“Can’t hurt to take a couple of hours to relax.”

“It’s New Year’s Eve.”

“All the more reason to go out and have fun. We’ll dance, have a few drinks and laughs with our friends.”

“Chat….Adrien…I can’t. Not now. There isn’t much time left and I feel like we need a backup plan for this.”

“And the spare dress is the backup plan.” The cat themed hero nodded. “I know.”

“Then you understand that I need to finish that on time. The deadline is soon. Very soon.”

“I know. I...I just...I just don’t want you to overwork yourself and fall back into what you were again.”

Ladybug frowned and pursed her pink lips. “What?”

“Your mom told me a long time ago, that you pretty much threw all of yourself into your work.”

“I had to.” She tried to argue. “Maman...papa...they needed me to….”

“It helped break you my Lady. It prevented you from grieving when you needed to and that’s why you’ve felt broken and I’ll be damned if I’ll let you do that to yourself again. Especially when you told me, more than once, that you don’t feel completely like your old self yet.”

“I…I…”

“Rest. Please.”

“Chat. You need my help. You know I’m doing it all for you right?”

“I know. But that shouldn’t stop you from thinking about yourself.”

“You sound awfully hypocritical right now Kitty.” She snorted.

“It’s different for me.”

“No. No it’s not.”

“Yeah. Yeah it is.” He let out a uncomfortable chuckle.

Knowing very well how right she was.

The closer the dreaded deadline approached, the more trouble he was having sleeping at night.

Often tossing and turning until the early hours in the morning.

Doom scenarios dancing through his head whenever he closed his eyes.
Things his father could.
The ways he could screw up and give the older man a reason to go off again.

“Do you honestly believe the words coming out of your mouth just now? Because I’ve seen how
tired you’ve been lately.”

Chat Noir sighed deeply and shook his head. “I had hoped I would be able to hide that.”

“You’re just as tired as I am. If not more.” Ladybug took a step forward and wrapped her arms
around his waist to pull him into a hug.

The moment she leaned her head against his chest, his arms wrapped around her small frame to pull
the woman as tightly against him as he could.
Burying his face against her shoulder.
Enjoying the warmth between them.

“I’m...I’m fine Bug.” The blonde muttered against her.

“So am I. I’m able to handle this Chaton. The bakery, helping you, patrols. I can handle it.
Barely...but I’m handling it and I’m still getting better bit by bit. Mostly thank to you.”

“I’d still feel better if you take a rest every once in a while.”

“I’d feel better if you would do the same.”

By now it became crystal clear to him that neither of them would give in.

If his business classes taught him anything, it was that now was the time to offer a compromise.

“Let’s both call it a night. We’ll pick up the sparing again tomorrow.”

Ladybug let out a confirming hum. “Okay. Just...I’m not sure if I’m up to go dancing. I know you
wanted to and--”

“It’s fine. I just...want to spend the last few hours of the year with you. Is that okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah that’s more than okay.”

He pulled back from their hug and softly kissed her cheek before capturing her cold lips with his
own.

He was convinced that, if his father hadn’t hired her to sabotage the new line, at the very least she
had been hired to annoy the ever living daylights out of the team.

Adrien frowned as he watched Lila try on the dress she was supposed to model for the show.
The woman couldn’t seem to stop moving about, making it harder for Marinette to make some final
adjustments to the gown.

“This thing is hideous.” The brunette scoffed. “Couldn’t you have made something more flattering?”
“You’re not getting paid to have an opinion on what we design.” Adrien grumbled. “You’re getting paid to model.”

“Can’t I wear something that’s more me?” She pouted.

“I’m sorry Lila. There aren’t enough garbage bags in the world to make something that’s more befitting of you.” Marinette suddenly spat back.

He couldn’t help but crack a smile and let out a snort at her quick comeback.

“Adrien!”

“No. I’m letting her have this one. Maybe if you would actually cooperate I would have scolded Marinette…but you haven’t now and you haven’t since you stepped in here for the first time.” The blonde shook his head.

“Well, maybe I would have if some people around here treated me nicely.” The woman squinted her eyes as she tried to give Bettina a mean glare. “Just wait until your father hears about this. I’m sure monsieur Agreste would love to hear how you’ve all been treating me!”

“As if that man would care.” He heard his love mumbled under her breath.

If his father cared or not wasn’t the current problem. The many wide eyed stares directed at him were.

There was no point in hiding it now after Lila had openly blurted out his last name to half of his department.

At the very least all of the present designers and models knew he was an Agreste now.

Should he address the matter?

Pretend nothing happened?

He had tried to keep things under wraps for a couple of months now.

If he didn’t confirm nor deny Lila’s claim, he would at least show he wasn’t bothered by people knowing. That was the very least he could do. Being the manager and all, keeping his head cool in these sorts of situations was key.

“Just because you know monsieur Agreste, doesn’t mean you can boss everyone around.” Adrien firmly stated.

“Or ruin our work.” One of the other designers added. “I’ve seen you walk into this department far more times that you should mademoiselle Rossi.”

“I just want things to be perfect. That’s why I was hired too!” Lila flipped her hair over her shoulder. “To make sure everyone is doing their jobs and as far as I can tell you all are. You’re real professionals. Unlike someone here.”
The woman glanced down at Marinette.

“Talking about yourself again?” She asked with a smirk. “In that case I agree. You’re not a professional.”

“I absolutely am! I modelled for Vanello last summer and Torlina Desponé last spring!”

“Sweetheart, if you’re a model, I’m the Queen on England.” One of the other models in the room scoffed. “It’s not hard to stand still darling. But you managed to screw that up.”

“I had scoliosis when I was little, I can’t stand for that long otherwise my back will hurt.” The woman pouted. “I’m...I’m sorry I can’t do my job as well as you can because of my medical condition.”

Letting out a heavy sigh, Marinette stood up from her crouching position and took a few steps back to admire her work.

