**Basilisk**

by Interrobanng

**Summary**

“Adrikins, you’ve been hypnotized by a giant snake.”
--Chloé Bourgeois, multiple occasions

It’s been 5 years since Stoneheart and Ladybug is finally ready to reveal her identity to Chat Noir. Unfortunately, this does not go according to plan. When Adrien shows up at school the next day claiming to have no idea who or what Chat Noir is, she thinks he’s trying to teach her a lesson—until she realizes that his ring is missing along with his memories. Now it’s up to Marinette (and some friends) to rescue her partner, in all his forms.

(Identity Reveal(s)/Everyone Already Secretly Knows. Plot-driven, romance/angst,
hurt/comfort, fantasy/adventure and a happy ending.)
Disclaimer:

Author: Okay, this is a new fic and I don’t want to confuse anyone by just diving into the disclaimer mini-plots willy nilly, so I’m taking suggestions on how to kick this off. Ideas? Thoughts? Compliments?

Chat: I have a question…where are we?

Author: Ah, yes. Well, since I am going to be writing a fic about you two that’s longer than one chapter, I’ve kidnapped both Adrien and Marinette and I have brought you to my secret Inspiration Castle. Don’t worry. We have almost zero killer robots now.

(Something explodes in the distance. The Author continues to smile, but it’s strained)

Ladybug: Uh…I get that you’ve kidnapped us and are holding us prisoner until you’ve had your devious plot-driven way with us, but just to be clear, you don’t actually own us, do you?

The Author: That is correct. I do not own Miraculous Ladybug nor any associated content and/or properties.

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Forget Me Not

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Two Weeks Ago

“Hey Adrien! You’re coming to the street fair with us, right? It’s got a medieval mythology theme. It’s gonna be lit like a supervolcano.”

“Sorry, Nino, I can’t.”
“C’mon dude! Nearly everyone from class is gonna be there. We’re all going as one big group. You’ve gotta come!”

“I have to head straight home. Father’s orders.”

“He’s still making you go to those party planning meetings? I thought you weaseled out of those already.”

“This is the last one, I promise. After tonight, I’m done.”

“I feel like I never see you outside of class anymore. Can’t you—”

“Sorry, Nino. Next time, okay?”

“…Okay.” Nino nodded reluctantly, thinking ‘next time’ had been a long time coming.

Marinette finished stuffing her papers into her book bag, ducking her head and trying to appear as if she hadn’t been eavesdropping on their conversation. The other students had already filed out of the classroom, leaving the three of them alone. Nino noticed her flutter of movement and turned to her appealingly.

“You’re coming aren’t you, Nette?” He asked, serving up his absolute best baby-doll eyeballs.

She laughed. “Later. I promised Luka I’d help put up flyers for the show this weekend.”

“That’s down at the waterfront, right?” Nino asked, pulling out his phone and opening up his calendar. “Does it start at 8 or 9?”

“The concert is from 8 to 10, and then there’s an after-party on the houseboat which, knowing Anarka, will probably keep going until Monday.” Marinette pulled out a flyer and handed it to Nino. He quickly entered the information into his calendar. Marinette expected Adrien to leave while they were discussing the local art scene, but he lingered at the edge of his desk, staring at her with a tiny distracted frown.

“Great flyer, Nette.” Nino complimented her design as he handed the paper back to her. “I like the Transformer. Did you trace?”

“No. And it’s not a Transformer.” She put it back in the folder with the rest of the flyers. She’d blanket the neighborhood and then head home and get changed before meeting up with Alya and the others at the street fair. “Just a really big angry-looking robot, nothing special.”

They both looked at Adrien somewhat expectantly. Marinette blushed prettily as she peeked up at him from underneath her lashes. Nino wore that half-smirk half-grimace he always wore whenever Adrien said something that made him want to hide in the bathroom with second-hand embarrassment but also kinda made him want to crown his friend the King of Smooth and call it a day.

But to their surprise (and to Marinette’s chagrin) Adrien did not take the opportunity to assure Marinette of her prodigious talents in the most glowing and flowery language imaginable.

“Have fun.” He grunted instead, hefting his bag higher on his shoulder and turning away. Nino and Marinette gaped at each other as he stalked out the classroom door. When he was gone, Nino sighed and shrugged, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“I give up.” Nino grumbled. “I don’t know what that kid’s problem is, but I give up.”
“I’ll talk to him.” She replied, frowning at the empty doorway.

“If you ask me, all he really needs is a vacation or something. Something to make him happy. Get him outta this funk. I dunno…”

“Don’t worry, Nino. I’ll figure something out…”

Marinette thought she might already know what was bothering Adrien. Or maybe she just hoped that he was bothered by the same thing that had been bothering her lately. And if it was bothering both of them, at the same time, and to such an extent that their civilian friends were picking up on it then maybe…

Maybe it was finally time for them to have The Talk.

But she couldn’t just cough up her secrets willy-nilly. The road to hell was paved with impulse decisions and garbled stuttering. She needed a foolproof plan.

Hmm…

Adrien’s birthday was coming up.

She still hadn’t received her invitation to the party, and she knew they’d been sent because Nino, Alya and Ivan had all asked her about it.

She was probably overthinking things…

The party was in two weeks. That would be plenty of time to find the perfect way to tell her partner what she strongly suspected he already knew. She had tons of ideas already. The first idea that popped into her head was…to bake him a cake that was plain white on the outside with her name written on top and then when he cut into it the cake was red velvet with dark chocolate spots. Surprise, it’s a…Ladybug!

Or something else.

Probably not that.

Oh god, definitely not that.

Two weeks was plenty of time to come up with a better idea.

Hopefully…

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Thursday

(the present)
Moonlight cast prison bar shadows across the room as the young man slumped on the floor next to his bed, his face completely hidden in his hands. Every once in awhile he let out a whimper or a muffled why. Plagg drifted pensively through the air over Adrien’s head, staring up at the ceiling with his paws crossed over his belly.

“Y’know…” The tiny god started slow and soft. “This whole superhero secret identity thing has only been a thing for the last century or so.”

Adrien hesitantly peeked up through his fingers. “Really?”

Plagg nodded. “Yeah. Before—I dunno—1912 or so, I remember it was right around the time my old friend Emperor Meiji died—superheroes didn’t really need secret identities. You were what you were and what you were was fast enough to outrun the mobs with pitchforks. Then lawyers started showing up and people started writing everything down and that alien dick Clark got drunk one night and blabbed his whole life story to a couple of high school students he met out back of a speakeasy in Cleveland of all places and now here we are…”

The longer Plagg spoke, the more strain Adrien could hear in his voice.

“Honestly, I don’t have a lot of experience with revealing secret identities. My Chosens have only had to do it a handful of times. Maybe it would be different if the Guardian had settled someplace where you see a lot of action, like New York City or Hong Kong—major economic power centers tend to attract all the global domination types—but Paris has always been relatively tame by comparison.”

Plagg’s volume rose one notch with every syllable.

“So maybe I don’t have enough personal experience to say this definitively but…”

Plagg floated down a few inches so that he could shout directly into Adrien’s eardrum.

“THAT WAS A TOTAL SHIT SHOW!”

Adrien groaned helplessly and sobbed into his palms. He banged the back of his head against his mattress and wished that the floor would open and swallow him whole.

“THAT WAS THE BIGGEST CLUSTERFUCK I HAVE EVER WITNESSED! AND I WAS THERE WHEN HANNIBAL CROSSED THE ALPS! WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU, ADRIEN? HAVE YOU LOST YOUR DAMN MIND? ARE YOU POSSESSED?! DO I NEED TO CALL MARINETE BACK SO SHE CAN PURIFY YOUR SORRY ASS?!”

“Don’t you think I feel bad enough already?” Adrien snarled, even though Plagg wasn’t saying anything that he wasn’t already thinking.

Plagg’s eyes bulged out. “No I don’t!” The kwami began darting back and forth, too agitated to remain in one place. “Don’t get me wrong, you’ve been acting like a grade-A asshole these last few weeks, but this is by far one of the worst things you have ever done. All that time we spent agonizing and planning and waiting for the perfect moment—which she hands to you on a silver platter by dropping her transformation first—and what did you do?”

“Please stop.” Adrien begged, but Plagg was far too angry to heed the warning behind the please.
“First you screamed, which was bad enough. Then you laughed, which was even worse. Then, still without actually saying anything to her I might add—”

“Stop.”

“—you started to cry.” Plagg stuck his muzzle so close that Adrien had no choice but to open his eyes and glare back at him. “Then, and this is the second-worst thing you did, due to some inexplicable and inexcusable perversion of your capacity for reason, you spent a full 6 minutes and 24 seconds yammering on about goddamn motherfucking Chloe Bourgeois—”

“Stop it!”

“THEN—and this is the absolute worst thing you did, you insufferable putz—when she had finally had enough of you being a complete and total twit and she tried to leave—”

“SHUT UP!”

“YOU FUCKING TACKLED HER!” Divine wrath poured off of Plagg’s tiny trembling body. “YOU PINNED HER DOWN IN THE FUCKING STREET—SCREAMING HER NAME—BOTH HER NAMES—FOR THE ENTIRE WORLD TO HEAR—”

“SHUT UP!”

“—IS IT ANY WONDER THAT SHE PUNCHED YOU IN THE FACE AND RAN, YOU RIDICULOUS OUT-OF-CONTROL TODD—”

Silence.

Silence.


Adrien rolled the silver ring in the palm of his hand. He had slipped it off in a blind rage and immediately regretted it, but the idea of Plagg’s response to being shut down in such a manner made Adrien hesitate before putting it back on. He took a deep stuttering breath. He just needed a few minutes, a few minutes to wallow in solitude, a few minutes to get his thoughts in order, a few minutes to come to grips with how monumentally he had screwed everything up...

Knock knock

Adrien had just enough time to slip the ring in the front pocket of his black jeans and curse himself seven ways to Sunday for neglecting to lock his bedroom before the door opened and a familiar face appeared. Pale blue eyes glittered against sallow skin.

“Monsieur Kaibliss?” Adrien didn’t bother trying to hide his surprise and irritation at the unexpected appearance of his father’s long-time personal lawyer. “What are you doing here?”

“Your father asked me to speak with you.” Kaibliss answered. If he was offended by Adrien’s attitude, he didn’t show it. His smile was wide and warm but his narrow blue eyes were as icy and impervious as they always were. “I know it has only been a few weeks since our last discussion, but Monsieur Agreste believes I might be able to help further with the Ladybug situation.”

Someone had removed all of Adrien’s internal organs and replaced them with mounds of dry ice—freezing and smoking and not good, not good, not good. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”
Kaibliss tittered as he made his way into Adrien’s room, glancing casually at the papers strewn across his desk. Adrien’s palms itched with an irrational desire for some kind of weapon and he frowned. He didn’t remember any discussion with Kaibliss in the previous weeks. The last time he could remember seeing the lawyer was years ago—right around the time his mother disappeared—and he recalled always liking the man well enough. Right now, however, Kaibliss was giving him the creeps.

Maybe it was just bad timing.

“Half the household staff witnessed your, ah, interaction with your little friend in the driveway, Adrien. Revised non-disclosure agreements are being printed out as we speak.”

Fuck. Adrien was hit with a wave of self-loathing so strong it knocked him over, forcing him to sink onto his bed. People had seen them, her, because of his actions. How many ways could he let her down in one night?

“Where is your Miraculous?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Adrien was very careful not to place his hand protectively over his pocket.

Kaibliss shook his head. “It’s not a good idea to lie to your lawyer.”

“You’re my father’s lawyer, not mine.”

“Currently, but I’ve never considered myself a partisan.” Kaibliss’ smile was wide, too wide, too many teeth. “Like I said the last time we spoke; superheroes need lawyers just as much as supervillains.”

Adrien’s brain, already drowning under the weight of earlier revelations and screw ups, struggled to process the implications. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I cannot sense the presence of a kwami in this room. Considering your alleged behavior, I assume she took it with her when she left. No matter, it is a minor inconvenience. She will be dealt with shortly. You will see to that.”

Adrien was already surging to his feet and reaching for the metal bat he kept under his bed when he felt Kaibliss’ hand close around the back of his neck and his muscles went limp. Adrien tried to fight—to kick, punch, hiss, bite, claw, scratch, maul—but his body refused to respond to his instructions. He was boneless and pliant in Kaibliss’ hands, even as he roared within the confines of his mind. The prison bar shadows grew longer and darker as a muffled rattling permeated the otherwise silent room.

Kaibliss spun him around until they were practically nose-to-nose. “Don’t fret, prince charming. You won’t remember a thing. You never do.”

His last thoughts were of her…

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Marinette fell asleep angry and she woke up furious. She glared at her reflection as she brushed her
teeth. She scowled at her melon slice during breakfast and snapped at her quietly concerned parents. When she grabbed a pair of jeans from her closet only to discover a previously-unnoticed tear along the inner seam she snarled and threw the offending pants out her open window. They fluttered down to the street below, startling a courier who swerved and crashed their bike into a fire hydrant. Marinette ignored the screams and began viciously stabbing her legs into a pair of slacks.

Tikki watched all of this in cautious, mournful silence.

She had warned Marinette that revealing her secret identity to Chat Noir could create new and unforeseen problems, but she hadn’t expected the big moment to be so…spectacularly awful. Adrien had not taken the news well. She felt sorry for him—she was certain the sensitive young man was tormenting himself over what had happened—but not sorry enough to try and calm her Chosen. Marinette had every right to be angry, furious even, especially after spending so many months agonizing over whether or not she should reveal herself. Tikki was worried about Chat’s susceptibility to mind control and the potential for him to reveal Marinette while under some kind of influence, but Marinette had dismissed that concern. If he hadn’t revealed his own identity after so many years and so many mind control attacks, he probably wasn’t going to reveal hers anytime soon.

Marinette had been far more worried that Chat wouldn’t respond well to a change in their relationship, despite his constant hints to the contrary. Hints which had been escalating into ‘flashing lights and carnival barker’ territory since the start of the school year last fall.

Marinette was afraid that Adrien was far too comfortable in the amorphous inbetween space they had fallen into over the last several years. She thought he wanted to stay just friends. Tikki wasn’t convinced that Adrien’s reaction was because he didn’t want anything to change between them, but she understood how in Marinette’s eyes that fear had been realized.

Marinette’s sweater twisted and caught as she tried to pull it over her head. She ripped it off, snarling; “Fuck you, you home-schooled richie-rich bastard!”

“Marinette!”

“Sorry Tikki.”

“I know you’re upset, but you mustn’t let your negative emotions control you.”

“I know.” Marinette glared at the sweater. It was green, like his eyes. Maybe she should wear the white one after all. “I just wish someone would tell him that.”

This was supposed to be the best day of her life. Adrien was Chat! Chat was Adrien! Her best friend and her partner were the same person! This was the dream, right? So why the hell had he freaked out? It wasn’t as if they hadn’t already suspected each other, hadn’t been dancing around the issue for months, if not years. They just never said it out loud. But he knew, he had to know, after all this time and everything they had been through together. And they were already…

Well. She didn’t know what their relationship status was, exactly. To be honest, she wasn’t sure their relationship needed a status. It wasn’t like she could click a button on her social media page and magically transform them into something new. She didn’t have any social media accounts. Something about having a secret identity left her wary of giving that much personal information to faceless corporations.

They were close. They were…together? More together than a lot of couples her age that Marinette knew. They needed to trust each other in a way that most people never needed to trust anyone. But they didn’t go on dates and they didn’t touch (much) because…what if they were wrong? What if it
was dangerous? What if they began dating as civilians and then one of them was exposed and the other was targeted as a result? What if she started dating and her parents started paying more attention to what she did at night? What if people noticed Chat Noir visiting Adrien Agreste’s girlfriend’s rooftop? Or Ladybug sneaking into Adrien’s room when his girlfriend wasn’t around? And don’t think she didn’t notice that she was the one cast in a harsher light in both those imaginary tabloid headlines. There were certain risks to being publically romantic with Chat or Adrien that she would have to face and that he would not, which did nothing to convince her that being Official was worth the trouble. Marinette didn’t want that kind of attention and as Ladybug she couldn’t possibly allow it.

“If I know Plagg, and I do, I’m sure someone already has told him exactly that on several occasions and extremely loudly.”

“I’m sorry, Tikki. Weren’t you and—what’s his name—Plagg planning something once Ch-Ad-that selfish asshole and I—argh!” Unable to continue her mangled sentence, Marinette whirled around and slammed her fist into the cushions on her chaise.

*What if he freaked out because he doesn’t love me anymore and he’s too nice to tell me?* She couldn’t help but wonder. The thought had occurred to her before. He’d been distant for weeks. A few days ago he snapped at her during class as Adrien, which she couldn’t remember him ever doing before. Even Nino had been taken aback. *Adrien never told me he loves me, anyway. That was Chat. Maybe he only ever wanted me to be part of his superhero life and he doesn’t want the rest of it.*

Tikki shook her head. She and Plagg had been planning a surprise to celebrate the emergence of a deeper and more meaningful partnership between their two Chosen—a dramatic retelling of the full history of the Ladybug and Black Cat Miraculouses, complete with shadow puppets and buttery popcorn and a 15-minute intermission—but now clearly wasn’t the right time for a show. “Don’t worry about me, Marinette. Are you going to be okay? I’m sure your parents would let you stay home from school if you explained—”

“They’d ask too many questions.” Marinette sighed. She didn’t want to go to school (and she definitely didn’t want to deal with a certain classmate-slash-cat boy) but she also didn’t want to alarm her parents anymore than she already had. As far as they knew, she was just in a bad mood and not, as was actually the case, petrified that at any second a rampaging horde of akumas was going to come bursting through the wall and slaughter her entire family while Hawk Moth laughed at Ladybug’s weakness and failure.

As far as her parents knew, everything was fine. She aimed to keep it that way.

“Besides,” Marinette continued. “Why should I stay home? He’s the one who should be hiding from me.” The ripped skin on her left-hand knuckles gave a twinge and she winced, more from the memories than the pain.

*Last Night*

*(Thursday)*

*Patrol had ended, but Ladybug wanted to make one more stop before she went home. Adrien had been acting strange lately. He was quieter. Laughing less. Frowning more. Raising his voice and*
keeping to himself. She felt like she’d barely even seen him in the last month, let alone spoken to him.

Well, except as…

No. Ladybug shut down that particular train of thought before it could leave the station. **Saturday. Wait until you can talk to Adrien alone on Saturday.**

She had to take this step with Adrien, not Chat Noir.

That way…

If she was wrong…

Chat would never find out.

**Better that way.** She told herself firmly.

Besides. There was one other reason she wanted to visit Adrien as Ladybug…

In addition to Adrien’s many other peculiar behaviors recently, she kept catching him watching Chloe when he thought no one would notice and then looking away from her with a guilty expression which was just…weird. It was weird, right?

She wanted to check up on him, just a quick peek in his window to make sure he was okay. Y’know. Safe. Alone. Whatever.

It wasn’t like she was *stalking* him or anything, she told herself repeatedly as she soared through the night sky.

She landed silently on the mansion roof, careful to avoid the security cameras. She fastened her yoyo around a chimney when a shifting patch of darkness on the lawn caught her eye. She frowned and, instead of rappelling to the bedroom window (**not a stalker not a stalker**) she plopped down on the grass just a few feet behind him. He was bent over, fiddling with something in the shadows, and he did not notice her until she cleared her throat.

“Chat?” She asked softly. “What are you doing here?”

He gasped and spun around, his pupils blown wide and his arms splayed against the wall behind him. Her eyes darted from the stack of mail clutched in his left hand to the tiny silver key dangling from his right.

“L-Ladybug?!”

“Are you…” She leaned to the side to get a better look at the open grate. It looked like…the mailbox. It looked like the top quality super-secure Agreste family mailbox that you needed a key and a passcode to get into. And she would know, having tried to break into that mailbox on at least four separate occasions to retrieve incriminating artifacts before they could transform into evidence.

“What are you getting the mail?”

“Th-this isn’t—I’m not—this is **not** how this was supposed to happen! I had a plaaan!” His desperate wailing turned into a caterwaul on the word ‘plan.’ Her eyes kept moving. Chat. Mail. Mansion. Mail. Chat. Mansion.

He was still babbling. “A proper plan! I wrote it all down so I wouldn’t mess it up! **This is not the plan!** M-milady, could you just wait—just let me get—I wrote it down so I—w-why are you smiling?”

“Because it’s you.” Marinette whispered. This was the happiest moment of her life and she lost sight of everything beyond his sparkling green eyes. “Because it’s you and I knew it and I was going to wait a few more days but I can’t remember why right now…”

She’d had her suspicions about Chat and Adrien from nearly the beginning (specifically, from the moment she learned both of them were allergic to feathers), and over time those suspicions had grown into a hypothesis before eventually maturing into a theory. Then, 6 months ago while sharing patrol duty, she had slipped up and accidentally asked Chat what answer he gave on a test they had taken at school that day, and he had absentmindedly told her. When he turned just as red as she did and stammered something about teachers who downloaded test questions off the internet and that he didn’t think her hair smelled like delicious baked goods at all, she realized for the first time that he might have a theory about her as well.

“Spots off.”

It was unprecedentedly and uncharacteristically irresponsible to release her transformation on the front lawn of the Agreste family mansion, but she was lost to wonder and joy in that moment and did not think of her responsibilities. Some part of her had always known. She was so happy she forgot to be surprised.

She forgot he might be surprised.

Marinette stepped towards Chat Noir with a dazzling smile and an outstretched hand. “Adri—”

Chat made a noise—a terrible noise—a noise that started with a yowl and escalated into an ear-splitting harpy shriek. Marinette’s hand changed trajectory and flattened over his mouth. She shoved him hard against the grate and pressed her forearm across his sternum.

“People will hear you!” She hissed, glancing nervously over her shoulder. She was pressed so close that when he started to shake the vibrations rippled through her. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “…are you actually laughing at me right now?”

She pulled away from him in disgust and yes, he was definitely laughing. Helpless hiccupping giggles through which he barely managed to stutter; “C-C-Claws in.”

A flash of green and there stood Adrien. The stack of mail and the tiny key fell from his hands as he wrapped them around her waist and burrowed his face in her shoulder. His laughter turned into shuddering sobs and she began to soften. She’d always suspected this would be hard for him, after all. He was just a little more hysterical than she had anticipated. She moved her arms so she could hug him back but before she could squeeze he whispered a name that froze her in her tracks.

“Chloe…”

If he noticed how stiff she got it didn’t dissuade him from continuing. His tears dried up as he spoke into her skin, gradually moving his nose from the juncture of her shoulder to press against her temple. Normally she would be tingling at the caress of his breath and the heat in his voice, but not this time. She felt herself becoming more and more annoyed as the words poured into her ear.

“Chloe, it’s her fault. She’s the one who made me start writing things down. It’s a crutch. She’s a crutch. Not like—I mean, she was my only friend before I—and you—argh! I wrote this all down! I
should have memorized it but Chloe has this rule where memorization doesn’t count—it’s like this time when we were 6 and we were playing hide and seek at the hotel where we weren’t supposed to and I told her that but Chloe never listens so anyway, oh and this is back when I was allowed to play team sports, okay, so Chloe and I were—"

Marinette had imagined the moment she outed herself to Chat Noir a million different times, a million different ways.

None of those scenarios had involved long rambling anecdotes about Chloe Bourgeois.

At one point she was pretty sure she heard his kwami whisper loudly: “Kid, what the hell are you doing?!” She was wondering the same thing.

She kept waiting and waiting, assuming that eventually he would snap out of it, but he just kept whispering Chloe’s name with aching tenderness into Marinette’s hair. It was bad enough for Adrien to be talking about Chloe at a time like this, but for it to be Chat Noir…

There’s only so much a girl can take.

“You know what? You were right—this is not how this was supposed to happen.” Her voice was flat and her grip was firm as she pushed him away from her. She almost apologized when she saw something that resembled terror splash across his features, but she honestly didn’t see this conversation getting back on track anytime soon. “So let’s just pretend it didn’t. We can try again some other day.”

They still had Saturday, after all.

“No—wait—”

“Good night, Adrien.”

“Milady, Marinette, please…”

But Marinette wasn’t interested in his pleases; she was interested in getting as far away from her partner as possible before she boxed his ears for being such a dweeb. She spun on her heel and began marching home, hell bent on appearing calm and unruffled until she was safely back in her room with the curtains drawn where she could pummel her pillows to her heart’s content. She had barely made it out the gate when—

WHAM

He tackled her.

He came out of nowhere. One second she was walking upright, eyes forward, back straight and shoulders back, and the next second she was facedown on the pavement, no air in her lungs, bloody tooth marks in her tongue, and 153lbs of frantic teenager on her back.

“Merde—I don’t know why I did that. I panicked. Marinette, I am so sorry! Are you okay? Marinette? Marinette!”

She tried to shake her head and stand up, but he was still on top of her. She tried to tell him to move, but he was pressing down on her ribs too hard. She couldn’t pull in enough oxygen to form the words.

“Please say something! Marinette!”
Usually when he jumped on her he rolled to protect her from the impact and his weight. He hadn’t done that this time. Why hadn’t he done that this time? Why hadn’t he protected her?

“Marinette!”

She still couldn’t move. She was trapped, crushed, pinned down like a butterfly on cardstock, gasping for help and oxygen and even though her partner was right there she couldn’t make him hear her...

“Answer me! Ladybug!”

DANGER

Something primal rose up within her and, using all her strength, she twisted her body enough to shift him slightly to the side. This gave her just enough space to move her arm out from underneath her.

DANGER

He had called her Ladybug when she looked like Marinette. To her face, out in the open, in quite a loud voice. She didn’t need to glance up at the grandiose estates lining the street to know she’d find twitching curtains and curious whispers.

DANGER

He was drawing attention to them. He was too loud. Too much.

“You’re still not saying anything. Please say something, Marinette! Ladyb—”

WHAM

She punched him.

Right in the kisser. Bang zoom straight to the moon.

At least 75% of Marinette’s psyche immediately went numb, unable to do much more than quibble endlessly in a dusty neglected corner of her mind that oh my god I punched Adrien oh my god he’s going to hate me oh my god I hate me oh my god…

But she was still acting on instinct alone so she ignored her instant regret, horror and mortification and chose to focus on the most pressing and overwhelming of her emotions.

Fear.

“Let go of me!” Her voice spiked sharply as he fell backwards and she scrambled to her feet. Anyone who heard her scream in that moment would know exactly what she was feeling, would be able to hear how scared she was.

She watched him hear it, watched the color drain from his face as he touched his bleeding mouth. Watched him hear it but not understand it, watched his eyes fill with hurt and shame. He saw that she was scared of him and she watched it break a part of him. The look he gave her was that of a wounded animal, of a frightened little boy who didn’t want to be alone. She opened her mouth to tell him that she was sorry and that it was over now that she could breathe and move freely, but...

She closed her mouth.
But the fact that she didn’t feel scared now didn’t change the fact that she had felt scared a moment ago. The split skin on her knuckles and his bottom lip were proof enough of her terror.

He had scared her. She had been scared of him.

That is not supposed to happen.

Unable to give him anything other than a shake of her head at the wrongness of it all, she ran.

Present

Marinette opened her skylight and glanced around her balcony one last time. She scowled and told herself that she wasn’t disappointed by the lack of a single long-stem rose carefully placed in a secure spot where she would be sure to notice it. Usually in a flower pot or watering can. She never asked Chat for any of his silly romantic gestures and besides, she was mad at him. She didn’t want to make up yet so it really didn’t matter that he hadn’t left her an I’m Sorry present in the night as she had expected he would. She closed the skylight with a huff.

“Marinette? Are you sure you’re okay going to school?” Tikki asked again, just to be sure.

“Yes.” Marinette said firmly. “I can do this.”

She refused to be scared of him ever again.

***

Adrien grinned when he saw Nino waiting for him at their usual spot by the school steps. They’d be graduating soon, their merry band o’ tight-knit school mates dispersing as they pursued degrees and jobs and…whatever he was going to do next, which was something he tried not to think about too often. He only had so many more weeks to enjoy the easy comfortable routine he had established with his best friend over the years of college and lycee.

“Happy Friday, dude! Check it out.” Nino waved him over and proffered his headphones. “I’ve been working on a new playlist for your birthday party.”

“Just because my father let me have a party doesn’t mean he’s going to actually let me enjoy it.” Adrien laughed. “He’s already hired a band, so I don’t think you’re gonna get a chance to DJ.”

“Never know. Musicians take breaks.”

“Not when they’re working for my father, they don’t. There’s five people in the band, and I guarantee if they ask to take breaks he’ll tell them to do it in shifts.”

“You don’t sound upset about it.”

Adrien shrugged. “Honestly, I still can’t believe he suggested a party in the first place. Then Nathalie convinced him to invite the entire class so I’ll actually have people to talk to this year. If I make a
fuss, I’ll jinx the whole thing.”

“That’s…really sad.”

Adrien rolled his eyes. Nino could be so melodramatic when it came to his home life. “It’s really not.”

“If that’s what you need to keep telling yourself. So, has You-Know-Who RSVPed yet?”

“Oh…no, not yet. I’ve been checking the mailbox, but…” Adrien flushed and nervously ran his fingers through his hair. “And the party is tomorrow, so I’m kinda giving up…”

“That’s even sadder. You should just ask her if she’s coming. Maybe the card got lost in the mail.”

“Or maybe she doesn’t want to come and she’s too nice to say so and if I ask her it will make her uncomfortable.”

“Of course she wants to go to your 18th birthday party.”

“I don’t want her to feel like she’s obligated. We’re close, but it’s not like we’re dating or anything. She probably has better things to do.”

“Dude. I’ve known Marinette since we were 3 years old. I know how she operates. She wants to be there. Trust me on this.”

Adrien eyed his friend skeptically but couldn’t bring himself to argue. “If you say so…”

“I’ll do you one better. Yo! Marinette!”

Adrien whirled around and immediately fixated on the slender girl with dark hair who was standing at the bottom of the stairs. As soon as he saw her his heart began to pound and a goofy smile spread over his face. He barely noticed Alya standing next to her until the blogger greeted him.

“Hey Alya.” He replied without actually hearing a word she said. “Hi Marinette.”

As soon as he said her name, Marinette blanched and jerked her head to the side, blatantly refusing to look at him. Adrien’s smile faded and was replaced with a worried frown.

Was she mad at him?

Adrien racked his brain, trying to remember something—anything—he could have done to offend her, but he drew a blank. She’d been her normal bashful-yet-bubbly self yesterday when he said goodbye at the end of class and he hadn’t seen or spoken with any of his friends since then, so what could have possibly happened in the interim?

Whatever it was, he needed to fix it.

Nino didn’t seem to notice Marinette’s reaction to Adrien. “Nette, you’re going to Adrien’s party, right?”

Alya threw her arm over Marinette’s shoulders and laughed. “Of course we’ll be there! Adrien Agreste having a real live totally consensual b-day bash? It’s the event of the century! We’ve been planning our outfits for weeks. You guys are gonna freak out when you see Marinette’s dress.”

Normally this was the part of the conversation where Marinette turned red and started squawking, but today she just kept staring at the pavement. Adrien was pretty sure he saw her nostrils flare.
Something was definitely wrong with Marinette.

Adrien reflexively placed his hand on her shoulder. “Are you o—”

“Don’t touch me!”

Marinette’s desperate bellow reverberated in the sudden silence. Adrien jerked his hand back as fast as he could, but the damage was done. Marinette started backing away from them, clutching her bag in front of her like a shield. “I was wrong. I can’t do it.” He heard her mutter. “This is way too much.”

He realized what she was about to do a second before she did it. “Wait—”

Marinette ran.

Alya and Nino gaped after her swiftly disappearing figure as the other arriving students began to murmur and speculate. Only Adrien had the wherewithal to chase after her, which was harder than he thought it would be. Why is she so fast? He asked himself. He caught up with her after 4 blocks and put on an extra burst of speed so that he could plant himself in her path, forcing her to either stop or crash into him. She stopped.

“Mari—”

“Not now, Adrien.”

“I just want to know why you’re mad at me!”

That got her to look at him. A little piece of his soul shriveled up and died when he saw the storm of sorrow and outrage and bareknuckle betrayal brewing in her eyes.

“How dare you ask me that.” Venom dripped from every word.

“Look, I don’t know what I did, so please tell me so that I can make it up to you.” He pleaded. He was willing to do anything if it meant he never heard her scream like that again.

It didn’t help. If anything, Marinette seemed even more upset. “You…you don’t…”

Adrien nodded fervently. “Please tell me what happened.”

“…I have nothing to say to Adrien Agreste.” Marinette blinked against the stinging in her eyes. I was the one who said we should pretend it didn’t happen, but this is not what I meant and he knows that.

“But—”

He was cut off when she grabbed his collar and dragged him forwards until their noses were only a few inches apart. Her sorrow had vanished, leaving only outrage. Her grip was so forceful that his feet nearly lifted off the ground. It was like being held by an inferno, the heat from her eyes and hands filling his body and turning his bones into ash. Why is she so strong? He wondered. Her lips pulled down and she bared her teeth as she hissed too softly for anyone else to hear:

“But if Chat Noir has something he wants to say to me…” She released her hold on his shirt and he stumbled backwards. “He knows where to find me.”

Speechless and flabbergasted, he was only able to observe as she spun around and stomped off. Pedestrians took one look at her face and dove headfirst into oncoming traffic to get out of her way. A few minutes later, an out-of-breath Nino finally caught up.
“Dude…” Nino panted as he braced his elbows on his knees. “What happened?”

“I have no idea…” Adrien answered slowly, too confused to be heartbroken over the fact that Marinette clearly hated him now. “Nino?”

“Yeah?”

“Who is Chat Noir?”

***

“Marinette!”

At first, Marinette assumed the person shouting her name was Adrien and so she tried to walk faster. But when the call came a second time, she realized that wasn’t Adrien’s voice.

“Alya?”

“Finally! I’ve been trying to get you to stop for ages!”

Marinette sighed and pushed a stray hair behind her ear with her left hand. “You should go back to school. Don’t worry about me, I’m fine.”

Alya snatched her hand and turned it over, examining the scrape across her friend’s knuckles. She raised her eyebrows. “Want to try that again?”

Marinette pulled her hand back. “It’s nothing.”

“Marinette…”

“Alya. I appreciate your concern and I love you, but I really don’t want to talk about it.”

Alya wasn’t pleased, but she also wasn’t going to push too hard. Not yet, anyway. “Okay. But you’re clearly not fine, so don’t try to pretend for my sake.” She grabbed Marinette’s other hand and started dragging her down the street, away from the bakery. “Come on.”

“Alya, I’m not going to class today.”

“I know. We’re going to get ice cream.”

“Oh…Okay, I’m good with that.”

“I thought you might be.”

They checked Andre’s Twitter feed and tracked his cart to le Marais. They sat side by side on a bench, nibbling on scoops of pistachio and strawberry as they watched tourists filter in and out of the trendy shops and meander down the old cobbled streets.

“Better?” Alya asked after a long contemplative silence.

“Yeah.” Marinette answered slowly. “I think I just needed a little time to calm down.”
“You ready to tell me what happened between you and Adrien yet?”

“Alya…” Marinette bit her lip, feeling more than a little guilty. She very much wanted to confide in her friend but she didn’t know how to do that without revealing herself as Ladybug. “Really, it’s noth—”

“I get it if you can’t talk about it, but don’t tell me it’s nothing.” Alya frowned and picked at her sleeve. Marinette turned towards her, alarmed at this uncharacteristic display of nerves. Alya saw her worry and tried to smile but the gesture wavered. “Sorry, it’s nothing.”

“If I’m not allowed to say something is nothing then neither are you.” Marinette said firmly. “Spill.”

“Okay…there’s something I want to say but I’m worried it might be out of line.”

“Just tell me. I promise not to be offended.”

“That’s not really what I’m worried about…ugh, fine. Do you remember when my little sisters got akumatized a few years ago?”

Marinette tensed. This was one of the few topics of conversation she and Alya mutually avoided. “…I do.” She said eventually, her tone guarded.

“After…after everything, I had a lot of questions and feelings that I didn’t really understand and I…well, I couldn’t talk about it with anyone, not even you.”

Marinette nodded. That was a problem she understood all too well.

“Anyway…” Alya continued, not meeting Marinette’s gaze. “Around that time I met…well, someone reached out to me. Someone I could talk to about stuff I couldn’t talk about with anyone else.”

Marinette knew exactly what those things were, and she didn’t like where this was headed. “Are you sure that was wise? If someone contacted you out of the blue…”

“I was careful.” Alya reassured her. “And, uh…it wasn’t totally out of the blue. I’d been trying to get an interview with her for the Ladyblog for months before…y’know.”

Marinette did know. The question was, how much did Alya know?

“The Ladyblog?” Marinette repeated, the wheels in her brain turning as she mulled the possibilities.

“Yeah, for a historical context piece I was doing on superheroes and Paris. I only bring it up because whatever your nothing actually is, it seems like a big deal and if you can’t talk to me, maybe you can talk to her.”

“What’s her name?”

Alya shook her head. “I can’t say.”

Marinette raised an eyebrow. “You want me to discuss my private affairs with a mysterious stranger who contacted you years ago and you won’t tell me her name?”

“Pretty much.”
“...Okay.”

“Really?”

“I trust you, so yeah.” Marinette shrugged. It wasn’t as if she’d have to actually tell this person anything if they just met for coffee or something. “Set it up whenever.”

Alya’s phone chirped and she pulled it out of her pocket. “Does now work for you?”

“Now?”

“Yeah. She just texted me and said we should come over.”

“Well, that’s weird and unnerving.”

“It’ll make sense once you meet her. Come on, let’s go.”

***

Chapter End Notes

That's a wrap on Chapter One! Please tell me what you think.

I've been working on this fic for a couple months. I'm really pleased with how it's turned out and it has been SO HARD not to post, but I promised myself I'd finish enough of the fic to be able to give y'all an iron clad guarantee that this fic will be completed. Today I finally finished the first draft of the last chapter and am finally ready to start posting. Updates will come twice a week, I'm aiming for releases on Tuesdays and Fridays but that might be different sometimes so definitely subscribe. (Chapter 2 should be up on Tuesday, June 19th)

I'll tell you this right now: This is not your usual Miraculous Ladybug fic. There is only 1 balcony scene, and the one scene only half counts, so really it's more like 0.5 balcony scenes.