Adrien honestly wasn’t sure why Lila was complaining. The dress was simple, yet elegant. A yellow-ish, shimmering fabric covering a dark brown one. Giving it a golden like glow in the right light.

Although it didn’t completely suit the self proclaimed model, it didn’t look horrible either. He was sure with some hair and makeup adjustments, the dress would entrance the public regardless.


“It’s not my best work.” She admitted. “But for a consumer line I don’t think it’s half bad either.”

“And with two days to spare. I’m impressed.” Adrien nodded. “Very impressed. Not to mention proud.”

“Proud?” The woman in front of them huffed. “Of this rag? Seriously Adrien?”

“I am.”

“I share Adrien’s sentiment.” Bettina quickly added. “Marinette, you managed to accomplish so much in so little time and you delivered quality work. I am proud of you too.”

Marinette pretty much beamed after hearing the head designer’s compliment.

“It’s really a shame you can’t stay.” Lucille, one of the designers suddenly remarked. “You’re a perfect fit for the team.”

“I...I can’t Luci.” She muttered.

“You hear that? She can’t. Such a shame. Are we done here by the way? I’ve got more things to do.”

“Yeah. We’re done. Thank you for showing up for the final fitting Lila. I’m expecting you to be at the Grand Palais at seven in the morning sharp, this Friday.”
“Your father already informed me. Don’t worry. I’ll be there and ready to blow everyone away.”

“Alright. This way mademoiselle Rossi.” Bettina beckoned for the girl to follow her to bathrooms.

A precaution Adrien insisted on adding since the girl had been caught trying to tear up the dress at some point.

Of course they had the spare Marinette had made in what little free time she had left. But he wanted to be sure that would be enough.

He couldn’t afford to screw up. There was too much on the line for that and he couldn’t have Lila mess up this big event in whatever way.

So every time she had to come in for a fitting of some sort, Bettina would escort her to the bathrooms to make sure nothing happened to the dress while Lila was changing.

An extreme precaution...maybe. But in this case he figured it was needed.

“It’s almost over. So...how do you feel?” He asked Marinette the moment the two women were in the hallway.

“Exhausted. But happy it’s nearly finished.” His partner sighed happily.

“Do you think you’ll be able to survive until Friday?”

“F-Friday?” She asked surprised. “You want me there?”

“Of course. You deserve to be on stage when the show is over. Just like everyone here. You’ve worked hard Mari. You deserve a few moments in the spotlight.”

“I...I eh...I don’t know. I’ve never experienced what it’s like backstage.”

“It’s easy darling.” The model who had called out Lila assured her. “The designers simply oversee that the pieces are worn like it’s meant to. Then they shove us onto the runway.”

Adrien nodded. “Bettina will be doing most of the work. When a model is dressed, just give everything a quick inspection and let them go out there to show off your work.”

“Okay. Yeah. I can do that...I think.”

“I’ll help you Marinette. I know how hectic it can be behind the scenes.” Adrien assured her.

“Thank you.”

“Is it true by the way?” Lucille suddenly asked. “What that girl said? That you’re Gabriel Agreste’s son?”

At this point he could easily write it off as another lie Lila told. The people in the room didn’t really seem to believe her claims anyway.
Then again…

This was one sour apple he eventually had to get through sooner or later.

“‘I am.’

The strawberry blonde woman shrugged. “Okay. Just checking.”

“You eh...don’t have a problem with that?” He asked nervously.

“Most of us kind of figured you were the moment you cut out monsieur Agreste from the whole design process. Nobody else here would have the gall to do that without risking to get fired. But since you’re his son, you don’t have that same risk right?”

“I’ve got other risks to calculate into everything. But...you’re right. Besides, we had to cut him off otherwise we wouldn’t make the deadline.”

“You made a good call. Probably. I’m just curious to know how your father reacted when he found out.”

“He hasn’t. At least, I haven’t heard him complain about it yet so I assume he has been too busy to care.” He shrugged.

Then again he hadn’t exactly told him he wasn’t involved with the whole thing anymore either. So….

There was that.

Although Adrien highly doubted the older man hadn’t caught on to that fact by now.

“At least we’re making our deadline.” Marinette sighed deeply.

“I’m not sure how we’re going to next season.” Another one of the designers mumbled slightly. “Not without someone extra to help us out.”

“Easy. The same way we’re doing right now, only with someone new to help us out.” Adrien explained. “A budding designer fresh out of school. Or maybe even people who have just started out and haven’t made their name in the fashion industry just yet. They’ll be able to present something fresh and new, get paid and have something nice to put on their resumé.”

“You’re free to use any of my sketches Bettina rejected too. Maybe you can work off them or something? It might save some time if you need it.”

“Are you sure?” Lucille asked. “You worked so hard on them. Don’t you want to use them for your portfolio?”

“I eh...I don’t think I’ll be working on full collections anymore after this. But experiencing what it’s like to be a designer has been amazing. Working with all of you has been amazing. Thank you.”

Adrien was about to tell her that she shouldn’t completely give up what she loved doing. That there had to be a way to combine her passion for designing with helping out her mother.

Any word ready to leave his lips were interrupted by Lila’s loud yelling in the hallway however.
“How dare you!”

He noticed madame London’s voice trying to calm the girl down. Seemingly to no avail.

“No! I will not stand for this! How dare you accuse me of doing such a thing! It’s not my fault Dupain-Cheng doesn’t know how to make a quality dress! I’ll have you fired! I’ll have you all fired!”

The designing office fell quiet as they heard the model stomp down the hall.

It wasn’t long after the older woman came back into the room.
A displeased look on her face and his partner’s gown in her arms.

“She managed to rip it.” She sighed, looking at Adrien and Marinette.

“What? How?!”

“She stood on the bottom and when I helped her out of the sleeve on the other side, she just pulled the fabric up. It ripped. I’m sorry Marinette.”