Next Chapter Title: Meeting Magic Mirror

Next Chapter One Word Tease: Elvis
Meeting Magic Mirror

Chapter Summary

Pay no attention to the superhero behind the curtain.

Chapter Notes

Welcome dear readers!

I wanted to add a quick note explaining why I'm writing this fic and what I'm trying to do:

This is a fantasy adventure story told through the lens of the superhero genre. I'm having a lot of fun with tropes and, hopefully, creating something original enough to keep y'all on your toes. Like Miraculous Ladybug, this fic pays homage to a lot of genre classics. You'll see some Golden Age and 90s era superhero references (I'm not touching MCU with a 10 foot pole). Buffy The Vampire Slayer was a big influence--especially Season 3, especially the prom episode. There's some X-Files, some Lord of the Rings, some Power Rangers, and a ton of general manga/anime influences. You might even pick up on the Tintin vibes I tried to channel for cultural ambiance.

If you're familiar with those genre classics, than you probably already know that this fic is going to get dark and there will be scenes with descriptions of violence as well as some moderately sexual content (not smut, but toeing that line).

If that sounds like fun to you, you're right--it's gonna be a lot of fun. If not, I bid you adieu.

Thank you and onwards!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Disclaimer:

Author: And this is the dungeon you’ll be staying in. Feel free to furnish it however you like.

Chat: Why are we staying in the dungeon? Why can’t we sleep in one of the many bedrooms in the castle?

Author: Two reasons. 1: You’re prisoners, and aesthetics are important. 2: I don’t want you accidentally bumping into any of the other characters I’m currently imprisoning in my Inspiration Castle because they are all way smarter than you but they don’t have magic powers and if they find you, they will be able to escape. (The Author glares suspiciously at the shadows)
Ladybug: Do you own any of the characters in your Inspiration Castle?

(Suddenly, a tall man in sunglasses and a trim black suit jumps down from a chandelier)

Mr. X: Just me. Hey, nice to meet you, I’m the foil. I was sent here by the Copyright Police in 2005 and I’ve been stuck here ever since. The Author definitely does not own Miraculous Ladybug or any associated content.

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Meeting Magic Mirror

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Two Months After The Volpina Incident

(Age: 14)

“Adrien! Hide in here!”

Adrien didn’t have time to argue before Ladybug threw him in the broom closet and slammed the door.

“I’ll come get you when it’s safe!” She shouted through the keyhole.

That was all fine and good. But Chat Noir needed to be out there with her and he couldn’t very well do that with Adrien stuck in a broom closet and Plagg napping in his locker on the other side of the building.

Last time I let him sleep instead of coming to Geometry with me. Adrien vowed.

He opened the door and stepped into the hall.

“Adrien!”

Oops. Ladybug was still there. She was standing at the end of the corridor, lips parted in horror.

“What are you doing?!” She cried. “It’s not safe!”

“Right! Sorry!” He yelped, hastily shutting the door. “Hiding now.”

He held his breath and listened with all his might. When he still didn’t hear anything after a minute
or so, he tried cracking open the door and peering around the corner.

“Adrien.” Ladybug was standing right outside, hands on her hips, a disapproving scowl on her face.

He offered her a half-heartedly apologetic grin and pushed the door open the rest of the way. “It’s just…I’m worried about my friends.”

Ladybug softened, her disapproval replaced with a starry-eyed gaze that made his insides melt and his cheeks heat up. “Of course you are.” She sighed. “Don’t worry—Nino’s safe. He’s in the locker room with the rest of the class.”

He nodded. He knew that already. “But one of my other friends—Marinette—she ran this way. I need to find her.”

He should have gone to the locker room to fetch Plagg first, but when he saw his pigtailed classmate running towards the tornado of iceberg lettuce (the akumatized victim that day was a lonely grocer) he panicked and followed her.

And now he was stuck, unable to help his lady because he’d been chasing another girl.

Ladybug’s eyes were so wide they filled her mask and her complexion was the same color as her suit. Adrien felt his own blush darken at her unfathomable reaction.

“Oh.” She whispered. “Oh!” She repeated, her voice getting louder. “That’s so sweet—I mean you’re so sweet—I mean Marinette’s fine!” She clapped her hand over her mouth to muffle the flood of babble.

Adrien stepped the rest of the way out of the broom closet and let the door close firmly behind him. “Did you see her? Is she okay?”

“Yup! She’s—I—er—I already rescued her so she’s—yup! Uh-huh!” Ladybug nodded furiously, her blush deepening to a heady merlot, her hand staying close to her lips in case she needed to gag herself again.

Adrien’s shoulders sagged as he released a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “Of course you did.” He beamed at her. “You’re amazing.”

Ladybug made a strangled noise in the back of her throat. “Yup! So! Marinette’s fine! She’s with the rest of the class where you should go!” Her eyes widened impossibly further and she uttered a startled squeak that had him automatically reaching out for her in concern. “I MEAN MARINETTE WENT HOME!”

His hand froze in the air at this unexpected news. His head cocked sideways in puzzlement.

“She went home?”

“Oh YUP!” Ladybug bobbed her chin before grabbing his shoulders and steering him down the hallway. “She’s home, safe and sound, not in the locker room, where you should go, we go there now, OKAY GOOD!”

Huh… Adrien thought.

“Okay good.” He agreed. He needed to go to the locker room anyway.
Present

(Friday)

“Oy oy Agreste! Wait up!"

Adrien nodded at Nino, who went on ahead, and turned to wait for Alix. It was lunchtime and Adrien was planning on going to the deli across the street with his friend. Normally he was forced to return home, but his father had inexplicably cut him some slack this week. Though Adrien had no idea what had caused the sudden loosening of the reins, he wasn’t foolhardy enough to question a good thing.

“Bonjour, Alix.” He greeted. “What’s up?”

Alix came to a halt at the top of the front steps, suddenly appearing uncharacteristically uncertain. “I…uh…are you okay?”

He plastered a fake smile over his confused frown. “Yeah, I’m fine. Why?”

“It’s just…” Her cerulean eyes landed on her shoelaces. “I mean, I saw what happened with Marinette this morning…I guess I wanted to make sure it didn’t have anything to do with…y’know…Monday?”

“Monday?” Adrien allowed the false smile to slip away. “What happened on Monday?”

Monday, Monday, what could he remember about Monday?

Nothing special. He had woken up and eaten breakfast alone in an empty room as the staff scurried through the shadows like terrified mice. He had gone to school and hung out with his friends. At lunch he had walked with Marinette towards the bakery. Then an akuma had attacked and…

They had gotten separated. He waited out the attack. Then they met up afterwards and continued with their day as if nothing happened.

Same as usual.

“Y’know, with…ugh. Look. It was my fault that guy got akumatized, okay? I’m the one who yelled at him when all he did was open his car door as I was skating by, it could have happened to anyone. So if that’s why…I just, I don’t want you to fight because of me. If that’s why she said…and if it’s cuz you…y’know…with the building and the saving and the being under the rubble and stuff. It was my fault. Not yours.”

Adrien took a step towards her, concern darkening his features. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about, Alix, but someone getting akumatized is not your fault. It’s never your fault, okay? That’s on Hawk Moth and no one else.”

“I know that.” She sighed. “But…I hate it when you and Marinette fight, y’know?”
Not more than Adrien, she didn’t.

He felt like he was drowning. All he really wanted to do was run off and find Marinette and demand an explanation and beg for forgiveness. But he couldn’t. For one thing, he had school. For another thing, he knew from experience that if Marinette didn’t want to be found than she damn well wasn’t going to be found. Adrien was left with a sea of questions and hurt feelings and no dry land in sight.

“So do I.” He sighed, then smiled at her. It was a real smile this time. “Thanks Alix, that’s really sweet of you. I don’t know why Marinette’s mad at me, but I don’t think it has anything to do with you or with the akuma on Monday. Thanks for worrying about me, though. It means a lot.”

“Sure.” She still looked confused and somewhat guilty. “What are friends for, right?”

“Right.”

***

There is a building on the outskirts of Paris.

It is not a majestic or impressive building. It is not a famous monument or an architectural marvel. It is a beige cement office building—too boring to be brutalist—in a neighborhood filled with offices. It is drab. It is innocuous. It is ordinary.

Some might say too ordinary.

The front door opened into a nondescript lobby. A reception desk was set up on the opposite side of the room and the waiting area was framed by mismatched sofas. The only decorations were a few plastic plants scattered throughout the room and a bland abstract painting hanging between the two elevators. Marinette was uncertain what they were doing in such a place, but Alya approached the receptionist with the confidence of someone who had been there many times before.

“We’re here to see the Founder.”

The receptionist nodded without looking up and tapped on her tablet. “Is the Founder expecting you?”

“Of course.”

“Very well. One moment please.”

Marinette shot Alya a quizzical look as the receptionist focused on her device. Alya just winked. Suddenly, one of the two elevators chimed and the door slid open. Marinette jumped.

“The Founder will see you now.” The receptionist nodded towards the elevator and then went right back to ignoring them.

When they got in the elevator, Marinette realized there were no buttons.

“Oh—”

The doors shut and the elevator rocketed skywards. Marinette squeaked and braced herself against the wall with one hand and kept her other hand on her purse. The last thing she needed right now
was her purse hitting the wall and falling open with Tikki inside. Alya laughed and spread her feet as if she was surfing the subway, clearly enjoying the ride.

After what felt like way too much time for a normal building the elevator came to a jarring halt. Marinette just barely managed to stay on her feet but Alya was not so lucky, tumbling through the opening doors in a giggling heap. Marinette pulled her back up and glanced around.

They had emerged into what was obviously a private residence. The decorations were an unsettling mix of charming, eclectic and downright disturbing. The walls were lined with bookshelves and old photographs, and also racks of swords that stretched from the floor to the ceiling. The bright orange and green carpet was cheerful and brought a very much needed splash of color to the overall-darkened assemblage, but the woven figures in the patterns made rude gestures when you stared too long. Lots of big comfy chairs and soft lighting, but also glowing statues of tentacled Elder Gods and an amethyst sarcophagus that appeared to contain an incredibly lifelike statue of a young Elvis Presley.

Wait…was that statue breathing?

She then noticed the large bay windows and really wished she hadn’t.

Those are planets. Yup. Those are definitely alien planets. We aren’t on Earth; this isn’t my solar system; Toto, we have left Kansas in the rearview-fucking-mirror.

Alya didn’t even seem to notice the fact that they had just been transported into outer space and holy fuck Alya you should warn a bug before you spring her first space adventure on her.

“How long?” Marinette blurted. How long have you known I’m Ladybug? If the earlier weirdness hadn’t been confirmation enough, this certainly was.

“You’ve got my secrets, I’ve got yours.” Alya winked.

“What? What does that even mean?” Marinette shook her head. “What does…Alya, those are planets!”

“Yeah. It’s best if you don’t think about it too much. Pretend it’s a picture window or a screensaver or something.”

“Wha—buh—I—wha—”

“Breathe, girl, breathe. It’s gonna be okay. I promise, this is a safe place.”

Marinette wanted to say that she didn’t believe her but her vocal chords had momentarily died of shock.

“Welcome to the Union of Unidentified Colleagues.”

Marinette uttered a soft scream when the melodic voice spoke over her shoulder. She instinctually spun around and spread her arms in front of Alya in a protective gesture. The tall, elegant, dark-skinned woman who had just materialized behind them as if by magic—which, yeah, probably magic—smiled kindly. Her long braids were coiled atop her head and were filled with twinkling lights like a hundred tiny galaxies. Her eyes, on the other hand, were boundless voids. Marinette made the mistake of looking directly into them and for a dizzying moment felt as if the Stranger’s face was a mask Marinette was wearing, the only barrier between her and the endless abyss, but then the Stranger blinked and she was back in her own skin.
“Do not be alarmed.” The Stranger said, her designation appearing in Marinette’s mind without being prompted. “This is indeed a safe place. Please follow me, the Founder is expecting you.”

“I’ll wait for you here.” Alya said. “Stranger, did Chamelion bring the new Foxfire novel back yet?”

“Yes, it’s on the returns shelf in the lending library.”

“But Alya—”

“Don’t argue. Pay attention.” Alya kissed her on the cheek and gave her a little push. “Go.”

The Stranger led Marinette to another sitting room that had slightly more space and slightly less eldritch horror. At least, Marinette couldn’t see any tentacles or potential victims of alien abductions. There were also no windows, which was a soothing balm on the low-grade existential crisis she was currently nursing. There was a glowing crack in the floral wallpaper through which slipped whispers that sounded suspiciously like her name, but Marinette made a judgment call in the name of self-preservation and chose to pretend that she couldn’t hear the hissing voices.

The Stranger waved a long-fingered hand towards a large pink armchair situated next to a low coffee table. “Make yourself comfortable. The Founder will arrive shortly. I will return when you are ready to depart.” She swept out of the room without waiting for a response, leaving Marinette alone with her thoughts.

Okay, maybe not completely alone.

“Tikki?” Marinette hissed. “Do you know what this is about?”

The clasp on Marinette’s purse split and Tikki peeked out at her. “No, but it appears that Alya’s been keeping secrets from us.”

“Clearly, but who are we to judge?” Marinette glanced around the room nervously. As far as she could tell, the door was the only point of entrance or exit. The only escape route. On the other hand, if this entire place (whatever kind of place this place was) wasn’t filled to the dusty rafters with trap doors, spinning bookcases and secret tunnels, she would be shocked and, frankly, a little disappointed.

“Do you think we’re in danger?” She asked her kwami.

Tikki squinted contemplatively. “I don’t think so. Just because something is unfamiliar does not make it dangerous. But I do think you should be careful.”

“Do you remember what the Stranger said before? The Union of something?”


Marinette heard the doorknob turn and quickly clicked her purse shut. She turned and found herself confronted with a playful, snaggle-toothed grin.

“Found it!” Crowed the Founder.

Marinette blinked. “Huh?”

The Founder was a tiny wizened old woman with a face like a walrus, a long white braid that she kept tucked into her belt and a wispy billy-goat beard curling under her chin in a fetching manner. She wore a long grey dress that was unadorned except for the thick black belt and a large silver
brooch that Marinette initially mistook for a key until she realized it was an upside down masquerade mask. The old woman was wearing an expression of expectant delight and she was waving a thick leather-bound photo album under Marinette’s nose.

“Took me long enough but oooohhh wait until you see!” The Founder continued cheerfully, paying no attention to Marinette’s befuddlement. The old woman gently pushed her into the pink armchair and laid the album on the table, flipping through the pages until she found the one she was looking for. She jabbed at a large group photograph with a gnarled finger. “There!”

Marinette’s eyes automatically flicked down and she gasped, snatching the album up and almost to her nose so that she could get a better look. “Is that Master Fu?!” She asked, staring at the familiar face hidden behind a textured mask. Even though the photograph was black-and-white, she knew his costume was green.

The Founder laughed as she settled herself on a stool. “Sure is. I thought you’d like to see that, since it’s the only remaining copy of that picture. That was taken on January 14 1941, right after the final battle with Usurper. He was a supervillain working with the Vichy regime. The one and only time they tried allying themselves with an alien warlord.” The Founder had a wistful twinkle in her eye. “It didn’t end well for them.”

“1941? He hasn’t aged much…” Marinette’s eyes drifted over the other masked superheroes winking in the photograph. She recognized a few of them from history books, but most were unknown to her. She wondered if future generations would remember Ladybug and Chat Noir. “Oh wow, is this Knightowl? I’ve never seen him so young before.”

“Ol’ Featherbrain was just a side-kickin’ kid in those days, but Fu was already over 100, even back then.” The Founder winked and pointed at another figure standing in the middle of the group, a tall woman wearing a bandolier and a pale blue cowl that covered her eyes. She was one of the few heroes in the photograph that Marinette could instantly put a name to. “Some of us are not so fortuitously preserved.”

“You’re Magic Mirror?!” Marinette squawked, her jaw dropping and her eyes bugging. “Oh wow—I can’t believe I’m meeting you—you’re a legend—I wrote a research paper about you once—wow—and that thing with the munitions caravan? I can’t even tell you—oh no, I’m babbling aren’t I? This is so embarrassing…” She clapped a hand over her mouth because it was the only way to stem the tide of nonsense. You’re a professional! She told herself. Act like it!

Magic Mirror was the most famous superhero associated with the French Resistance during WWII. Her primary power was the ability to predict all possible outcomes of any action, which came in handy with always staying one step ahead of the Nazis and their collaborators. In addition to being a brilliant tactician, she was universally recognized as a prodigious orator. They still broadcast the speech she gave before single-handedly vanquishing a convoy of Nazi munitions trucks once a year on the radio. She always found the right words because she always knew exactly what people needed to hear. Even supervillains studied her speeches when they were learning how to monologue.

She had retired from public heroing sometime around the tail end of the Cold War, but even today Magic Mirror was a Big Deal.

That’s what Alya meant when she said it would make sense. The Founder knew to text us at that exact moment because she’s a seer. Marinette realized.

“Okay…” She let the album fall back to the table. She could feel herself slipping into Ladybug mode. “I’m assuming you know who I am.”
The Founder—who used to be France’s own Magic Mirror and was now something new and unfamiliar, but probably not dangerous—nodded. “I do. And, as one Parisian to another, I have been very impressed with your work. I have not met any other Ladybugs, but I believe you are a credit to your kwami.”

That…was one of the nicest things anyone had ever said to her. Marinette hoped she wasn’t blushing.

“And Alya’s been, what, working for you?” She asked, still not letting her guard down all the way.

“That is a conversation you should have with your friend.”

“Did you tell her to bring me here?”

“No, but from the moment I met her I knew that she would and when it would happen.”

That checked out, if Marinette was remembering her 10th grade history homework correctly.

“So…” She said, deciding to skip ahead to the obvious point. “What is the Union of Unidentified Colleagues?”

“I’m so glad you asked!” The Founder glowed as if Marinette had just delivered an especially considerate and insightful compliment. “The Union of Unidentified Colleagues is a pan-dimensional organization that is dedicated to the mission of procuring and preserving supernatural rights and quality of life. Put simply, Mademoiselle, superheroes save the world and we save superheroes.”

The Founder snapped her fingers and a large pamphlet poofed into existence on top of the photo album.

“Founded in 1973 by myself and a few like-minded individuals, the Union is unique amongst Earth-origin supernatural organizations because we don’t tell you what to do. All major operational decisions are presented to and voted on by our member heroes at our bi-weekly meetings in a secure pocket dimension. Attendance rates vary, but we usually average between 75% and 93%-member turnout, a statistic we are very proud of even though we are of course always aiming for 100%-member turnout. We are not a government and we’re not a corporation and we’re not an ancient secret order and we’re definitely not a lonely billionaire tinkering in his basement. We exist solely to identify and meet the needs of the modern superhero on the go.” She reached across the table and patted Marinette’s arm. “Are you keeping up?”

“I think so…”

“Good. The Union provides a wide range of services, all of which are listed in our literature. We are most often called upon to render legal assistance, but as you can see we end up doing some of everything, one way or another. We have a childcare program for superheroes with young offspring. We have a research and development lab that designs adaptive technologies for superheroes with disabilities. We even have an inter-dimensional search and rescue team for those days when you find yourself stranded in an alternate timeline and the transporter is on the fritz. I cannot tell you how useful the power of illusion is when you don’t know if you’re about to pop out in the Ancient-Rome-but-with-Cockney-accent universe or the medieval universe ruled by telepathic reptiles. Almost as useful as a bit of mirror glass when you're in a tight spot.”

Marinette’s jaw dropped and there was a startled cheep from the vicinity of her purse, but the Founder had whispering wallpaper so if she heard the tiny noise she was polite enough not to mention it.
“Has Alya—” Marinette started to ask, but the Founder wagged her finger.

“Ah-ah. We don’t talk about people who are not in the room at the Union of *Unidentified Colleagues.***

*As if you weren’t doing exactly that.* Marinette thought, but smartly chose to keep her irritation to herself. She flipped the pamphlet over so that she could read the back. At the top of the page were the words ‘In The Event Of Being Stranded In An Unknown Dimension/Universe/World/Timeline/Metaphysical Plane’ and brief instructions for a simple blood ritual that would send a distress signal to Union headquarters. She read the incantation that went with the ritual.

*Magic Mirror hear my call

Part the veil and break the wall

Search the stars and stranger ground

For I am lost and must be found*

It read more like a poem than a magic spell to her, but she wasn’t an expert.

And at the bottom of the page…

“What’s this about a non-voluntary mandatory magic binding?”

“In order to protect our members, all information about the Union is bewitched.” The Founder explained. “We try to limit non-voluntary magics as much as possible, but in this instance it is a necessary precaution. The binding applies only to the information and not to you directly. It shouldn’t be an issue unless you try to discuss the Union with someone who is not already aware of it.” She nodded at the pamphlet. “For example: to anyone besides yourself, the pamphlet will look like an ordinary take out menu from a Thai restaurant, and not a full list of our many wonderful programs where talented young folks who enjoy a challenge have the chance to do interesting work helping people who help others.”

The Founder tented her fingers. “We can offer you a competitive package with a stipend of €1,500 a month, which you can take as a weekly or monthly allowance, or as two lump sums at the beginning and end of your contract. I understand you are interested in fashion and design and we have a number of available positions where you would be able to hone your craft. No matter the dimension, people always need a good seamstress, after all. You would also have access to our mentorship program and our Gas N’ Groceries savings program—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on…” Marinette’s head was spinning. “Are you offering me a *job*?”

“I am offering you a one-year paid internship.” Amusement danced in the old woman’s voice. “You won’t be able to put it on a resume—and if you try you’ll end up with a list of random Aramaic verbs—but you will learn a lot and have many valuable networking opportunities. Upon completion of your internship you will be eligible for eternal union membership. Whether you decide to prioritize your art or your superhero duties in your life, this internship would be an unparalleled opportunity for you.”
Marinette felt like someone had just dropped her down the not-normal elevator shaft. “But…what about Paris? Ladybug can’t just leave for an internship in space.”

“Since our physical headquarters are technically located within city limits, I see no reason why you would not be able to participate in the internship and continue to perform your superhero duties. In fact, we explicitly encourage our interns to prioritize their communal obligations. That’s the work, after all. We’re just here to make the working a little easier.” The Founder said. “Your life would be very full, but that is usually how life is at your age.”

“What about school? I haven’t graduated yet.”

“We accept applicants year-round. It’s much easier that way since most of us aren’t using the same calendar anyway. You can begin whenever you are ready to begin once you have graduated.”

“Is…” Marinette hesitated, worried that her next question would make her seem foolish. “Is it dangerous?”

“Sometimes.” The Founder didn’t seem to think that was a foolish question at all.

“…what exactly would I be doing?”

The Founder shrugged. “That depends on you, but generally speaking our interns do what all interns do—a little bit of everything.”

Marinette chewed on her bottom lip, uncertain yet intrigued.

She had been actively avoiding thinking about her future for months now, ever since university admissions had become the primary conversation topic amongst her classmates. For as long as she could remember she had dreamed of studying fashion and design at a higher level, of being the next Coco Chanel or Edith Head. But over the last few years those dreams had been pushed to the backburner and replaced with a big bubbling crockpot of Battle Plans with a side of Believable Excuses and a dash of Fairy Tale Wedding To Adrien Agreste Fantasies. Between being Ladybug and being a teenager, planning for the future seemed like an unaffordable luxury. Whenever her friends started talking Next Big Adventures or her parents tried to engage her in a conversation about different design programs, Marinette could sense a tidal wave of anxiety and dread rising up behind her. She was sure she would drown once the wave crested and so she always found a way to change the subject.

She had even sat down and clocked it out one night. On average, how many hours in a week did she spend battling akumas, how many hours did a first year fashion major spend in class, doing homework, how many hours would she have to work in the bakery in order to afford materials, how many hours for sleep and meals and buying cookies for Tikki…

No matter how she calculated it, there weren’t enough hours in the week for her to be a superhero and a fashion major.

Forget about having any time left over to be a person…

So she didn’t talk about the future and she tried not to think about it and if sometimes, when Ladybug was flying solo on patrol, she found herself peeking in the windows at ESMOD and wondering what she would do for the quintessential make-a-dress-from-a-found-object project (one word: feathers. People had no idea how many pigeon feathers were collecting on the rooftops of Paris), well, a girl could dream, right?

But according to the Founder, there was a way she could do it all.
“Would I really be able to learn design by fetching coffee for superheroes?” She heard herself asking doubtfully. She flushed and hoped she hadn’t come off as rude.

To her relief, the Founder chuckled. “I like to think our internship program is a little more stimulating than drink runs, but yes.” She leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially, “I shouldn’t be saying anything until the candles have been lit and the incantations droned, but we’ve secured the ghost of Alexander McQueen as our next Resident Undead Artist.”

“SHUT THE FRONT DOOR!” Marinette screamed, jumping to her feet and nearly knocking over the armchair in her excitement. “For real?”

“For a given value of real, yes.” The Founder was obviously pleased at the young woman’s response—which, of course, was exactly what she had privately predicted it would be. “Don’t make any decisions right now. Take some time to think about it, and then I will contact you again when you are ready to ask the rest of your questions.”

Marinette felt her heart sink.

Back in 10th grade, she had dedicated an entire section of her Magic Mirror research paper to first-person accounts of Resistance fighters describing the dynamic of working with a clairvoyant. She was deeply interested in how a superhero’s powers effected the perception of the person behind the mask, for personal reasons. She had not cast the skeptics in a positive light, again for personal reasons. Now, however, she had to admit it was unnerving to be offered a choice by someone who already knew what you were going to do. Was it even a choice?

The Founder somehow knew what she was thinking. “The existence of free will is debatable, but I personally believe that it is always possible to choose not to do something, even when the choice is painful. I see only in possibilities, not absolutes. Whatever accuracy I might have is the result of practice and experience.” She gestured for Marinette to sit back down. “Our time is almost up, but was there anything else you wanted to discuss with me?”

Oh…

Suddenly reminded of the reason Alya had brought her here, Marinette’s heart sank a little more.

She could understand Alya’s point of view. It wasn’t difficult to see what the Ladyblogger had been thinking. She had brought Marinette here for the same reason she wanted an interview with the Founder in the first place. There were plenty of superheroes in the world, but there were only two superheroines in modern history who had been called the Protector of Paris. Ladybug and Magic Mirror shared a connection, a calling, a cause; and Marinette did have questions for the old woman. About growing up and making choices and being strong and staying human. Questions Chat couldn’t answer as a cis-gendered man, questions Tikki couldn’t answer as a non-human, questions Alya couldn’t answer because she had the same questions. But Magic Mirror? She’d been there, she’d done it, and she had lived to tell the tale. If anyone could help Marinette figure out what it meant to be Ladybug at this point in her life, it was the hero whose shoes Ladybug was filling in the Parisian psyche.

But…not yet.

Famous superhero or not, Marinette was by no means prepared to discuss her partner problems with the Founder, and the thought of him cast a shadow over the golden horizon she had just been presented with.

“What about Chat Noir?” She asked softly.
The Founder’s expression remained friendly but was otherwise unreadable. “What about him?”

Marinette’s heart sank even further. It was probably somewhere around her knees by now. “Are you going to make him the same offer?”

The Founder’s eyes glittered in the dim light. “No.”

Marinette inhaled sharply. That made her choice a lot easier, though no less painful. “Then my answer is also no. Ladybug and Chat Noir are a team. You don’t get one without the other.”

The Founder smiled knowingly. “Like I said. Take some time to think about it.”

***

Something was up with Adrien.

Dude had been acting twitchy for a few weeks, to be frank, but Nino had chalked it up to the usual domestic strife. Adrien had convinced his father to let him quit modeling during his senior year, but the old man wasn’t happy about it. The past month had seen a marked escalation in the cold war between father and son. Gabriel grew more demanding as his son grew more rebellious and Adrien ended up spending a lot of nights on the couch in Nino’s apartment. Nino didn’t mind unless Alya was coming over, but Adrien was real good at making himself scarce, even at the latest of hours.

Nino had moved out of his parents’ and into his own apartment closer to the school last summer—and Adrien enjoyed the extra privacy almost as much as Nino. More than once Nino had heard a noise in the dead of the night and emerged from his bedroom armed with a baseball bat and his girlfriend on speed-dial, only to find a wide-open window and Adrien passed out on his sofa. When that happened Nino quietly made sure there was food in the fridge and then went back to bed, and when he woke up in the morning his friend was gone and there was slightly less food in the fridge. Neither boy had ever mentioned these encounters afterwards.

Nino doubted that Adrien understood how much people loved him, how far his friends were willing to go to take care of him. Maybe he didn’t need to understand, so long as they kept showing up when he needed them. It hadn’t been easy finding an affordable apartment near a cheese shop in the right neighborhood with a private entrance and easy roof access. But if Adrien had never questioned Nino’s extremely specific housing needs, then maybe he didn’t need to know. And if Chloe showed up once a month with rent money “from the City” and no further comment…well…

Maybe Adrien didn’t need to know about that either.

Usually Adrien told his best bud what was going down, but not this time. Whatever the cause of the shoulder chip he was currently hauling, Adrien was keeping it to himself. Which was fine. Some things you just had to deal with on your own and Nino was here if Adrien changed his mind. No worries.

Except now Nino had a lot of worries. Three, to be precise, but it felt like a lot more.

First of all, the whole birthday party thing was a total nightmare, despite Adrien’s single-minded determination to not be frustrated by his father’s constant machinations. Gabriel could not make up his mind about a single party detail. His demands grew more outlandish by the day. Nothing was good enough, and when it was deemed ‘too perfect’ and changed anyway.
The venue had changed 13 times, causing so much confusion that Gabriel had been forced to charter a bus to bring guests to the birthday party which—get this—was being held at a chateau over an hour’s drive out of the city.

Because obviously a birthday party should be as inconvenient as possible.

The menu changed with the wind. It started as classic French cuisine, then French-Vietnamese fusion, then vegetarian, then vegan, then paleo, at which point the first batch of caterers had quit in protest. They were currently on batch three. Gabriel’s latest whim was suckling pig. Nino suspected they’d be on batch five by the time the party began tomorrow evening.

And then there was the situation with the band. Nino didn’t care what Adrien said, he was bringing his equipment. As the duly elected President and Treasurer of the Adrien Agreste Emotional Support Team, it was his sacred mission in life to make damn sure there were some sick beats at his best friend’s b-day. He figured there was at least a 65% chance no live musicians (excepting guests, of course) actually showed up on the big night. Gabriel had hired and fired so many performers that there were warnings about him all over the message boards.

So the birthday party stress was the first worry.

Second worry was the thing with Marinette.

Whatever that thing was. Adrien and Marinette always had a thing, of course, but this thing seemed like a different kind of thing. Usually their thing was double-entendres and longing glances. Today their thing seemed to be broiling discontent and not being in the same room. Adrien claimed to be just as lost as the rest of them, and Nino wanted to trust his buddy, but…

But seriously. What was that?

Worry #3 was…

Well…

“Nino? Who is Chat Noir?”

“Uh…is that a trick question?”

“I don’t know. Maybe?”

“What? I mean, Chat is—wait, why?”

“Chat is what?”

“…I feel like this is some kind of trap…”

“Why?”

“What?”

“Jeez, Nino, who’s on first?”

“Who?”

“What?”
Yeah.

Like.

Seriously.

What the hell was that?

I mean.

Right?

Nino continued to side-eye Adrien as the lecture rolled on, consumed by his many worries.

Adrien steadfastly ignored the prickle of his friend’s stare and tried not to fixate on the yawning emptiness at his back.

All these years, and they still had the same classroom seating arrangement. It felt weird, not to have her there, not to be able to turn around and try to make her laugh or blush or look at him as if he was somehow special and important. He supposed there must have been other days when she was absent, but for some reason he couldn’t bring any instances to mind. The classroom felt much bigger without Marinette sitting behind him.

Don’t touch me!

He had never heard her sound like that before. Desperate and cornered, almost as if she was frightened of him. It echoed in his mind and festered in his gut. What could he have possibly done to make her sound like that?

His relationship with Marinette was complicated and confusing at the best of times. They were close, anyone could see that. They were into each other, which everyone else had been forced to point out to him on numerous occasions before he finally got it through his skull that Marinette was blushing that way because she liked him. But they weren’t dating. He knew there were Important Reasons why they weren’t dating, but lately he had been struggling to remember what those reasons were. He kept reminding himself that even if he didn’t mind labels, she didn’t want them. Her not wanting to call what they did ‘dating’ was more than a good enough reason not to be dating.

They had…moments. Perfect little moments when the stars aligned and he got to hold her and be held in return. Moments huddled together under an umbrella in the pouring rain. Moments when they played video games at her house and she leaned into him and blew on his ear to distract him at a critical juncture, a completely unnecessary strategy that always left him blushing and squeaking. Moments when he convinced his driver to drop him off at the bakery so he could wait for her to come dashing out a second before school started and catch her as she flew by, spinning her through the air as she squawked in surprise. Moments when one worked up the courage to ask the other to dance. Moments when they said goodbye at the end of the day. Moments when he wanted to kiss her, moments when he thought she wanted to kiss him. Only moments, but each one precious and cherished. Sometimes the ambiguous nature of their relationship made him uneasy, but she never gave him any reason to feel insecure about the place he held in her affections.

Until today…

Did he even want to date her? Yes, obviously, but he’d be lying if he said the prospect didn’t scare him a little. It was risky, and what they had right now was the best thing that had ever happened to
him. *She* was the best thing that had ever happened to him. Even after all these years, there was still a part of him that was constantly trying to prove himself to her. He needed her to think well of him the same way he needed air to breathe. As if somehow he would always be that 13-year-old boy standing in the rain begging her to give him a chance. She was the first person he found when he stepped out of his father’s shadow into the world all those years ago, and he had attached himself to her like a limpet. She’d never given any indication that she minded, until today…

Had she changed her mind? Had he lost her somehow?

He was hurt and confused, but for some reason he wasn’t angry. Mostly he was anxious. Adrien could sense that Nino didn’t fully believe him, but he was telling the truth when he said that he had no idea why Marinette was mad at him. Either he had done something stupendously awful and was too obtuse to realize it, in which case he’d have to wait for her to tell him what it was, or she was mad about something else and he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, in which case he had to wait for her to cool down. Either way, it was a waiting game.

Thus the anxiety.

The name Chat Noir was probably a clue, and since Adrien had no idea who or what Chat Noir was, he was leaning towards the second explanation.

Nino hadn’t been any help on that front, either. Adrien still couldn’t make heads or tails—

*ha. tails.*

—of that particular interaction.

Class ended and Adrien rushed to stuff his books into his bag as fast as he could before—

“Adrikins!”

*Dammit.*

Chloe was standing in front of him, a steely look in her cold blue eyes as they darted over his face, taking in every detail. She held a familiar fuzzy pink notebook in her hand, it’s spiral binding bent with age. The glare she leveled him with was almost as sharp as Marinette’s.

“Adrikins.” She repeated firmly. “You’ve been hypnotized by a giant snake.”

Adrien rolled his eyes and shoved past her. “I don’t have time to play word association games with you, Klo.”

Nino’s eyes bounced between Chloe shaking in silent purple-faced fury and Adrien’s disappearing backpack before he chased after his friend for the second time that day. He caught up in the hallway.

“*Dude.* First Marinette, now Chloe?”

“I keep telling you, I don’t know what happened with Marinette. I don’t even know if it’s *me* she’s mad at,” Adrien sighed. Maybe if he kept saying that out loud he’d stop remembering her desperate, cornered voice and the shadow of betrayal in her eyes. *What did I do? Should I just say sorry and hope she doesn’t ask me what I’m sorry for?* “But Chloe’s been in a mood at me since last month.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed things have been tense between you two.” Nino thought about it for a second. “Tenser than the usual amounts of Chloe-related tension, I mean.”
Adrien shrugged and continued walking to the lockers. He still had to get ready for fencing practice. “We had a fight. Not about anything important, just Chloe being Chloe.”

“Chloe’s always being Chloe, but you two don’t normally argue.” Nino pointed out. He waited but when it became clear that Adrien wasn’t planning on responding, he decided to shift tactics. “What was that thing she said about a snake?”

“You’ve Been Hypnotized By A Giant Snake. It’s a word association game we used to play a lot when we were kids.” Adrien opened his locker and started putting away his textbooks. “You don’t know it?”

“Can’t say that I do.” Nino wasn’t following. “Is the word game somehow connected to the fight?”

“Kinda. There wasn’t a lot of logic to it.”

“Well, what did she say?”

Adrien rolled his eyes. “Tons of stuff, I dunno. Oh—she said I have daddy issues.”

“I mean…”

“Don’t get me wrong, there are issues, but compared to Chloe? I could actually hear the capital D when she said the word daddy.” Adrien frowned. “If anything, I have father issues. Totally different type of issue.”

“Touché.” Nino was still lost. “So if you and Chloe are on the outs, why does she want to play word games with you?”

“She doesn’t. She knows that I don’t like that game and she’s trying to annoy me.” Adrien closed his locker a little too hard. “Like I said, just Chloe being Chloe.”

Nino opened his mouth to point out that this didn’t make a lot of sense and that Chloe was more vindictive than obnoxious anyway, but before he could say a word the screaming started.

***

Marinette and Alya took the metro back into the center of the city and decided to walk home along the Seine. For a long time, both girls said nothing, neither certain where to start.

Marinette decided she should at least try. “So…” She drawled. “You’ve been having secret space adventures without me, huh?”

Alya giggled. “Right back atcha.”

Marinette shook her head. “Nuh-uh. So far, none of my adventures have involved leaving lower orbit.”

“Well, so far none of my adventures have involved handsome cat boys in leather bodysuits.” Alya
winked. “Wanna swap?”

“Sure. I’ll take the teleporters and you can keep the hairballs.”

“Ew. He doesn’t really cough up hairballs, does he?”

“A lady doesn’t kiss and tell.”

“Gross.” Alya twirled one of her curls around her finger. “You’re not mad at me, are you?”

Marinette’s eyes widened, startled by the question. “Of course not! Why would I be?”

“She just being silly.” Chirped an unexpected voice from deep within Alya’s wild mane. Marinette breathed a soft oh when she saw the curls shift and a pair of violet eyes sparkled down at her. “She’s been brooding over how she broke her promise, even though I keep telling her that she’s Rena Rouge and it’s her decision, not the Guardian’s and not Ladybug’s. No offense.”

“Trixx, we’ve been over this. You can’t hang out in my hair anymore if you keep talking to people.” Alya grumbled at her kwami while Marinette chuckled.

They walked a little further and eventually Marinette asked, “Does this change anything? Knowing about each other, I mean.”

Alya shrugged. “I don’t know. I keep my extra-curriculars separate from my Earth life. I’m not a huge fan of crossovers, if you know what I mean. Too complicated. Too much collateral damage. It’s hard enough getting my Miraculous back to Fu’s in time whenever I think you might need Rena. Glad I don’t have to bother anymore.”

“If you ever do want another team up,” Marinette smirked. “It would be a very special issue.”

Alya groaned as Marinette cackled. “You’ve been spending way too much time with Chat Noir if you think superhero comic book puns are funny.” Marinette’s laughter died in her throat and Alya grimaced. “You’re still not going to tell me what’s wrong, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Is it really that bad?”

“I don’t know. I’m waiting to feel calmer before I decide how bad it actually is.”

The thoughtful silence that followed this answer lasted until the peaceful afternoon was shattered by terrified screams. The two friends heaved matching sighs of exasperated resignation.

“That’s my cue.” Marinette said, heading towards a patch of shrubbery where she could safely transform.

“Have a good day at work, honey!” Alya called after her, already checking her wifi connection and making sure her portable phone charger was in her pocket. Then she crouched down nearby and waited to get the perfect shot of Ladybug exploding from the hedges.

Yeah, she wanted to protect her best friend’s secret identity, and sure, she moonlighted as a portal-hopping super vixen from time to time, but Alya never lost sight of what really mattered in life.

The Ladyblog came first.
Chapter End Notes

I know, I said I would update on Tuesday, but I've been thinking and this week I'm going to try out a Monday/Thursday release schedule and see how that goes. So! We get a chapter a day early. <3

Note On Flashback Scenes: Every once in awhile there's going to be a flashback scene showing one of the memories Adrien does not have access to. These scenes are for the audience's benefit and Adrien is not aware of them. They are just for you to enjoy, and also to explore how Adrien figured out Ladybug's identity and how he differentiates between his Adrien memories and his Chat memories.

Thank you dear readers!

Next Chapter Title: Five Years Later
Next Chapter Tease: “You don’t look dead or maimed.”
Five Years Later

Chapter Summary

Everyone is very confused.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer:

Author: This is the bathroom you can use (points at door) and this is the bathroom you can’t use. (points at identical door right next to the first door)

Ladybug: Why can’t we use that bathroom?

Author: Well, you can. Just not for bathroom stuff. (opens second door) This bathroom is purely for mirror messages. So you can use it if you have a mirror message, like so… (walks into second bathroom, pulls lipstick out of pocket, starts scrawling on the mirror) “I don’t own Miraculous Ladybug or any associated content.” See?

Ladybug: Oooh! That looks like fun! Can I try? (The Author nods and hands Ladybug the lipstick) “The end is nigh.” There, did I do it right?

Author: We’ll find out based on how loud Mr. X’s screams are when he accidentally stumbles in here later tonight.

***

Five Years Later

Five years.
Five years since Stoneheart.

Five years since Hawk Moth declared war on Paris and two masked champions arose from the rubble to protect the city of love from his sinister designs.

Five years of being either attacked by or transformed into a supervillain with a hokey theme on a weekly, and sometimes daily, basis.

Five years of staying calm and being brave and patiently explaining to every new person who came into their lives that yeah, this kind of thing happens to me a lot, and if you stick around it will happen to you too.

Five years of saying au revoir before they finished saying bonjour.

Alya had this theory that Hawk Moth was someone they knew, and that was why this one particular group of students was targeted by akumas more than anyone else in Paris (not including Chloe, who was in a class all her own when it came to villains). They hoped she was wrong, but they knew that Alya was usually right about all things super. Currently, the smart money was on Hawk Moth being Chloe’s butler Jean-Whatsit.

Five years of slowly putting the puzzle pieces together and then making a collective, though unspoken, decision to never ever talk about it, in case talking about it made it real.

Five years was a long time.

Not quite long enough to grow accustomed to regular akuma attacks, but long enough to fall into a fairly simple routine.

Step One: When an akuma attacks the school, go wait patiently for it to be over in the locker room.

Step Two: Don’t ask Marinette or Adrien why they’re running in the wrong direction. Discourage strangers and other outsiders from noticing or commenting.

Step Three: Try to stay out of the way and not get injured, but look, we all know Ladybug’s gonna set it right in the end, so don’t strain yourself or nothing.

They did the same thing every time and every time everything turned out fine.

But for some reason, this time was different.

When the screaming began, they all immediately assembled in the locker room. Kim, Alix, Max, Nathaniel, Chloe, Juleka, Rose, Sabrina, Mylene, Ivan, and Nino, they were all there. Per usual. Marinette and Alya were off doing their own thing. Also per usual.

What was unusual was the fact that Adrien had decided to stay with the group, instead of scampering off to find his own discreet hiding spot in an out-of-the-way broom closet.

His classmates watched Adrien in baffled silence as he searched the room for something he could use to barricade the door that led to the hallway. “Kim,” he snapped in a commanding tone. “Go stand guard by the bathroom and make sure nothing tries to get in through the window.”

Kim just stared back at him, not moving.

Adrien frowned. “Something wrong?”

“Um…” Kim searched the surrounding faces for a hint or a clue and found none.
They heard a loud explosion in the street outside, shortly followed by maniacal laughter. Adrien winced. “Something wrong other than the supervillain currently attacking the school, I mean.”

“Uh…No?” Kim’s forehead wrinkled with the effort it took not to say anything he wasn’t supposed to say. “Are…are you okay?”

Adrien cast him a dryly amused glance. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’ll be better when this is over. Aren’t you the ones acting weird? None of you even seem scared. What if Ladybug doesn’t make it in time?”

“Oh!” Rose suddenly brightened as if she had been struck by a revelation and she bounced towards him, her hands clasped over her heart.

“Oh?” Adrien asked, watching her approach with a touch of trepidation.

Rose smiled understandingly and her large eyes sparkled with compassion as she placed a hand on Adrien’s arm and sang in her sweetest voice, “We’re not afraid because we know Ladybug and Chat Noir will always save the day in the end. We all believe in them. They’re the best superheroes in the whole wide world.”

“Oh.” Was Chat Noir another superhero? If so, Adrien was surprised he hadn’t heard of them before, though admittedly he didn’t follow the Ladyblog as closely as some of his friends. At least that explained why Nino had been so confused by his earlier question, if the appearance of a new hero in Paris was common knowledge. “Right. Of course.”

Rose waited for him to say something more for a minute before pulling back, a confused frown replacing her sunny smile. She turned to face the other students and shrugged. Everyone looked at Nino, who scratched his head and tried to think of a compelling excuse for Adrien to leave the room. Maybe Chat Noir was just trying to be extra careful about his secret identity and he needed a helping hand from his very subtle, very sneaky, very much still-pretending-to-be-naïve best friend in the entire universe.


Adrien shrugged. “Hopefully it’ll still be there when the battle is over.”

“You…you don’t want to go get it for me or something?”

A gigantic pizza levitated past the window. In the distance, a shrill voice screeched: “Cheesed to meat you, Ladybug!”

“No.” Adrien replied flatly. “Not right now.”

“…Why not?”

Adrien gave Nino a look that clearly indicated this was the most ridiculous question he had ever heard. “Because it’s not safe.”

Chloe, who had been uncharacteristically quiet this entire time, burst into loud, angry tears and ran into the bathroom. The confused silence suddenly felt heavy and foreboding.

“Chloe!” Sabrina cried once she had recovered from the shock. She chased after her friend, the bathroom door slamming behind her.
Everyone swung back around to stare at Adrien, who threw his hands up in the air.

“Don’t look at me!” He cried. “I have no idea what’s going on!”

Max cleared his throat. “You know what? I think, er, Chloe had the right idea.” He looked uncomfortable even saying the words, but he forged on as best he could. “Why don’t we all go hide in the bathroom. Adrien, you should stay here and…guard the door to the hallway.”

“But if you have something important you need to do somewhere else, we all totally understand.” Alix added. The others nodded in agreement. Mylene gave him a thumbs up.

Adrien watched his classmates file into the bathroom, a puzzled frown plastered across his features. Even Nino went with them, throwing a pleading glance over his shoulder as he shut the door behind them, leaving Adrien by himself in the locker room.

Was it something he said?

Adrien pressed his spine against the hallway door and slid down to the floor, still frowning in the direction of the bathroom. This sucks. He thought glumly. Now everyone was mad at him and he still had no idea why. He expected this kind of behavior from Chloe, knowing—

knowing. knows. he knows.

—her as well as he did, but now everyone was acting weird around him, even Nino!

The bathroom door creaked open and Adrien saw Nathaniel peek his head around the corner, spotting him and then jumping back. Adrien heard the words “No, he’s still out there” before the door swung shut again. Why were they so determined to leave him alone—

alone. he knows she’s alone. knows i’m not there.

—out here?

At least Marinette wasn’t at school today, so he didn’t have to worry about her getting caught up in the fighting. He supposed that was the one silver lining of the total shit show—

ouch. right in the guilty conscience.

—that was his day.

Adrien glanced around. “Hello? Did someone—”

is any of this getting through?

“—say something?”

No one answered.

Adrien jumped onto his feet and began pacing nervously, peeking at the windows that he didn’t want to get too close to in case it was dangerous. His universe shrunk until there was nothing but him, the distant sounds of combat, and the roiling pit of dread twisting in his gut. After several minutes he couldn’t help himself and he ran to the glass, craning his neck to try and see the Dupain-Cheng Bakery a few blocks down the street.

Marinette may not be at school, but she was still nearby. What if the bakery had been attacked? He
had counted no less than seven explosions since the screaming began, and there was still no sign of Ladybug or the supervillain. This seemed to be another service industry themed akuma (you got a lot of those) and a successful bakery could easily be a target. He saw smoking craters in the sidewalk. Plastic straws blanketed the ground and a thick billowing plume of noxious fumes rose from the deli across the street. From what he could see the bakery was fine, but Adrien still broke into a cold sweat as his brain concocted ever more drastically disastrous scenarios that might have befallen Marinette.

Fear galloped through his bloodstream like a herd of wild antelope. Anything could have happened to her. She could have been drowned in cheese sauce or electrocuted by a flying pizza. That sort of thing had become a regular occurrence over the last five years. Far more likely, Marinette had gotten caught up in the battle, tried to run, tripped and hit her head, and was bleeding out in some alley where he’d never be able to find her in time. The fact that she wasn’t here with him did not necessarily mean she was safer. Why had he assumed that in the first place? Weren’t akuma battles usually over by now? What was taking so long?

*Where is she?*

**She’s not safe.**

Adrien was one second away from abandoning his post and running outside to go find Marinette when he heard a distant voice cry, “*Miraculous Ladybug!*” and his entire body sagged with relief. The magical swarm swept down the street, leaving everything just as it had been that morning. It was okay. They were safe.

She was safe.

**She’s not safe.**

Adrien suddenly felt exhausted, as if he’d been the one fighting a supervillain for the last hour. He leaned his forehead against the cool glass and let his eyes flutter shut as his classmates finally emerged from the bathroom. The susurrus of conversation slowly returned as people got their things together and students from other grades began to trickle through. He heard a few snatches of whispered conversations, fragments and pieces that echoed his own unpleasant thoughts.

“It’s not like we ever confirmed—”

“I heard they—”

“She yelled at—”

“Don’t touch—”

Adrien looked up when he felt someone place a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey.” Nino said softly, his eyes honeyed with concern. “Are you okay?”

Adrien nodded. “I’m just tired.”

Nino frowned. “Do you want to go somewhere and talk about it?”

Adrien shook his head. “There’s nothing to talk about. Besides, I’ve got fencing practice.”

“But—”
SLAM

The hallway door was thrown open so hard it nearly came off its hinges. Everyone jumped and a few people screamed until they realized the vivid figure storming into the room like the wrath of Zeus was none other than the famous Ladybug. Some of the younger students tried to ask for an autograph but she ignored them, her eyes laser-focused on the blonde by the window. She stomped right up to Adrien and crossed her arms, looking him up and down.

Her expression was stone-cold, but there were two mini volcanos going off in her eye sockets and he could taste the raw power crackling in the air around her. Adrien felt heat rising in his cheeks and he tried to stand as straight as possible, barely even breathing. He quivered under her inspection. Ladybug had rescued him a few times over the years. He had always been fascinated by her, but he’d never felt like this when she looked at him. Like his body was on fire and his blood was made of lightning.

It was exciting.

It was terrifying.

It was completely unexpected.

“Hi?” He heard himself squeak, inwardly cringing at how mousey his voice sounded.

“You don’t look dead or maimed.” Her voice was steel and ice. “I came as fast as I could because I thought—have you been here the whole time?”

“What? Yeah. No. First I was in class—oh, do you mean during the fight?” Adrien knew he was babbling but he couldn’t seem to make it stop, not when she was turning his bones into jelly just by glaring at him. Get it together, Agreste! Use your words! “Here. Yes, since the first screams. I was already here, so I stayed here. During. I’m fine. Nothing happened. Okay?”

not okay.

Ladybug reared back as if he had struck her and gave him a drastically different type of look that turned the butterflies in his belly into spiders. She spun around and marched out the door, all without saying another word. Adrien helplessly watched her leave before turning to Nino.

“What was that about?” He asked his friend.

Nino grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him roughly. “That’s what I’m asking you!”

***

She was going to kill him.

She’d make it look like an accident, too. Afterwards, she would help plan his funeral and she would cry at the burial and then she would return later that night to dance on his grave in her red suit and spots. Tikki probably wouldn’t approve, but she’d cooperate if Marinette convinced her that it was all part of modern human mourning rituals.

She was already drafting his eulogy in her head.
Marinette furiously paced the length of her rooftop balcony, fists clenched, hair loose and damp because she’d taken an angry shower the moment she returned home.

Tikki watched her nervously. “Marinette? I’m worried about Chat Noir.”

“Why?” Marinette snarled. “He’s fine. He stayed in the locker room so he’s a-okay with a cherry on top.”

She couldn’t believe this. Couldn’t believe him. Yes, they had a fight and true, they had not parted on amicable terms that morning, which was as much her fault as his; but she never suspected he would pull something like this. Sitting down, holding back, playing it safe while she did both their jobs. Refusing to be Chat Noir when she needed him, when Paris needed him. When she told him they should pretend the identity reveal hadn’t happened, she never imagined he would go to such lengths to make her regret saying those words.

She had fought supervillains on her own before, but Chat had always had a better reason for not showing up than Teaching Ladybug A Lesson even on the few occasions when he couldn’t tell her what that reason was. She trusted him enough to know that even if he couldn’t be there with her, he would always be there for her.

But this time, she knew for certain that Chat was Adrien and so she couldn’t rationalize his unexplained absence by telling herself he was probably out of town or at the dentist. She knew he was nearby. She knew class had ended. So when she purified the akuma and Chat still hadn’t shown up, she knew something was terribly, horribly wrong.

She’d never run so fast in her life. She scared the daylights out of a physics teacher when she dropped out of the sky almost on top of him and demanded to know where the senior year students were. He pointed to the locker room with a shaking finger and she raced up the stairs, throwing open the door only to find him…

Fine.

Safe.

Not a scratch on him.

Not a hair out of place.

And he was stammering.

“He was making fun of me!” Marinette hissed, glaring in the direction of the school where she knew he was still at fencing practice. “I haven’t stammered around him like that for years! Okay, months… and again last week when he noticed that eyelash on my cheek, but still!”

“Don’t you think he’s been acting strange lately?”

“He’s been acting like a jerk lately.”

He loved me when we were 13. That doesn’t mean he loves me now.

Tikki shook her head. “I mean even before last night. Haven’t you noticed that Adrien has been on edge lately? He’s been arguing with Chloe which he almost never does. And didn’t Nino mention last week that he felt like Adrien was avoiding him? You yourself have said that Chat Noir is more protective of Ladybug than he used to be. You were complaining about him taking too many risks on Monday when he pushed you out of the way of that collapsing building and was buried under the
Ever since you fought that akumatized matador last month, he’s been acting like your personal shield.”

“Not today, though.” Marinette snapped, but her temper faded to a slow simmer. Tikki had a point. “Something has definitely been bothering him, but he won’t talk to me about it. I tried two weeks ago. And again on Monday after I dug him out of the rubble. He just brushed me off. And that doesn’t excuse what happened last night or what happened during the battle today.”

Tikki agreed, but she still felt like they were missing a huge part of the puzzle. Call it an eternal being’s intuition. “Try talking to him again as Marinette. You’re the one who said you two should pretend that you don’t know one another’s identities yet. Maybe he’s trying to respect your wishes and can’t help making a mess of it.”

Marinette groaned and crouched down, hiding her face in her knees. “I don’t even know if I want to talk to him.” I see his face, and I can’t decide if I want to kiss him or smack him. I don’t know what to do.

Tikki flew in close and pressed her arm gently against Marinette’s temple. “I understand that you’re feeling hurt, angry and frustrated right now, Marinette, and those emotions are valid. But something is clearly wrong with your partner and you owe it to the both of you to get to the bottom of it.”

Marinette sighed and pulled her phone out of her pocket, glancing at the time. He would be finishing practice in a few minutes. “I’ll do it for you, Tikki, but if he makes fun of me again and I beat him to death with his own fencing helmet I expect you to help me dispose of the body. Deal?”

Tikki kissed her lightly. “Absolutely not.”

Marinette laughed. “Do you want to nap here until I’m back?”

Tikki yawned and nodded. It had been a hard-fought battle and it was warm and sunny here on the balcony. She sank down into a flower pot and was fast asleep almost immediately. Marinette shook her head fondly and headed back towards the school, her tiny smile fading with every step. She wasn’t scared.

But she was nervous that she might lose her temper and say something she would regret later. She was doubtful he’d be able to say anything at this point that would make her less angry. That ship had sailed this morning when, instead of showing her an ounce of consideration and giving her a little bit of space, he had tried to act like nothing was wrong, touch her like it didn’t mean anything and then, when she ran away because it was all way too much, followed her without any intention of acknowledging their problems. She was wary about discussing the simmering tension between them in public, as it raised the likelihood of being overheard. Fortunately, he was usually the last one out of the locker room after fencing practice and when she finally arrived she was relieved to find him alone.

He had finished changing back into street clothes and was pulling his backpack out of his locker when he heard her approach. He turned around and sighed as soon as he saw her expression, running a hand through his hair and lifting his brow. “Are you here to yell at me some more?” He sounded resigned.

Marinette clasped her hands behind her back. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“I still don’t know what I did to piss you off, but whatever it is I’m sorry.” He told her eagerly. She
had sought him out and she wasn’t running away yet. Those had to be good signs, right? “Same goes for everyone else.”

“Everyone else?” She focused on the second part of his statement because if she thought about the first part her brain was going to explode and there wouldn’t be a Lucky Charm to clean up the mess on the walls. *How dare he act like he doesn’t know! Like he hasn’t been doing it on purpose!*

“Yeah. Everyone else seems pretty pissed with me too, don’t ask me why. Not as pissed as you.” He offered a grin, but it looked like it pained him. “Except Ladybug, weirdly enough. I don’t think I’ve even seen her since the last time she rescued me 7 months ago, but she showed up today and—I mean, she didn’t yell, but you could tell she was mad. Just my luck, I guess. She gave me the exact same look you did. Yeah—that look.” He gestured towards her face. “That one you’re giving me right now. Like I murdered your favorite puppy on Instagram.” His hand nervously swept through his hair a second time. “I don’t know what’s wrong, and I want to fix it but I can’t if you don’t tell me what I did. But you’re not telling me, you’re just giving me that look. I don’t know what to do, so I’m going to stop talking now and wait for you to tell me what you want me to do to make this better.”

Marinette tried to school her expression. She was thinking and feeling too many things at once to control what was filtering through, and she didn’t want him jumping to conclusions until she had decided how she wanted to react. She tried to make sense of the tidal wave before it crashed over her.

Disappointment over their long-anticipated revelation? Check.

Outrage whenever she remembered his full weight pressing down on her lungs? Check.

Fury that he had possibly jeopardized her secret identity? Check.

Relief that he was still alive and not, as she had feared earlier in the day, a mutilated corpse abandoned in a ditch somewhere? Check.

Disgust that he had allowed their personal issues to interfere with their work? Check.

A little distracted by how good he looked right now in his white t-shirt and tight black jeans and all flushed and glowing from exercising for the last few hours? Check.

Really wishing he would just say *sorry Marinette it was an accident and it won’t happen again* so she could forgive him already and move on? Check.

But this was Adrien. This was Chat. She knew when he was lying and she knew when he was sincere and right now, he sounded and looked sincere. She could already feel the burning coil of anger in the core of her being start to loosen and unwind, only to be replaced with an icy dread.

He really didn’t know why she was mad.

As if he didn’t realize what he had done.

As if he wasn’t doing it on purpose.

She had been staring at him silently for almost two minutes now and he was inching towards full blown panic. Both hands were on top of his head, swiping his blonde hair flat as he shifted from one foot to the other, waiting for her to speak, vibrating with nervous energy. Her eyes flickered up and the color drained from her face. She grabbed both his wrists and yanked his hands down, holding them palm-up in the space between their bodies. Adrien’s heart stopped beating as she examined his
“Marinette?” He breathed.

Marinette’s eyes filled with salty water as she stared at his empty, barren hands. Her face was turned down so Adrien could not see the tears she was holding back. He just saw her holding his hands.

*It’s not here.*

She knew where it was supposed to be. She could see the band of paler skin that marked the spot where it used to be. But it wasn’t there anymore and wherever it was now, it had taken a piece of her with it.

“Where’s your ring?” She whispered.

It was as if she had flipped a switch inside him.

One second, Adrien was gazing down at her adoringly with baited breath and a light blush spreading across his face. The next second, his eyes were flashing dangerously and his teeth were bared and he had flipped their hands so that his fingernails were digging into her wrists.

“*Leave me alone!*” He growled.

It was a good thing she had already promised herself that she wouldn’t be scared of him anymore. Ladybug never broke a promise. Neither did Marinette, if she could help it.

“Never.” She snarled back just as fiercely, matching his intensity pound for pound, inch for inch.

“It isn’t safe!”

“What isn’t safe?”

The switch flipped again. He blinked and his grip on her arms loosened. He gave her a friendly smile. “Sorry?”

“Adrien?” Marinette’s heart hammered against her ribs. *I’m not scared, I’m not scared, I’m not scared.*

“Yes?”

“Chat Noir?”

“Who is that? I asked around, but no one gave me a straight answer.”

“What?”

“What—oh, not this again.” Adrien shook his head. “Please, not you too. I already did the whole Who’s On First routine with Nino.”

Marinette searched his face, but all she found was plain and simple puzzlement. The perturbing ferocity from a moment ago had vanished without a trace, except for the fading crescents where his nails bit into her delicate skin. She drew a long shuddering breath and took a step back from him. His hands stretched out towards her, but he tucked them in his pockets when she wrapped her arms around her stomach. Her body language made it clear that the No Touching rule was back in effect.

“Chat Noir is Ladybug’s partner.” *Why are you making me say this?* Her eyes added.
“Really?” Adrien sounded genuinely surprised. “I never imagined her with a partner. I don’t think she needs one.”

Marinette flinched. Was he trying to say he was leaving her?

Not that they had ever really been together in the romantic sense, but they saved each other every single day and that sort of thing added up after awhile. The only aspect of their relationship that wasn’t already fully committed and involved was the physical aspect. She had chosen to wait for the Big Reveal before jumping his bones because the thought of making out with her partner when they both suspected who the other was but neither knew for certain made her feel icky in the Jiminy Cricket region.

What if her theory was correct and she took advantage of Adrien’s hero worship for Ladybug? The boy had literally jumped off buildings because she told him to—what else would he be willing to do just because she was wearing a mask when she asked? It was a dangerous thought. What if her theory was wrong and she hurt Chat once he figured out that she’d been imagining someone else? She knew how much he worried about not being good enough. She wouldn’t be able to live with herself if she did that to him. In every other way that mattered, he was hers and she was his. She had thought they were on the same page. She used to think it was better to wait, at least until Hawk Moth was defeated, or at least until they were old enough, or at least until they couldn’t wait any longer—and then, last night…she couldn’t wait anymore.

She reached that point a few days earlier than she’d planned. Maybe she should have kept waiting until Saturday after all, but she hadn’t thought he would be this upset. She thought this was what he wanted, what he’d been asking her for.

She was finally ready to stop waiting. Had she waited too long? Had he moved on?

“No, she—wait, what?”

“Still not doing the what-what thing anymore.” Adrien frowned and leaned towards her. “Marinette, please tell me what’s going on. You’re starting to scare me. Is it this Chat Noir person? Did they do something to you?”

She shook her head. He wasn’t lying. She knew he wasn’t lying. Which meant he really didn’t remember, didn’t know who Chat Noir was, couldn’t remember being Chat Noir…

Wait.

What?

“No, go back to what you were saying. The last five years? So you remember when Ladybug and Hawk Moth started fighting?” Marinette’s mind was racing. She could suddenly see a pattern in all the strange and inscrutable comments he had made over the last 24 hours, but she didn’t know what any of it meant.

Adrien raised his eyebrows. “I remember Ivan turning into a vengeful gargoyle on my first ever day of school, yes. That sort of thing tends to stick with a person.” He remembered that it really raised the bar for what’s the worst that can happen?
“But…you don’t remember Chat Noir?”

“No.”

“You’re telling me you remember five years of Ladybug but no Chat Noir?”

“Marinette, please…” Adrien reached for her again but she pulled away so his hand fluttered into his bangs, useless. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

“Do you remember the battle with Stoneheart at the stadium?” Her first battle. She remembered it vividly. Chat had thrown himself in headfirst, showing no doubt or hesitation, but she had only entered the field at Alya’s prodding. He had been so sure that he wanted to be a superhero, while she had needed convincing.

“I think I remember watching some of Alya’s footage afterwards.” Adrien answered. “Why are you asking me about Stoneheart? That was ages ago.”

“I’m just trying to put the pieces together. Do you remember what you were doing last night?” She said, instead of asking ‘Do you remember the first time we met?’ because clearly he did not remember her dropping out of the sky and landing on top of him the first time they transformed and she didn’t need to stick a knife in her own heart just to see if it would bleed.

Adrien eyed her suspiciously for a moment before deciding that he was better off playing along for now. “Nothing special. Homework, video games, bed.”

“You don’t remember anything about me?”

“No.” His brow furrowed. “Am I supposed to? Did we have plans that I forgot about?” He was still trying to figure out what he had done wrong. Marinette, on the other hand, was beginning to reevaluate her analysis of the entire situation. He’s been acting strange for weeks—how long has this been going on? Is this why he freaked out last night? Was he trying to tell me something? But he was still Chat last night, so…

Marinette didn’t bother answering his question. If he didn’t remember going on patrol with her last night or their misadventure at the mailbox, it would be too complicated to explain. Besides, getting stood up was a convenient cover for her earlier public outbursts and the best part was he had suggested it himself. If she needed it, it would be an extremely Believable Excuse. “Do you remember talking to anyone? Did you eat anything that tasted strange? Weird phone calls? Flickering lights? Disembodied voices? Anything?”

“Not really.” Adrien gave a wry chuckle. He was as confused as ever, but the Adrien What’s The Matter With You look she was giving him now was a million times preferable to the Adrien How Could You look she’d been giving him earlier. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay.” She was in full Ladybug mode now, pumping a source and digging for clues. “What about when you woke up this morning? Did you notice anything unusual about your bedroom? Any furniture that had been moved in the night? Objects you don’t remember seeing before? Any members of the household staff acting funny during breakfast?”

“Normal, no, no, and no one on staff has spoken to me other then Nathalie since my father started getting touchy about eye contact.” Adrien shifted towards her ever so slightly and was gratified when she didn’t flinch or move away. She didn’t look like she wanted to run anymore, instead she was squinting at him as if he were a riddle she was on the verge of solving. It wasn’t his favorite look, but it was high on the list.
His all-time favorite look was a tie between the face she made when she was talking about a new project she was really excited about and the look she'd given him last week when he had brushed an eyelash off her cheek and asked her to make a wish. He honestly couldn’t remember what her wish had been because she’d given him this *look* and he had been forced to walk away before he asked if he could lick her face. “Do I get to ask questions at some point?”

“No.” Marinette pursed her lips, thinking hard.

“Why not?” He tilted towards her.

“Because I don’t know you anymore.”

Adrien forgot about the No Touching rule and grabbed her hand. She let him, waiting to see what he would do. “You know me.” He whispered desperately, lifting her trembling fingers and brushing them against his lips. He wasn’t sure what possessed him to kiss her hand; his body made the motions before he was aware of moving. He hated feeling like they were having two entirely separate conversations, like no matter how hard he tried nothing he said would get through to her. “I don’t know what’s going through that head of yours, but you’ve known me for years.”

Yeah.

She had.

But they never talked about it and now they might not ever get the chance.

Oh…

She hadn’t thought about that before.

She knew him so well; she’d been so sure of how he would react to their fight. The boy she knew would have left a rose on her balcony and would have tried to coax her into approaching him as Adrien, first through mutual friends (mostly Nino) and then via kittenish antics that he knew she couldn’t resist. He’d bounce pencils and erasers on his desk to draw her attention, bat his paws at anything that moved, lean back in his seat so he could look at her upside down and chirp. And she would forgive him by mid-afternoon, as she always did, because she was helpless against his kitten eyes.

It wasn’t that she *wanted* him to act like a spoiled housecat, (maybe part of her did, but most of her remained upset with him) but she thought she knew him better than anyone, better than she knew herself. It scared her that he wasn’t acting and reacting the way she expected him to. As if he was someone else. Not a stranger, but also not himself. She had been so sure that he was doing it to hurt her that it hadn’t occurred to her to consider other possibilities.

She didn’t consider that the reason Chat hadn’t already come to her, hadn’t landed on her rooftop in the night or swept her off her feet that morning to repair what was broken between them, was *not* because he was trying to teach her a lesson or get back at her for saying they should pretend nothing happened. The reason he hadn’t come to her yet was because he *couldn’t*, because he *wasn’t here anymore*, and if he never came back, if they never got a chance to fix it…

Oh.

Well.

*Fuck* that.
Marinette slapped her hands against Adrien’s cheeks with a loud clap, holding him in place so she could glare directly into his startled eyes. His lips parted in surprise and he ogled down at her, stunned into silence. “I know you can hear me, Chat, so listen up.” Her voice was a promise. Her voice was a threat. “Snarl and hiss as much as you want, I’m not leaving you alone, I’m not leaving you behind. You are my partner. So one way or another, I’m going to find you. I’m going to save you. I’m going to bring you home. I don’t know when and I don’t know how, but I will bring you home.”

He gaped at her, not understanding what she meant and not knowing what to say. He felt something was required of him in response to such an ardent declaration. Thank you? I’m already here? My name isn’t—

we are so fucking screwed.

—Chat?

Her damp blue eyes darted from one part of his face to another, searching for something. When she spoke her voice was spider silk soft and aching with fragility.

“Do you still love me?” She asked. They hadn’t really talked about it since that night with the candles when they were 14, but he found ways to keep telling her, all the time, however he could manage it, I love you…

If she had lost that part of him too, if even that had been stolen from her in the night without her realizing…

“Wh-what?!” That jumpstarted his mouth. Of course he loved her, with all his heart and soul, but he had never told her that…had he?

“Adrien, do you still love me?” She asked again, a spark of urgency flaring in her throat.

She said his name as if it were a treasure. How could he deny her anything when she said his name as if it were something precious, as if his name was something she needed to survive? How could he refuse to give the obvious answer to such a question?

“Always.”

She kissed him.

The kiss was fast and brutal. She smashed their faces together so hard that they both saw stars and she tried to pour as much of the overwhelming cacophony of emotion she was currently experiencing as she could into those few seconds of contact. Anger, longing, despair, determination, love, and yes—even fear. Not of him but for him. He took everything she offered him like a starving man who had just been invited to a banquet.

God, he wanted her, wanted this, wanted this for so long, couldn’t explain why it hadn’t happened sooner and now that it was finally happening it seemed cruel to end it. He would have liked to participate more fully but the kiss didn’t last long enough for him to do that. Adrien barely had enough time to part his lips in surprise and lift his hand to curl around her hip before she was pulling back and stepping away. He whimpered as the space between them increased but something stopped him from reaching out and pulling her flush against his frame like he wanted to.

She released him and left, having said everything she needed to say.

Adrien sank into a boneless puddle on the floor, his heart racing and his vision swimming.
She’s amazing. He sighed to himself, too lost in a blissful daze to realize that he didn’t understand upwards of 80% of what had transpired over the last fifteen minutes.

she’s going to die. Replied the parts of himself buried way deep down.

Merde—I forgot to ask if she’s coming to the party.

***

Three Months After Marinette’s Birthday

(Age: 16)

He wished he had closed his eyes before he hit the spikes. Then he wouldn’t have to remember her face as she watched his body split open like an overripe melon.

He wished he had blocked his ears before he fell off the supervillain’s hovercar and went splat on the roof of Notre Dame. Then he wouldn’t have to remember the way she screamed his name as she listened to all his bones break.

He had died before.

Loads of times.

He just never told Ladybug about any of them.

This was the first time she was seeing it for herself and god, how he wished she hadn’t.

That was even his last thought: Don’t look, Ladybug.

Then there was darkness.

Then there was clicking and crawling and light and life and breath and beat and feel and think and miracle, miracle, miracle she brought him back.

Chat Noir knelt on the peak of the cathedral. He stared up at the night sky and thought thank you thank you thank you thank you.

“Chat!”

He turned to greet his savior.

She flew to him on black lines, landing before him with tears in her eyes.

“Chat!” She cried.

He winked and grinned to put her at ease. “Good work purr usual, milad—oomph!”

She barreled into him like a bullet train.
“Chat!” She screamed, her fingers scrabbling against his back as they tumbled across the roof. His arms wrapped around her frame as he tried to shield her from the impact. They slid to a stop with him on his back and her kneeling between his legs, hunched over as she pounded his chest with her fists, shouting his name over and over in a frenzy.

“Ladybug! Stop!” He’d never seen her so beside herself before. It scared him. He caught her wrists in his hands and sat up, leaning heavily against the wall behind him. “It’s okay, Bugaboo. Calm down.”

She stared at him for one long petrified second and then the tears in her eyes spilled down her mask. She curled up into a sobbing blubbery bundle in his lap, burrowing her face in the exposed skin on his neck. The collar of his suit was dripping wet in a matter of seconds.

“Oh no, no, L-Ladybug, p-p-please don’t cry!” Chat waved his hands uselessly in the air above her shoulder blades. **Ladybug’s crying! Ladybug’s not supposed to cry! Fix it! Fix it fix it fix it! He screamed at himself. “It’s my fault—I’m always messing up—I’m sorry I left you alone—it won’t happen again, I promise, so please stop crying!”**

Her brutal sobs wracked her slender form with so much force that he could feel every tremor through both their suits. Ladybug shook her head in the crook of his shoulder and slammed her open palm against the left side of his breast, directly over his heart.

_'Fix it fix it fix it!'_ “La-Ladybug, please, I don’t know why you’re crying…did something happen? Are you hurt?” A touch of fear seeped into his voice at the thought.

Her wailing got louder. Her arms wrapped around his neck so tight he had trouble breathing but he couldn’t bring himself to mind as she sobbed and shuddered into the one patch of skin she could reach when he was wearing his suit. An idea popped into his head, a possibility he hadn’t considered before, and his green eyes widened as he slipped his arms around her waist. He cradled his hero as she loudly and totally and without reserve fell to pieces in his lap.

“Ladybug…” he breathed in wonder. “Are you crying because you were worried about me?”

He could barely make out her rambling answer between her desperate sobs, but he caught the words ‘so much blood’ and ‘Chat’ repeated ad nauseam.

He choked on the lump that sprang into his throat. “Oh. Oh.” His embrace tightened and he buried his noise in her hair to hide the tears that were already pooling in the corners of his eyes. “It’s okay now, milady. I’m okay. You saved me.”

“Wh-why are you smiling?” She wailed, pressing her face into his chest, her arms going slack

“Wh-wh-what i-if it d-di-didn’t work?” She stuttered. He growled into her hair.

“Don’t do that to yourself.” He whispered harshly, his shoulders staring to quiver. “It worked. Don’t worry about what ifs.” He spent enough sleepless nights worrying about what ifs for the both of them.

“Chat? Are you c-crying?” She hiccupped, pulling back slightly so she could look at his eyes.

“N-no.” He tried to cover his face with his hand. He didn’t want her to see his tears. He also didn’t want her to see the silly sappy grin he couldn’t stop grinning even if he tried.

She saw right through him.

“Wh-why are you smiling?” She wailed, pressing her face into his chest, her arms going slack
against his shoulders. “I was so scared! I th-thought…”

“Shh.” He hushed her, pulling her up slightly so that she was draped over him and he could nuzzle against her jaw like a kitten. “I’m here. I’m safe. I’m breathing and I’m whole. You’re amazing and everything is going to be okay.”

Warmth spread from the tips of his ears to the tips of his toes as they held each other and wept, her cries gentle, his silent. Eventually their tears dried and their gasps stilled, but they kept holding and breathing together for a long time.

“Chat…I can’t lose you…”

“You couldn’t lose me if you tried, Bugaboo. We’re a team. I’m not going anywhere, not without you.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

***

Marinette waited until she had said goodnight to her parents after dinner before transforming and sneaking out through her skylight with an overnight bag slung over her shoulder. She and Tikki spent the entire night camped out on the roof of the building across the street from the Agreste mansion. Marinette still didn’t know what was wrong with her partner, but she’d be damned if she let anything else happen to him. After releasing her transformation, she and Tikki rolled out their sleeping bags (Marinette had made Tikki’s herself, and it was more of a nest than a sleeping bag) and settled in for a good old fashioned stake out. They briefly discussed contacting Master Fu, but decided against it. He and Wayzz were on a long-planned Galapagos cruise, and even if they did manage to reach him it would be a shame to ruin his trip. Especially since they still didn’t know what was wrong.