She handed her the piece ever so carefully.
The more the dark haired woman inspected the damage, the deeper the frown on her face became.

“I can’t fix this in time. It went way past the seam. I’d have to replace the entire lower half.”

“All your detailing is on the lower half.” He noticed.

“Yeah. It just won’t work without those tiny beads. Those...damn tiny beads that took me two whole weeks to sew on.”

“I guess it’s a good thing you had a backup plan then.” He muttered.

“Damnit….I...I worked so hard on this.”

Her blue eyes started to water.

“I’m sorry dear.” Bettina was quick to pull her into a hug. “It’s my fault. I should have kept a closer eye on her.”

“No way Bettina!” Lucille was quick to shout. “Mademoiselle Rossi has been causing trouble since the day she stepped in here. Adrien. Can’t you pull some strings to fire her or something? I’m afraid she’ll mess up during the show at this rate. We can’t afford to have a disaster on our hands.”

Didn’t he know it.

“I’m afraid it’s not that easy.” Adrien groaned. “But...I suppose I could talk to my father. He’s the one who hired her specifically for our show. He should be able to lay her off.”

“Worth a shot.” The designer shrugged.
“Tonight. Promise me you’ll be there.” Nino practically begged.

“If everything runs smoothly today, I will.”

“Awesome! Bring Mari with you? That girl needs a break and Alya said it’s been forever since the two of them had gone out. She wants to see her again.”

“We see each other every week.” Adrien chuckled as he fumbled with the tie his Princess made for him. “At least once.”

“Making up for lost time man. Before work and marriage might tear us apart.”

“Not letting that happen Nino. All of you are stuck with me.” He joked. “Besides. I’ve been wanting to take Mari out for weeks now. But we’ve both been too caught up in work and our little video project to actually take some time off.”

“The more reason to take her with you! It’s going to be amazing dude! When I played there during New Year’s it was. So I don’t expect anything different this time.”

“Yeah. Sorry I couldn’t make it then.”

“It’s okay. You kept an eye on our little baker girl when we couldn’t. We’ve all noticed she was in a gloomy mood around the holidays. We figured it’s just been hard on her with her pops gone and all. So we didn’t want to bother her too much to come and hang out.”

“You did the right thing. She needed the space. Both of them did.”

“You doing okay too? I mean. The last time we really hung out was during the day the girls went to the spa. You seemed kinda worn down then.”

“Still kinda am.” Adrien chuckled. “But everything should be okay after today.”

Well.

Not okay.

Things wouldn’t be okay until he had gotten his hands on the brooch.

Everything should feel...less heavy.
Less suffocating.

Hopefully.

“I hope so dude. But you’re sure to drop by tonight right? I need to talk to the manager to reserve the
“v.i.p lounge for you guys.”

“Yeah. I’m going to drop by for sure! Even if Mari isn’t feeling up to joining us.”

“Awesome! Hey. Good luck today man.”

“Thanks Nino.”

“I’ll message you later with some details and stuff.”

“Much appreciated. Good luck making a start on planning the wedding too.”

“Thanks man.” His friend laughed. “Alya sometimes has these crazy ideas, so I’m going to need it.”

“This is a first draft right? So just jolt down whatever both of you want and you can look at what’s reasonable within your budget later.”

“Good idea Adrien. Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

“See you tonight.”

“See ya Nino.”

With a tap of his finger, Adrien hung up the call and focused back on fixing his tie. The suit jacket she had made for him wouldn’t be complete without it after all.

He tried.

He really did.

But he just couldn’t seem to get the hang of it without a tutorial.

“You’re going to be late.” Plagg muttered on his shoulder.

“I know but…”

“Let Spots tie that thing for you.”

He had to admit, that was one of the Kwami’s better ideas.

“You’re coming too Plagg.”

“Yes, yes. Just in case your dad tries to pull some crap during the show. I know. We’ve been over it ten times already.” The black cat sighed. “Shame. I really wanted to see what ridiculous murder Jessica Fletcher will solve in season three. That old lady knows her stuff!”

“You and Tikki have a problem. You know that right? Hooked on crime shows and all.”

“Well we have to do some kind of research, just in case you ever want to hide a body or something.”
“I’m not going to murder my father. If that’s what you’re implying.”

“You could let me? Quick, no evidence and you wouldn’t be so grumpy when Marinette isn’t around.”

“Grumpy?”

“Just a little kid. I’ve heard you grunt and groan more times this week than I can count.”

“It’s just...things haven’t been going easy lately. It’s frustrating.”

The small cat gently patted his shoulder. “I know. But maybe it’ll be over soon. Just grab that Miraculous when you get the chance. Consequences be damned kid.”

“You know. Breaking in and stealing it would be the easier way.”

“Talk it over with Ladybug. Grab some cheese and we’ll go plan a heist!”

“It’s not very hero-like. But it’s for the greater good.”

“Take it from a Kwami who has seen it all. Sometimes doing bad things for the greater good is the easiest solution.”

“I don’t think he’ll expect me to actually steal it either. We might have an advantage.”

“The Ladyblog hasn’t picked up on you two having returned either. Your old man doesn’t know your partner has your back.”

“Another advantage.”

“Exactly!”

“I could ask Nathalie for help. Once she comes back, she’s allowed to pick up her things inside the house. She might be able to get us the layout of the mansion and the placement of the security cameras.”

“If she’s willing to do that, that would make things so much easier for us.”

“I’ll text her after the show to ask if she wants to have lunch when she comes back next month. We can talk things over in private.”

“Clever. Probably harder to track for the police too.”

“The police?”

“Well I am going to assume that your father is going to report it as stolen when he finds out.”

“A fake. We need a fake. A very good fake. To replace it. So he won’t find out.”

“Kid. That might actually work.”

For the first time in weeks, Adrien felt a little less tired and a little more confident things would turn
out okay.

Maybe even sooner than he initially thought.

It was cold outside.

Cold and wet due to the rain.

Yet he felt happy when her hand intertwined with his own as they made their way into the large building.

It was buzzing with people.

Photographers.

Staff running back and forth with their supplies.

It had been a long while since had been part of such an event and it honestly just reminded him of how much he had despised it.

From being dressed by others to needing to sit perfectly still so makeup could be applied on his face.

Eventually he had gotten used to it.

But that didn’t mean the dislike for it had vanished.

If he could turn back time, he would have told his younger self that he needed to speak up to his father.

Tell him when something he was forced to do made him unhappy.

“Where to?” Marinette asked as she tightened her grip on the bag she had brought with her.

In it the spare gown she had spent several nights working on.

He really needed to buy her dinner to compensate in some way.

This woman.

This amazing, wonderful, selfless woman, had really gone above and beyond just to make sure the whole team was going to be able to make the deadline.

Adrien felt that in many ways, he didn’t deserve her.

Yet at the same time he felt immensely blessed that she was a part of his life.

“That way.” He nodded towards the door he remembered lead to the backstage area.

“Can I be honest with you?”

“Always Bug. What’s on your mind?”
I’m nervous.” She let out a big sigh. “Like…very nervous.”

“It’ll be fine. Just follow Bettina’s instructions and I’ll be there to help out.”

“Aren’t you nervous then?”

“Nah. It’ll be fine. We only have twenty five pieces so it should be a short show anyway. Besides. After today, we can both breath a little easier.”

“I can.” She reminded him. “For you it’s just waiting until--”

Adrien wasn’t sure why she suddenly stopped speaking. That was until his eyes fell on Lila speaking with his father near the backstage entrance. It seemed his request to rethink his decision on having her be part of the show had been ignored.

“Shit.” He hissed under his breath. “What is he doing out of the house?”

“I don’t know!” Marinette whispered back. “How can we not screw up when he’s literally going to watch our every move! What is he finds something as an excuse to use the Miraculous?!”

“He wouldn’t. Not in public anyway. I hope.”

“It’s a good thing I have Tikki with me then.”

“Yeah. I brought Plagg too. Just in case.” He sighed. “I had half hoped he wouldn’t be here. That would make things so much easier.”

“I figured that was what Lila was for? To report back to him if something got messed up today.”

“Apparently not.” He grumbled as Lila noticed the two approaching them.

“Adrien! Oh Adrien! I told your father all about what happened to the dress I was supposed to model. It’s horrible that you’re just one piece short.”

“We’re not.” He told the woman with clear confidence in his voice.

“I’ve got your dress right here Lila. Please go join the others to get yourselves ready.” His partner requested with an overly honeysweet tone in her voice.

The green eyed woman turned towards Gabriel.

He paused for a few seconds before giving a nod. Letting her follow Marinette’s request.

“Father.”

“Adrien.”

“I didn’t expect you to show up today.”

“This is an important show. I have to make sure everything is just perfect.”
“That’s my job.”

“So it is.”

“So...you’re not trusting me to do my job? Is that it?”

“That’s exactly it.”

The grip on Marinette’s hand tightened. “Just don’t get in the way.”

Hastily he pulled her into the backstage area.

It didn’t take long before Bettina came storming at him. “He fired me.” She huffed. “He actually fired me.”

“What?” The woman next to him gasped.

“He. Fired me. I need to be out of the building by the end of the month.”

“Fucking--” He cursed under his breath.

“You only have yourself to blame for that.” Gabriel’s voice suddenly sounded. “What mademoiselle Rossi told me, the dress was ripped due to a lack of quality control.”

“It ripped. Because she actively tried to destroy it.” The older woman huffed. “Honestly Gabriel. In all the years I’ve worked for you. How many times have I delivered sub par quality?”

“Plenty. If the sale numbers are any indication.”

“Sale numbers do not correlate to the effort and quality our designers put into their work.” Adrien argued. “I won’t let you fire another one of my staff because you fail to give a damn and fall for honey covered lies. Bettina stays.”

“You have no say in the matter Adrien.”

“She. Stays.”

The sudden smirk on his father’s face brought back the worried feelings that had subsided earlier that morning.

“Very well. She can stay. Provided everything today will go without a hitch.”

“It will father. I have faith in the people I work with. Unlike you.”

“Misplaced faith, I’m sure. You still have a lot to learn Adrien.”

“Just don’t stand in our way while we work.”

“I do not plan to Bettina. Now go. Prepare your models and your pieces. I will merely observe for now.”
Again he pulled Marinette away from the man.

“What the Hell is he planning?” She whispered.

“Don’t know. But I’m not letting him send madame London away.” He hissed. “Just...do your best and pretend he’s not even here.”

“Okay...yeah...I think I can do that.”

“I’ll help you get through things Marinette.” The older designer assured her. “You can put the dress on the rack right there.”

Marinette nodded and let go of his hand.

“You’ll do great Bug.”

She shook her head as a smile curled on her pink lips. “We’ll do great”

Twenty minutes to go before they would need to start showcasing their collection for the upcoming season.
People were rushing all over the place to make last minute adjustments to makeup, clothes and hairstyles.

All the while his father had made himself comfortable on a spot where he could clearly oversee what went on behind the curtains.
That same, smirk never leaving his face.

It irked Adrien to no end.

“Adrien!” The panic in Marinette’s voice clearly cut through the murmurs around him.

“Okay. Luci. Will you be able to handle this on your own?” He quickly asked the strawberry blonde.

“Yeah. No problem. It’s just a button that fell off. Give me two minutes.”

“Awesome.”

With that he quickly left Lucille’s side to rush towards his partner.

“Marinette? What’s wrong.”


“What do you mean gone?”

“I mean I put it on the rack and now it’s gone!”