“But shouldn’t we let Master Fu know that the Black Cat Miraculous is missing?” Tikki asked uneasily.

“Probably.” Marinette agreed glumly. “But what am I going to say? I don’t know if it was taken from him or if he took it off himself. I don’t know if it was before or after he lost his memories. If it was Hawk Moth—”

“If Hawk Moth had Chat’s Miraculous, you’d know.” Tikki interjected firmly. “You and I would both be able to sense it. Wherever Plagg is right now, he is currently safe. Trust me on this.”

“Which means Adrien must have hidden him somewhere…”

She and Tikki spent hours more speculating as to what, exactly, had happened to Adrien.

“Maybe he’s been replaced by an evil robot?” Tikki wondered. She had been obsessed with all things AI ever since their battle against Max’s mechanical friend. As a goddess of creation, she seemed to find the whole scientific field charmingly quaint and worryingly misguided in equal measure. She had recently started reading Asimov on the kindle Marinette had received from her grandmother but never used because she missed the smell of paper pages.
“I don’t think so. He was too nervous and sweaty to be a robot. Evil doppelganger?”

“Not all doppelgangers are evil.”

“Yeah, but this one might be.” Marinette muttered, keeping her binoculars trained on Adrien’s darkened bedroom windows.

“Well, we know he hasn’t been akumatized.”

“Mind control, perhaps?”

“What kind?”

“Hypnosis?” Marinette asked, mostly because she didn’t know about any other kinds of mind control.

Tikki shook her head. “Hypnosis only works that way in movies.”

Marinette squinted at her. “What about other kinds of mind control?”

“Mind control is very complicated. To suppress one single fact in all its facets requires absolute influence over every nuance of an experience and its retention.” Tikki explained without actually explaining. “Adrien has lost his memories of Chat Noir, and of being Chat Noir, but not of you or of Ladybug. If this was the result of mind control, the person or creature who did this must have been incredibly precise.”

Marinette thought about this for a moment. “So…it would be one thing if he just forgot all his memories of being Chat, but the fact that he forgot that Chat ever existed and didn’t forget Ladybug means…?”

“It means that, if this is the result of mind control, the person who did this is able to both suppress and alter memories. They did not merely erase the memories of Chat Noir, they also changed the memories of Ladybug to fill the blank spaces left behind.”

“Do you know of anyone who can do that?” Marinette asked. “Another Miraculous holder?”

Tikki shook her head. “No, not in the modern world. Former Ladybugs have battled such creatures in the past, but they were all vanquished from the Earth many centuries ago. I know of no beings who are capable of such things today.”

“But it’s possible?” Marinette pressed her. Tikki nodded. “If one of these creatures is responsible, can we fix it? Fix Him?” She pointed towards the bedroom window on the other side of the dark, empty street.

Tikki lowered her head and tried not to cry. “That’s just it, Marinette.” She sighed. “If the problem is what I think it is, and I don’t want to say more until we have some evidence one way or another, there is nothing I can do. Only Plagg can help Adrien now.”

Marinette cursed. “And we don’t know where he is.” She pulled a marbled composition notebook out of her bag and flipped it open to a blank page. “This is as good a place to start as any. Tikki, what are these creatures?”

Tikki began to list the ones she could remember. “It could be a Sandman but then you and Adrien would both be having nightmares. It could be a carbuncle but I’ve never heard of one outside of South America. Other possibilities include sirens, gorgons, basilisks, incubi and the Snow Queen,
but she swore a blood oath to stop targeting the Black Cat Miraculous holders after Hans wrote a book about it. Or, really, it could be any magic user with a talent for potions and access to Adrien’s morning juice.” She frowned severely. “It could be a vampire. But I hope not. Vampires are boring.”

Marinette finished writing down the names, took a picture of her list with her phone and sent the list to Alya.

**M: Research help?**

She waited a few minutes before getting a response.

**A: Sure! What am I looking for?**

**M: Mind control symptoms/causes/cures**

Marinette saw Adrien’s bedroom light flick on and she lunged to pick up the binoculars, training them on his window just in time to see him cross into his bathroom. It was almost impossible to know for certain, especially since all she had really seen was a tan blur turned away from her, but he seemed nervous. Marinette winced. She knew how anxious he already was over the birthday party, and now this on top of everything else his father was putting him through? She was surprised he was sleeping at all.

Well, even if she hadn’t figured out how to help Chat yet, she could still help Adrien. She picked up her phone and texted Alya again.

**M: Could you make sure everyone in class knows that the reason I was mad at Adrien was that he stood me up for study plans?**

**M: I overreacted and we talked about it and we’re fine now. Don’t want to ruin his birthday with drama. Pass it on.**

**A: On it. You sure that’s all it was?**

**M: Depends. You on for a team-up?**

**A: Dammit.**

**A: I regret everything.**

**A: Yes.**

---

1:17 AM, Saturday

“Max, hey. It’s Alya.”

“Hey Alya. What’s up?”
“I wanted to ask—are you having a party or something?”

“Oh—Kim and Alix are over playing VR games.”

“Ok cool. I was wondering, do you—”

“Alya, sorry to interrupt, and I know we’re not supposed to talk about this but I have to ask…is Adrien okay?”

“You noticed too, huh?”

“It was kinda hard to miss.”

“Yeah. So here’s the deal. Something happened. We’re still trying to figure out what, but it’s starting to look like we might be outclassed. We’re not expecting trouble this weekend, but in case we do encounter some we’re wondering if you have any tech that could give us an edge?”

“Oh my god.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I might have something, let me check.” Alya heard the distinct sounds of a hand being haphazardly smooshed over phone. “Kim! Alix! It's happening! It's finally happening!”

“EEEEEEEEEEE!!!”

“OH MY GAWD!!!”

“Uhh…Max? You still with me?”

“Uh—yup!” Max cleared his throat. “Okay, Alya, I'm sending you some schematics now. Take a look and tell me what you think. Oh—and tell Ladybug she can count on all of us.”

“Max…who is us? Max? Max! Who is…oh, I just got the schematics, hold on a second…sweet undead zombie god, Max, what have you done?”

***

3:08 AM, Saturday

BANG BANG BANG

Ivan stumbled towards the front door, vision hazed with sleep.

BANG BANG BANG

“Tell whoever it is to murder themselves because I’m not getting up to do it!” He heard his mother shout from her bedroom.

Ivan grabbed the doorknob and yanked it open, a fierce growl on his face. It vanished as soon as he
saw who was standing in the street outside.

3 in the morning or not, if Kim, Nathaniel and Sabrina were hanging out, you knew something serious was afoot.

“Put this on.” Kim shoved a balaclava into his hands. “We’ve got work to do.”

“What kind of work?” Ivan asked suspiciously.

“It’s better if you don’t ask too many questions.” Nathaniel fretted.

“Well, in that case—good night!”

“We need to borrow some things.” Sabrina interjected tersely, shouldering her lock picking kit. “And we need more muscle to get into the Army Surplus store.”

“…it’s finally happening, isn’t it?”

“Seems like.”

“Hold on, I’ll get my shoes.”

***

5:03 AM Saturday

“I don’t think I can do this.”

“Of course you can, Juleka!”

“No, Rose. I can’t. Why would anyone think I can do this? Ladybug should ask someone else. I’m not the right person for this job. I’m too—”

“Ladybug wouldn’t have asked if she didn’t believe in you, Juleka.” Mylene interrupted from her perch on the bed. Rose glanced at her, her hands hovering over her girlfriend’s arm as Juleka glared at her reflection in the mirror. Every line in her body radiated tension as she shivered in her purple pajamas. “Do you remember when I became the Horrificator?”

Rose shuddered at the memory as a wistful smile appeared on Juleka’s face. “Yeah.”

“You were the only one who wasn’t scared of me, not even a little bit.” Mylene said with a kind twinkle in her eye. “That’s why I know you’re the right person for this job. You are so brave, Juleka, you just don’t know it.”

“She’s right!” Rose nodded emphatically, lifting onto her tippy toes so she could kiss her girlfriend sweetly. “Alya said it might not even come to that, remember? This is just in case. And even if it does end up happening, I’ll be with you the whole time, okay? And everyone else will be there too. You’ll never be alone.”

“…okay.” Juleka took a deep breath. With Ladybug believing in her and her friends counting on her,
she couldn’t let them down.

No.

She wouldn’t let them down.

“I can do this.” Juleka muttered, more to herself than to anyone else. “I can do this, I can do this, I can do this. I will do this.”

“But first…” Rose whispered as she hugged her tightly. “We should probably take a nap because we’ve been up all night planning.”

***

Chapter End Notes

My goodness, whatever could those wacky kids be planning?

Please let me know what you think! I have a tendency to write long-winded plotting scenes, but I decided to forgo those for this fic cuz it's an ADVENTURE story and not a political thriller, like my other current ongoing fics. So I figure we can save the action for the action sequences, like in a heist movie when they don't explain what's happening until during/after it happens, but please let me know if this is confusing! That's how I improve as a writer.

I think the Monday/Thursday schedule is working out. So Chapter 4 will be up on Monday! Be sure to subscribe, in case I randomly decide to change the update schedule again/can't wait to post the next chapter.

Oh! One more thing...I started a Miraculous Ladybug-specific fan blog on tumblr called akumatize this blog. I'm reblogging stuff and posting some of my own art and thoughts. I am bad at tumblr so I really hope this is the right link: https://www.tumblr.com/blog/akumatizethisblog

Thanks!

Next Chapter Title: Missed Connections
Next Chapter Tease: "Oh. Well. That was obvious."
Missed Connections

Chapter Summary

People have questions. Chloe has answers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer:

Author: You say it.

Mr. X: No, you say it.

Author: The mini-plot Disclaimer format only works if there’s conflict, Mr. X! You need to say it!

Mr. X: You’re the one who promised it would be different this time around! You said ‘no more epic showdown plot lines!’ You signed paperwork to that effect! And it only counts if you say it!

Author: I don’t wanna!

Ladybug: UGH! Enough! I’LL say it! (ahem) Interrobanng does not own Miraculous Ladybug or any associated content.

Author: I hope you’re happy, Mr. X. Now the characters are doing your job.

Chat: Cheer up, Bang, it’s not that bad. We’re much cuter than him, anyway.

Mr. X: Why would you even say something like that?

***

Missed Connections

***
It had been a rough couple of months for Gabriel Agreste.

He paced the length of his secret lair and brooded over his troubles. He wasn’t in the habit of lingering under the house without his mask, but since Nooroo was deactivated at the moment he didn’t have a choice. A flickering man-shaped shadow watched his movements with amusement.

Gabriel hated to admit it, but his businesses were struggling. The new artistic director he had hired to turn around the House of Agreste was not working out. The man could barely tell organza from silk. Gabriel needed to initiate the search for an even newer artistic director, but the hours he spent as Hawk Moth were taking up more and more of his day and he scarcely had minutes left over for such mundane affairs.

And why was he being forced to spend so much time behind the mask that his bank account was suffering the consequences?

Because his son—his own flesh and blood—had betrayed him.

Adrien’s treachery continued to boggle the mind, even several days after Gabriel had become aware of the full extent of his son’s wrongdoing.

The trouble had started a little over a month ago when Hawk Moth had come closer to achieving his goal than ever before—he had gotten his hands on the Black Cat Miraculous.

It had been a hard fought battle and a hard won victory. Gabriel had finally admitted to himself that he could not best Ladybug and Chat Noir as a team, so he designed a trap that would separate them. The supervillain they fought that day was one of his most diabolical concoctions—a former matador who turned into a humongous bull with poison-tipped horns and tried to gore anything in red. The villain’s single-minded fixation on ripping Ladybug limb from limb escalated the battle from an average Tuesday to a fight for their lives. Ladybug and Chat Noir were forced to depart from the battlefield to recharge their kwamis several times, enough times for Hawk Moth to figure out Chat Noir’s hiding spot with the help of some GPS tracking software that Nathalie had showed him how to use. It was the boy’s own fault for transforming out in the open all the time.

So many years, and the superheroes still hadn’t figured out that they were at their most vulnerable at the moment of transformation. Hawk Moth had figured that out on Day 1, which was why he only ever transformed within the safety of his lair. Maybe that was the sort of thing only supervillains worried about.

When the matador had finally been de-evilized and Chat Noir returned to his spot in the alley, Hawk Moth sent in his second akumatized victim—a recently fired garbage collector who could disguise himself as a dumpster. As soon as Chat Noir dropped his transformation, the Dumpster turned back into a human and knocked the hero unconscious. The kwami had been furious, but the Dumpster had swiftly removed the ring, ending any protestations. Hawk Moth knew that victory was at hand—pun intended.

But then the Dumpster turned and Hawk Moth beheld the face of his greatest—scratch that, his second greatest enemy.

Adrien.

It was Adrien.

Adrien was Chat Noir.
Gabriel knew then that his world was ending, but he thought there might still be a chance to salvage his relationship with his son. He ordered the Dumpster to bring Adrien’s unconscious body to the secret lair under the mansion and tied him to a chair by the butterfly window. He removed the Dumpsters powers and sent the disoriented civilian on his way. Then he waited for his son to wake up, rolling the silver ring between his fingers as he practiced his monologue in his head.

How many times had he noticed the silver ring and wondered? How many times had he told himself to trust his sweet, sheltered, innocent-though-misguided Adrien? How many times had he told himself to have a little faith?

And it was all for naught…

When the boy finally opened his eyes, he was strapped to a chair and Hawk Moth stood before him. The villain offered the hero a choice.

His family or Ladybug?

Adrien chose Ladybug.

He didn’t even think about it. Didn’t want to think about it. They argued. Fought. Bitter words that nearly turned into bitter blows as tears slipped down the boy’s face and his cry of “I’ll kill you if you hurt her!” echoed throughout the chamber and Hawk Moth’s cane rose into the air to strike down across his defiant face—

But Gabriel stopped himself.

He had a better way to deal with disobedient children.

Gabriel had not directly contacted his longtime friend Kaibliss in many years, not since he called upon him to erase the circumstances of Emilie’s disappearance from Adrien’s mind. Inviting Kaibliss to the house with Nooroo around was…delicate. But he summoned the old snake again that night and they put their heads together and hatched up a most devious scheme.

Kaibliss managed to convince Gabriel that Adrien was his best shot at getting his hands on the Ladybug Miraculous and that they needed Ladybug to remain naïve for the time being, which meant he had to temporarily give the Black Cat Miraculous back to his son. “You already planned to use the Black Cat Miraculous to lure Ladybug here. The only difference is that now you are using the Black Cat himself to lure Ladybug and the jewels.”

The fact that Adrien refused to give up Ladybug’s identity, claiming not to know her given name even after Kaibliss’ intervention, was a minor set-back. Knowing her name would have made things easier, but since when did Gabriel care about making things easy? Adrien (ring placed in the palm of his hand) and his kwami woke up in the alley in the wee hours of the morning, none the wiser for their ordeal.

On paper, at least, everything was going according to plan. The party was ready, the guests would soon arrive and the hired help was one Chloe-interaction away from literally burning down the house. Gabriel had seen to that. But he could not shake the feeling that, somehow, Ladybug would find a way to foil his plan.

The plan that would allow Hawk Moth to seize the Ladybug and Black Cat Miraculouses as his own, once and for all.

The plan that would force Adrien to see the error of his ways and return to his proper place at his father’s side.
But not right at his side. More behind, really. And a little bit beneath. At least until he had redeemed himself for betraying his family with a red wench in spots.

*Ladybug.*

The name was poison in his veins. Gabriel considered himself a man of simple needs and reasonable desires. All he wanted was his family, whole and safe and together again. Surely no truly good person would begrudge a man his family? And yet Ladybug stood against him at every turn, always wearing the mantle of false superiority.

When he wanted to use ancient mystical artifacts to channel forces beyond his ken in order to enact a reality-altering wish that would bring his departed wife back to him whether she liked it or not, *who* refused to surrender said ancient mystical artifacts?

*Ladybug.*

When he wanted to create a perfect, secure and highly-profitable life to cocoon his radiant, docile child from the harsh, cruel world outside, *who* kept convincing the boy that he was an actual person and that it was okay to have his own needs and desires and that he was allowed to make his own choices?

*Ladybug.*

He was nauseated at the very thought of her.

Honestly, until the other day, they hadn’t been entirely sure how they were going to get Ladybug to the party. They couldn’t just count on her to show up in the countryside as they could in Paris. Kaibliss had been confident that, like any true superhero, Ladybug would show up in the nick of time, but Gabriel had his doubts.

Of course, that was before the Incident On The Lawn.

By coincidence, Gabriel happened to be watching the security feeds when Adrien returned from patrol. Kaibliss had left the boy with his superhero memories intact after that first session (except for the ones involving his father), but he had also lifted some of Chat’s need for secrecy. Not enough to raise any alarm bells, just enough so that Gabriel could keep an eye on his son. Any parent would do the same, right?

Gabriel watched the screens as Chat Noir approached the mailbox, as the boy had done every night for the last two weeks before he went to bed even though he knew Nathalie would collect the mail as soon as she came in the morning. According to his assistant’s latest report, Adrien was anxiously awaiting an RSVP card from one of his classmates. Gabriel had vague recollections of Marinette Dupain-Cheng, but the girl had never struck him as anything special. Apparently Adrien was quite taken with her, but Gabriel doubted the boy was fooling around with one of his classmates when he was so consumed by his Ladybug obsession.

Gabriel had been on the verge of losing interest when he saw a flash of red in the corner of the screen and Ladybug landed on the grass next to Chat Noir.

Gabriel couldn’t believe his good fortune when she dropped her transformation in full view of the security cameras. He dropped the bowl of cheerios he’d been eating on the floor as he leaned towards the screen, close enough that his nose was pressed against the protective glass. He went from shock to glee to hysterical sinister cackling in the space of three seconds, a personal record.

Of course.
It was so obvious.

Marinette was Ladybug.

Adrien hadn’t betrayed him for a superhero or for an ideal. Adrien had betrayed him for the girl he wanted to have sex with.

That was equally unforgivable, but it was a much more sympathetic—practically expected—motivation in Gabriel’s mind. His son was a teenage boy, after all, and he was driven by teenage boy urges. No matter. Gabriel would teach him how dangerous those urges could be.

But first, he needed to get Chat Noir out of the way.

Once they knew that Ladybug was in contact with Adrien in civilian form, and that she had both the Ladybug and Black Cat Miraculouses in her possession, it was safe to call Kaibliss back and have him finish the job, erasing any trace of Chat Noir from Adrien’s mind. Gabriel had assumed that would be enough to end the boy’s infatuation with Marinette as well.

But now, he was not so certain.

“What happened, Kaibliss?!” He growled at the lanky form lurking in the shadows. “You said he would forget her!”

“I said he would forget Chat Noir.” The reply was issued in a soft hiss. “The only knowledge of her that he lost was that which was intrinsically connected to his understanding of his own self, which was a significant amount of information. The fact that he continues to be drawn to her suggests that his love for her exists outside his love for himself. Lust is easily forgotten; true love is not. Perhaps you were wrong, and their relationship is based on more than the connection between their artifacts.”

Gabriel shook his head. “Impossible. They are children.”

Kaibliss stepped into the light enough for Gabriel to see his silhouette twitch as he shrugged. “I once devoured a couple in their 90s who had been together since they were 6 years of age. First they were childhood sweethearts, then high school sweethearts, then college sweethearts, then newlyweds, then spouses, then parents, then grandparents, then food.” There was a misty quality in his pale blue eyes as he smiled at the memories. “Sometimes, if you are very lucky, true love finds you young. And sometimes, if you are very unlucky, someone like me finds you instead.”

“You can’t eat Adrien.” Gabriel reminded him. He had told Kaibliss the exact same thing on numerous occasions, but it was always a good idea to give his old friend a few gentle reminders.

“I know.”

“But I don’t care if you want to eat anyone else. Just wait until after Ladybug has shown herself.”

Kaibliss bowed. “I will keep your gracious offer in mind, should the opportunity present itself.”

“…You can’t eat Nooroo either.”

“…”

“Kaibliss.”

“Very well, old friend. For your sake, I will abstain.”

Kaibliss hadn’t changed at all since Gabriel had first met him when he was a little boy. He
remembered the day they met as if it were yesterday, as opposed to a half-century ago. Gabriel’s father had taken him camping in the wilderness to “make a man of him.” One night Gabriel ran away and stumbled across an old stone well in an overgrown meadow. He discovered a new friend in the old well and he returned to the campsite to show his father what he was capable of.

A boy and a man returned from the wilderness, but Gabriel’s father was not among them. Nor was he missed by any who knew him.

Years went by and Gabriel grew up, got married and became a father in his own right, but Kaibliss remained a static constant in the margins of his life. The old snake was even still using the same glamour as he did in those early days. But even though Gabriel knew his sly ageless face as well as he knew his own, he had never been able to tell when Kaibliss was lying.

And when it came to Kaibliss and kwamis, it was always best to prepare for the worst. His insatiable lust for kwami flesh was the reason Nooroo was currently deactivated, the moth pin hidden deep within Gabriel’s cravat. The old snake was normally incredibly careful not to draw attention to his predatory habits, but when he was around kwamis he couldn’t always control his urges.

“Come, Gabriel.” Kaibliss beckoned him towards the door. “We must depart in order to finish our preparations for the party.”

***

“Dude, don’t take this the wrong way, but have you been wearing the same pair of pants for three days?”

Adrien raised a brow as he stepped aside and allowed his best friend to enter the mansion. “Good morning, Nino, and congratulations on winning the silver medal in Weirdest Hellos I’ve Gotten Today.”

“Sorry man, happy birthday.” Nino gave him a half hug. “Who took gold?”

“I woke up to a text from Marinette asking if I’d had any unusual nightmares or sex dreams lately.”

“O-kaay. So I guess the two of you made up?”

“I don’t think so. Maybe?” Adrien tossed his hands in the air. “I still don’t know what she was mad about but…” His face turned red as he remembered her lips crashing into his. To say nothing about…

Adrien, do you still love me?

Always.

“Whoa.” Nino gaped at his burgundy complexion. “Have you been having unusual sex dreams?”
“Oh sure, I had one a few nights ago where—come on, no!” Adrien crossed his arms, still flushing. “And even if I had, I wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“I’d tell you!” Nino protested teasingly. “For example, last night I dreamt that Alya had to wrestle an alligator in order to prevent an intergalactic war but then it turned out that in the alien language ‘wrestling’ actually meant ‘blowjobs’ so I had to dress up as—”

“Please stop.” Adrien shook his head. “There is such a thing as oversharing.”

“Scaredy cat.” Nino allowed his duffel bag to slip off his shoulder and thump to the floor. “So is Father Dearest awake yet?”

Adrien glanced nervously at the staircase over his shoulder, in case his father had developed the ability to materialize at the merest mention of his name, like a bathroom mirror ghost. “Yeah. I think he already left, though. He said he would meet us at the chateau.”

“Remind me again why your birthday party is an hour outside of city limits?”

“Because it’s easier to let my father have his way than it would be to try and get him to consider the needs of others.” Adrien shrugged. “I didn’t see you jumping up to bat at any of the party planning meetings.”

“Fool me once.” Nino replied. “We’ve still got a few hours before the bus leaves, right?”

“Yeah. Video games?”

“Video games.”

They played video games for several hours instead of talking about their problems or their feelings and it was glorious.

It was also a missed opportunity.

Nino probably should have mentioned the group texts from Alya explaining that Adrien and Marinette had already made up, especially since Adrien told him that he didn’t know where he stood with Marinette.

Adrien probably should have said something about Marinette’s unfathomable declaration of impending salvation yesterday afternoon. Or about the kiss. Or about the many other strange and cryptic texts he had received from her over the course of the morning.

The question about his dreams had just been the first text he saw when his alarm went off at 5:45. The actual first text had arrived at 4:39. The most recent, arriving a few seconds before Nino at 9:57, read:


He still hadn’t responded. For one thing, he honestly couldn’t remember buying groceries ever in his life and he didn’t want to tell her that in case she thought he was a spoiled brat who couldn’t fend for himself. For another thing, he was getting fed up with the one-way street that was their ongoing
Q&A. She asked questions and he answered questions. He asked questions and she ignored his questions and kept asking her questions, each question more peculiar and specific than the last.

Like this exchange from 7:03:

Ad: No to ur last Q. What did you mean yesterday when you said you would bring me home? Am I going somewhere?

M: Have you ever gone ice skating on a natural body of water at night?

Ad: No. If Chat Noir is Ladybug’s partner, who are they to you?

Or this one from 8:17:

M: Have any of your house plants suddenly wilted in the last week?

Ad: I don’t think so. Are you still mad at me?

M: Could you check?

If Adrien had mentioned any of these texts to Nino, his best friend might have been able to commiserate, for he too had been the recipient of increasingly strange and alarming textual missives from the girl of his fancy.

The most recent being:

A<3: Get ur butt ovr 2 Adrien’s place NOW and so help me god if u leave his side 4 a single second i will sic my little sisters on u.

Alya Sisters were not an idle threat. He had once watched the twins reduce a classically trained French chef with a 5-star Michelin rating to tears in a matter of minutes. He hated to imagine what would happen if those skills were turned on him. They knew way too many Creole insults. Their multi-lingual mastery was perfectly and worryingly matched with their prowess in identifying weak spots.

It was a beautiful sunny morning outside. Adrien’s room was bright, the prison bar shadows faded into sun spots. The mansion was unusually quiet as most of the staff had been given the day off. Only Nathalie remained, quietly filling out paperwork at her desk as the boys entertained themselves. At one point Nino asked Adrien to explain the rules of Chloé’s word association game and Adrien made a half-hearted attempt to answer, but other than that brief interlude the conversation was kept to an absolute minimum.

Because.
Y’know.

Gotta shoot those pixel zombies.

The game didn’t end until the bell on the front gate rang twice, announcing the arrival of Alix, Max and Nathaniel. Nino stretched and headed towards the door to go downstairs. He paused when he realized that Adrien wasn’t behind him.

“You coming?” He asked, remembering Alya’s warning just in time before he accidentally left Adrien alone and was forever cursed with the wrath of Girlfriend Sisters.

“Yeah…” Adrien answered, gazing around his bedroom as if he thought this was the last time he would ever see it. “Yeah. Let’s go get ready for the party.”

***

Adrien and Nino waited outside the bus as the partygoers filed in.

Juleka and Rose were first on board. Rose wished Adrien a happy birthday in a voice so chipper it could pressurize coal into diamonds while Juleka yawned into Rose’s hair and draped her arms around her girlfriend’s neck. It was well past noon, but it was obvious that Juleka had only just woken up.

Alix and Kim raced each other to see who could get the single seat at the rear of the bus first. Max insisted on staying outside and helping the driver fit everyone’s suitcases in the compartment underneath the bus. Though they were only going away for one night, it seemed to Adrien that his friends had brought an inordinate amount of luggage. When Ivan and Mylene showed up, Ivan was hauling two heavy plastic bags and Mylene was carrying a white cake box so big her eyes barely peeked over the top. The word SURPRISE was written on top in sparkly rainbow bubble lettering.

“You know there’s going to be food at the party, right?” Adrien teased, before his brow knit in the middle and a shadow passed over his face. “I hope.”

“Hush. It’s a surprise.” Mylene snickered.

Chloe was late, which meant Sabrina was also late. Adrien raised an eyebrow as she minced up to him, nose in the air. “Glad you could make it.” He said in a well-practiced perfectly civil tone.

She braced her hands on her hips while Sabrina carried both their bags to the driver. “If you think I am going to miss the most exclusive social event of the season just because you are being a stubborn child, then you really don’t know me at all.”

Adrien’s eyes bulged slightly but his polite smile remained firmly in place. “I’m being a stubborn child?”

“Adrikins!” Chloe stomped her foot on the gravel. “You’ve been hypnotized by a giant snake!”

“Gah! Fine! You wore me down!” His smile vanished and was replaced with an exasperated scowl as he grabbed her shoulders and steered her towards the door. “I’ll play the damn word game with you just get on the bus.”
Adrien turned to Nino with every intention of complaining about his friend only to find his other friend staring at him with a suspicious expression.

“What?”

“Adrien, is it possible that—”

Before Nino could finish asking his question Nathaniel ducked past them and shoved a rectangle wrapped in tissue paper into Adrien’s hands.

“Aw, thanks Nathaniel. That’s really sweet of you.”

Nathaniel nodded shyly and vanished into the bus as Adrien unwrapped his gift. He stared at the framed sketch for a few seconds before laughing and showing it to Nino.

“Look—Nath drew a picture of me as Catwoman.”

Nino gave him another even-more suspicious look but instead of saying anything he slung his arm over Adrien’s shoulders and swung his head left and right as if scanning the landscape for predators.

“What are you doing?” Adrien asked.

“Just making sure Alya’s sisters aren’t hanging around, watching my every move, waiting for me to slip up…”

“Speaking of Alya—where is she?”

“I’m here!” Alya skidded around the corner of the bus, panting heavily. “Sorry. Had to get some last minute supplies.”

“There is probably going to be food there.” Adrien repeated. He looked over her shoulder and his heart sank when a pair of blue eyes and pigtails failed to appear. *She never said she was coming. You had plenty of chances to ask. You have no right to be disappointed now.*

“Where’s Marinette?” Nino asked.

“She’s still coming.” Alya rushed to assure them. “She’s going to meet us there.” Her eyes flicked up to Adrien’s. “Is that okay?”

Adrien shrugged noncommittally. “Sure, I—”

*please god no. i can’t lose her.*

“—guess. So that’s everyone?”

As the bus rumbled out of the driveway and began the long journey to the Chateau de Anguis, a spotted superhero dressed all in red waved goodbye from the roof of the building across the street.

Ladybug waited until Nathalie had gone out for her lunch break before swinging over the avenue and entering the mansion through Adrien’s bathroom window, taking extra care to avoid the security cameras this time. His lingering presence hit her like a sledgehammer. His scent, his clutter, his traces and vestiges of everyday living. She wanted to pause in his room and wrap herself in his afterglow but she shook her head and forced herself to keep moving into the hallway. She had an entire mansion to search and no time for indulgent sentiment.

The searching was not easy. She wasn’t completely certain what she was even looking for.
Marinette, Tikki and Alya had narrowed the list of possible suspects to an incubus, a basilisk or a vampire. Any one of those three could be Adrien’s attacker. Unfortunately, neither a basilisk nor an incubi left any sign of their presence, unless you counted really intense sex dreams (which Adrien had denied) or a cov—

A covered mirror.

Marinette blinked.

There was a tall mirror hanging on the wall across from the entrance to Gabriel’s office. Marinette had noticed it on many occasions. At the moment, it was covered in a white sheet. Marinette turned to face the office. “Hmm…” She pushed open the door and went inside.

The office was more or less as she remembered it. Marinette ignored the desk and focused on the floor-to-ceiling portrait at the far end of the room. It was by far the most suspicious object in Gabriel’s office, always had been, but Marinette had never had an opportunity or a compelling reason to examine it more closely. She did so now.

The portrait of Emilie had never made much sense to Marinette. Don’t get her wrong, she loved Gustav Klimt’s Gold Period as much as the next designer, but in-the-style-of wasn’t Gabriel Agreste’s style. He was famous for originality—his streak of ingenuity was what first sparked industry interest in his fashions. So why, when time came to commission a portrait of his dearly beloved and much younger former-actress-and-model wife, did he spring for a copy of a much more famous painting? The comparison between Emilie’s portrait and the original Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer only emphasized the copy-cat’s amateurish shortcomings and clumsy brushwork. Maybe someone with a less trained eye wouldn’t be able to notice the differences in quality, but Marinette’s grandmother was an art historian and archivist and Marinette had grown up in the storerooms of galleries every bit as much as she had grown up in a household where 4:30 in the morning counted as oversleeping. The painting was a copy and a bad copy at that, which did not fit Gabriel Agreste’s MO.

Marinette kept eyeing the painting, walking back and forth in front of it and tilting her head. When she’d been staring at it for so long that the colors started to bleed together and the lines stopped making sense, she shook her head and closed her eyes. She needed a new perspective.

There was another smaller mirror on Gabriel’s desk, covered by a scrap of gauzy fabric. Marinette picked it up and faced it towards the painting over her shoulder. This was a trick an art teacher had shown her once when she had been staring at a painting for too long and knew something was wrong with her project but couldn’t see what the problem was. Looking at the painting in reverse through a mirror forced a change in perspective. Sure enough, as soon as she looked at the reflection in the mirror, Marinette noticed that a few of the dots and cell-structures in the painting were smudged. She put the mirror back on the desk and returned to the painting, leaning in until her nose was brushing against the canvas. This close, she could see the tiny fracture lines surrounding the smudged cells.

“Ceci n’est pas une pipe.” She muttered under her breath, giving thanks for her art history classes as she stuck her fingers in the cells and the painting slid away and she felt herself begin to lower into the ground.

A false Woman in Gold.

An empty vessel, a platitude, an illusion. A means to an end.

Was that what Gabriel really thought of his wife?
The platform hit the ground and Ladybug suddenly found herself in the heart of Hawk Moth’s secret lair.

“Oh. Well.” She said as she looked around at the sinister cavern and the gigantic butterfly symbol on the window. “That was obvious.” She suddenly remembered something she had noticed years ago, when a misadventure with an ancient mystical book had briefly led her to suspect Adrien’s father was her arch nemesis. “God dammit—Chat’s been walking around with Hawk Moth’s calling card on his sneakers.” She was a little surprised when frustrated tears pricked at the backs of her eyes and she furiously rubbed them away. Now was not the time. “Wow. We must really suck at all this secret identity stuff, huh? Or maybe we’re too good at it. Oh, Adrien…I’m so sorry…”

She didn’t have time to investigate as much as she would have liked. She still had to get ready for the party and make it to the chateau before midnight, after all. She quickly moved around the lair, trying to commit every detail to memory as she parsed the implications.

Okay. Gabriel is Hawk Moth. Which means I released my transformation in full view of Hawk Moth’s security cameras. That was me. I took off my mask first, not Adrien. So I’m the one who put us at risk.

Okay. If Gabriel is Hawk Moth, that means Hawk Moth is going to be at the birthday party. He already knows about both of us, it’s the perfect opportunity to catch us unaware.

Okay. So if the mirrors were covered, that means either basilisk or vampire, right? Oh god, I hope it’s not a vampire. Tikki was right. Vampires are boring.

Okay. If it is a basilisk (or a vampire) that is responsible for Adrien’s memory loss, that means Hawk Moth is working with a partner. Has he ever done that before? I don’t think so, but maybe this has been going on for years and I had no idea.

Okay. If Adrien found out his father was Hawk Moth and then had his memories erased but still subconsciously knew what was happening, what would he do? The answer was even more obvious than Hawk Moth’s secret identity.

He’d do whatever he could to keep me safe.

***

Nino was trying to take a nap before they arrived at the chateau. As the self-appointed President and Treasurer of the Adrien Agreste Emotional Support Team, he had every expectation that the actual party would be just as stressful and demanding as the planning process had been. He wanted to be well-rested, but his girlfriend had other plans.

“What are you even looking for?” He asked after she’d been rummaging through her backpack for several minutes and cursing under her breath.

“I’m looking for—ah-ha!” Alya pulled out a small plastic bag containing several cloves of peeled garlic. “I need you to trick Adrien into eating one of these without him realizing what it is and then tell me how he reacts.”

Nino closed his eyes and pushed back in his seat. “No.”
“Fine. I’ll do it.” Alya huffed and leaned up to peer over the headrest. Chloe and Adrien sat a few rows behind, their heads bent low over a pink notebook with a cover made from what Alya could only assume was the scalps of a dozen troll dolls. “Do you think I could throw it into his mouth from here if I timed it right?”

“No.”

“I’m a good shot.”

“I meant: no, you shouldn’t throw garlic at Adrien on his birthday.”

“What are they even doing back there?”

“I think they’re playing You’ve Been Hypnotized By A Giant Snake.”

Alya’s entire body went stiff as a board next to him and Nino opened his eyes, giving up on his nap.

“…what?” Her voice was hushed and filled with warning bells. Nino gulped.

“Look, I thought it was weird too, but you haven’t told me what’s going on so—”

“Explain.”

“Okay. A couple of times now, I’ve seen Chloe walk up to Adrien and say, out of the blue, ‘Adrikins you’ve been hypnotized by a giant snake.’ Super weird, right? So I ask him about it and he says it’s a word game they played when they were kids. He tried to explain it to me but I don’t really get it. I think one person closes their eyes and holds a notebook, and then the second person lists a bunch of random words and then when they say the right word the person with the notebook writes down a word they associate with the prompt. But, like, for some reason the person with the notebook doesn’t know what they wrote? Or something?” Nino pushed back his hat and scratched at his hairline. “Like I said, I don’t really get it.”

Alya stared at him in wide-eyed disbelief for a moment before grabbing the front of his shirt and hauling him in for a deep sloppy kiss. When they parted, she purred:

“You are the world’s sexiest detective and I love you.”

“Cool.” Nino grinned as he readjusted his cap. “Cool, cool, cool.”

Alya pulled out her phone and texted Marinette.

A: Possible ID. Stand by for confirmation.

A few seconds passed.

M: Source?

A: Chloe.
Alya chewed her lip as she waited for Marinette to respond. You never knew where the chips would fall when it came to Marinette and Chloe.

M: Good.

A: Anything I need to know about?

M: HM will be @ party. Confirmed.

Alya inhaled sharply through her teeth. Was it just her imagination, or did that last text have a final showdown ring to it?

“There.” She heard Adrien say. “We done?”

That’s my cue.

“Not so fast, birthday boy!” Alya cried, leaping out of her seat with a devious grin. “The games are only just beginning!”

Adrien smiled back at her, unsure but willing. “Let me guess. Twenty Questions?”

“Actually…” Max drawled as he pulled out his laptop and pushed his glasses up his nose. “It’s more like 209 questions that have been algorithmically calculated to test your generalized knowledge across multiple disciplines.”