“Okay. Okay deep breaths Bug.” He quickly kissed her cheek. “I’ll go look for it. Maybe one of the
assistants took it for Lila to put on.”

“We don’t have much time. If that gown isn’t ready to go on the runway in fifteen…”

“I know. I’ll handle it. Don’t worry.”

“Bettina is already looking for it too. I...I don’t know what to do!”

“Deep breaths remember. Go through the racks again. Maybe someone put it back on the wrong one.”

“Okay. Okay.”

“Message me when you’ve found it.”

“Okay. Yeah. I can...I can handle that.”

“I know you can.” He gave her another peck before running off.

Logically, since Lila was supposed to wear the dress, he figured if he found her he would find the piece of clothing as well.

Right?

As his green eyes scanned the group of people around him however, he soon found out that his former classmate was nowhere to be seen.

“Damnit. Where is she?”

He kept walking, trying to search for the girl amongst all the models.

Past the mirrors, the dressing rooms.
Racks of clothing belonging to other design houses.

He searched for the self proclaimed model in the entrance hallway, the bathrooms and even briefly outside.

She was nowhere to be found and there was no time left to look.

“I’ve searched everywhere.” He huffed once he returned to Marinette’s side. “I can’t find Lila or the dress.”

“It’s not on the other racks either and nobody from the other fashion houses got it mixed up in their collection.” Adrien could tell that she was starting to really panic. “Bettina couldn’t find a clue either and we’re three pieces away from showcasing our last one!”

“Shit. Shitshitshit.” Adrien ran a hand through his hair and noticed he started hyperventilating a little.

This was bad.

One piece less than what his father would have wanted, would surely be a breach of contract.
Madame London would be out of a job.

He just couldn’t allow that.

There had to be a way.

“The spare is gone. The model who is supposed to wear it decided to fuck off. We’re screwed Chaton.”

“No. No there has to be a way Bug.”

His eyes darted to the entrance of the runway where a model had just stepped off stage after their walk.

“I don’t--”

The worried look she had been carrying was quickly replaced with a different one. One he could not quite place, but yet seemed so familiar.

Her bluebell eyes darted up and down, almost as if she was looking for something he was carrying.

“Take off your coat.” She demanded suddenly.

“What?”

“Take off your coat. I have an idea.”

Adrien knew better than to question her when his Lady had an idea.

“Give me a quick rundown of this plan of yours my Lady?”

“We need to present something new right?” Marinette turned her head. “Lucille! I need red lipstick! Now! It’s an emergency!”

The other designer merely gave a quick nod and ran to one of the makeup tables to grab what was requested.

“Right.”

“Then I need you to go onto that runway Chaton.”

“What!”

“You’re wearing something I made! I designed! Besides, nobody is going to know you’re wearing a Gabriel’s three piece suit from two years ago, from where they are sitting.” She loosened his tie and slid the knot down his shirt. “Basically. You’re wearing the last piece.”

“Marinette. You--”

“Here you go!” Lucille hastily trusted the lipstick into Marinette’s hands.

She uncapped it and proceeded to apply the red colour onto her soft lips.
At this point Adrien was a little confused.
It wasn’t that he didn’t like to see her wear red, since it was one of his favorites to see her in, but they
didn’t have much time left.
A few seconds at most.

What was she doing?

Before he could even ask, she had yanked him down to her level by his tie and pressed a firm kiss
against his lips.
Much time to enjoy it wasn’t given to him before she pulled back and ran her thumb over his mouth
and pressed one more kiss against his cheek.

“Go. Go up there and strut your stuff Adrien!”

“Eh..right! Yes! What’s my motivation? What kind of attitude should I present out there?”

“I don’t know! Just go!”

“She just gave you your motivation! Go! There isn’t much time left!” Lucille basically shouted at
him as she started pushing him towards the runway entrance.

The moment he set foot on the platform, he noticed how fast his heart beated inside his chest.

This was it.

They would be able to work things out.
He just had to walk up and down the runway and that was it.

Easy.

He had done that many times before.

He felt how someone, he suspected Lucille or Marinette gave him a gentle nudge to usher him from
behind the curtain.

He took the first step, his coat in one hand, the other found its way into the pocket of his pants.

Straightening his back, he took another step.
Remembering to keep his gaze fixated on the farthest wall he could see as the former model made his
way to the end of the stage.

Cameras flashed as he stopped, threw the jacket over his shoulder and posed for the audience.
Making sure Marinette’s design was shown off as much as he could.

The moment he was back behind the curtains, Adrien let out a deep breath he didn’t even realize he
had been holding.

“Adrien!”

Two strong arms wrapped themselves around his neck and it took him a second to realize it was
Marinette hugging him tightly.
“Thank you.” She muttered against him. “Thank you for doing this.”

“Didn’t have much of a choice.” He chuckled, returning the embrace. "I was pushed on stage before I could even prepare myself."

“I’m sorry I didn’t ask you if you even wanted to go out there.”

“It’s okay. Don’t be sorry. This had to be done and I’ll gladly walk another hundred thousand shows for you Mari.”

The woman giggled against his chest. “You’re amazing you know that. You pretty much saved the show and Bettina’s job.”

“Thanks to your quick thinking! You’re the amazing one Marinette!” Adrien pushed her out of the embrace and gently cupped her cheeks. “You’re the one who saved the show. You were quick to find a solution. I still don’t know what the lipstick was for or why you kissed me before I had to go on, but it worked. We met our deadline thanks to you. You’re truly amazing Marinette Dupain-Cheng.”

A faint blush started to appear on her cheeks.

“Well...I eh...just figured a bit of red on you would help bring out the piece you know.”

“Marinette! Take a bow with us!” Madame London called out.

“Oh. I don’t--”

“I insist my dear. You’ve earned your moment in the spotlight.”

Bluebell eyes turned to look at him to silently ask for advice.

“Go. You’ve earned it Bug. I’ll wait here for you.”

His partner bit her lip and smiled brightly at him. “Okay. I’ll be right back. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

As Adrien watched her until she disappeared out of sight, he felt proud.

Proud of what she was able to accomplish in such a short time.

Proud because she had come such a long way since he came back.

No longer did she need to cry as much as before.

The insecurity that had seeped into her only sometimes surfaced for the world to see.

She took the lead more often.

She smiled a whole lot more.

A smile he wouldn’t trade in for anything in the world.
"Adrien."

He let out a small groan at hearing his father say his name. “Yes?”

“I have to say that I’m impressed.”

“Oh?”

“I did not think you would have been able to actually have a solution for this sudden predicament.”

“All the credit should go to Marinette for that. She came up with the solution.”

“Indeed. I don’t suppose she is interested in becoming my protegé? She has great potential.”

Adrien would rather lose a limb than let the love of his life be that close to his father. Who knows how many ways he could manipulate the both of them then.

No.

He’d rather not have her move involved than she already was.

“She’s not interested.”

“You seem very sure about that. Perhaps I could ask her instead and hear the actual answer.”

“She’s not interested.” He once again repeated. “She only agreed to design for this collection to do me a favor. Nothing more.”

“It’s a shame to see such talent go to waste. Don’t you think so?”

“She’s a person. Not just...potential or talent you can just throw away like you do with the rest of your staff. I’m not letting her near you.”

“Tell me son.” Gabriel took a deep breath. “I couldn’t help but notice that mademoiselle Dupain looked very happy while she was doing her work. Are you telling me that you’re willing to throw her happiness away just like that? Don’t you think she would be much happier if she could keep on doing what so obviously is her passion?”

“Dupain-Cheng.” Adrien corrected with a hiss. “And I am. If it means it’ll keep her safe. Then I am.”

“I see. How very selfish of you.”

He let out a short chuckle while narrowing his gaze. “Says the guy forcing his own son to work in the family business without asking if he even wants to. This coming from the man who has no problem firing people when he feels like it. How selfish of you father.”

“You are clearly confusing that with business decisions I had to make.”

“Bullshit.” Adrien grumbled.
Slowly the people which had been on stage, started to make their way back. The sound of applause from the audience clearly heard.

“Nevertheless. You managed to have your team deliver what I asked for. I am proud of you.”

Proud.

Coming from anyone else that would have meant something.

“I wish I could believe that.”

He noticed madame London push through the small crowd and hastily made her way to them. “Gabriel. You’re still here?”

“I was just about to leave. Still...congratulations Bettina. It seems like you’re going to keep your position.”

The older woman merely responded with a glare. One his father seemed to ignore.

“I can’t even understand why you even wanted to lay her off in the first place.” Adrien continued to grumble. “She’s wonderful to work with.”

“Those reasons are my own and don’t concern you.” Gabriel assured him.

“Doubtful.” He muttered under his breath.

“I will leave you to clean up. Good work today.”

The older man turned around and slowly left the area.

“Hey. Thanks.” The head designer suddenly spoke in a soft voice.

“For what?”

“I still have a job thanks to you stepping out there on the catwalk.”

“You’d have to mostly thank Marinette for that.”

“Back to the bakery?” He asked Marinette as they stepped back out into the cold.

“Yeah. I need to get back to work and I can't wait to tell maman about today!”

“Do you have time to get a late lunch?”

Carefully he took hold of her hand and intertwined their fingers.

“I could go for a bite actually. The same place you took me for breakfast once? It should be on the way back.”
“That little café you mean?”

She nodded with a smile.

“Sure. Why not I really liked their--”

Adrien stopped mid-sentence as his eyes fell on someone familiar.

Lila looked extremely displeased, leaning against the side of the Grand Palais. Her gaze fixated on her phone screen.

“Could you wait here for a minute Mari?”


“I need to have some words with Lila for a second.”

She frowned. “Oh. In that case, ask her what he Hell she has done to my dress.”

“Are you absolutely sure it was her? It could have been my father when we weren't looking.”

“The gown disappears at the same time she did. Since this is Lila Rossi we’re talking about, it is no coincidence and I think you know that too.”

Adrien gave her a solemn nod. “I’ll ask her about it. Wait for me?”

“Always Chaton.”

The blonde smiled and leaned forward to gently peck her cold lips. “Love you.”

“Love you too Adrien.”

He let go of her hand, instantly missing her warmth, before making his way towards the other woman.

All the while he tried to think of ways to bring up the delicate situation of the missing dress and that she had not been there where he needed her to be.

Should he be harsh or subtle?

Maybe just being direct would work.

But most of all he needed to be skeptical of whatever story she would decide to feed to him. She had a tendency to lie when they were kids after all.

Even if her attempt at a facade didn’t fully work on his team, he had no idea how many people she had tried to manipulate over the past few weeks.

“Lila.”

The model looked up from her phone, her frown turning into a overly sweet smile. “Adrien!”
“Where were you?!” He hissed, coming to a stop next to her. “We needed you on the catwalk back there.”

She shrugged before answering. “I was told by madame London to take the dress and change in another part of the building. Oh Adrien! I got so lost trying to find my way back. By the time I did the show was over.”

“Bettina looked for the dress with us. If she told you to take it, she would have notified everyone you had.”

“Maybe she lied to cover up her mistakes? Your father was on the verge of firing her, from what he told me. For good reasons it seems.”

He slowly felt himself fuming. In the few months he had been working with his staff, Bettina turned out to be one of the more trustworthy people around. Going out of her way to help resolve the situation the department had been thrown in. Guiding Marinette wherever needed.

But he couldn’t lose his cool just yet.

If he learned anything from the arguments he had with his father, it was that he would get the most out of a conversation before the yelling would start.

“T’s fully disagree with him on that.” Adrien muttered. “But tell me. What did you do with the dress?”