The rest of their classmates, many of whom had been kept up late by Alya and Marinette in order to complete the questionnaire and get ready for Adrien’s surprise mini-party on the bus, in addition to their own plans, gathered around. Marinette and Alya hadn’t bothered explaining what the questions were for, exactly, and no one had asked. It was clear that something was wrong, something Marinette and Adrien couldn’t talk about but needed help with, and they were there to provide that help, no questions asked unless those questions had been approved by Alya beforehand.

They all agreed that Adrien deserved to have at least one positive memory of his 18th birthday and they were going to make damn sure he got one. Max took the empty seat beside him. Rose popped a pointy hat on Adrien’s head while Kim and Nathaniel blew up balloons.

“209 questions?” Adrien repeated weakly.

“Don’t worry.” Mylene said cheerfully. “We have cake.”

Ivan handed Adrien a paper plate with a slice of chocolate cake and a fork. Sabrina knelt on the floor and cut pieces for everyone else.

“Brace yourself, Adrien, because you are about to be extensively quizzed on your understanding of life, death, time, space, the universe and everything in it.” Alix winked. “I helped with the formatting!”

“I helped with the formatting.” Nathaniel muttered. “You distracted me.” Alix ignored him.

Adrien’s eyes darted from face to face, searching for and finding no mercy. “42. Final answer.”
Max nodded. “Good, we can cross all the Douglas Adams stuff off the list. Now please list all the distinct animal species you can recall in alphabetic order.”

“Uhhh…”

“Don’t worry about subspecies for now. That’s question 2.”

As their classmates kept Adrien distracted with cake and balloons and lighthearted bickering and quizzes that were designed to give the superheroes a clearer picture of the extent of his memory loss, Alya walked to the back of the bus. Chloe was sitting alone by the rearview window, curled over a fuzzy pink notebook and looking perfectly miserable.

“What do you want?” Chloe sneered as Alya slid into the seat next to her. “I think that truck is following us, by the way.” The blonde gestured out the window towards a grimy white semi-truck driving a few yards behind the bus.

“Don’t worry about it.” Alya said calmly, keeping her voice quiet so they wouldn’t be overheard. “Chloe, when you say ‘Adrikins you’ve been hypnotized by a giant snake’ are you talking about a word game?”

A sly half-smile tweaked the corner of Alya’s mouth. “I think that when you tell Adrien he’s been hypnotized by a giant snake what you’re trying to tell him is that he has fallen under the thrall of a basilisk, an ancient monster that uses its powers of perception to incapacitate its victims before devouring them, a monster which is biologically distinct from, yet which looks an awful lot like, a giant snake.”

Chloe snorted and crossed her arms. “Took you long enough.”

Alya blinked. “Okay. Not really sure what I was expecting you to say but that…wasn’t it.”

Chloe rolled her eyes. “Oh please. It’s so obvious what happened. If I knew you lot weren’t clever enough to figure it out on your own I would have explained everything a month ago.”

“Explain what exac—”

But Chloe kept talking, without letting Alya ask any questions or request any clarifications. She was on a roll. She’d been waiting nearly 12 years to talk about this and she had never needed an invitation to speak her mind.

“What do you want to know? The snake doesn’t always look like a snake. He has to take off his costume when he eats you. So sometimes he looks like a snake and sometimes he just looks like an ugly person. Have you figured out who Hawk Moth is yet? Do you want the names of their victims? I’ve got locations and dates, too. Don’t know why I bother. I tried going to the cops when we were 10, didn’t do a lick of good. Want to know how many times it’s happened? Or do you want to know about the first time it happened? At least the first time I know about. We were 6 and we were playing hide and seek in the hotel—”

The floodgates were open, it seemed. Alya pulled out her phone as Chloe kept talking and talking and talking.

A: Confirmed. Basilisk.
“—but it didn’t work. It stopped after his mom left, but then it happened again last month, and again on Thursday. And he doesn’t believe me and I keep telling people and how much clearer can I be than saying ‘Adrikins you’ve been hypnotized by a giant snake?!’”

Alya wrapped her arms around Chloe’s shoulders and hugged the blonde, ignoring how the other girl flinched at the unfamiliar contact. “You couldn’t have possibly been clearer than that and I’m really sorry we didn’t do a better job of listening to you.”

Chloe awkwardly patted Alya on the back and the Ladyblogger pulled away, sensing she had reached Chloe’s limits.

“Tell me about the notebook.”

Chloe reluctantly handed it to her. “I’ve been using the same notebook for years, ever since I figured out that Adrien could write about what had been erased if I prompted him with the right word. The snake doesn’t have total control. Bits and pieces slip through.” She shrugged. “I don’t understand it. I just know that it works.”

“So when you find the right prompt, he’s able to write down something about the memories that have been suppressed?”

“Only if his eyes are closed. If he’s aware of what he’s writing it doesn’t work. And I have to say a lot of nonsense words first, to kind of lull him into a trance.” She wrinkled her nose. “But not a trance like what he does to you. That’s just gross.”

Alya flipped open the notebook to the most recent entry. “What was the prompt?”

“Party.”

The word Adrien’s subconscious had written was: TRAP

Chloe shook her head. “Figures, doesn’t it? The one time I get to go to a party sponsored by the House of Agreste—sure to be one of the most fashionable and talked about events of the year—and it’s going to be a fucking bloodbath.” She leaned back in her seat and sighed. “Thank goodness Daddy ordered the butler to bring the rest of my luggage. As soon as that limo pulls up the driveway, I am gone. Oh no—what if he drove the Tesla instead? I can’t be seen fleeing in a sedan!”

Alya grabbed her phone.

A: We need to move to Plan B. I’ll tell Max.

M: K. We need a distraction. Can you provide?

Normally, Ladybug relied on Chat Noir for her distractions, and don’t get Alya wrong, the boy had potential. He was loud and flirtatious and great at outrunning lumbering supervillains. But he was no Master of Illusion.
With Alya and Trixx on her side, Ladybug was in good paws. Chat Noir had his charms, but Rena Rouge was a professional.

“Chloe…” Alya sang sweetly. Chloe eyed her suspiciously. “How comfortable are you with your sexuality?”

***

Ladybug saved Adrien’s bedroom for last.

Marinette didn’t really believe that Chat would be so careless as to hide his ring in his room, but she had to check to be sure. She searched and searched but she didn’t find the ring.

She did find a metal bat under his bed, an iron safe filled with stinky cheese and an erotic magazine with a leather theme sandwiched between a bookshelf and the wall. She spared a moment to glance through the magazine, chuckling when she saw that he had taken the time to fill in the naughty crossword at the end. There were some interesting models, too. She’d have to remember to ask him to lend her the magazine in the future—it would be perfect for practicing drawing anatomy. An art teacher had once suggested this technique to her, but she hadn’t been able to work up the courage to buy a porn mag on her own. Plus, it would be funny to see his reaction…

The last spot she checked was the top of his bookshelves on the upper level, where he kept all his DVDs and video games. It was the hardest possible spot to reach in the entire room, which also made it the most likely hiding place. Ladybug scaled the shelves and sighed when she got to the top and saw there was no ring and no engraved black box.

But there were two envelopes pushed up against the wall.

Ladybug reached for the envelopes and pulled them towards her. She didn’t intend to actually open them, just feel them in case the ring was stuck inside, but she froze when she saw the writing on the front of each envelope.

The first one read: To Ladybug

The second one read: To Marinette

Uh-oh…

She shouldn’t…

She really shouldn’t…

She was searching Adrien’s room because she wanted to help him, not violate his trust and snoop on his private thoughts about her…

What if they were unkind thoughts that he had written down and hidden away and forgotten about? God knew she had written some post-screaming match Dear Chat letters that ended up in the paper shredder over the years. What if he had written the letters so long ago that their contents were no longer reflective of his feelings? What if he never intended for her to read whatever was inside?

But…when she caught him at the mailbox the other night…he said he had a plan…he said he wrote
Dear Ladybug:

Thank you.

Thank you for being my partner.

Thank you for trusting me with your name.

When we first started this, I wanted to know your name more than I had ever wanted anything before. But over the years, I realized that your name was the least important thing about you. A name cannot speak to your courage or your compassion. A name cannot keep me company when I am lonely. A name cannot make me laugh or bring me to my knees or inspire me to stand up when I’ve been kicked down. That power is yours, milady, no matter what your name is, no matter what colors you wear. It is yours simply because you are you.

I won’t lie and tell you that this doesn’t matter or that nothing will change. The truth is, I don’t know what will happen now. Maybe we will be in more danger than before. Maybe something will change between us now that I know your name and you know mine. I don’t want to make any promises I won’t be able to keep.

But I can promise you this: no matter what happens, between us or to us, Ladybug can always count on Chat Noir.

I love you, milady.

Always,

Adrien

Red fingers trembled as she opened the second envelope, slightly thicker than the first.

Dear Marinette:

Thank you.

Thank you for being you.

Thank you for telling me.

Thank you for giving me a second chance that day in the rain when we were 13.
Thank you for letting me win at Ultimate Mecha Strike III that one time.

Thank you for not letting me win every other time.

Thank you for remembering my birthday every year.

Thank you for making me eat.

Thank you for standing up for me.

Thank you for standing up to me.

Thank you for coming that night with the candles, even though you didn’t know it was me and I didn’t know it was you.

Thank you for coming twice.

Thank you for keeping the rose.

Thank you for calling me friend.

Thank you for growing up with me.

Thank you for looking at me as if you think I’m amazing, because sometimes I almost believe you.

Thank you for saving me.

Thank you for letting me be the one to save you.

Thank you for letting me love you.

Please keep letting me love you.

I love you, milady.

Always,

Adrien

Dammit.

She had Chloe to thank for this.

He’d tried to tell her on Thursday that something was wrong, but the message had gotten scrambled on the way and all she had heard was another girl’s name. How childish, how petty her jealousy seemed in hindsight. Chloe, Chloe, the spited name sounded like a prayer to her now.

Chloe was the one who made him write things down. Chloe knew that sometimes the things that mattered were taken away from him and so she had drilled it into his psyche to write important things down Adrikins so that even if they were stolen, they wouldn’t be lost.

If Chloe had been standing next to her in that moment, Marinette would have kissed her, would have gotten down on her knees and thanked her until her voice was hoarse and her throat was sore.
It was selfish of her to care. No matter how much weight she had allowed the moment of revelation to carry, it was nothing compared to Adrien’s safety and wellbeing. She felt guilty for minding that the actual event had not played out in accordance with her many fantasies. Even now that she knew it wasn’t his fault, that something had happened to him and he needed her help, there was this shameful greedy part of her that mourned their squandered moment.

But the moment wasn’t lost or squandered.

It was right here, in her hands, scrawled across ivory parchment in a familiar, angular script. His love letters were so much more beautiful and precious than any of her fantasies had been. He had written down all the words he needed to say in case he couldn’t say them when the moment came. These were the words she’d been waiting for, the words she needed to hear before she could believe them. The right words for Ladybug and the right words for Marinette. And it was Chloe of all people in the known universe who made him write those words down.

She remembered how scared she had been when he tackled her the other night and she tried to ask for help but he didn’t notice her asking. She remembered the terror of that split second, of reaching out to him as best she could and not understanding why he wasn’t reaching back. The desperation of trying to communicate with the person she trusted most and him not even realizing that she was trying to tell him something. It felt like missing a step in the dark, that ice-cold full-body horror as you slip through empty space when you thought you were on solid ground.

She couldn’t help but wonder, how long had she been doing the same thing to him?

That was the moment, sitting in Adrien’s bedroom, clutching his perfect words to her breast, when Ladybug found the solace she needed to let herself break down and cry.

_I love you too, Kitty. I’m sorry it took me so long to hear you._

_Please hold on a little longer._

_I’m on my way._

***

_Sometime Last September, Final Year of School_

_(age: 17)_

Chat smirked as he landed on the rooftop balcony and Marinette slid out of his grip. His chest filled with twinkling fluttering light at the sound of her breathless giggles.

“Thanks for letting me walk you home, princess.” He placed his hand over his heart and bowed.

“If I didn’t know better…” Marinette snickered. “I’d say you avoided using your Cataclysm on purpose so you could wait around for me afterwards.”
Chat kept his head lowered so she wouldn’t see his smirk widen. “I would never!”

He had. It was an under-handed temptation he occasionally indulged. Only when his powers weren’t needed, of course. He didn’t make a habit of it or anything. And this was the first time she had actually accepted his offer of a lift home.

It was just…

He had noticed that Marinette was usually hanging around after an akuma battle. He didn’t read anything into it but sometimes…

Sometimes, like today, the battle was on the outskirts of the city. And it would take a really long time for someone who wasn’t wearing her super suit to get back home. She might miss dinner and worry her parents (two of the kindest, warmest, most generous people in the entire world, he could only assume) which would cause no end of trouble. His driver was just a phone call away whenever he found himself stranded in the suburbs, but most people did not have a tight-lipped chauffeur at their beck and call all hours of the day and night. Adrien couldn’t give Ladybug a ride in the town car, but Chat Noir could absolutely carry Marinette home in his arms.

“Well, you did me a favor, so I’m not complaining.” Marinette snorted.

“Maybe we can do this again sometime.” Chat straightened a little too quickly and his vision swam. His stomach dropped all the way down to his feet and fireworks exploded behind his eyes.

Fuck. Not now.

His world spun like a kaleidoscope and something soft and squishy deep inside his core gave way with a regretful pop.

Not here.

“Chat!” She sounded terrified as he stumbled forwards.

Not in front of her.

She caught him before he could hit the ground and braced him against the railing, one of her hands flying to his forehead as he tried to catch his breath. “Chat? What’s wrong? Talk to me!”

He blinked the white fuzz away from his vision. “I’m fine.” He said brusquely, jerking his head away from her hand so fast he saw spots. They cleared in time for him to catch the startled hurt in Marinette’s eyes and he immediately tried to backpedal. “Princess, have I ever told you that you make my knees weak?”

“Chat…” She wasn’t buying it. His flirtatious smile vanished as her worried frown deepened. “Are you eating enough?”

Fuck.

“I’m fine.” He repeated firmly, pushing himself away from the railing and striding to the other side of the balcony. He wasn’t fine. He felt like he was walking along the edge of a cliff. He’d been feeling that way for some time. She watched him with a conflicted expression that twisted his insides into knots.

Of course he wasn’t eating enough.
Given the amount of food an average 17-year-old boy needed to eat and the amount of energy he expended tangling with baddies, there was no possible way he was eating enough. At home he had to maintain the appearance of adhering to his strict diet, which provided barely enough sustenance for a student let alone a superhero. He was one more soylent-and-celery dinner away from raiding Plagg's cheese supply, which could only end in tears and shame.

But he was trying, dammit!

He snuck food every chance he got, his own ravenous hunger made all the more insistent by his gnawing dread of collapsing in front of Ladybug. But no matter how much he ate, he couldn’t keep up. He didn’t have enough unsupervised moments in the day to consume enough calories to replace the ones he burned battling the forces of evil. He’d done some research, crunched some numbers, and in order to stay healthy he needed to be eating like an Olympic athlete, not a teenage fashion model. It had gotten worse since the start of the school year, under the extra strain classes placed on his schedule. He was losing weight, fast.

His father was delighted.

Gabriel was talking about putting Adrien on more runways. Adrien had seen plenty of runway models; he knew precisely the aesthetic his father was aiming for. Tall, striking, emaciated, and completely incapable of leaping over tall buildings without getting woozy. He knew something had to give. He needed to be eating more, a lot more than what he could get from stealth bodega runs and Marinette’s brown bagged lunches.


He knew she was trying to help. She was concerned about her friend Adrien, who wasn’t looking so happy or healthy these days, and the extra lunch she packed every morning and placed in front of him without comment or judgment was a beautiful symbol of their friendship and her infinite compassion. A daily reminder in case he forgot that his friend was the sweetest, most considerate person he had ever met and he was lucky to have her in his life. Each tenderly, mindfully prepared meal a message in a bottle promising that he wasn’t alone anymore. Part of him was grateful.

But it was a small part.

Because most of him wanted to curl up and die every time the lunch bell rang. Each and every brown bag confirming and re-confirming how badly he was screwing up; all the times he didn’t bother to say thank you only reinforcing his conviction that he didn’t deserve her.

He knew he had a problem. He knew his eating habits weren’t sustainable. He couldn’t continue picking at his uncooked watercress and carrots and then gorging on junk food whenever he got a minute alone. He was losing too much weight—pretty soon he’d be losing muscle mass.

He also knew how to fix the problem, but for some reason he couldn’t force himself to bite the bullet. Every morning he woke up and swore to himself (and to Plagg, who was just as concerned as Marinette but at least he didn’t make Adrien feel guilty about it) that he’d confront his father and every night he went to bed without saying the magic words: I quit.

He knew what he had to do but he kept not doing it. He was letting her down for reasons he couldn’t begin to explain and sooner or later she was going to figure it out. She already pitied Adrien. Now she was going to pity Chat Noir too.

Fuck.
“Chat…” She sighed. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

She was already helping and it wasn’t enough and he couldn’t tell her that. And he was trying to fix it but his best efforts weren’t good enough and he couldn’t tell her that either.

“I’m fine, really.” He shrugged, staring out across the city so he wouldn’t have to see the sorrow in her big blue eyes as he refused her.

“Please don’t lie to me.”

“Leave it alone, Marinette. Seriously. Just drop it, okay?”

“B-but I’m worried about you. Tell m-me how I c-can help.” She stammered and pouted.

She stammered. And she pouted.

Adrien fell off the edge of the cliff he’d been tip-toeing along since the school year began three weeks ago.

Because Marinette wasn’t allowed to stammer and pout in front of him. That was how she acted with Adrien Agreste, who was not to be confused with Chat Noir. There was supposed to be a difference. Those were the rules.

Her rules.

Unspoken, unquestionable, unfathomable rules he didn’t have a choice about and tried his damnedest to follow anyway. For her sake.

Always, for her sake.

“You can stop treating me like a little kid, for one thing.” He snapped, crossing his arms defensively. “You’re not my mother.”

She went ramrod straight, her lips a tight white line. “I don’t think that I’m your—”

“Could have fooled me.” He cut her off, a wicked thrill running down his spine as he pushed their shared boundary. Even if he meant what he said, he really shouldn’t be saying it as Chat. She was coddling her classmate, not her mysterious masked friend. At the moment he couldn’t bring himself to care. He felt like a live wire. She poked him, he shocked her. It was basic physics.

Her face went red. She opened her mouth and he could almost see the furious words that would surely put him in his place bubbling up her throat.

“It’s not your job to take care of me.” He added before she could start shouting, before he could lose his nerve. “You want to help? Great. Stop trying so hard and leave me alone. That’s how you can help.”

It was as if a little black butterfly had flown into his mouth and transformed him into a supervillain whose one and only power was taking things too far. Her shimmering eyes swelled and her mouth snapped shut. Gone was the worry, the fury, the confusion. He didn’t want to name the emotion rising behind her welling tears. He ran away before the salt water could fall, pretending he didn’t hear the wounded way she called his name as he disappeared.

Plagg nodded along politely as Adrien ranted and raved in his bedroom. Plagg watched silently as Adrien smashed his desk chair in a fit of rage—his frustration split evenly between himself and his
partner. The kwami floated aimlessly around the ceiling while Adrien had himself a good long cry on the bathroom floor. Then he patiently bullied Adrien into sneaking down to the kitchen and eating a decent meal. It was well after midnight and the mansion was dark and empty as the pair rummaged around in the fridge. Food, Adrien decided, was the only thing that made life worth living. The more he ate, the less weepy and explosive he felt. He owed Plagg an apology for questioning his priorities so often.

Eventually, Plagg said: “Okay. So, interesting factoid about you, maybe you’re already aware, maybe not, but you are one of those people who has a self-destructive meltdown when your blood sugar gets too low. You can’t help it so don’t beat yourself up too much. But also you need to start eating properly or this won’t be the last time you scream at her just because you skipped breakfast.”

Adrien frowned but didn’t stop smearing brie on the hunk of baguette he was simultaneously wolfing down. “She needs to back off.” He muttered, spewing crumbs across the counter. He spotted a ripe tomato and sighed happily as he sliced it up and added it to his bread and cheese.

“Maybe that’s a conversation Adrien should have with Marinette.” Plagg said. “But Chat Noir needs to keep his whiskers to himself.”

“I don’t have whiskers.” Adrien grunted. He knew Plagg was right but he wasn’t quite ready to admit that out loud. “I know there’s a problem. But it’s not something she can fix. If anything, she’s making it worse.” He’d almost worked up the courage right before school began, but then the goddamn lunches started showing up and giving him an easy way out. Sating his hunger just enough to keep it from overwhelming his anxiety and forcing him to say the words he desperately needed to say.

“She’s not trying to fix anything. She only wants to help you, which you’re not letting her do. If what she’s doing isn’t helping, you need to say that instead of lashing out and saying whatever you think will hurt her most.” Plagg shook his head. “You and I both know that today’s little hissy fit is nothing compared to the unholy super-tantrum you’d throw if she actually started leaving you alone.”

His voice was uncharacteristically gentle but the words cut deep.

What would Adrien do if Marinette actually stopped bringing him lunch? Starve to death, probably. What if she stopped showing up for him, stopped making time for him, stopped singling him out or, god forbid, stopped blushing when she looked at him? Stopped sending him cat memes (nothing suspicious about that, everyone likes cat memes!) when she knew he was in a bad mood? Stopped mailing him a card for literally every single holiday, including the ones she made up because she saw a cheesy postcard in the checkout line that she thought would make him smile? What if she stopped doing any of the hundreds of mundane-yet-significant actions she performed every single day to remind him that he mattered? What if he had to live with the knowledge that she stopped because he told her to?

The answer was obvious: he’d lose it.

He would completely and totally lose it. He needed her attention the same way he needed oxygen. He would suffocate without it. Her rejection would erase any scrap of dignity he had left. He would freak and flip and flail and fight to get her eyes back on him and him alone. He’d chase after her and he’d plead with her and he’d offer to do anything, be anything she wanted him to be. He’d probably make a nuisance of himself and scare her off. He’d end up scratching at her skylight in the night, yowling to be let back into her heart like a mangy stray.

She’d end up thinking he was every bit as pathetic as he already thought he was.
Adrien looked up and saw a vase of wine-red roses standing on the end of the counter. The bouquet was intended for tomorrow’s table setting. He walked over and pulled a solitary bloom from the bunch. He rolled the trimmed stem between his fingers contemplatively.

“You know what you have to do.” Plagg told him. “Make this right.”

When Marinette woke up the next morning and checked her balcony there was a wine-red rose sticking out of the spout of her watering can.

Lunchtime found Adrien sitting by himself on the steps in front of the school, his face cradled in his palm as he struggled against his own exhaustion. He heard Marinette sit down beside him but he refused to look at her. She was silent for a moment, probably waiting for him to acknowledge her, and when it became clear that he had no intention of speaking first she sighed. He heard a by-now-familiar rustle of paper and his jaw clenched.

Of course.

Of course she made him lunch again. Chat was the one who told her to knock it off, not Adrien. She didn’t know any better. It was his own damn fault for breaking her ridiculous rules.

“Adrien?” The quaver in her voice made his insides congeal with guilt and resentment. Why wouldn’t she leave him alone? “You need to eat something.”

Adrien pressed his palm harder against the bridge of his nose, trying to dam the angry tears stinging at the backs of his eyes. She was trying so hard and it wasn’t enough.

He wasn’t enough.

“Okay…” He muttered, not trusting himself to say more. He reached out with the hand he wasn’t using to mash his traitorous eyeballs and groped around for the brown paper bag. He felt her palm slide under his, freezing his search with a feather-light touch, and he held his breath as she slowly entwined their fingers. She didn’t squeeze or pull. He could break the contact at any time if he wanted to. She wasn’t trying to control him, she just wanted him to know she was there.

God fucking dammit.

His fingers twitched once, twice and then he was slipping his through hers and clasping her palm with all his strength as if he thought she would float away unless he tethered her to the ground. She hesitated briefly before returning his grip in equal measure. Her nails scorched white crescents into his knuckles and every inch of him was burning. Her hand was so small compared to his, but her grip was bone-crushingly powerful. He halfheartedly wondered if this was what it felt like to hold hands with a shooting star.

“Fix it.” She commanded in a hoarse whisper.

Adrien slowly lowered his free hand from his face and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He lifted the rectangle to his ear, keeping his eyes closed so he wouldn’t have to look at Marinette, and yet still holding onto her as if his life depended on it. Her strength poured into him through their joined palms and he managed to say the words without faltering or hedging or chickening out.

“Nathalie? I’m not going to the photo shoot today. Or any other day. Ever again. I quit. Please inform my father.” He hung up immediately and fell forward, hiding his face in his knees.

He felt as if the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders. He felt as if he’d been tossed into the deepest circles of hell.
Dad is going to kill me. I need to tell Nino that I’m staying with him for…forever. For the rest of my life which won’t be very long because Dad. Is going. To kill me.

“Hey.”

Adrien finally worked up the courage to turn his head and peek at Marinette from beneath his lashes. His breath hitched in his throat as he watched her cradle his hand in both of hers like a baby bird. For a second he thought she was going to press her lips against his skin but instead she folded his fingers at the knuckle and made a fist. She raised her own clenched hand and bumped their appendages together, an achingly familiar gesture that instantly nullified almost all of the anger coursing through his veins.

Almost.

“I’m proud of you.” She said. He could tell she meant it with all her heart. She was practically glowing as she beamed at him, a warm pink aura that grew brighter the longer he stared. She continued to hold his hand after she returned her attention to her lunch, tracing her thumb in little circles against his skin. He remained bent over, staring up at her with a tangled mix of pure adoration and bitter frustration swirling in his eyes.

He wanted to kiss her so badly it might end up killing him before his father got a chance. But he couldn’t. Because Adrien wasn’t supposed to act like that in front of Marinette. He wasn’t allowed to give up his secrets and pretenses and obfuscations and neither was she. Those were the rules.

He hated her rules. But only because he loved her more than he was allowed to say.

“Thank you.” He said instead.

***

Chapter End Notes

Did you blink and miss it? That was the one and only balcony scene.

In case you're wondering: I've dispensed with the bodyguard for this fic. I really like his character, especially since it's clear he's devoted to Adrien, but I'm not comfortable calling a human being "Gorilla" especially since canonically it's an appearance-based nickname. I've seen some fic writers call him Gregory, and if I ever DO use him in a fic I'll probably use that name too, but for this fic I decided that I already had enough cast members. I could write a couple sentences explaining that he's on vacation or something (which would work better for Gabriel's plans anyway), but I don't think it's necessary.

Comments welcome and adored! Next update will be on Thursday, so subscribe and stay tuned!

Next Chapter Title: The Ballad of Chloe Bourgeois
Next Chapter Tease: Why is Ladybug in my room?!
Chapter Summary

In which Chloe continues to be right about everything.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer:

(Mr. X has locked himself in the mirror message bathroom and refuses to come out)

Author: (knocking on the door) Mr. X? Honey bunch? Moon pie?

Mr. X: Leave me alone!

Chat: I'm sorry, Mr. X, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.

Mr. X: What do you think is going to happen when you say someone isn't cute!

Ladybug: Technically he didn't say that you're not cute. He said we're cuter. Which is an objective fact.

Mr. X: WAAAHHHHHH!

Author: Mr. X, would it make you feel better if I said the disclaimer on my own today?

Mr. X: (sniff)...maybe.

Author: I do not own Miraculous Ladybug or any associated content/properties.

***

The Ballad of Chloe Bourgeois

***
“Marinette? What are you doing here? Weren’t you supposed to be at the Agreste mansion an hour ago?”

“Don’t worry, Maman. I’ve got it all under control.” Marinette smiled in what she hoped was a reassuring manner as she closed the refrigerator. She had hoped to rustle up some food for Tikki without her parents noticing, but her mother came upstairs to find a cell phone charger and caught her rummaging in the kitchen.

Sabine frowned, unconvinced. “If you’ve missed the bus, your father or I could—”

“Really, it’s okay. Nino and I are driving out together. He wanted to bring his DJ equipment but there wasn’t enough room on the bus for the turntables so we’re going in his truck.” The lies came too easily for comfort, but she couldn’t tell her mother that she planned on travelling to the party via yoyo. “I’m headed over to his apartment right now. I was just looking for some road snacks.”

“I see.” Sabine sounded relieved and Marinette’s guilt cranked up a notch. “Sounds like you kids are going to have a lot of fun.”

“Definitely.” Assuming everything goes according to plan and no one dies. “Is it okay if I take these cupcakes?” She held up a tupperware she had removed from the fridge.

“Yes. Do you want a box?”

“This is fine. It’s only Nino, after all.” Marinette headed towards the stairs to her bedroom, pecking her mother on the cheek as she passed. “Thanks Maman. Love you.”

“I love you too, sweetheart. Be careful, okay?”

A wry, self-deprecating smile twisted Marinette’s mouth. “I’m always careful.”

“I know you think so, but we’re not always prepared for the situations we encounter in life. Even you can be taken by surprise, love. Don’t forget that.”

Marinette froze halfway up the steps and turned to stare at her mother. “Maman, do you—”

“You already missed the bus.” Sabine interrupted. “You don’t want to keep Nino waiting, right?”

“…right.” Marinette nodded and continued up the steps.

Not talking about these things was safer, right? It was the smart choice, wasn’t it?

Tikki was waiting in Marinette’s bedroom, flitting anxiously from one corner to the other. “We need to talk.” She said as soon as Marinette closed the trap door.

“What’s wrong?”

“I know who attacked Adrien.”

“I know. It’s the basilisk. Alya already confirmed that.”

“There’s more than one basilisk in the world, Marinette. Or at least there used to be.” Tikki closed her eyes and turned her head away, as if in pain. “But there’s only one who…does things like this. And it’s been a hundred years since the last time. I thought we’d be safe in the modern era but he’s right on schedule.”
“Tikki? What are you talking about?”

Tikki opened her eyes and stared at her Chosen, a miserable expression marring her sweet features. “Marinette…there’s something I need to tell you. It’s about Ladybug. And it’s about…Kaibliss.”

Marinette, who had a knack for detecting patterns and picking up on subtle details even without the super suit, wrinkled her nose. “It calls itself Kaibliss? Is that supposed to be an anagram of basilisk or something?”

“Yes. He’s old fashioned that way.”

“Seems kind of tacky to me.”

“Marinette! This is extremely serious.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Tikki. I’m using humor to cope. It’s a human thing. Please tell me what you need to tell me.”

Tikki sniffed disapprovingly. “It all began 500 years ago…”

***

The river Seine, its wide berth clouded after its journey through the city, bent sharply around a crooked little village at the heart of a lush, green valley. Sheep and cattle dotted the rolling hills and yellow wildflowers lined the bumpy roads. Founded many centuries ago as a trading post, the village had once been host to a booming fishing industry, but those days were long gone. Now it was little more than a ghost town, home only to a few hardened octogenarians who refused to abandon their river bend and their rocks, and the people who worked at the hospital or the Chateau. There was a gas station and a dumpy motel with a misspelled neon sign and a movie theater that was only open one day a week, and precious little else.

The Chateau de Anguis was perched high on the hill looming over the village, casting the narrow stone houses in shadow. All the wine grapes had been uprooted several decades ago and the rambling estate was surrounded by a thick hedge, pruned into a maze. The extravagant buildings were mostly used for conferences these days, but Gabriel had rented the entire estate for his son’s birthday. What made the Chateau de Anguis unique among event rentals was the glass dome that capped the main house. During nighttime events, the staff would always find a moment to dim the lights and direct their guests’ attention to the galaxy-filled sky above their heads and the crowds would gasp and marvel and remark on how they never got to see the stars like this living in the city.

Traffic had been slow leaving Paris and they arrived somewhat later than expected. The setting sun reflected off the glass and almost blinded the driver as the bus pulled to a stop in front of the main entrance.

Adrien made sure his guests were settled before making his way to his room. By the time everyone was satisfied, the sun had set and the moon had risen. The business associates his father had invited would not be arriving until after the party had officially started at 8 o’clock and Adrien wanted to take a shower and a cat nap before then. He was grateful his father had agreed to let him and his friends spend the night in the countryside instead of driving back into the city. The hopeful prospect of getting to enjoy breakfast with his friends in the morning more than made up for the horror of having to be polite to hedge fund managers over aperitifs and hors d’oeuvres tonight.
A hassled staff member gave Adrien directions to his assigned room and he found his door without too much trouble. The halls were long and winding and it was easy to get lost, so Adrien was relieved when he found the right number and the key turned in the lock. He pushed on the heavy wood, warped with age, and the door swung open with a prolonged creak.

Adrien took one look inside the room and slammed the door shut.

He looked at the number over the door.

He looked at the number on his room key.

It was the same number.

He very slowly opened the door.

A slender girl in spotted red smiled at him from the bed.

Adrien slammed the door shut again, his heart pounding in his throat.

Why is Ladybug in my room?!

He opened the door to check if she was really there one more time and she waved him inside. His body automatically obeyed her unspoken command even though he would much rather have been running away at that moment. Ladybug watched him plaster himself against the wall with a curious twist of her mask.

“Sorry.” She said, keeping her voice low so they wouldn’t be overheard through the walls. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

The lights were off and the room was dark, but enough moonshine poured through the open window for him to see her clearly—black hair, blue eyes, red leather against granite-grey sheets. She was lying on her stomach across the bed, knees bent and ankles twining in the air behind her head. One arm was draped over the side of the mattress and her other hand was curled under her chin. The look she was giving him could most innocently be described as coquettish, with a distinct come-hither patina.

Adrien didn’t know where to direct his gaze. It seemed rude not to look at her when she had come all this way but actually looking at her set off fireworks under his skin. He couldn’t in good conscience look at her face because from this vantage point it was too close to other, perkier parts of her anatomy. He tried anyway, but then his eyes briefly dipped down from her chin and had he known that Ladybug had cleavage in the suit? Was this information the public was aware of? Was this a fact he could forget? Because he felt like it was something he had no right to know.

His eyes jerked up in time to catch a subtle movement that was just as, if not more, dangerous. She huffed a tiny sigh and sank her teeth into her plump lower lip, which apparently was all it took to send the blood that he desperately needed in his brain on a one-way trip down south. Fan-fucking-tastic.

He settled on staring at the twirling tips of her toes.

“What are you doing here, Ladybug?” He asked with a gulp.

“You didn’t really think I’d miss your birthday party, did you?”

It hadn’t occurred to him to speculate as to whether or not the famous superhero would attend his
“Don’t you have more important superhero things to do?”

She shrugged and his eyes dipped down from her feet just in time to see the motion ripple through her assets. *Back to the toes, back to the toes!* Not that her toes were much safer. Her suit didn’t come with shoes, and her leather-bound feet rubbing together was a disconcertingly evocative spectacle. What would it feel like to wrap his tongue around hers the same way her left foot was—


“No. I don’t feel like being a superhero tonight.” She whispered with so much bittersweet melancholy that he came wickedly close to asking if she wanted company.

Instead, Adrien sidled along the wall until he was standing by the window, the furthest he could get from the bed without leaving the room. “I’m sorry. Or thanks? Don’t get me wrong, I’m honored. And surprised. After yesterday, I kind of thought you were mad at me, but…um…” He trailed off as Ladybug shifted. She pushed herself onto all fours and crawled around the bed to keep him in her sights as if she was a lion stalking her prey; her spine low and her hips raised, her arms crisscrossing in graceful swoops. Adrien made a strangled noise in the back of his throat. “C-could you not do that?”

Ladybug blinked. Once, and very slow. “Do what?”

As if she didn’t know *exactly* what she was doing to him.
As if she wasn’t doing it on purpose.

“M-move like—uh—could you just…just get off the bed? Please?”

“Oh.” Ladybug swung her legs off the mattress and glided towards him, stopping when there was only a foot of space between them. Adrien’s eyes got bigger and bigger the closer she came. “Is that better?”

Of all the questions (and there had been many, *many* questions) he had been asked that day, whether or not Ladybug being *closer* qualified as *better* was the one he felt least equipped to answer.

“What are you doing?” He heard himself whisper.

“I wanted to see you.” She glanced down at the carpet bashfully, reminding him of Marinette and causing the desire in his loins to coil even tighter.

*That’s not—*

*not safe.*

—*fair.* He thought.

She was still talking. “I know it’s not the best time. You’re not one hundred percent yourself right now and I’m…I’m trying to be more careful. But I’ve got a bad feeling about tonight, so…” She lifted her gaze to meet his. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No!” His mouth blurted without his permission.

*yess!* Howled the part of him that was still fighting. *Please! Go now! Run before it’s too late!*
“What I mean is—uh—what kind of host would I be if I kicked you out?” Adrien continued hurriedly, praying she didn’t notice his shallow breathing and tinted cheeks. She was standing so close he could almost smell her.

She smelled…familiar.

Familiar and good. Like vanilla and cinnamon and sugar and butter and whipped cream and meringue and macarons and croissants and canelés and freshly baked bread and what were they talking about again?

She gave him a dazzling smile that lit up her bluebell eyes and his knees wobbled. His mouth went bone-dry and he decided to wait for her to speak, to offer him some hint as to what she wanted, any clue as to how he might escape from this situation unscathed and hopefully without making a complete ass out of himself.

But she didn’t say anything; she just kept smiling and the more she smiled the more Adrien could feel his soul filling up with impressions of Ladybug. The glint of her eyes in the moonshine. A stray lock of hair wavering down her neck. The bend of her knee, the angle of her elbow, the line of her jaw. The warmth in her voice every time she looked at him and said ‘you.’ He waited and waited until it felt like he was about to explode.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” He croaked when he couldn’t wait any longer.

She sighed. “I want to give you your birthday present but I can’t. Not until you’re you again.”

He tried to disperse the haze of lust from his vision by shaking his head. It didn’t work. She still looked good enough to eat. “I don’t know what that means.”

“Part of you does.” She told him, her voice calm and even. She took a step closer, cutting the narrow divide between them in half. “More importantly, Monsieur Agreste, why are you looking at me like that?”