“I put it back on the rack after the show was over of course. What do you think I did?”

“Anything but that. Because, you see. I just walked out of the building two minutes ago. I checked over the pieces we had personally. Mari’s dress wasn’t there.”

“Maybe someone took it? One of the other companies? It was a very pretty dress.”

“You said it was ugly not even two days ago.”

Again she shrugged. “Opinions change.”

“Lila.” He took a deep breath. “No offence. But I can spot your bullshit from a mile away. Your lies might have wrapped everyone around your fingers when we were in school, but it isn’t working on me now that we’re adults. Be honest. No more lies. This is important.”

A sly smile curled up on her lips. “What is the truth worth to you in this case?”

“What?”

“It seems that you’re looking for information I can provide. What is that worth to you?”

“What are you asking for it?”

“You. Me. Dating.”
“What?!”

“I do care about you Adrien. Unlike Marinette. She is only after you for your money and good looks. I, on the other hand, have loved you since forever. I just want you to be happy and make you happy."

“So it comes full circle.”

She blinked a couple of times in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t think I’ve noticed that you tried to cling onto me when we were in school. It honestly made me super uncomfortable, but back then I didn’t want to be rude and push away a potential friend. But we’re adults now. Yet you still try to blackmail people to get what you want. Is that what you did to my father too? Manipulate him?”

Her smile turned into a smirk. The kind he only ever seen on movie villains.

“How perceptive of you. I did. To get closer to you. He agreed to help me get what I want, in exchange for doing him a little favor.”

“Revolting.” He sneered. “That is just sickening.”

“That is exactly what she is doing to you.” She nodded towards Marinette.

He followed her gaze and noticed that Jagged Stone and his assistant Penny, had walked up to her. Adrien had seen some celebrities in the audience, but not many. He didn’t even realize the rocker had been there.

They were happily chatting away with the baker’s daughter, who was all smiles and laughs being reunited with one of her idols.

“She’s using you to get what she wants.” Lila continued. “As I was using your father to get what I want.”

“Marinette isn’t like that. If you were nice and actually got to know her, you would know she gives more than she takes.”

“Isn’t it true that she always wanted to be a designer?”

“Yeah.” Everyone who knew her would have known that.

“And now she is. Thanks to you. Look at her, expanding her horizons. Talking to potential clients. She could have never done that without using you.”

Lila’s words made no impact on him. He knew the truth and the truth was that Marinette was amazing, loving and generous.

She was Ladybug in every way. Worthy of being a hero.
But…

If he played along with the lies, maybe he would be able to get some truth out of the woman.

“No…No she’s…no.”

“It’s true isn’t it? Takes a liar to know one. She just has a different approach to get what she wants.”

“I fell for it. I even fell for her.” He sighed sadly.

“She’ll break your heart Adrien. I don’t want her to do that to you. To see you heartbroken. I do care about you. That has never been a lie.”

“So…you really tried to manipulate my father because you love me?”

Lila nodded, putting a hand on his arm. “I did. Sometimes people need to do bad things for the right reason. It wasn’t hard to wrap your father around my finger at the gala. He’s very receptive to sweet talking you know.”

“No wonder he insisted that you’d model for him.”

“That was actually part of the favor he wanted me to do. I don’t have any modelling experience. Not really. I tried to be, but never got a chance to be in something other than one catalog photoshoot. Your father said he could change that.”

Now that, he could believe.

“Makes sense.”

“He said he would gladly have someone as lovely as myself be his daughter-in-law and work for his company. He would help me get together with you and he later paid me in exchange for doing him that favor.”

Adrien raised a brow. “What favor exactly?”

“Well it seems you weren’t doing as good of a job as he hoped you would do. But he was afraid to directly tell you and he heard some rumors of you hiring a non-Gabriel designer for the collection. Your father paid me to get some inside info.”

“Just some inside info? I could have told him what he wanted to know if he just talked to me.”

“Well. Not just some inside info.” She chuckled. “He wasn’t too happy to find out you didn’t involve him with the whole thing like he used to, so he asked me to find a way to get rid of some of the collection pieces I would be modelling.”

“But I only asked you to model one. Because I figured you would do it justice more than any of the other pieces.”

“Awww. That’s so sweet of you to say Adrien! You’re so right.” It seemed like his father wasn’t the only one receptive to a little sweet talking. “That’s why I tried to destroy the dress. It just wasn’t up to your father’s standards and he wanted it gone. Who am I to go against him.”
“Not a decent person.” He thought.

“Okay, so I didn’t know Marinette was going to make a spare in her own time. It’s quite smart.” Lila continued. “That girl goes above and beyond to get what she wants huh. Anyway. I took the spare of the rack and found a quiet place to rip it to pieces and throw it in the trash. Can’t have a rejected prototype lay around for the competitors to steal.”

“I can’t fucking believe it.”

“I only did it for you. I don’t even care about the money your father gave me. I think he was just trying to do what’s best for you and the company.”

“I can’t fucking believe you let yourself be used by him like that.”

“What?” She asked bewildered.

“What did you say again? Takes a liar to know one? Yet my father promised you an easy way to get what you want and you didn’t even realize he has been playing you?”

She frowned. “It wasn’t easy. Nobody in your office trusts me. I had to flirt really hard with that one guy to get some gossip out of him.”

“Lila. I know my father. I know he wants this show to be a disaster because that would be a breach of the contract between us. That’s probably why he came here personally. You helped him sabotage us.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder. “So what if your contract between him was broken. You’re his son right? That shouldn’t matter.”

“The big deal is that someone almost got fired because of him. Someone who works hard and is one of the best people in my staff.”

He felt his anger rise again.

“Well he should have fired Marinette the minute you brought her in.” She scoffed.

“It’s not Marinette I’m talking about. Not that you would care but he was going to lay off madame London. He’s been trying to lay off staff left and right to fit...whatever it is he’s planning.”

“Since when did you turn into a conspiracy theorist?” She laughed.

He didn’t laugh with her.

“Let me ask you something. Do you remember Hawkmoth?”

The woman rolled her eyes and snorted. “Of course. Who hasn’t.”

“You were probably one of his most favorite people to akumatize. He once made a off hand comment to me about how easy it was to manipulate such a spiteful person like yourself. Angry about me not believing you. Out for revenge because Ladybug called you out on your bullshit.”

“He...told you?”
“Ah. Let me explain a little more. By Hawkmoth telling me, I meant my father told me. Then again, they were the same people until the contract between us. The contract he is trying to break, using you.”

“What? No. That’s a lie!”

He shrugged. “Whether you believe that or not is up to you. You could ask him directly. He’ll probably deny it since Ladybug and Chat Noir took the proof with them years ago and their word alone won’t be enough to put him away for his crimes. But he was Hawkmoth.”

“No. He can’t be. That nice man.”

“That nice man who knows exactly what you want to hear to make you do what he wants, by giving you what you want. Sound familiar doesn’t it? Be glad you got paid at least for the shit he put you through. I’ve been dealing with it for years and got nothing out of it.”

“That’s a lie! Stop lying!”

“It’s a harsh truth Lila. Not a lie. But eh...thanks for the information I needed. I wish you the best. I really do.”

He shot her a knowing smile and made his way back to Marinette. Behind him, he could hear her mutter some curse nasty words under her breath, but he didn’t care.

He now knew why his father had been so insistent on having the woman be part of the show and he could only theorize as to why she was hired to sabotage the collection and by extension a part of his own company.

It still just didn’t make sense.

If he had to make a bet, it would be because he wanted to use the Miraculous. To do that, he needed to be put in a situation that would break the contract.

Although why Gabriel wouldn’t just use it and disregard their whole deal from the get go, Adrien didn’t know either. A small part of him figured it was because he still had some sort of honor left.

Another part of him speculated because it might have something to do with his main scheme. Whatever that would be.

All in all, it just didn’t make sense to him.

Maybe Marinette, Tikki or Plagg could help him figure out what motivation was driving the man to risk ruining a part of his own company and put a stain on the Gabriel brand.

“Y-Yeah. I can do that.” He could hear Marinette stutter.

A faint blush graced her cheeks the moment he walked back to her.

“Awesome Marinette!” Jagged replied enthusiastically. “I’m sure you’ll be able to make some rockin’ outfits!”
“I hope so.”

“We’ll keep in touch.” Penny Rolling assured her, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder before walking passed her.

“I know you’re going to do great Marinette! You always do!.” The rocker encouraged her before following his assistant.

“You seem happy.”

The dark haired woman slightly jumped at hearing his voice. “Wha-- Oh. Adrien. It’s just you. Yes...yes I’m very happy. Jagged Stone wants me to design his outfits for his world tour next year! Isn’t that exciting! I have so many ideas already!”

“That’s amazing Mari!”

Without warning her, he picked her up and spun her around. Earning a couple of giggles from the love of his life.

“Adrien!”

“Only you would be so amazing to get the Jagged Stone asking you personally to make you his stage outfits!”

“Put me down you dork!” She laughed.

He gently put her down and pecked her cheek lovingly a couple of times.

“I’m so proud of you.” Adrien sighed happily.

“I’m proud of you too. You handled the situation back there wonderfully.”

“So did you!”

“Okay. Okay. We both did amazing.” She laughed. “Let’s leave it at that before we end up complimenting each other all day.”

“Just stating facts Bug.”

“How eh...how did the talk with Lila go? Did you manage to find out where the gown is?”

He frowned at that question.

“Yeah. I’ve got some bad news about that.”

“It’s gone isn’t it.”

The way she stated it didn’t even sound like a question to him.

“Afraid so.”
“I’m not surprised...but that doesn’t mean I’m not feeling sad about it.” She sighed. “I put a lot of time into it. Both of them. It was horrible the first one got torn, but now the second one is gone too.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know. It was Lila’s fault but...I can still weep for the amount of sleep I lost making it can’t I?”

“I will weep with you Princess.”

“Is she going to be more trouble for you by the way?”

“I don’t think so. It seemed like father paid her to sabotage the show. I think it’s because he found out I cut him off from the process? But I’m not entirely sure about that since he is harming the company by extension. So that doesn’t make sense.”

“When does he makes sense?”

Again he frowned. “Not lately. That’s for sure.”

“Well...let’s not think about it for today. I don’t know why, but I feel like celebrating our victory.”

“Victory?” He laughed.

“Yeah. We showed that man that we can punch back whatever he throws at us. It feels like a personal victory don’t you think?”

“That is one way to look at it.”

“I don’t suppose you’re willing to celebrate with me?”

“What did you have in mind Mari?”

The corners of her lips pulled up into a big smile, a glint in her blue eyes. She looked so happy it made his heart flutter.

“Let’s go on a date. Tomorrow.”

“Really? A...an actual date? For real?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to pressure you and--”

“I want to....I want to give you more of me and...I don’t know if I’m ready to focus completely on a full relationship between us since I’m still struggling with myself. But, if you’re okay with it...I’d like to take things forward between us. Step by step.”

“Yeah. Yeah! Of course that’s okay with me. Holy shit! Why wouldn’t that be!” He laughed, running a hand through his hair. “I eh...don’t suppose you’d want to go out with our friends tonight? Nino is playing at that high end club again tonight. We didn’t get to go last time and well…”

“I knew you were upset we didn’t go back then. You could have gone you know.”
“It’s less fun without you. Besides why would I pass on getting my butt kicked by you?”

A Cheshire grin appeared on his face when he noticed how red the girl’s face was turning.

“Pick me up at ten?” Marinette muttered softly under her breath.

He placed another kiss onto her cold cheek. “As you wish my love.”

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