He hadn’t been able to stop his eyes from trailing up and down her figure. The moonlight streaming through the window trickled down her curves, pooling in the valley of her breasts and cascading along her thighs. His hands clenched into fists with the effort it took not to satisfy his curiosity and run his bare palms along the dimpled leather of her suit. She was so close; he’d barely have to lift his arm to reach her.

She was too close.

He needed her to be even closer.

“I-I don’t know…” He half-sobbed, one of his hands unclenching and flying into his hair. “I don’t know why this feels so—I don’t even know you…”

Ladybug grabbed his hand from his hair and brought it to her lips. As soon as he felt her velvet skin brush against his fingertips the rest of the universe blinked out of existence and it was just him and her, together in the shadows. It felt undeniably right, as if this was where they both belonged.

“You know me.” She murmured, returning his words from yesterday. “I don’t know what’s going through that head of yours, but you’ve known me for years.”

It took him a second to refocus his attention on the words coming out of her mouth as opposed to the mouth itself, and then Adrien’s jaw hit the floor.
Ladybug grinned and nipped at the palm of his hand. “You really shouldn’t call me that when I’m wearing this suit.”

“Oh thank god you’re the same person.” He rasped as he gathered her into his arms, too overcome with relief to register any other emotion. “I thought I was in so much trouble.”

She giggled and returned his embrace as tightly as she could, burying her nose in his chest and inhaling deeply as he nuzzled into her hair. She thought back to all her wasted nights spent tossing and turning, agonizing over her feelings for what she had assumed were two different sets of peridot eyes. *You have no idea, Kitty.* As far as Adrien knew, he’d only been longing for Ladybug since yesterday.

She had noticed the way he looked at her in the locker room, thank you very much, and the magazine she found behind his bookcase had been a strong clue. When she decided to come visit him before the party started, teasing him had not been her intention. Then he got so flustered after one glimpse that it took him three tries to open the door properly. How could she resist? She’d been waiting for five years, and she wasn’t happy about having to wait any longer. Wasn’t pleased with putting her Saturday plans on hold. Hawk Moth would pay for that too.

Out loud, she gently needled him: “I should’ve realized sooner that you have a thing for leather.”

“I have a thing for you.” He corrected her, before adding in a more thoughtful tone, “And, apparently, I also have a thing for you in leather.” He flexed his fingers a few times, kneading her waist through her suit. *She feels amazing.* He mused to himself as his hands splayed against her back and he buried his nose in her hair, relishing the luxury of holding her close. Supple, yet solid. Slight, yet powerful.

Ladybug could feel the evidence of his interest for herself, pressed up against him as she was. His black jeans didn’t leave much to the imagination.

She wanted to explore that.

She wanted it so much. But she couldn’t be with him yet, not until he was whole. As much as she wanted to drag him into that bed and wrap herself around him until the party was over, and the night had ended, and Gabriel gave up and Hawk Moth retired, until the sun swallowed the Earth and all the stars went out…she couldn’t do that to him.

Not to the boy who, from time to time, used his god-of-destruction-given powers to rip apart pictures of his own face.

If she told him that she loved him now, when the part of himself that he actually liked, the person he wanted to be, was buried deep in his subconscious she might hurt him. Maybe not forever, but for a long time. Maybe not irreversibly, but severely. She’d lost count of the number of times he had told her he loved her, and not a single one of those confessions had hurt her. Even if she didn’t share his occasionally-obnoxious but-usually-endearing proclivity for proclamations of eternal devotion, she should at least be able to manage saying ‘I love you’ without hurting him.

He made it look so easy. Flirting and loving and *being* loving. Adrien had always been the kind of person who held his heart out in front of him for the entire world to see. She admired that about him, but she couldn’t do the same thing.

If she tried to say ‘I have a thing for you’ he’d laugh, and rightfully so because that would sound
ridiculous coming from anyone other than him, and she would blush harder than she had ever blushed before and her face would get so hot her blood would instantly evaporate and her dehydrated husk of a corpse would implode and then she would die.


Also, they really needed to talk about the whole Your Dad Is Hawk Moth situation before making any significant relationship-defining decisions. She didn’t have a lot of romantic experience, but she had a hunch that any conversations along the lines of “so after we steal his magic jewel, is the plan to hand your father over to the authorities or are we gonna, y’know, insert finger-across-throat gesture here” were a surefire way to kill the mood.

Get Chat back first, she told herself. Then we’ll deal with everything else.

Ladybug would have to leave soon. She still had a lot of work to do before the party started. But the tsunami of dread that she had been avoiding for months felt closer tonight than it ever had before and she tried to burrow into his chest a little deeper, hold on a little longer. Just a few more seconds…

Adrien sighed contentedly into her hair and rubbed small circles between her shoulder blades. “I can’t believe you were Ladybug this whole time and I never knew…” She felt the fingers on her spine pause, felt his arms tighten around her slightly. “Wait, so that means…every time an akumatized supervillain attacks, you’re the one who…”

Uh-oh. Ladybug could spot a patented Chat ‘Human Shield Is My Middle Name’ Noir lecture a mile away and she really didn’t have time to deal with Adrien’s protective streak. Especially since, in his current state, she couldn’t calm him down by pointing out that he was always there to save her. Especially since even Chat didn’t know about the few times he hadn’t been there to save her and Tikki had to pick up the slack…

Now wasn’t the right moment for that conversation either.

“Don’t worry about me, I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing this for years and I’m really careful.”

He wasn’t buying it. “You just said a couple minutes ago that you were trying to be more careful, which implies that you think you haven’t been careful enough.”

Ladybug patted his upper arm nervously. “Uh…can we go back to the part where I say a bunch of things you don’t fully understand and you just kind of roll with it? I liked that part. That part was fun.”

“No.” His arms tightened a little more. He remembered how scared he had been for Marinette during the battle yesterday, how relieved he had been when the magical swarm came swooping down the street because it meant that even if Marinette had gotten caught in the cross-fire, Ladybug had saved her. But now he knew that if anything ever happened to Marinette there wouldn’t be a Ladybug to save her or anyone else. “What if something happens to you? What if you get hurt? Or ki—or worse? You—you’re Ladybug. You’re the only one who can set things right once the battle ends. You have to be more careful than the rest of us!”

Ladybug frowned and tried to pull away but he held on tighter. “That’s not really how being a superhero works…”

“Then don’t be a superhero anymore.”
She shoved his arms off her waist and took a step back, eyes flashing. “Want to try that again?” No one talked to Ladybug that way. Not even Adrien Agreste and definitely not Chat Noir.

Adrien winced. “That came out wrong. I’m sorry, what I meant was…” He paused and frowned. “No, actually…that was what I meant. Marinette, being a superhero is dangerous.”

“First of all, stop calling me that when I’m wearing the suit. Secondly, yeah, that’s why I’m a superhero.” She put her hands on her hips. “Hawk Moth is dangerous and it’s my job to stop him.”

“Bullshit.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said bullshit. Stopping Hawk Moth is no more your responsibility than it is mine.”

Ladybug laughed sarcastically. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Ugh—nothing. There’s no point in having this discussion until I bring you back home.”

“Back where? Back to Paris? You keep saying that you’re going to ‘bring me home’ and I still have no idea what the hell you’re talking about.”

I mean back home to me, you stubborn jackass! She thought.

But that was not what she said out loud.

“Yes you do!”

“No I don’t!”

Ladybug jabbed her forefinger into the center of his chest, pushing him into the wall. “You would if you’d tell me where you hid your ring already.”

Even in the shadows, she could see his expression change to barely contained aggression, confirming her suspicion that mentioning his Miraculous brought the buried parts of his psyche closer to the surface. Thanks for the tip, Chloe. She thought, non-sarcastically.

(Really. She wasn’t being sarcastic. It was just that she couldn’t seem to be nice to Chloe without sounding sarcastic even in the privacy of her own mind. But she was trying. Honest.)

“You should leave.” He said quietly.

“Adrien, please. I need to know.”

“I need to take a shower and put on a clean shirt, so you should leave.” He looked away from her. “Go back to Paris. They need you.”

Ladybug snapped. It was crystal clear that he had been trying to keep her away from the party since the very beginning, but she didn’t know if he was conscious of his attempts or if he understood the reason why. She was running out of time. If she couldn’t get Chat back before the party started, she would have no choice but to go into battle alone. Alya was still looking for cures, but Tikki was insistent that only Plagg could undo what had been done to Adrien. If they didn’t find his kwami soon, they might lose both black cats. She grabbed his shoulders and shook him, trying to force him to understand the urgency of their situation. “Why won’t you tell me where it is?!”
“Because it isn’t safe!”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t tell you!” His strangled cry echoed in the otherwise silent room. He covered his eyes with his hands as if looking at her was more than he could bare. “It’s as if…you know when you pour water into a glass with a crack in the bottom? You can’t see the crack, you think everything’s fine, and then when you pick it up a few minutes later the glass is almost empty and there’s a puddle on the counter. That’s what my brain feels like all the time and I don’t know what’s going on.”

“You don’t understand why you feel this way.” She whispered mournfully. “And according to our research, you won’t be able to understand even if I try to explain it. That’s why you need to trust us.”

“You?” He lowered his hands enough so he could see her face. “Who is us?”

You and me, duh. “Me, Alya, Nino, Chloe, Max, Juleka, everybody. We’re all trying to help you. But you have to trust us and do exactly as we say in order for this to work.”

“So I should assume that my looming dread about the party isn’t just my anxiety talking?”

“We’ll find out.”

His expression curdled with suspicion and a smidge of jealousy. “What about Chat Noir?”

She searched his face before she answered but she didn’t find what she was looking for. The fight in his eyes was already starting to fade. He was slipping away from her again. “What about him?”

“Yesterday, you said he was your partner. You said you needed him more than anything.” He sneered as he recalled the words she had intended as an assurance of her affections. Marinette’s opaque hints about Ladybug’s partner had taken on whole new meanings now that he knew she was talking about herself and…someone else. Someone she spoke about as if he was her entire world. Someone who was not him. “Why isn’t he here helping you?”

“I think he’s trying to help me.” She answered, choosing her words carefully. I can’t even tell him he’s important to me without fucking it up and making him feel insecure. “But right now he needs help more than I do.”

“Sounds like a pretty pathetic excuse, if you ask me.” Adrien sighed. “I’m never going to have a birthday party that isn’t a near-death experience, am I?”

“Next year. I promise.” Ladybug smiled, relieved that he finally seemed to be calming down. “We need to make it through tonight first.”

“Okay.” Adrien’s shoulders slumped as he gave in. “What do you need me to do?”

“Tell me where your ring is.”

“Other than that.”

Ladybug sighed. She wasn’t getting through to him and she was out of time. “Just keep away from your father tonight, okay? Oh—and later on I need you to play that word game with Chloe again.”

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Ladybug tapped on the glass before sliding the window open and climbing inside. Alya gave her a tired smile and waved as Ladybug’s feet hit the carpet.

“Ladybug!” Two skinny arms immediately wrapped around her neck and a big wet smooch was pressed against her cheek. “I missed you! Did you miss me?”

“Chloe…” Alya sighed. “Remember how, not five minutes ago, I explained that Ladybug is Marinette?”

“I know.” Chloe pouted as Ladybug dislodged the blonde’s arms with a roll of her shoulders. “But she’s so cute in spots, I can’t help it. Besides, I already knew that. Everyone knows that Marinette and Adrien are—”

“Where’s Nino?” Ladybug interjected before Chloe could finish her sentence. Honestly, young people these days had no respect for secret identities. Wealthy blonde young people who had known each other their entire lives in particular.

“He’s explaining the plan to the rest of the class.”

“Not the whole plan, I hope.”

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“—and that’s the whole plan.” Nino crossed his arms and glanced around. The classmates had assembled in Ivan’s room, as it was in a corner of the building and had the most space. The air was heavy and everyone was tense, but Nino didn’t see a single flicker of doubt in the faces staring back at him. All he saw was grim determination. “Any questions?”

“Yeah, I have a question.” Alix raised her hand.

“Okay, shoot.”

“This is a question for Kim—where’s my €50?”

“What?” Kim yelped and jumped off the bed. “What are you talking about?”

“You bet me fifty that Hawk Moth was the butler. I win.”

“Nuh-uh! You didn’t put money on it being Gabriel Agreste neither!”

“I put money on Hawk Moth being not Jean. Adrien’s old man is not Jean. Pay up!”

“No way! That’s cheating!”

“Oy!” Nino interrupted with exasperation. “The two of you can settle up on your own time. Are there any relevant questions?”

“Um…” Mylene frowned. “Is Adrien going to be okay?”

Nino didn’t know how to answer that.
“It’s only…” Mylene continued as a hush fell over the room. “Even if our plans work, and Adrien returns to normal, his father is still trying to use him against us. Won’t he…won’t he blame himself?”

He would. They all knew he would.

“Don’t worry, Mylene.” Surprisingly, it was Nathaniel who spoke. “We’re not going to let that happen.”

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Alya shook her head. “Nope, just the parts they need to know about. Everyone’s on board. Alix is especially excited. I’m a little worried about her going overboard.”

“Is Max doing okay?”

“Oh yeah. A bit nervous, but I think he’s been so focused on running all the diagnostics he hasn’t had time to freak out. He’s stoked to finally get to show off what he’s been working on all these years.”

It had been surprisingly easy to convince everyone that Adrien had been enthralled by a basilisk. Apparently the entire class had been trying to figure out what happened to Chat Noir ever since taking refuge in the locker room yesterday afternoon. They started their investigation (after immediately dismissing Chloe’s suggestion that Adrien was hypnotized by a giant snake because that wasn’t how hypnosis worked) a few hours before Marinette and Alya. They had gotten half as far, which was impressive considering their classmates didn’t have two kwamis to help their search. Nino had offered to deal with their friends and let Alya focus on the superhero stuff and she couldn’t be more grateful. Nino had known about Rena Rouge for years, but they avoided discussing her side gig as much as possible. She was glad she could count on him on the rare occasions when her superhero activities occurred on her home planet (and in her original timeline).

“Good.” Ladybug sat down on the bed in the center of the room. “I wish I could let Tikki rest before the party starts, but she said the basilisk would be able to sense her presence.” She eyed Alya before glancing nervously at Chloe. She didn’t want to ask about Trixx and accidentally out Rena, whose secret identity—as far as she knew—remained a secret. “Um…is everything good with you?”

“I’m good.” Alya assured her with a wink and a nod. “Just don’t try to shake my hand.”

Ah.

“And we’re sure the basilisk will be here?” Tikki was certain he would be, but Ladybug was holding on to the hope that her kwami was wrong about the identity of the basilisk.

“Well, Chloe said he uses different names, but there’s someone on the guest list named Kaibliss, so we’re pretty sure.”

“Kaibliss is an anagram of basilisk.” Chloe explained, even though Ladybug had already figured that out. “Also, it’s the name the giant snake uses most often.”

“It’s all about the word games tonight.” The superhero sighed. So much for Tikki being mistaken. “I just hope we don’t end up playing hang man.”
“No luck finding the ring, huh?”

“No. I think he knows where it is, but he’s not letting me anywhere near it.” Ladybug released a frustrated huff at the reminder of her partner’s obstinacy. “I don’t get it. He doesn’t know he’s Chat, so why does he care?”

“He does know.” Chloe argued, her voice firm and certain. “It’s not like he’s a different person. The memories aren’t gone. He just isn’t allowed to think about them and he’s being a big baby about it.”

Ladybug began to glare, her ire perking with the anticipation of conflict. “You make it sound like he has a choice. It’s not his fault. He’s a victim, same as any akumatized person.”

“It might be a little more complicated than that.” Alya said hesitantly.

Ladybug gaped at her. “I can’t believe you two. You have both been akumatized and—”

“Chloe knows what she’s talking about.” Alya interrupted. “It happened to her too.”

Ladybug’s mouth closed with a click and she turned to face her classmate with her full and undivided attention. Alya gave Chloe an encouraging nod.

“Go ahead. Tell Ladybug what you told me.”

Chloe’s arms were wrapped around her torso and she looked more vulnerable than they had ever seen her as she began to tell her story.

“The first time it happened—or maybe it was just the first time I know about—was when we were 6-years-old. We were playing hide and seek at the hotel while his father had a business meeting.” Her lips twisted in bitter disgust. “At least, they called it a business meeting…”

**12(ish) Years Ago**

“*Chloe, we can’t, we’re not allowed.*”

“This is *MY* Daddy’s hotel. I’m ALLOWED to go anywhere I want!” Bellowed the tiny girl with two golden buns perched on the top of her head and a flouncy tulle skirt that bounced around her knees. Her face was screwed up in outrage at the suggestion that she would be denied. “And I WANT to play IN HERE!”

Adrien, still wearing his cleats from football practice, glanced nervously over his shoulder to check for any disapproving grown-ups. “Father said to stay out of the suite during his meeting.”

Chloe snorted derisively. “*MY* Daddy’s hotel and *YOUR* Daddy’s suite. That makes us allowed two times as much.”

Adrien could hardly argue with such ironclad reasoning.

They entered the suite and tip-toed down the corridor, past the closed study door where the meeting was being held, and continued into the bedroom. Chloe ordered Adrien to stand facing the window and to count to 100 while she found a hiding spot.

“And no peeking!”
He wouldn’t dare.

“One…two…three…four...”

Where to hide? Under the bed? No, too obvious.

“Nine…ten…one-teen…two-teen…three-teen...”

Under the writing desk? No, too exposed.

“Twenty...twenty and one...twenty and two...twenty and uh...fifty...”

Ah-ha! The closet! Perfect!

“Seventy...seventy-five...ninety-eight...ninety-nineonehundredreadyornothereIcome!”

Chloe burrowed deeper into the coats and put her fist in her mouth to stifle her giggles. She watched through the slated wood as Adrien made a beeline to the bed and pounced on the floor, clearly expecting to surprise her. Her belly quaked with glee as his shoulders sank in disappointment. He checked behind the drapes and in the cubby where the ironing board was kept. He was bent over behind the writing desk when the door in the hallway opened. Adrien curled up under the desk as his father’s voice drew closer. Chloe huffed in annoyance at the interruption.

Gabriel entered the bedroom, a young woman with stringy blonde hair clinging to his arm. Chloe assumed she was a model because she was almost pretty enough to be one. They were followed by a second, paler man that Chloe didn’t recognize. She shuddered when his cold blue eyes swept over the closet door. Though she had never met the pale man, she could already tell that she didn’t like him.

“Take a seat.” Gabriel told the young woman as he led her to the bed. She did so, glancing around the room like a cornered rabbit. She looked terrified. Chloe didn’t blame her. Even though she was almost pretty, she looked as if she hadn’t bathed in weeks. Her hair was matted and her dress was stained. She was probably being fired for not taking better care of herself.

It’s okay. I’m sure her butler will give her lots of chocolates to make her feel better. Chloe thought, giving herself a pat on the back for Considering Someone Else’s Feelings like Mr. Cuddly had asked her to.

The pale man stepped up to the bed and grabbed the woman by the nape of her neck. She went limp and her head slowly rolled sideways until she was staring deep into his eyes.

“I’ll leave you to it.” Gabriel said. “I’ll be in the other room. Come get me when you’re done.”

“Mmm...” The pale man hummed. Gabriel stuck his hands in his pockets and walked away.

Chloe watched in strangled horror through the closet door as the pale man’s form began to shimmer and shake. The shadows on the walls grew deeper and his body began to change into something elongated and writhing. The woman remained limp on the bed throughout it all.

Run away! Chloe tried to scream. Why aren’t you moving? What’s wrong with you? Run! Now!

She couldn’t tell if she was screaming at the woman or at herself.

Nothing came out of her mouth except a terrified gasp.
A giant snake, scales grey with the age of eons, coiled on the floor where the pale man had stood a moment ago. Its head was the size of a cow and its body was as thick as a truck (Chloe was somewhat limited in her reference points). Its girth filled the room, the spiked end of its tail slapping against the walls. Greasy black feathers sprouted from the ridge of its skull. The air filled with a rattling that bit down into Chloe’s marrow as the snake lowered its gaping maw over the woman’s motionless head.

She felt…

**Rage.**

**Pure.**

**Righteous.**

**Unadulterated rage.**

*How dare* this monster come into HER hotel, HER life, HER world, to do such awful things? Chloe summoned all her strength to release The Scream To End All Screams when—

“Stop it!”

**Oh no.**

“Get away from her!”

**Oh my.**

Adrien jumped out from under the writing desk and hurled one of his cleats at the snake. It bounced off the monster’s scales and milky blue eyes flickered up in mild surprise.

What was he *doing*? He was a *guest*. Defending the integrity of the hotel was HER job!

“Go away! Get lost!” Adrien shouted as he hoisted his other shoe in the air. His face was scrunched up and red but his voice rang strong and true. “I’m warning you!”

Adrien was warning the monster? With a *shoe*?!

Granted, not a very fashionable shoe, it didn’t light up or nothing, but *still*.

**He’s so brave!** Chloe realized, heart pounding. Was this what the poets meant when they spoke of love?

“Adrien!” Gabriel had returned to find out what all the ruckus was about. “What are you—Kaibliss, stop that now.”

The giant snake hesitated briefly before rolling its eyes and flicking its massive tail. The snake suddenly had human form again, but Chloe wasn’t fooled. He might look like a mean gross ugly no-good very-bad person but she knew the truth.

*The truth was that he was a GIANT SNAKE.*

The woman slumped back on the bed, boneless and glassy-eyed.
“Why didn’t you check the room?” Gabriel sounded furious. Adrien looked hesitant and Chloe’s vision of a knight in shining armor began to fade.

“How calm down.” Kaibliss hissed. “I have more than enough room for—”

“No. You can’t eat my son.” Gabriel strode across the room and grabbed Adrien by his collar. Adrien gaped up at his father as if he couldn’t process what was happening. The remaining cleat slowly sank to his side. “Enthrall him if you must, but be quick about it.”

“Fine. You used to give me children to eat all the time when you were his age. You’re no fun anymore.” Kaibliss sighed, walking over to them. Adrien began to struggle as the GIANT SNAKE IN DISGUISE THAT INSULTED HER MERELY BY EXISTING drew near. Gabriel gave him a rough shake.

“Hold still, boy. You’ve caused enough trouble for one day.”

The snake-man put his hand on poor Adrien’s neck and he went as limp as the woman on the bed. Chloe shook with fury on her friend’s behalf and her eyes filled with burning liquid, but there was nothing she could do.

Not...yet, anyway.

But once she got out of this closet and spoke to her Daddy ooooh they were going to be in trroouuuble.

The snake-man held onto Adrien for a few minutes before releasing him. The boy appeared to be in a daze as Gabriel placed long fingers on his shoulders and steered him out of the suite. “Go play somewhere else and do not bother me again.” She heard the grown-up say. “This is the last time your mother convinces me to allow you to participate in group sports. Those so-called teammates are clearly a bad influence on you.”

Chloe heaved a sigh of relief.

She thought it was over.

She was wrong.

The shadows deepened and the rattling started up again and the snake-man once again looked like a GIANT SNAKE WHOSE VERY PRESENCE WAS SPIT IN HER EYE. Once again, it unhinged its jaw and lowered its mouth to encompass the woman on the bed.

Chloe kept her eyes shut the whole time, but there was nothing she could do about the noises.

First a crack.

A soft sad gasp.

Then nothing but wet, sucking, splurting, squelching that she couldn’t make go away even when she pressed her hands over her ears as hard as she possibly could.

She managed to hold it together until it was over, until the giant snake was wearing his man costume again and the woman on the bed wasn’t anymore.

She just...wastn’t.
Chloe managed to hold it together until the monster had almost left the room.

Then she couldn’t hold it together anymore and she released a hushed, solitary sob.

Her hands clapped over her mouth, trying to shove the sound back where it belonged.

For one second she thought she was going to be okay.

The next second the snake-man ripped the closet door open and leered down at her.

“Well, well, well.” He drawled. “Dessert!”

Nuh-uh.

There was no way in hell that was happening.

Chloe stamped her foot. “NO! This is MY Daddy’s hotel and I will NOT be hypnotized by a GIANT SNAKE in MY Daddy’s hotel!”

It was an early example of that classic Chloe je ne sais quoi that had been the genesis and ultimate undoing of so many supervillains over the years. Even in the moment, she felt quite proud of herself for being such a strong communicator of her needs and boundaries. Mr. Cuddles would be proud too, once she had a chance to tell him about it.

“Oh dear. I thought you looked familiar.” He tsked. “You belong to Monsieur Bourgeois, eh? I suppose it wouldn’t do to draw attention to my hunting grounds by devouring his spawn. I’m afraid you’re going to have to settle for being ‘hypnotized’ after all, little princess.”

He grabbed the back of her neck and Chloe’s body went limp without her permission. He stared into her eyes. She crossed them. He frowned and held her neck a little tighter. She felt like she was drifting off to sleep, but her eyes stayed wide open, gazing listlessly up at him even though she didn’t want to. A heavy grey blanket fell over her mind. It covered up her memories like freshly fallen snow covering slushy bloody boot prints.

It was the most unpleasant experience of her entire six years two months and fourteen and a half days of existence.

Afterwards…

Chloe was led to the door by a pale man she—

snake.

—didn’t know.

“Go play.” He told her.

She glared at him suspiciously. Who was he to—

giant snake.

—tell her what—

GIANT SNAKE.

—to do?
Chloe wondered where Adrien had wandered off to, but she didn’t see him when she looked around. To be perfectly honest—

**GIANT. SNAKE.**

—she didn’t look very hard. She wasn’t feeling too good and she wanted to go lie down. She returned to her room on the top floor of the hotel and sat on her bed for a few minutes before—

**hey. hey you.**

—walking over to her desk and pulling out a fuzzy pink notebook from the bottom drawer. Someone had given it to her months ago—

**hey. i know you can hear me because i am you and i can hear me too.**

—but she had never used it.

**helloooo. are you listening to me? GIANT SNAAAAAKE!!!**

Chloe closed her eyes and tapped a pen against the first blank page of the notebook. She didn’t know what she wanted to write but—

**what? do you need me to spell it out for you? Fine. I-apostrophe-V-E-space…**

—she was feeling so many powerful emotions. Too many. And it was as if they were coming out of nowhere. Why was she so scared? Why was she so angry? She needed to find some way to get the feelings out before her tiny body exploded.

Chloe felt her hand move, seemingly of its own volition, and she opened her eyes. She stared down at the notebook, with surprise, with curiosity, with trepidation.

The words she had subconsciously scrawled across the no-longer blank page read:

**I’VE BEEN HYPNOTIZED BY A GIANT SNAKE**

She had always been a good speller, she noted with a touch of pride.

Then it all came rushing back.

Chloe leaned away from her desk and pursed her lips.

After a moment of careful consideration, she decided that this situation warranted the application of a phrase she had picked up in the hotel kitchens.

“Those motherfuckers…”

**Back To The Present**

“Of course I tried to tell Adrien.” Chloe explained as she handed Ladybug the fuzzy notebook. The superhero opened it to the first page and noticed that the spelling was, indeed, perfect, even if the Es
had too many lines. “He didn’t want to believe me. So I tried to make him use the notebook, but he
couldn’t do it by himself. I had to help him and it took forever to figure it out and he hated it. His first
entry is on the second page.”

“Is it about that day?” Ladybug asked quietly, staring at the page.

“Yep. I forget the prompt.”

The word was: HELP

Was he asking for help? Reaching out from the corners of his mind, a frightened little boy who didn’t
understand what had happened to him? Desperate because his own father, the person who was
supposed to love and protect him, had granted the basilisk permission to hurt him instead? Confused,
alone, crying out for someone, anyone, to please come help him?

Or was he describing what he’d been doing when he was enthralled—trying to help, same as he
always did? A child going up against a mythical monster armed only with his shoes and a soul-deep
resolve to help anyone in need. He was ridiculous and reckless and she had to rescue him and was it
possible to love him more than she did right now?

“I don’t get it…” Ladybug said slowly, handing the notebook back to Chloe. “If you were able to
break the basilisk’s thrall when you were 6, why can’t he do it now?”

“I’ve given that a great deal of thought over the years.” Chloe announced in that arch tone that never
failed to raise Ladybug’s hackles. Whatever was about to come out of Chloe’s mouth was sure to be
unpleasant and unnecessarily hostile. “Why was I able to undo the hypnosis almost immediately,
when he could not? Why was my subconscious able to write in full sentences with perfect
punctuation and spelling, while his is only able to communicate in one word answers, even to this
day? In the end, it boils down to willpower. Sheer willpower. I’ve always had it, he never has.”

Bingo.

“There’s nothing wrong with Chat’s willpower.” Ladybug replied coldly.

“I have a theory…” Alya said. The superhero turned towards her. “I think willpower does come into
it. I don’t mean that as a dig at Chat!” She added quickly when she saw Ladybug’s glare sharpen.
“But, come on, there’s willpower and then there’s Chloe. Maybe Chat doesn’t have quite that much
self-confidence to draw on. And that’s fine. Most of us don’t.”

Alya had a point. Chat did have some self-esteem issues that occasionally made him doubtful and
insecure. Admitting that did not make Chat or Adrien weaker or less amazing. Ladybug nodded for
Alya to continue.

“Maybe Chat is aware of his memories, but not as retrievable information.” Alya went on. “Chloe
said that after she was enthralled she could still feel all the emotions from the experience, and that
was what tipped her off that something was wrong. If it were me, especially if I was still a little kid, it
wouldn’t have occurred to me to take those feelings seriously. If I noticed them at all, I’d probably
assume it was anxiety. Maybe Chat isn’t self-aware enough to understand his emotions, but he’s still
having them and that’s why he’s so scared about the ring. He doesn’t know why it’s important, but
he knows that he’s terrified about it.”

Ladybug turned this over in her mind. “So we’re hoping his subconscious understands what’s going
on well enough to tell us where the ring is even though he’s scared?”

“Good luck with that.” Chloe growled. “It took me a month and a second attack to get him to play
the game and he only sat for one round.”

“He already promised that he’d play with you again tonight.”

“And as soon as the trouble actually starts, he’s going to go charging off and forget all about his promise.” Chloe shook her head. “He’ll do anything to avoid admitting that he’s been hypnotized by a giant snake. I know him.”

“He’ll probably try to join the fight.” Ladybug acknowledged with a shallow tilt of her head and an unreadable expression in her eyes. Of course Adrien would put the safety of others before his own. They already had contingency plans in place for that scenario.

Good thing there was a hedge maze outside. He wouldn’t be able to go running into the fray unmasked if he couldn’t figure out how to get to the battlefield.

Chloe seemed certain that Adrien was at least a semi-cooperative participant in his enthrallment. Ladybug hated to admit it, but Chloe knew Adrien exceedingly well. They had known each other since they were born, had crawled together, played together, explored the world together, had shared unspoken trauma together for years and years…

But Marinette knew him better.

Chloe thought Adrien had given up, but Marinette knew he was still fighting because she had seen it. Seen, heard and felt him scream and cry and try so desperately to reach her that he lost all control. He was fighting so hard that he overshot, tackling her to the ground and digging his claws into her wrists, but he was trying. She knew he was listening to her and was trying to talk to her in return. The words were getting lost in translation, was all.

“But if you think Chat isn’t coming back, then you don’t know him as well as you think.” Ladybug concluded smugly.

***

Chapter End Notes

Analysis Comment (Spoilers for ep. Frightningale in Season 2): So I know most of the fandom is currently consumed by the Great Adrien Knows Debate of 2018, but have you considered the fan theory that…CHLOE knows? Cuz I'll tell ya, Frightningale came out while I was working on this chapter and the next two, in all of which Chloe plays a prominent role, and I swear the version of Chloe in this fic would have behaved EXACTLY the same as the canon version in that episode. As soon as she heard about the music video, my version of Chloe would have thought "Awww naw, Adrikins gonna go and get himself revealed. I better make sure I'm the one playing Ladybug so that there's someone there to cover his ass." And then when Marinette decides she wants the role after all, my version of Chloe would have thought, "God fucking dammit, now both those nincompoops are gonna get themselves revealed. I gotta find a way to shut this whole thing down." A theory which is supported by the presence of Mr Cuddles who theoretically represents her positive side. I don't *really* think Chloe knows in the show, cuz I firmly believe that if anyone figures out any secret identity it will be obvious
and plotty and not subtle hints based on assumptions, but also....*whispers* Chloe definitely knows....

See you on Monday! <3

Next Chapter Title: Cataclysm: Part I
Next Chapter Tease: “Rough night?”
Cataclysm: Part I

Chapter Summary

Betcha Hawk Moth didn’t see THIS coming.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer:

Ladybug: Phew! I can’t believe it took five days to get Mr. X out of the mirror message bathroom.

Author: I know! He’s so melodramatic. I hope at least he used the bathroom for its intended purpose…oh no…

(The Author stares at the many mirrors. Scrawled across all of them, repeated hundreds and hundreds of times, are the words ‘The Author Does Not Own Miraculous Ladybug or Any Associated Content/Properties’)

Author: Well, at least he had the right idea. But I’m not cleaning this up.

***

Cataclysm

Part I

***

Nino discovered Chloe standing by a window at the end of the hallway outside his room. She was already wearing her dress, a royal purple number with a ruffled hem that emphasized her height. He quietly padded up behind her as she glared through the glass at the stream of guests who were beginning to arrive in their evening gowns and sports cars.

“Look at them all.” She sneered by way of greeting him. “Smiling, laughing, plotting out their petty little sob stories, completely unaware of anything going on around them. They’re like lemmings. So busy playing follow-the-leader they don’t even bother to ask what’s waiting at the bottom of the cliff.”

“Lemmings don’t actually do that, you know.”
Chloe’s head spun on its axis and she leveled him with a long hard lizard-glare. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Lemmings don’t actually jump off cliffs. It’s a myth. It comes from this movie that Disney made in 1958 called *White Wilderness*. It was supposed to be a nature documentary but the filmmakers had no idea what they were doing. Couldn’t get the shots they wanted, especially since wild lemmings don’t do the thing they wanted to film. So they faked it. They bought a few dozen lemmings off some kids in Alberta, then they put them on turntables to make it look like they had a lot more and chased them into a river. Bam—lemmings jump off cliffs. It didn’t take long for scientists to start debunking the idea, but by then the damage was done. Now everyone associates lemmings with mass suicide, but it has no basis in actual fact.”

“Wow, Nino.” Chloe drawled sarcastically. “Thanks for the film history lecture. That’s really what I needed right now.”

“Anytime.” Nino shrugged. “You ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” Chloe sighed. “Readier than you, probably.”

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you…” Nino braced his shoulder against the wall and ducked his head so that he could catch her gaze. “What made you decide to help me pay the rent on my apartment?”

Chloe frowned and tilted her face to the side, but Nino didn’t miss the twin roses blooming on her high cheekbones. “I don’t know. What made you decide to move out of your parents’ apartment just so Adrien would have a crash pad?”

“I saw a need. I made sure it was met.” Nino shrugged again. “That’s what friends do.”

“No, it isn’t.” Chloe said with a touch of incredulity. “Maybe friends look out for each other, and sometimes they don’t, but either way there are limits. Don’t kid yourself, Nino. We’re not doing this for Adrien or Marinette. We’re not even doing this for Chat Noir or Ladybug.” She turned to face him, sapphire eyes burning with conviction. “We do this for the city. We do this because Paris needs them and because they’re both useless without someone looking out for them. I wouldn’t pay your rent in a million years. I wouldn’t pay Adrikins rent neither, because he doesn’t need me to. But, like it or not, they are the Protectors of Paris and as such Paris has a legitimate interest in their survival and well-being. The city pays your rent, Nino. Not me.”

“If that’s how you feel…” Nino remarked with a sly smirk. “Then why have you been keeping detailed written records of every time Adrien was enthralled for the last twelve years? I love the guy, but like you said there are limits and one of my limits is homework.”

“Mind your own business, MC Jerkoff.” Chloe huffed defensively and crossed her arms, her blush returning with vigor.

“Alright, Chloe. That’s it. For whatever reason, that’s the last straw. We’ve got half an hour before the party starts, which means we’ve got half an hour to deal with that bee in your bonnet. Why don’t you finally tell me what the hell happened between you and Adrien last month?”

***
Adrien was grateful that their arrival at Le Grand Paris put an end to the whispered argument he and Plagg were having in the back of the town car. Adrien was just as confused and unsettled by waking up in an alley with only fuzzy recollections of the preceding events as Plagg, but his kwami was convinced that Adrien was holding out on him. He had all but accused Adrien of lying, and the young superhero did not feel up to the task of defending himself. He had a pounding headache and a sharp spike of anxiety running through his chest that refused to settle no matter how many breathing exercises he tried.

“Stay in the car.” Adrien ordered his kwami tersely. Plagg stuck out his tongue but complied nonetheless.

Adrien didn’t bother knocking before he entered the suite. He knew from experience that Chloe would just ignore it even if he did. “Chloe?” He called as he walked into the spacious living room. “It’s Adrien. I brought the stuff.”

“Adrikins!” Chloe jumped out from behind the drapes. She always hid when the door opened because half the time it was a supervillain hungry for revenge. “How wonderful! Let me see!”

Adrien handed her the heavy paper bag he’d been carrying. It was filled with brightly colored shoes of different shapes and styles. “Don’t mention it.” He said, knowing that ‘let me see’ was Chloe’s way of saying ‘thank you.’ “Even though I’m not working right now, I still get way too many samples from brand managers looking for free publicity. You’re doing me a favor.”

“I know.” Chloe crooned as she dumped the shoes on the floor and began sorting through them. “It’s what makes me such a terrific friend.”

Adrien snorted. “I agree completely.”

Chloe held up a sparkly olive green pump to ask if he thought he could get a pair in a bigger size for Sabrina when she unintentionally saw his face, which she hadn’t bothered to notice earlier. She dropped the shoe and clambered to her feet.

“Look at me.” She ordered him. He did as he was told and he watched as the fires of shoe lust died in her eyes. It was immediately replaced with an ice cold fury that he’d encountered a few times before as Chat, but never as Adrien. “What did those bastards do to you?” She asked.

Adrien blinked. “Not sure what you’re—oh. I was almost mugged last night. Why? Is there something on my face?” He turned towards the nearest mirror.

“Adrikins!” Chloe grabbed him by the arm and hauled him around. “You’ve CLEARLY been hypnotized by a giant snake!”

“What about it?”

Chloe’s brow furrowed with confusion. “Huh?”

“The word game, right? With your fuzzy notebook? What about it? You trying to trademark it or something?” He teased her with a gentle smile. “Kinda random throwback, Klo. We haven’t played that in years.”
Chloe’s expression went blank and she took three steps back. “You still can’t do it.”

“Do what?”

“Trust yourself.” Her hands balled into fists. “It’s been years since the last attack. How could you let them—I thought you were over this already!”

“Over what?”

“You know what! Adrikins! I told you to write it down so this wouldn’t happen!”

Adrien shook his head, his pleasant smile fixed firmly in place. “You’ve lost me, Klo.”

“You can’t let them do this to you anymore.” She started to shake from head to toe. “It’s not safe.”

“I thought we were talking about a word game.”

“And I thought you had finally grown some goddamn balls!”

The smile vanished. “You’re way out of line, Klo.”

Chloe turned rage-red from her scalp to her toenails. “Nowhere near as out of line as you, buddy boy. Ha—when she finds out you’re gonna be in so much trouble. Assuming you don’t get us all EATEN first! You’re gonna be a sidekick for the rest of your miserable life if you don’t snap out of it, Adrien!”

Adrien threw his hands in the air. “I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“YES YOU DO!” Chloe thundered. “You do! Because there is a tiny voice inside your head that is jumping up and down and screaming that YOU’VE! BEEN! HYPNOTIZED! BY! A! GIANT! SNAKE!” She snatched a cushion off the sofa and lobbed it at him.

Adrien caught the pillow and tossed it back to her. “Right. I’m out. I don’t know what your problem is today, Klo, but do me a favor and try not to get akumatized.” He turned to leave but froze when he heard her scoff.

“Oh, I see. I don’t even need the notebook to know what happened. You finally figured out that Gabriel is Hawk Moth, so he had your memories erased again.”

Adrien spun around and glared, hands on his hips. “Are you high or just paranoid?”

“It’s so OBVIOUS. Just look at your SHOES!” Chloe pointed a quaking forefinger at the butterfly logo on Adrien’s sneakers.

“What do you know?” He snarled.

“I know you’re letting your Daddy issues put us all in danger.”

“Of the two of us, I’m not the one with daddy issues.”

“I know you’re a sniveling coward with no willpower!”

“Fuck you too.”

“I know you’re a bad friend because you don’t listen to me and you don’t trust me!” She howled. “You’ve NEVER trusted me!”
“You want me to trust you?” He shouted, heading for the door. “Try being trustworthy!”

“You’ll regret this!”

“Doubt it!” His hand was on the knob.

“You can’t allow this to happen!”

“Watch me!” The door was open.

“You can’t do this to Ladybug!”

He slammed the door so hard the frame shattered.

***

**The Night of the Birthday Party**

*(Saturday)*

Adrien poked at his salad without noticing the crunch of the leafy greens or the pop of the sun gold tomatoes. He was far too nervous to eat. He tried to ignore the itching in his palms that coyly whispered at him to *go find a big stick cuz that rustling behind us might be the wind, but it’s probably a saber-toothed tiger come to munch our scrumptious behind.* He kept finding himself eyeing the antique swords that lined the walls and wondering if any of them were still sharp.

Every time the ballroom doors opened, he spun around in his seat and got ready to have a heart attack only to slouch in disappointment when he saw that the newly arriving guest *still* wasn’t Marinette. He was torn, unable to make up his mind between wanting to see her and wanting her to stay as far away as possible from any potential danger. He was left feeling frustrated and confused.

But what else was new?

*Ladybug is Marinette.* He couldn’t get over it. The words kept spinning round and round his mind, circling the drain. *Marinette is Ladybug and I never realized.*

That was the part that really bugged him. He thought he knew Marinette better than anyone, but clearly there was this huge part of her life that he had completely missed. Did she have some kind of magic to help keep her secret? Or was he so self-involved that he didn’t even notice the girl he loved was nowhere to be found every time a supervillain showed up? He had been sorting through his recollections of akuma attacks ever since Ladybug left his room, and Marinette was missing in nearly every one. Oh…except…there was that time with her grandmother—

Adrien’s mind slid sideways, as if the memory had no more traction than the glass dome high above his head.

His thoughts turned to the last time Ladybug had rescued him and he quickly reached for his water glass to disguise his embarrassed grunt as a dry-throated cough. It had been around 7 months ago and the villain du jour had an aquatic theme. Adrien wasn’t the best swimmer, so Ladybug had given him
He circled around to being frustrated and confused again.

Luckily, that was the moment Alix tried to smuggle a sharpened battle axe into the ballroom and Adrien was able to distract himself by soothing the justifiably upset servers. He told Alix to take the weapon back to her room while she nodded and made sure Adrien kept his eyes on her as Kim tip-toed behind him with a duffel bag filled with gas masks, which he stuffed under the banquet line next to the kitchen door as per Alya’s instructions.

At first Nino clung to his side but he was soon distracted by some kind of dispute amongst the band Gabriel had hired and he left Adrien to join the huddle of musicians in the corner. When he couldn’t avoid it, Adrien made polite conversation with his father’s guests. Most of them were investment bankers, with a few famous photographers and models thrown in to spice things up. Adrien knew his father wanted him to use this opportunity to network, but he didn’t bother remembering any names.
Quitting modeling had been one of the best decisions he had ever made. He didn’t share Marinette’s passion for fashion and while he sometimes enjoyed the clothes and his co-workers, he hated feeling like a dress-up doll and he loathed the squishy sticky feeling he got in his stomach every time he saw a billboard of his own face gazing dreamily into the distance. The ad campaign he had participated in last summer, the final campaign of his career, had required him to wear large feathered angel wings, like some kind of goddamn bird. The contrast between the cherubic innocence depicted on his face in the ads and his bone-deep revulsion towards the images had pushed him to confront his father. There had been an almighty row and Adrien had spent the better part of two weeks sleeping in Nino’s guest room afterwards, but Gabriel had been forced to relent when Adrien threatened to hire a lawyer.

Adrien wasn’t certain, because his family Didn’t Talk About Money, but he sometimes suspected that he wasn’t being compensated fairly for his modeling work.

His resentment towards his father for trying to force him back into a career he did not want made it easy to follow Ladybug’s wishes and avoid Gabriel as the night wore on. Gabriel seemed to notice and though he did not approach his son, Adrien could feel his steel gaze following him wherever he went. As Adrien drifted around the ballroom and tried to enjoy his friends’ company as much as he could under the circumstances, Gabriel remained seated at the high table next to his old friend and personal lawyer, Monsieur Kaibliss.

The itching in Adrien’s palms increased tenfold every time his eyes swept over the pale man.

Adrien didn’t know much about his father’s history with Kaibliss. He knew that his father had met his friend on a camping trip when he was a boy. He had a vague memory of his mother saying Kaibliss “came out of an old well” but he had no idea what that meant and no context for the memory. Adrien had no idea how old Kaibliss had been at the time. The pale man never seemed to age and his date of birth was anyone’s guess. Adrien had run into him a handful of times over the years, coming in and out of his father’s study, but they had never had a real conversation. Not as far as he could remember. Perhaps Kaibliss was here for his father’s sake.

So why was it taking every ounce of self-control at his disposal not to run over there and bludgeon the pale man with a chafing dish?

Adrien needed to get some air, but every time he tried to sneak out to the garden terrace one of his father’s guests approached him with a birthday greeting or an unsolicited job offer. He managed to catch Mylene’s eye over a banker’s shoulder and sent her his loudest possible Save Me! vibes. She immediately marched over and splashed her red wine on the other man’s dress shirt. He was fairly tall, and her drink ended up soaking his crotch as well as his stomach. Mylene turned bright red as the banker gasped in outrage.

“Ah! Forgive me, Monsieur! Allons y!” She grabbed his hand and yanked him towards the restroom as he continued to gibber. Adrien mouthed ‘merci’ at her departing form and slipped out the sliding doors and into the cool night air. He allowed his head to fall back and heaved a sigh of relief as the doors closed and the sounds of the party were muffled.

The landscaped terrace looked out upon a modest rose garden. Winding gravel pathways meandered through the blooming bushes. The pink and yellow flowers were gilded in silver by the light of the full moon hovering in the night sky. The garden sloped down a grassy knoll and ended at the entrance to the hedge maze.

Adrien gave the maze a resigned glare. Five years of themed supervillains had taught him to be wary
of anything that even remotely resembled a literary trope. He made a mental note to stuff extra napkins in his pockets—

**not safe.**

—in his *jacket* pockets in case he needed them later on, Hansel and Gretel style.

He heard a clicking sound and a few muttered curses. He turned to find a young woman—one of the catering staff, judging by her uniform—hunched over in the corner of the terrace where she couldn’t be seen through the glass doors. She held a cigarette between her lips and a lighter in her shaking hand. She cursed again as the lighter clicked but did not spark. She glanced up at him and tried to smile, removing the unlit cigarette from her mouth and holding it between two fingers.

“Got a light?” She asked.

Adrien clasped his hands behind his back and shook his head. “Sorry.”

The woman sighed and tried clicking her empty lighter a few more times before snarling in frustration and flinging it into the rose bushes. Adrien arched an eyebrow. She winced and looked away.

“Rough night?”

“You don’t know the *half* of it.” She snapped, grimacing when she remembered that she was talking to a guest and not to one of her co-workers back in the kitchen. “Please forgive my outburst, sir. It won’t happen again.” She pulled out a blue pack of Gauloises from her waistband and carefully slid the unsmoked cigarette into place among its brethren.

Adrien felt bad. She looked upset and it was technically his fault, since this was theoretically *his* party. He was responsible for whatever happened tonight. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She flashed him a disgruntled look that clearly said: *even if I did, I’m not allowed to talk to you about it so why are you trying to get me in trouble?* “Don’t worry about me, sir. Enjoy your evening.” She went back inside and left Adrien feeling slightly guilty on top of frustrated and confused. He heard her mutter a quiet *excusez moi* as the doors slid shut.

“What are you doing out here, Adrien?” His father asked in a cold voice.

Adrien didn’t bother turning around. “I needed to get some air. I’ll go back inside in a minute.”

“You are being rude to your guests.”

Adrien didn’t think he was being rude by slipping away for a few moments, but he also didn’t feel like litigating the matter. “I’ll make it up to them.” Remembering Ladybug’s request to stay away from his father, he turned to go back inside.

“Adrien…” His father stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. It had been awhile since the two of them had stood this close to one another and Adrien felt dizzy for a second when he realized that he was a hair taller than Gabriel now. “You know I love you, right?”

There was a time when any miniscule scrap of affection from his father left Adrien feeling giddy for days, but now he felt curiously numb. When he was younger, especially during that lonely year in between his mother’s disappearance and starting school, he sincerely doubted that his father cared about him at all. But as he got older and pushed his boundaries more and more, he came to understand that while his father truly loved him, Gabriel was only capable of loving people by trying
13-years-old Adrien had craved his father’s affection, but 18-years-old Adrien was fed up with his father’s twisted notion of caring. He knew his father loved him, he just wasn’t sure if he wanted anything to do with it anymore.

“I know.” Was all he said.

“Nathalie tells me you’ve taken an interest in Miss Dupain-Cheng.” Gabriel commented mildly. “I’m somewhat surprised she was unable to attend tonight’s event.”

Adrien said nothing. Marinette said she would come, she just hadn’t arrived yet. And after Ladybug’s warning, his father’s choice of conversation topic seemed too specific to be coincidental.

*He’s up to—*

*stop him stop him stop him now!*

—*something.* Adrien realized.

Gabriel soon tired of waiting for Adrien to respond. “Don’t be shy. It’s only natural for a boy your age to take an interest in girls. She certainly is a pretty little thing.”

Adrien’s skin crawled and he tasted bile when his father described Marinette (*Ladybug!* Ladybug!) as a ‘pretty little thing.’

“She’s not a thing.” He managed to keep the angry tremor out of his voice, but it was a close call.

“Hmm.” Gabriel hummed noncommittally as he adjusted his glasses. “Does she care for you in return? Nathalie was less forthcoming on that point.”

“I’m not dating Marinette.” Adrien kept his eyes glued on the sliding doors. Maybe Nino would walk by soon and notice them and rescue him.

“I didn’t ask if the two of you were dating. I asked if she felt about you the same way you feel about her.”

“I understood the question.” Adrien bit out.

“You seem to doubt the depth of her regard.” Gabriel remarked with cool interest.

Adrien shifted uncomfortably. It wasn’t that he doubted her feelings, he just wished…

He knew Marinette cared for him.

Liked him.

Was attracted to him.

And on good days he believed that deep down she really *did* love him. But she had never given any indication that she wanted any of the things he wanted—dinner dates and public hand holding and too many anniversaries and silly nicknames. He didn’t want to love her only in quiet moments when it was just the two of them—he wanted to love her in front of the whole world. He wanted to love her in front of their friends. He wanted to love her in front of her parents. He wanted to love her in front of complete strangers and he wanted to tell Gabriel to take a hike if he didn’t like it. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to run his tongue over every inch of bare skin and bury himself inside her and never, ever leave. He wanted to make her toes curl and her eyes roll back. He wanted to buy her pointless just-because saw-this-and-thought-of-you presents that would pile up in the corners of her
world and slowly, without her even noticing, fill her life with constant reminders of how much he
loved her. He wanted to use whatever terminology she was comfortable with—his girlfriend, his
lover, his sweetheart, his main squeeze, his heart and soul, his one and only, his significant other, his
amour, his partner. Whatever she wanted. As long as she was his. As long as he was hers.

Maybe someday, when they had both grown up enough, he’d wake up to find her waiting on his
doorstep with a bottle of wine and a bouquet of roses, ready to make it work. At least now that he
knew she was Ladybug, he understood a little better why she was so hesitant to define anything
between them. The last thing he wanted was to become a pawn against Ladybug for someone like
Hawk Moth. Adrien had seen a few Spiderman movies. He knew what happened when the Big Bad
figured out the love interest, and as thrilling as being rescued by Ladybug was, he didn’t want to be
targeted by akumas more than he already was. If anyone ever tried to use him to get to her, Marinette
would never forgive herself for putting him in danger. Whatever affection Marinette had for him,
Adrien couldn’t allow anyone to take advantage of it or hurt her through him.

“I don’t see how this is any of your business.” Adrien snapped defensively.

“I’m your father. It is my job to step in and offer my counsel when I think you are doing yourself a
grave disservice.” Gabriel took Adrien’s stunned silence as an invitation to return his hand to his
son’s shoulder. “By loving a woman who does not love you back, for example.”

Adrien blinked.

What the fuck did he just say?

oh shit. he’s trying to akumatize me. keep it together, agreste!

“You’re trying to piss me off.” Adrien plastered his most professional smile on top of his face.
Gabriel knew absolutely nothing about his relationship with Marinette, hadn’t taken an interest in her
for five years of Adrien unabashedly and unreservedly pining after her, and he had no right to
counter now. “But I’m not going to give you the satisfaction. Enjoy the party, Dad.”

He went inside, taking extra care not to slam the sliding glass doors. He set off across the ballroom
floor, gradually picking up speed until he was bolting towards the bar. He was in such a hurry to put
as much distance between him and his father as possible that he didn’t notice Sabrina casually walk
up to the sliding doors and turn the lock, hopefully buying them all a few more minutes before
Gabriel came back inside. Nor did he notice Sabrina nod significantly at Ivan, who gave Nathaniel a
thumbs up. Nathaniel ran to whisper something in Kim’s ear. Kim nodded and headed towards the
banquet line, whistling nonchalantly.

Some might say too nonchalantly.

Adrien slammed his open palm on the bar counter. “Scotch whiskey, two fingers, neat, please.”

The bartender nodded and began pouring the drink. He didn’t ask for a brand because Gabriel had
only paid for one brand of each alcohol variety, and all of them were rare obscure labels that no one
had ever heard of. Adrien had no way of knowing this, but this arrangement had turned the
bartender’s night into a living hell. No one knew what they wanted, he couldn’t tell anyone how
anything tasted because he hadn’t tried more than half his stock, he didn’t know how to mix some of
it without accidentally giving someone alcohol poisoning and some of the labels he couldn’t even
read.

And five minutes ago he received word from the kitchen that the entire building had suddenly and
mysteriously run out of ice. He had already sent two of the bus boys into the village to find some
more, but he had a sneaking suspicion they were going to return empty handed.

This was the bartender’s worst nightmare. Only this time he had all his clothes on and it was really happening. He tried not to let the handsome young man who was enjoying his party see the nervous breakdown as it started to set in. He ducked behind the counter and pretended to be fiddling with a box of Mongolian vodka as he began to cry.

“There you are.” Nino had finally found him. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere. Where’d you go?”

“Tried to grab some air outside.” Adrien grimaced. “Ended up shooting the breeze with the old man instead.”

“Oh.” Nino glanced over his shoulder in alarm. “Did he…is everything okay?”

“Sure.” Adrien snarled as the bartender placed his drink in front of him. “He just wanted to casually remind me that Marinette doesn’t love me, no big deal.” He picked up the glass and tried to down it in one gulp, but the liquid burned like fire and he sputtered, spraying droplets of amber all over the bar.

Nino looked furious, but his voice was carefully calm as he said: “You shouldn’t let him get to you.”

“I’m not.” Adrien said once he had finished choking.

“He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“No, it isn’t.” Nino snapped with a frown. “That’s not an okay thing for him to say to you, especially since it isn’t true.” Adrien shrugged and Nino’s eyes widened. “Dude, come on. You know Marinette loves you. She’s loved you since we were 13.”

“Maybe.” Adrien wasn’t so sure of that, but he didn’t want to argue with Nino. Especially not about Marinette, since whenever they argued about her Nino would pull out the I’ve Known Her Longer card, which was one of Adrien’s least favorite cards in the deck. “But she doesn’t want to…never mind. She doesn’t want to, so it doesn’t matter.”

Nino was quiet for a long time. “Maybe she needs her partner more than she needs a boyfriend.”

“Thanks Nino. That makes me feel so much better.” Adrien snapped, recalling the wistful longing in Marinette’s voice every time she spoke about her mysterious partner. He regretted it as soon as he saw his friend’s brow knit with concern. “Sorry, I’m in a bad mood. I’ll try to…to…oh…” He trailed off as his eyes landed on the person who was striding into the ballroom. The person he’d been waiting for. The last person he wanted to see walk through those doors. “…wow…”

Nino turned, saw who he was looking at, and winced. “Here we go.” Adrien heard him mutter, but he didn’t have any brain cells to spare for deciphering his friend’s reaction. At the moment, all of his mental faculties were split between three thoughts.

The first thought was: She came!

The second thought was: That dress!

The third thought was: no no no please god no, please don’t do this to me
Marinette’s dress was clearly one of her originals. She must have spent months crafting it. The sweetheart neckline swooped low and framed her breasts, black lace trim peeking out from the collar. Puffs of black lace covered her shoulders and she wore matching gloves that stretched all the way to her elbows. Her dress was rose pink and her skirt hung long and heavy, a slit on the side reaching up her thigh and revealing a glimpse of skin every time she moved. Knowing her, he knew that her signature was sewn somewhere into the dress and that there were at least four cleverly disguised functional pockets because Marinette never made anything without pockets anymore. She was gorgeous. She was sexy. She was romantic.

If he ran over there and picked her up and swung her around, he was pretty sure her skirt would ripple through the air behind her like in an old-fashioned musical.

He wanted to try, but he didn’t because she looked nervous. She bit her lip and glanced around the room. Adrien began to frown, his fingers slowly tightening around his glass. Whatever she’d been worried about earlier, he suspected he was about to find out what it was.

Nino placed a hand on his shoulder. “Okay, I’m not supposed to say this, but since you’re already kinda upset I just want to warn you before—uh-oh…”

All of a sudden, Chloe Bourgeois emerged from the crowd and marched straight up to Marinette Dupain-Cheng. Adrien, knowing all too well that the two did not get along, moved with the intention of intervening. Nino’s hand on his shoulder pressed down, keeping him in place.

Adrien watched Marinette’s nervous expression deepen as Chloe walked up to her. He watched as Chloe came to a halt just a few inches away from Marinette. He watched Chloe place a hand on Marinette’s shoulder. He watched Chloe place her other hand on Marinette’s waist.

“Dude, uh, before—oops. Too late.”

He watched Chloe bend down and press her face against Marinette’s face.

…

…was Chloe biting Marinette?

*Wait.*

*No.*

*Wait…*

*What?*

Marinette’s hand lifted into the air and Adrien hoped for the predictable smack and scream. But instead of shoving Chloe away, Marinette slid her fingers into Chloe’s ponytail and pulled out her hair tie, deepening the kiss as she did so.

Because that’s what they were doing.

They were definitely kissing.

And a little more than that. Marinette had hoisted Chloe’s knee up to her waist and was rocking into her. He could see her motions clearly even from across the room. They were still standing on the raised dais in front of the ballroom doors. *Everyone* could see.
He was watching Marinette and Chloe make out.

Big time.

**CRACK**

Adrien didn’t notice that he’d been holding his drink so tightly the glass broke, so it was up to Nino to deal with it before he cut himself. He silently removed the glass from Adrien’s unresponsive hand and placed it on the bar. He gently closed Adrien’s mouth with his finger, but his friend’s jaw dropped open again as soon as Nino removed his hand.

Adrien didn’t know what to think. Even his subconscious was stunned into silence.

“You shameless vixen!”

Adrien mustered a stupefied blink as Alya appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and marched towards Chloe and Marinette with a murderous scowl. The two girls entwined with each other didn’t notice her until Alya grabbed Chloe’s arm and yanked her away from Marinette.

“Hands off!” Alya shouted. “She’s mine!” She spun Chloe around and gave her a big smooch.

“No!” Marinette grabbed Chloe’s other arm and pulled her back. “She’s mine!”

“Girls! Girls! Don’t make me choose!” Chloe wailed as she was tugged from one to the other.

The party ground to a halt as everyone directed their undivided attention to the love triangle currently combusting on the dais. Nino slung his arm over Adrien’s shoulder and started nudging him towards a side door behind the bar. “Come on.” Nino hissed. “Time to go.”

“Wha…wha…what…” Adrien blubbered helplessly as Nino dragged him towards the exit. Marinette released Chloe so that she could give Alya a shove. Alya stumbled backwards into the middle of the ballroom. As Nino yanked him into a narrow corridor and closed the door, Adrien heard a voice that sounded a lot like Alix start to shout:

“Fight! Fight! Fight!”

Then the door shut with a snap and the sounds from the party were cut off. Nino waved his hand in front of Adrien’s face.

“Dude? You still with me?”

Adrien’s eyes bugged out as he cried, “What was that?!”

“We needed a distraction.” Nino explained with a touch of guilt. “Alya thought that would be effective.”

“What do you mean effective?!”

“Finally. Took you long enough.”

Adrien spun around and pointed accusingly as Chloe walked up to them, tapping away at her phone. “You!” He snarled. “What the hell Chloe?!”

She ignored him. “Rena says that Hawk Moth is on the move, so we need to go before the akumas show up.” Nino nodded and grabbed Adrien’s arm, hauling him down the corridor. Adrien twisted so that he could continue to glare at Chloe.
“Chloe!”

“What?” She asked without looking up from her phone, jogging to keep up with them.

“You can’t go around making out with my—”

“She’s not yours, she’s hers. And I didn’t. It was an illusion.” Chloe interjected coolly. She took hold of his other arm and their pace increased until Nino and Chloe were practically carrying Adrien as they flew down the hall. “Try to keep up, Adrikins. It’s going to be a long night.”

***

Kim hovered nervously by the kitchen doors as Alya and Marinette’s fight over Chloe escalated from shoving and name-calling into a no-holds-barred ballroom brawl. The assembled bankers, photographers and models were transfixed by the spectacle. The grappling duo slowly moved closer to the kitchen and the mesmerized crowd followed. Kim glanced through the porthole into the kitchen. A moment ago the space had been filled with cooks and dishwashers and servers, with steam and shouts and shallot peels, but now it was empty. He unzipped the duffel bag slung over his shoulder and confirmed that the gas masks were all accounted for. He looked up and caught Ivan’s eye. The two nodded at each other and Kim slipped inside the kitchen, waiting to open the doors when the moment was right.

Five years.

Five years of putting up with this shit.

Five years of being assaulted and brutalized and manipulated by a supervillain who exploited your darkest thoughts and most shameful impulses.

Five years was a long time.

Five years was long enough to start thinking about fighting back.

Five years was long enough to start asking how to do it, for when the moment came.

Five years was more than enough time to come up with a plan.

Kim saw Alya coming his way and he quickly opened the door. Marinette gave her a mighty shove and Alya went flying into the kitchen. Within a second, Marinette was on top of her. They rolled to the far end of the kitchen in a screeching heap. The crowd chased after them, not wanting to miss a single second of the entertainment. Kim made sure each of his classmates got a gas mask as they ducked past him. When he was confident all the remaining party guests were in the kitchen, Kim and Ivan shut the doors, leaning their full combined weight against the wooden panels to keep them closed.

Max was on his phone—he’d been in constant contact with the rest of the team all night. Rose was clinging to her girlfriend’s side, shaking with terror, but there was a vengeful gleam in Juleka’s eye as she surveyed the room. Juleka’s gleam was nowhere near as terrifying as Alix’s sadistic grin. They were supposed to be looking concerned and alarmed, but Alix couldn’t contain her excitement. Mylene and Nathaniel were shoving guests away from the back wall as fast as they could. Sabrina was quietly but firmly organizing the crowd into small groups and sorting those groups in an orderly
line by the prep counters.

Chloe was nowhere to be seen. Someone must have bumped into her in the ballroom. Kim hoped no one noticed before Hawk Moth made his move.

Adrien was there too, standing behind Max in the corner and gaping at Marinette and Alya with stunned horror.

At least, it looked like Adrien.

Five years was plenty of time to learn when to ask questions and when to keep your suspicions to yourself.

**BOOM**

The building shook. The gas masks went on.

“Up! Up!” Sabrina shouted, lifting her mask so that she could be heard clearly. “People in the back! Up on the counters! NOW!” The conglomerated bankers, photographers and models found themselves obeying her commanding voice before they had a chance to wonder why.

**BOOM**

Kim and Ivan made eye contact as the kitchen doors shook violently against their shoulders.

*Wait for it…*

The doors blew apart, pulverized into particles by a magical blast. Kim and Ivan spun around, making sure they were in between the now-panicking party guests and the freshly minted supervillain.

“My name is Maître Death and I’ll be your server of despair tonight!” Bellowed the former caterer hovering in the air above the ballroom floor.

*Wait for it…*

Suddenly, the doors leading to the garden terrace shattered and five more akumatized villains entered the fray. Once they were a humble oldies band but, spited and cheated by the powerful Gabriel Agreste and spit on by drunk bankers during a last-minute gig, they were now The Battle Boys and the only music they knew how to play was the sweet siren song of pain.

*Wait for it…*

A gigantic corkscrew with arms, legs and a distorted face cackled wildly as it levitated up from behind the bar. “Do you prefer your blood shaken or stirred?” Scartender asked.

The seven assembled supervillains pointed their weapons at the kitchen and shouted in unison: “SURRENDER ADRIEN AGRESTE!”

“Markov! Go!” Max shouted into his phone.

*Beep beep beep*

The kitchen exploded with plaster and dust and screams as the back-end of what appeared to be a semi-truck smashed through the wall.
“We’re fine, Markov. Back in the driver’s seat!”

“Everybody in the truck! Keep moving forward!” Sabrina’s voice cut through the chaos like a hot knife through vegetable shortening. “Group one! Go! Group two! Go! Keep moving, keep moving!”

Wait for it…

“Not so fast!” Screeched Maître Death. “You all like giving orders so much—let’s see how much you like taking them!” Her weapon was a giant pepper grinder and when she turned the knob a plume of spice that would turn anyone who inhaled it into her mindless drone emerged from the bottom.

Called it. Kim thought smugly as his mask filtered out the mind-controlling particles. Hawk Moth was so predictable.

A few of the straggling party guests caught a whiff of the substance, but Juleka and Rose were there to shove them onto the truck as the slack-jawed expression of total obedience consumed their groomed features.

“Kim! Ivan! Let’s go!” Mylene shouted.

Waaaaait for it…and…now!

“You want Adrien?” Kim bellowed as he moved backwards. He was careful to walk at an angle so the supervillains had a clear view of Adrien’s face getting a huge whiff of mind control spice as he peered out from the back of the truck.

“Come and get him!” Roared Ivan as he and Kim leapt into the truck. The engine rumbled to life and the truck shot forward at an alarming speed. A record shattering speed. A mind boggling speed. A comprehensively, universally astounding speed.

A theoretically impossible speed.

“Stop gawking and MOVE!” Sabrina was still doing crowd control. “Come on! I need everyone who does not have an assigned station in the front compartment by the time we hit the river! Let’s GO!”

“Are they following?” Max shouted at Kim as he strapped into his seat.

The back of the truck did not look like the back of a semi-truck on the inside.

It looked like a spaceship.

Only better because this spaceship came with an Xbox and a soft serve dispenser.

Also it could transform into a giant robot.

People always forgot that Max built robots.

Technically, as Max had reminded them all on numerous occasions, it wasn’t a robot so much as a semi-automatic mecha multi-unit. But everyone else called it a robot.

He’d been working on this particular bot for the last five years, waiting for the perfect moment to strike back. When Alya called him last night and asked if he had any tech up to the task of battling a
supervillain, he had known the moment they’d all been waiting for had finally arrived.

“Yeah!” Kim shouted as he peered out the back window. “They’re barely keeping up, but they’re all there! All seven present and accounted for!”

“Good. We’re at the river.” Max nodded and tapped his headset. “Markov! Detach the submersible unit!”

The front of the not-truck shot into the air, transformed into a submarine and crashed into the Seine. It began chugging upstream, bringing all the party guests safely back to Paris. Sabrina went along with them, in case those few stragglers who caught a whiff of Maître Death’s dastardly pepper started causing trouble. The back of the truck came to an immediate (and, considering how fast it had been moving, theoretically impossible) stop. The illusion of Adrien went up in a puff of magic.

The supervillains closed in, delighted that their prey had stopped moving.

“Everyone at their station?” Max asked.

A chorus of “Oui, Chef!” answered him.

“Good. Markov! ACTIVATE MECHA-CLASS!”

The not-truck began to moan and shake as panels slid against compartments and metal kissed metal. Angry red sparks shot up into the night sky. In the space of a few seconds, the not-truck metamorphosed into a 30ft tall robot souped up for battle. There were black cat ears with red polka dots on the top of its head.

The seven supervillains froze in their tracks, suddenly less certain of the vulnerability of their quarry.

Five years was a long time…

[WE REALLY HOPE YOU’RE PAYING ATTENTION, HAWK MOTH.]

When Mecha-Class spoke, it was in Juleka’s voice.

[BECAUSE THIS IS THE LAST TIME YOU EVER FUCK WITH US.]

Five years was long enough.

[MECHA-CLASS ATTACK FORMATION: ACTIVATE!]

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_the Night Nino Decided He Needed His Own Apartment_

_June of Last Summer_

(Age: 17)
“Thanks for staying late to help me pack up, Marinette.” Nino said with a half-grin, half-grimace. “You didn’t have to.”

She chuckled and easily hoisted the last amplifier into the back of Nino’s truck. “I know, but I don’t mind.” She assured him as she slammed the door. “It’s more fun helping you than being the only sober person at the party anyway.”

“Yeah.” Nino glanced ruefully up at the heavily trashed third floor apartment they had just vacated. “Kim’s gonna have a lot of explaining to do when his folks get home.”

“It’s his own fault for letting Juleka spike the punch with absinthe.” Marinette’s eyes suddenly brightened. “When the cops showed up about the noise, I thought Alix was gonna punch them in their mugs. She was really giving them the sauce. It was nearly a brew-haha.”

Nino groaned. “When is Adrien flying home from Milan again?”

“A day after Alya gets back from New Orleans, so Monday.” She stuck her tongue out at him. “Good. Can’t wait.”

“Me neither.” Marinette heaved a dreamy sigh.

Nino snorted and she began to flush. “Ooooo, somebody’s in looooove.”

“Shut up.”

“Marinette and Adrien, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I—”

“I will destroy you, Lahiffe.”

“Ouch. So hostile.” He tapped a finger against his chin and pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Y’know, it might help blow off some of that steam if you and Adrien actually were kiss—oof!” He broke off as she gave him a tiny shove and he stumbled away laughing. “Okay! Okay! I’ll stop teasing! Sorry, Nette, just trying to be a good wingman while my buddy’s out of town.” He winked.

“Well, don’t.” She huffed, crossing her arms and looking away. Her cheeks were blotched in the yellow early AM streetlight. “It’s complicated enough without your meddling.”

“You’re right.” His smile vanished. “I’m sorry, Nette. I’ll back off, scout’s honor.”

She rolled her eyes and grinned as they both relaxed. “You were never a scout.”

“Still counts though.” He pulled his keys out of his pocket and twirled them around his finger. “Are you sure I can’t give you a ride home?”

“I can walk. It’s not far.”

“If you say so. Night Nette.”

“Night Nino.”

Nino climbed into the driver’s seat and began fiddling with his phone, trying to find something energizing to listen to on the way home. The last thing he wanted to do was fall asleep at the wheel.

SCREEEEEEEMECH
Nino cursed and cringed as a black sedan roared by, swiping off his side mirror as it went. The car ran a red light at the end of the street and vanished before Nino could blink.

“What the fuck?” Nino opened the car door and glanced around. He cursed again when he spied the crumpled figure lying in the middle of the street.

“Marinette! Are you o—urk!” Nino gagged as he fell to his knees beside his stricken friend.

It was bad.

Real bad.

Like rotten melon kind of bad.

“N-Nette? C-can you h-hear me?” Nino whimpered as tears welled in his eyes. She didn’t respond. “H-hold on, okay? I’ll c-call the ambulance, okay?”

His music streaming app was still open. Nino’s hands were shaking so badly it was a struggle to press the home button to close out of the screen.

“Stop!”

Marinette’s purse had been flung to the other side of the street by the collision. A tiny red blob zoomed out of it and sped towards Nino, waving its arms frantically.

He’d only met Trixx a handful of times, but he knew a kwami when he saw one.

“No ambulances! No hospitals!” The kwami cried. “It’s too late for any of that!”

“No…” Nino shook his head furiously. “Sh-she can’t d-die. We n-need her. She’s—”

“She’s not going to die. I can fix it.” The kwami snapped tersely, her brow furrowed. “But I need your help.”

Nino gulped and tried not to think about the puddle of blood seeping into the pavement and staining the knees of his pants. “Tell me what to do.”

“I can heal her, but it will take awhile and we’re too exposed out here.” The kwami darted down and wrapped her arms around Marinette’s broken wrist. “I need you to carry us to your vehicle.”

Nino’s stomach lurched. “I can’t. She’s too badly injured, if I pick her up I might—”

“You can and you will.” The kwami interrupted him. “We don’t have time for arguments or squeamishness, young man. If you want her to live, you’ll do exactly as I say.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And be quick about it!”

It took all of Nino’s concentration not to think too hard about the nature of the hot gooey substance his hand was touching as he lifted Marinette’s body and carried her to his truck. Tikki phased through the passenger door and opened it from the inside. Nino tried to place Marinette in the seat as carefully as he possibly could, but as soon as he let go she slumped over and her head cracked on the dashboard, leaving behind a dark wet smear. Nino whimpered and grabbed her, cradling her to his chest with one arm as he reached over her and pulled the lever to recline the seat.
“I can fix it.” Tikki repeated grimly as she settled herself in the dip of Marinette’s rib cage.

“What should I do?”

“Get her purse.”

Nino ran so fast to grab the purse he almost tripped on the way there and again on the way back.

“Okay, got it. Now what?”

“Get in the driver’s seat and try to act natural. This could take a few hours.”

“Isn’t there somewhere we can go? The bakery?”

“No. Please be quiet.”

“What about my place? My folks are cool, we could—”

“No! No one must know about this! Now hush so that I can concentrate.”

“We can’t just stay in my truck. There are crumbs everywhere and I’ve got dirty laundry in a trash bag in the backseat cuz I was gonna go to the laundromat earlier only then it didn’t end up happening but either way it’s not sanitary in here and there’s gotta be—”

“Nino Lahiffe!”

“Yeah?”

“Shut the fuck up!”

It was the first time any mortal creature had heard Tikki swear and live to tell the tale.

Nino very wisely shut the fuck up.

He waited in the silent, motionless car for what felt like years. The only sound his ears could detect was his own breath and heartbeat and he tried not to think about that. He tried not to think about the damp patches on his clothes or the smear on the dashboard. He tried to remember the license plate number of the black car that had done this, but it had all happened so fast and he didn’t have the best night vision to begin with.

He tried not to think about what would happen when Adrien found out.

He was unable to stop himself from imagining what would happen when Alya found out.

And macabre as that was, it was better than thinking about the vacant slack of Marinette’s shattered jaw.

Much better than looking at what was left of her torso.

A flicker of movement in the rearview mirror caught Nino’s eye and his blood ran cold as a heavyset figure stepped into the lamp glow.

It was a cop.

And here Nino was, loitering in a truck in the dead of the night, with thousands of euros-worth of acoustic equipment in the bed, a busted side mirror, and what very definitely appeared to be a dead
girl lying in the seat next to him...and no possible viable explanation for any of it.

“Uh...ma’am?”

The cop swiveled towards them and ambled down the sidewalk.

“Boss kwami?”

The cop’s eyes swept left and right, searching for anything out of order, and any second now he would spy Nino sitting here and wonder what was up.

“Little magic bug dude!” Nino hissed urgently. “Cop! There’s a cop! He’s coming right at us! What should I do?”

“Drive.” Came the grunted monosyllabic response.

Heart pounding in his throat, Nino spurred the engine to life and carefully pulled into the street. He kept his eyes forward as he crept down the road and away from the police officer. The man’s gaze followed them, but he made no move to flag the truck. Nino released a sigh of relief as they turned the corner and slipped away into the night.

“Okay. Now what?”

The kwami didn’t answer.

“Uh...guess I’ll keep driving then.”

Nino drove.

He drove.

And he drove.

And then he kept driving.

Past bars and and cafes, past celebrations and break ups. He drove through narrow dark streets and down deserted autoroutes. He passed shuttered shops and buzzing 24-hour convenience stores. He drove as the early shift workers shuffled on their way to report for duty. He drove beyond the bright lights and the no parking signs until he had left Paris behind entirely.

And then he kept driving.

The roads were empty and the truck slipped through the darkness like a shade, unnoticed, unhindered. Nino found himself driving along a canal lined with oak trees and wisteria leading to one of the little villages clustered around Paris. Still, he kept driving.

And then...

An explosion of bright, pink light burned his retinas.

Nino screamed as the truck cab filled with ladybugs—thousands of them, swarming and clicking and blanking out his view of the road up ahead. The truck swerved off the cobbled avenue and Nino slammed on the brakes a second before they wrapped around one of the oak trees. Swearing at the top of his lungs, he shifted the truck into park and swiveled in his seat.

“What the fuck was that?!”
“Nino?”

The bugs were gone. The light was gone. Nino’s outrage was gone as well.

Because Marinette was back.

She sat up in her seat, rubbing her face and blinking at him in confusion.

And it was her face. It wasn’t mashed or mangled or mutilated beyond all recognition. It was just tired, confused, and a little dirty because her make-up was smudged.

“Marinette…”

She glanced out the car window and frowned. “Where are we? What’s going on?”

“Marinette…” It was hard to speak past the lump in his throat. “You were d—”

“You were hurt, Marinette.” The kwami interrupted from her Chosen’s lap. “I took care of it. Everything’s fine now.”

“Tikki!?” Marinette gasped, glancing nervously between her kwami and her friend. “What are you—Nino, I can explain.”

“Don’t.” Nino shook his head.

“It’s not what you think. It’s—this is my cat! She’s a very special kind of cat from—”

Nino opened his car door and climbed out of the truck in the middle of Marinette’s slapdash explanation. He closed it gently and began to walk down the bank towards the canal. He sat down on the grass and waited while Marinette had a frantic conversation with her kwami. He couldn’t make out their words, but he could hear the tone of Marinette’s voice as it rose with fear and fell with relief.

Breathe. He told himself. Don’t think about it right now. Just breathe.

A few minutes later he heard the slam of a car door and muffled footsteps coming up behind him. Marinette took a seat on the grass next to her friend.

“Nino—”

“Don’t tell me. It’s safer if I don’t know.”

“You already do, though.”

“All I have is evidence, suspicions and theories. And as long as you don’t confirm any of them…” He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “…I can’t betray you.”

With a resigned sigh, Marinette slung her arm over Nino and rested her head on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry for scaring you.” She bit her lip and frowned. “You know you can’t tell anyone about this, right?”

“No. Not even Alya and definitely not Adrien.”
“Has this…I’ve picked you up from the hospital a couple times. Did…” He trailed off, not knowing how to phrase his question, not knowing if he wanted to hear the answer.

Luckily, he didn’t need words in order to be understood by Marinette.

“Not those times. We don’t go to the hospital when I’m hurt this bad.”

“So this has happened before…”

“Once. A few years ago. And that was worse, because Tikki didn’t have anyone to help her. We were stuck in an alley the whole time. She tried to hide me behind an old refrigerator box, but there were a few close calls. Being able to heal in your truck was much safer. You really saved the day.” Marinette smiled. “Thanks for taking care of me, Nino.”

“No worries.” He growled as the tears he’d been holding back since he saw her lying in the street began to pour down his cheeks. “That’s what friends are for.”

They sat like that, Marinette holding Nino as he wept, for a long time. He wept for her, for all the heavy burdens she was forced to carry alone, for the little girl he used to know and play with, for the woman he was watching her become. She wouldn’t allow herself to break down, because if she did she’d never be able to put herself together again, and so he broke on her behalf. Because someone needed to.

And it was enough.

Eventually, inevitably, the sun began to rise. Marinette lifted her head off his shoulder and examined their surroundings.

“Seriously, Nino…where are we?”

***

Chapter End Notes

We're officially in Act II now!

There are gonna be a couple times when I mention this, but this fic involves a lot of foreshadowing.

I didn't want to spend too much time describing Mecha-Class. Super Robots are a genre trope, so I'm assuming y'all can pretty much picture it. In my head it looks a lot like a Power Rangers bot, but Gundam is an equally acceptable cultural influence. Or Transformers. Or Evangelion. Or--point is, it's a big angry-looking robot (even though technically it is not a robot).

All comments welcome and appreciated! See ya Thursday.

Next Chapter Title: Cataclysm: Part II
Next Chapter Tease: "Plagg!"
Cataclysm: Part II

Chapter Summary

In which everything goes to hell in a clutch purse.

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNING: This chapter includes descriptions of violence that may be disturbing for some readers. This chapter includes descriptions of blood, gore and predatory behavior. I tried to avoid making these descriptions too graphic, but please be advised that these scenes could be upsetting. (Again, I promise there's a happy ending at the end of all the pain)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Disclaimer:

Chat: Banng, I want to talk to you about something.

Author: What is it, Adrien?

Chat: Look, you know this is a kid’s show, right? Are you sure the story you’re writing is… appropriate?

Author: …

Chat: Why are you pulling out that massive book of children’s bed time stories?

Author: Should we start with the one about the little girl who gets raped by a wolf or should we start with the one about the young woman who gets raped by a bull or should we start with the one about the fair maiden who gets raped by a dragon or we could skip the rape stories entirely and go straight to the ones about cannibalism—

Chat: Okay, okay, forget I asked.

Author: Look on the bright side, Adrien. It could be worse. At least I don’t own you or any other Miraculous Ladybug content/properties. (in the distance, the Author’s original characters can be heard shouting that they can confirm that it could be much, much worse)

***
Cataclysm

Part II

Hawk Moth strode through the shattered remains of the ballroom. The antique swords had slipped off their mountings and lay in heaps against the wall. The previously-gleaming dance floor was now coated in plaster dust and magical blast residue.

“What’s going on, Kaibliss?” He roared furiously. “How did those meddling kids get a giant killer robot? I know one of Adrien’s classmates has a modicum of engineering expertise, but how did they finance the construction?”

Kaibliss blinked. “What is a robot?”

Hawk Moth threw his hands into the air, an exasperated tic he shared with his son. This is what I get for scheming with immortal beings made of pure evil. “Your plan is a disaster. How is Maître Death going to take control of Adrien and force him to steal Ladybug’s earrings when she tries to rescue him if he isn’t here?”

“Gabriel…”

“Where did Marinette even go? One second she was there, the next second she was gone. Is she inside the robot? Why didn’t she transform?”

“Gabriel.”

“Gabriel. It’s a trick.”

Hawk Moth spun around. “Really? How do you know?”

“It’s obvious.” Kaibliss shrugged. “Also, I can smell her. Ladybug is still nearby.”

Hawk Moth glanced around suspiciously. “Then why hasn’t she transformed yet?”

“She has.”

“I thought you couldn’t detect the presence of a kwami when the Miraculous user is transformed?”

Kaibliss let slip a wistful sigh. “This one is special.”

“Aw, thanks.” Quipped a cheerful voice. “It must be my new perfume.”

Ladybug pranced through the blown-open ballroom doors and struck a pose with her hand on her hip, grinning down at them from the dais. “Just kidding. I don’t wear perfume.”

“Ladybug!” Hawk Moth cried, brandishing his cane. This wasn’t exactly his plan, but he could
“Yes?” Replied a second Ladybug as she poked her head through the shattered terrace doors.

“Someone say my name?” Asked a third Ladybug from her perch on the chandelier.

Hawk Moth glared all the more viciously as Kaibliss closed his eyes and sniffed the air.

“What’s going on?” Gabriel asked.

“You started it.” Answered a fourth Ladybug.

“It’s only fair.” Added a fifth.

“Seven akumas? That’s a bit much, even for you.” The sixth pointed out.

“So I figured, why not balance the scales?” Shrugged the tenth.

“Seven akumas…” The sixtieth Ladybug blew the two villains a kiss.

“Versus seven hundred Ladybugs.” Said #346 as she tap-danced across the bar.

“How’s that for fair?” All seven hundred thundered in unison.

The ballroom swarmed with spots. Everywhere he looked, left or right, up or down, at the floor or the ceiling, all Hawk Moth could see was an ocean of red leather and bright blue eyes. It’s an illusion. He realized. They must have brought the fox brat out of retirement.

The illusions were harmless since they would vanish as soon as they were touched, but they were also obnoxious and distracting.

“Kaibliss…” He hissed out of the corner of his mouth. “What’s going on?”

Kaibliss opened his eyes and smiled. “They’re buying time.”

Hawk Moth gripped his cane a little tighter. “For what?”

***

“Look, all I’m saying is, how would you feel if I suddenly started macking on Sabrina?”

“I’d say good for you because Sabrina is an excellent kisser.”

“Oh come on. You would be totally jealous and that’s normal.”

“Not everyone is as insecure as you, Adrikins.”

“And not everyone is as stunningly overconfident as you, Chloe.” Nino snapped as he closed out of his GPS app. “The two of you better drop it, cuz we’re here.”

‘Here’ was the center of the hedge maze.

Obviously.
Adrien was kicking himself for not grabbing those little black napkins off the bar counter when he had the chance. Luckily they still had Nino’s GPS to guide them through the labyrinth, but phone batteries were known to die and Adrien didn’t like their chances of escaping the maze without fulfilling their literary obligation to get hopelessly lost.

The center of the maze was a round clearing with a dried up fountain standing in the precise middle. The stones on the base of the fountain were cracked and vines wrapped around the pissing cupids like coiled snakes. Dead leaves drifted across the bone-dry bottom of the fountain, even though there was no wind.

*Subtle.* Adrien thought wryly.

All they were missing was a thematic lightning storm.

**BOOM**

It took a second for Adrien to realize the sound was an explosion and not a thunder clap.

“It’s started.” A strangely familiar figure emerged from behind the broken fountain. Adrien squinted at her before remembering he had seen her face on the news. She was Rena Rouge, the superhero who occasionally teamed up with Ladybug. “We need to hurry.”

And since Ladybug was Marinette, that could only mean that Rena Rouge was…

**BOOM**

Adrien turned around and headed toward the wall of hedges. He didn’t think he could figure his way out of the maze, but maybe if he walked straight through the greenery he could make good time.

Nino grabbed his elbow and hauled him back towards the fountain with a forbearing sigh. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Something’s wrong. I need to go back.” Adrien frowned.

“No.” Nino told him flatly.

Adrien tried to pull free but Nino held on tight. “Marinette is still inside.”

*Ladybug wants you to stay here and play the word game with Chloe.* Nino reminded him, placing pointed emphasis on the proper designation.


“Ladybug doesn’t need you, Adrien.” Rena said softly. “She needs Chat Noir.”

“Shut up, Alya.” Adrien glared at her. She had hit a sore spot and he wanted to return the favor. “We all know it’s you under there.”

Nino gave his elbow a disapproving shake. “Hey man. Respect the mask.”

“What did I tell you? No! *Willpower!*” Chloe shouted at Rena, jabbing her thumb in Adrien’s direction. “He’s going to go running off into danger and get us all eaten by that ugly old monster! He’s a big baby!”

“What did you just call me?” Adrien finally managed to shake off Nino and he stalked towards
Chloe, eyes flashing. She whirled around and stuck her finger in his chest as they stood nose-to-nose and snarled at each other.

“Mind your tone, Agreste. I’ve given you a wedgie before, I can do it again.”

“Bite me, Blondie.”

“ENOUGH!”

Chloe, Adrien and even Rena all turned and gaped at Nino. The reliably affable young man was angrier than any of them had ever seen him—including when he was the Bubbler. His honey eyes were boiling amber as he glared at Chloe and Adrien.

“Enough.” He repeated in an ice-cold tone of voice that made it clear he would suffer no further name-calling. “This has been going on for a month and it ends now. The two of you are friends. I don’t care that you’re not getting along right now and I don’t care that you had a fight. Right now, you need each other. Adrien.” Nino’s gaze snapped to Adrien’s and pinned him in place. “Chloe told me what happened last month, and dude, you’re in the wrong.”

Adrien opened his mouth to argue but Nino held up a hand and continued.

“I’m not saying I agree with everything she said or that she wasn’t out of line, but you should have trusted her. She is your oldest friend. She was your only friend for years. She has tried to help you deal with this shit for years. No, she didn’t have to speak to you that way, but being awful is kind of her thing. She has earned your trust regardless. And Chloe.” He turned to face the other subject of his ire. “None of that matters right now. You’re pissed because even your oldest friend doesn’t trust you? Tough. For once in your life, suck it up and deal. Because my oldest friend—” He took a step forward and slammed his palm against his chest. They all flinched at the smack. “—is going to get herself killed trying to bring her partner back if we don’t hurry up. So the two of you need to get your shit together and play the fucking word game.”

The stunned silence was broken by a buzzing from Rena’s Bluetooth. She tapped her earpiece and nodded.

“Ladybug wants to know what’s taking so long.” She reported. “She says to remind Adrien that he promised.”

Adrien knew when he’d been beat. “Fine.” He sighed as he took a seat on the broken fountain and closed his eyes. “Let’s play You’ve Been Hypnotized By A Giant Snake.”

A lone cricket played the world’s smallest violin in the distance.

“…how has he not figured this out already?”

“Magic.”

“Ah.”

“Stop distracting him.” Chloe snapped as she pulled her fuzzy notebook out from the hidden pocket in her ball gown. She placed the open book and a pen in Adrien’s expectant hands. He held the pen poised above a blank page, waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting…
Rena’s earpiece buzzed again. “Ladybug wants to kn—”

“Shh!” Chloe cut her off.

“We’re working on it. Keep checking in to let me know you’re safe.” Rena whispered into her earpiece.

Chloe waited until she saw the minute relaxation in Adrien’s brow that meant he had finally stopped thinking about how much he resented her for making him do this and was actually ready for her to begin.

Did she know her Adrikins, or what?

Chloe began listing the special words that would gradually lead him into a more receptive state of consciousness.

“Ginger snap…chocolate chip…snicker doodle…rugelach…”

“Cookies? Seriously?”

“Shhh!”

“Biscotti…oatmeal raisin…pfeffernüsse…”

Chloe kept her eyes on the pen in Adrien’s hand. It remained poised in the air, steady as an anchor. Just as she was beginning to scrape the bottom of her cookie terms barrel and was about to switch to types of cake, the pen began to tap against the paper as if to say, *I’m here, what do you want?*

He was ready.

“Fig roll…macaron…ring.”

The pen flew across the page. As soon as his hand stopped moving, Adrien opened his eyes and thrust the notebook at Chloe without so much as glancing at the page. Nino and Rena leaned over Chloe’s shoulder so they could also see what Adrien’s subconscious had written.

“Pocket?” Rena read the word dubiously.

“Of course!” Chloe and Nino exclaimed at the same time.

“That’s why you wore denim to a formal event!” Chloe cried.

“That’s why you haven’t taken off your pants since Thursday!” Nino shouted.

Rena stared at them, stared down at the notebook, stared at Adrien’s tight black jeans and then finished up by staring at Adrien’s innocent expression.

Some might say too innocent.

She made sure her earpiece was muted so that Ladybug wouldn’t be able to hear. No point in upsetting her until they knew for sure. “You mean to tell me that Ladybug and I have been running ourselves ragged for the last 24 hours trying to find his ring, and he was walking around with it in his pocket the whole time?”

Nino shrugged. “Only one way to find out.”
“Adrikins.” Chloe crossed her arms. “Turn out your pockets.”

Adrien reached into his jacket pockets and turned them inside out. “Sorry to disappoint, gang. Nothing in my pockets except lint.”

Nino joined Chloe in crossing his arms. “The pockets in your pants, Adrien.”

“Oh…” Adrien winced and rubbed the back of his head. “Yeeaaah…sooooo…here’s the thing about that…” He suddenly leapt up from the broken fountain and began sprinting towards the hedges.

“He’s making a run for it!”

“Grab him!”

“ARGH!”

“Wow. Chloe is a lot stronger than she looks.”

***

Ladybug watched it all happen.

From her perch on the highest peak of the Chateau roof, she watched as Max and the others got the bystanders to safety. She watched Nino and Chloe drag Adrien into the hedge maze and she heard via her earpiece when they met up with Rena Rouge. Mostly, she kept her eyes on Hawk Moth and Kaibliss, watching them through the glass dome that capped the ballroom. She watched them argue amongst the debris. She watched them get surrounded by Ladybugs.

Having a Master of Illusion around was damn useful.

Even though Alya had to drop her transformation every time she created a new illusion, it was easy for her to hide somewhere, nearby and out of sight, and slip in and out of her mask as needed. The center of the hedge maze had been the perfect spot. She kept in contact with everyone through her phone and earpiece, allowing her to send illusions where they were needed, and not only where she noticed a need.

Ladybug would never, ever tell him this, but Rena was way better at creating distractions than Chat Noir. It was a secret she would have to take to her grave.

She frowned when she heard muffled noises that sounded like argument through her earpiece.

“Rena, is everything okay over there? Adrien better be playing the word game already like he promised. I don’t think the illusions are fooling Kaibliss at all. Find out where the ring is so we can all get out of here.”

“Ladybug wants to know what’s taking so long. She says to remind Adrien that he promised.” She heard Rena rephrase her message.

Ladybug glanced towards the center of the hedge maze and wondered for the millionth time if she should have gone with them. She could go there now, be at his side in a hop and a skip and a yoyo trick.
But that would leave them open to attack. Ladybug was vulnerable without Chat Noir at her side. If she took her eyes off her foes for even a moment they might sneak up on her and—

Oh hell.

Kaibliss had disappeared.

Ladybug leaned closer to the glass and tried to smother her noises of frustration in case she alarmed Rena. Somehow, in the few seconds she had spent looking over her shoulder, Kaibliss had left the ballroom. Hawk Moth was still there, alone with seven hundred Ladybug illusions, but the pale man was nowhere to be found.

“Rena, how much longer?” She asked, trying to put as much urgency into her voice as she could without sounding panicked.

“We’re working on it. Keep checking in to let me know you’re safe.”

Ladybug bit her lip. She really wished they’d hurry up. How long did one round of You’ve Been Hypnotized By A Giant Snake take, anyway?

Tikki was certain that Hawk Moth didn’t have Plagg or the ring. Something about the connection between the Ladybug and Black Cat Miraculous allowed her to have some insight into Plagg’s wellbeing and she had repeatedly assured Marinette that the ring was safe. But there was a slim chance she was wrong. Or maybe Kaibliss had the ring. Or Nathalie. Or maybe Adrien had tried to hide it at a rest stop somewhere between here and Paris, or maybe he had left it on the bus. Ladybug needed to know now, before her enemies returned to their hidey holes and their mansions with military-grade security systems.

She wanted to finish it.

When Chat came back, they could make a plan and deal with their enemies now, tonight, without a moment to lose. They could finally end it. With Mecha-Class handling the akumas and Hawk Moth removed from the safety of his lair, they would never have a better opportunity.

And if Chat wasn’t returning…then she needed to know exactly where to get her hands on the bastards who had stolen her partner from her.

If it came to that, she wouldn’t even care that one of those bastards was her partner’s father.

…Okay. Maybe she would care a little.

Also, Adrien might care. As Ladybug, she had a responsibility to take Hawk Moth into custody or at least try to get his Miraculous while she had the chance. But Hawk Moth was also Gabriel which meant whatever she did would define the rest of Adrien’s life. She knew how important family was to him. What if she ended up being the person who destroyed his family forever? He’d never forgive her if she made this decision without him. She would never forgive herself, either.

But if Chat didn’t…

If that happened, she would do what she had to do, and if she enjoyed it she could keep that to herself.

Are other people’s lives this messed up, or is it a super-teen thing? She wondered as she watched Hawk Moth stride through the quipping Ladybug illusions, poofing them in his wake, to retrieve a half-empty decanter of tequila from behind the bar. He unscrewed the cap and took a swig directly
You took him away from me. She thought viciously as her eyes burned two holes in the top of his mask. How could you do this to him? To your own son? She hoped she got a chance to ask him to his face before the night was through. She leaned forward until her nose was pressed against the glass, her hands curled into fists beneath her. This is the last time, Gabriel. I swear to god this is the last time you hurt him.

She didn’t hear the rattling until it was far too late and the basilisk’s powerful jaws were already closing around her torso. She felt lightning bolts of pain in her shoulder and hip, and then...

Everything went black.

***

Rena heard a gasp and a click in her earpiece, followed by flat empty static that suggested she had lost her connection to Ladybug. She cursed, but she didn’t have time to deal with her malfunctioning earpiece because she was too busy dodging feet.

Adrien wasn’t letting them anywhere near the ring without a fight and he was fighting dirty. Kicking, punching, hair-pulling, finger-biting, face-scratching, palm-licking, you name it.

Chloe tackled him when he made a run for the hedges, but he elbowed her off and tried to scrabble away as she clung to his pants. Nino dove on top, managing to pin Adrien’s shoulders to the ground for a grand total of three seconds before Adrien overpowered both of them with an animalistic howl. He almost made it to the hedges before Rena tripped him with her flute.

It took all three of them to hold him down. Rena tried to catch hold of Adrien’s flailing legs while Nino lay sideways across his shoulders and held onto his arms, using his full weight to keep his friend from lashing out at them. Chloe sat on his back and tried to dig around in his front pockets, which were pinned between his hips and the grass. It was exceedingly awkward. Her warning of “Adrikins, if you keep wriggling and make me accidentally touch your dick I will rip off your balls” did not have the calming effect they were hoping for.

“This isn’t working!” Nino shouted.

“Got any other ideas?” Rena shouted back as she ducked a dress shoe.

“Let me try talking to him!” Nino rolled off Adrien and peered into his burning forest eyes. “Dude! You need to chill.”

Adrien hissed. He was beyond panic at this point, wild with a terror that sprang endlessly from his marrow. He couldn’t understand what they were asking of him, was no longer capable of deciphering the meaning of their words. All he knew was that he had to keep the little silver ring in his pocket hidden at all costs.

“That’s it.” Chloe lost her patience, something she didn’t have much of on a good day and it had not been a good day. She dug her fingers under Adrien’s belt. “It’s wedgie time.”

“Chloe, no!” Rena let go of Adrien’s leg so she could grab Chloe’s elbow.
It was nearly a fatal mistake.

With Nino off his shoulders and the girls distracted, Adrien was finally able to twist himself free. He lunged to his feet and side-stepped Rena when she tried to swipe his legs. He called upon years of fencing practice and retreated backwards towards the fountain, taking quick, even steps that put distance between him and his attackers more efficiently than if he turned and ran. He only stopped when the bend of his knees hit stone. He crouched into a defensive posture and snarled at them threateningly.

“Dammit Adrien!” Nino cursed. “We’re trying to help!”

“NOT SAFE!” Adrien thundered.

Nino threw his hands in the air, an exasperated habit he had picked up from his best bud. “Hate to break it to you dude, but this is as safe as we’re gonna get!”

*Why isn’t this working?* Rena wondered desperately. *His subconscious was willing to tell us where the ring is, so why won’t he let us get it? Why is he so scared?* Her eyes widened with sudden realization.

“Plagg!” Rena yelped.

“Ew.” Chloe wrinkled her nose. “Keep it to yourself.”

Rena ignored her and turned to Nino. “He’s trying to protect Plagg. That’s why he won’t let us near the ring.”

“What’s a Plagg?” A slightly calmer Adrien asked suspiciously.

Rena ignored him too. “He doesn’t realize that Plagg can—oh! I know!”

Rena’s form disappeared in a flash of light and left Alya standing in her place, a tiny fox bobbing in the air above her head.

“What is *that*?” Adrien squawked with alarm, jumping into the bone-dry fountain to put some extra distance between the kwami and himself.

“Cute!” Chloe exclaimed simultaneously. “I want one!”

“Trixx,” Alya said. “Tell Adrien what you told me about Plagg and basilisks. And do it fast so he doesn’t have time to rationalize it.”

Trixx nodded and zoomed towards Adrien, shouting:


He stopped a few centimeters from Adrien’s ear, took a deep breath and bellowed:

“Kaiibliss can’t sense Plagg! It’s safe to let him out now!”

Another deep breath.

“Can! You! Hear! Me!”

“Yes!” Adrien yelped, jumping away and rubbing his ear. “I can hear you. It just doesn’t mean
anything to me. Also, *what are you?*

Alya’s phone rang. She turned around and pulled it from her pocket as Chloe, Nino, Adrien and Trixx all started to shout at the same time.

“Talk to me Max. How’s it going with the butterflies?”

“We’ve got two netted and contained, but the Battle Boys gave us the slip. In pursuit now. Also, we lost contact with Ladybug and I can’t find her on the scanners. *Is she with you?*”

Alya’s blood ran cold.

“Alya?”

How could she have been so thoughtless? She just assumed her earpiece was on the fritz because she’d been wearing it throughout her many transformations, like some kind of *amateur.* How could she have been so *careless?*

“Alya! **A long foreboding silence is not** what I want to hear right now. *Do you need Mecha-Class to turn around? We can be there in ten minutes. Less if we don’t worry about what we step on.*”

“Focus on catching those butterflies, Max.” Alya said in a leaden voice. “I’ll call you as soon as I know something.”

She put her phone back in her pocket and looked up to find everyone staring at her with varying degrees of trepidation.

“Ladybug’s gone dark.” Her stomach twisted as she said the words. She kept replaying that tiny gasp she’d heard before the line went dead. “Max put a sensor in both our earpieces to monitor our location. Somehow, she’s gotten separated from her tech.” She couldn’t bring herself to look at Adrien’s face so she fixated on Nino’s instead.

The wrecked wasted look in his eyes was almost as bad.

“But…” Nino said slowly. “She wasn’t supposed to…she was only supposed to *watch,* at least until Chat…”

Adrien slowly stumbled out of the fountain and collapsed on the leaf-strewn ground. He landed on his knees, hands falling open at his sides, head hung low. The drumbeat of fear in his marrow began to pound, began to quicken, the tempo rising to a crescendo until it rattled his bones. The melody changed from fear to wrath to despair to something gaping and screaming and *bleeding,* all in the space of a few seconds.

He’d been ready for this.

He’d been expecting this. Anticipating this.

It was finally happening.

The thing he’d been afraid of, sometimes consciously and sometimes not, for the last few days, for the last month, for the last five years, since he was a child who wore cleats.

He couldn’t remember why he felt this way, but good *god* he was feeling it…

He was pretty sure he’d die along with her, if it came down to it…
Long fingers wrapped around Adrien’s chin and jerked his gaze up to meet Chloe’s steel-blue eyes. Her haughty voice echoed throughout the confines of Adrien’s private hell.

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t know how to trust yourself, Adrikins.” She told him. “Because you can trust me when I say that I won’t let you let her down.”

Adrien could hardly argue with such ironclad reasoning.

He slowly slipped his hand into his pocket.

*It’s not safe.* He thought.

*doesn’t really matter now, though, does it?* He also thought.

His hand emerged and opened to reveal the silver ring.

“She.” He muttered, his voice numb and empty. “Take it.”

Chloe rolled her eyes because, honestly, Adrikins could be so melodramatic when the mood struck him.

She plucked the ring from his palm and slid it on his finger as delicately as if it were an engagement band. A ball of light appeared in the air and burst, unleashing the god of destruction upon this mortal coil once more.

Plagg picked up right where he’d left off.

Ripping Adrien a new one.

“—LET! AND IF YOU THINK I’M LETTING YOU OFF EASY WITH A PUNCH TO THE TEETH YOU’ve got…another thing…coming…huh…”

The black cat surveyed his surroundings, his tirade trailing to a merciful (and long awaited) halt. Adrien gaped at him from the ground, too far gone into shock to manage much more of a reaction than still conscious. Plagg’s ears went back and he crossed his arms.

“Let’s see…” He hissed. “We’ve got four teenagers in grass-stained formal wear standing in what appears to be the center of a hedge maze under a full moon sometime around midnight.” His green eyes flashed to Trixx. “Vampires?”

Trixx shook his head. “Basilisk.”

“Dammit. It’s never vampires when you want it to be.” Plagg glared around the clearing. “Okay, who’s gonna catch me up? You! Blondie!”

“Are you talking to me?” Chloe sniffed disapprovingly at the nickname. It was abundantly clear where Adrien had learned his bad manners. Plagg bobbed towards her, nodding.

“Yeah. You’re fast on the uptake and you keep your cool in a crisis. I’ve always liked you. Come on, get me up to speed, let’s go.”

“Fine. If you *must* know, Adrien has been hypnotized by a giant snake—”

“Enthralled by a basilisk.” Alya corrected automatically.

“Whatever. It’s been happening off and on since we were 6 years old. Alya, who is also Rena Rouge
and she has terrible hair, seems to think you can cure him. Right now we’re supposed to be at his birthday party but it was never a real birthday party, it was all a big trap set up by Hawk Moth to get the Miraculouses, as usual. Adrkins doesn’t know he’s Chat Noir, he doesn’t know who you are, and he doesn’t know that there’s a giant snake which, by the way, is probably eating Ladybug alive as we speak.” Chloe summed up.

“What’s his name?”

“That’s Adrien.”

“Not him. The snake.”

“He goes by Kaibliss.” Alya supplied.

“It’s an anagram of basilisk.” Chloe explained smugly and unnecessarily.

“How much time has passed since he caught her?”

“We’re not sure. Ten, fifteen minutes?”

Adrien’s enthralled brain was forced to bend itself into pretzels to follow the conversation without thinking about anything he wasn’t supposed to think about. He did the best he could under the circumstances.

Plagg’s tail bristled and his ears pressed flat against his skull. “Then Ladybug is still alive.”

“How can you be sure?” Nino asked, his voice cracking.

“Because quickly is not how the game is played.” Plagg answered darkly. “And because I can still sense Tikki. If our Chosen dies, we immediately revert to our inert state. Which means Marinette isn’t dead, at least not for another couple hours. Which brings us to the main cheese board…what the actual hell, kid?”

Adrien fell back on his hands as the black cat floated closer and closer, green eyes glowing with fury.

“You reckless son of a bitch.” Plagg spat. “You’ve been enthralled by a basilisk this entire time. The entire time we’ve known each other and you never said a word about it. And we’re not talking about just any basilisk. Not some doddering old snake, not some mindless predator, no. You managed to find yourself stuck under the thumb of a real deal serial killer. Do you have any idea how dangerous that is for a Miraculous Holder?”

“That’s what I said!” Chloe clapped victoriously. “Well, it’s what I meant.”

“Not now Chloe.” Nino hissed.

Plagg ignored them. “Kaibliss eats kwamis, Adrien. He’s been doing it for centuries. Why do you think there are so few of us left?” He glanced at Chloe. “When was the last attack?”

“Thursday night, we think.” Nino answered.

“And a month ago.” Chloe added.

Plagg’s eyes sparked with understanding. “That morning we woke up in the alley…” He glared at Adrien. “I knew you didn’t fight off a mugger in a fugue state!” He hovered in the air a few feet above his Chosen and shook his head. “Adrien, Adrien, Adrien. You are so lucky that I can fix this.”
He rubbed his paws together and grinned diabolically. “Hold him down.”

“What?” Nino blinked.

“You want Chat Noir back? Hold him down.”

Alya and Nino glanced at each other.

“I thought—”

“What? You thought you could put a ring on his finger and the spell would be broken?” Plagg scoffed. “Please. What’s happening to him is neurological.”

“And that means…what, exactly?”

“It means I have to get up in there.”

A few moments of silence ensued as all four teenagers considered the implications.

“Er…and by ‘get up in there’ you mean…?”

“I mean,” Plagg’s voice crackled with impatience. “That in order to repair the damage to his central nervous system I am going to fly up his nose and phase into his brain and rejuvenate the effected neural axons through a metaphysical process that your puny human mind cannot possibly comprehend. So hold him down because he’s not gonna like it.”

“Uh…yeah…” The emptiness in Adrien’s voice had been filled with an ounce of incredulity as he said: “I’m not comfortable with any levitating talking animals crawling up my nose and messing around with my brain.” He slowly got to his feet and inched away.

Nino and Alya shared another meaningful glance.

“Sorry dude…”

“But we are.”

“ARGH!”

“Oh—wow. Wow. Blondie, you have no idea how funny it is that you just body slammed him. No idea. Fucking poetic is what it is. Someone get a picture so Marinette can see. This is gonna make her week.”

***

Ladybug thought she heard a rattlesnake in her dreams.

Then she realized that she was awake and the rattling was much too loud to be made by a normal animal.

At first she couldn’t feel anything at all. Couldn’t move, couldn’t talk, couldn’t open her eyes. She floated in an endless void, just her and the bad vibrations.
Then she heard a man’s voice say: “Stop that, Kaibliss. We need to focus.”

That was how she knew for sure that she was awake and that something had gone horribly wrong.

Her eyelids refused to peel.

She tried to scream. Nothing happened.

She wasn’t sure if she still had a throat to scream with. Maybe she was already dead and this was what it meant to be a ghost?

“You worry too much, Gabriel.” Said a second, raspier voice.

“You wouldn’t be so cavalier if you understood what a killer robot is or what a giant one could do to you.”

“I can always—”

“You can’t eat a robot, Kaibliss. It’s not physically possible. They don’t have the right parts.”

“Then I leave it in your capable hands, old friend.”

“Absolutely not. It was your idea to invite Adrien’s classmates. ‘More pepper for the grinder’ you said. You go deal with the robot and I’ll handle Ladybug.”

“I believe the so-called robot was constructed for the sole purpose of exacting vengeance upon you, Gabriel. Would you deny a creature the opportunity to fulfill its destiny? Go forth, old friend, and meet your fate. Ladybug and I will wait here.”

Gabriel (Hawk Moth, she remembered) sighed. “Maybe I can find a YouTube video or something that explains robots in terms you’ll understand.”

Kaibliss hummed and the rattling ebbed into the sound of someone else’s breathing. A sliver of light cut through the void, startling her with its suddenness. Slowly, Ladybug opened her left eye.

A milky blue iris with a pinprick pupil blinked back at her.

“Well, well, well.” Kaibliss smiled, his human face stretched impossibly wide to accommodate the gesture. “The princess is waking up.”

The sound of Chat’s nickname for her civilian self on the monster’s tongue filled Ladybug with white hot fury. Kaibliss was only a few inches away from her. She tried to grab him, to rip the unnatural leer off his false face.

But she couldn’t move.

Her left eye darted wildly in her mask as she tried to catch a glimpse of the rest of her body.

She couldn’t feel anything…

Not her hands. Not her feet. Not her stomach nor her heartbeat. Nothing.

“Poor thing.” Kaibliss cooed. “This must be a very confusing experience for you. Here, let me help.”

His hand left her line of sight and then her world dissolved in a blinding blur. She found herself staring up at the glass dome above the ballroom; inky black and stars beyond.
He had tilted her head up.

Good. That meant she still had a head and was not just a floating eyeball.

Also good. She could now see her hands and arms, cloaked in red and firmly attached to her shoulders.

Less good. She could now see the nigh indestructible black rope wrapped around her limbs and secured to the chandelier high above.

The bastards had trussed her up with her own yoyo.

“She’s awake?” Hawk Moth’s voice was louder. He must have come closer to investigate. “Why? What good does that do? If you’re going to eat her, just get it over with. It doesn’t make a difference now, anyway. Adrien is lost.”

“I don’t question your creative process, Gabriel. Don’t question mine.”

“You’re playing with fire keeping her around so long.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing.”

Ladybug’s world blurred again as Kaibliss tilted her head so that her ear (which she could now feel) was pressed against her shoulder (which she couldn’t feel at all). She could now see both Kaibliss and Gabriel, still wearing their disguises, and the broken ballroom doors behind them.

I’m not scared. I’m not scared. I’m Ladybug and I’m not scared of you!

She glared at them as best as she was able with one eye and partial brow control. They didn’t notice.

Kaibliss was standing right in front of her, and for the first time she was able to get a good look at the monster that had been terrorizing her partner since childhood.

He was tall and dressed in an old brown suit that hung loosely on his narrow frame. His pale sallow skin clung to his skeleton, shadows pooling in the contours of his skull. His short black hair was greasy, a white widow’s peak jutting from his crown. It was impossible to pinpoint his age—he could have been anywhere between 45 and 80, though of course she knew that he was much, much older. His eyes were blue flames licking at the sockets and his smile…

His smile had no business being on a human face.

Of course she knew it technically wasn’t on a human face, but have some decency...

Hawk Moth stood a few meters back, his cane clenched tightly in his fists, his cold eyes flashing furiously.

“Kaibliss!” He shouted. “How do you propose we salvage this situation?”

The pale man sighed and rolled his eyes at Ladybug, as if Gabriel was a petulant child and she was in on the joke. “What is there to salvage? I have what I want, and when I am finished you will have what you want.”

“What I want is my family! There is no point if Adrien is still obsessed with this brat!” Gabriel turned on his heel and paced to a part of the room she could not see. “She’s bewitched him, convinced him somehow that she’s something special. He must be made to see reason and the only way, the only way, that happens is if he is the one who brings her low, who reveals her as the filthy wretch she is.
He won’t give up if he thinks there was even a slim chance he could have saved her. The deed must be done by his hand! I know my son!”

“Yuh…”

“Hmm?” Kaibliss peered at Ladybug curiously.

“You…”

“Oh? Is someone regaining the power of speech so soon?” He sounded pleased.

“You don’t know him as well as you think you do, Pops.” Ladybug poured as much scorn and vitriol as she could muster into those carefully pronounced words. Her tongue felt like ground meat and her mouth was wet. She couldn’t taste yet, but she had a hunch that the wetness was blood.

“Kaibliss! Why is she talking?”

“The numbing qualities of basilisk venom are effective, but not long-lasting.” Kaibliss explained, his eyes searching Ladybug’s face for reflexive twitches as the paralysis faded. “It doesn’t need to be.”

“Then why haven’t you—”

“This is a special occasion.” Kaibliss turned his face to the side, presumably to look at Hawk Moth. “Relax, Gabriel. So what if you were unable to akumatize Adrien and your back-up plan with Maître Death fell through? Perhaps the simple fact that she dies for his sake will be enough to force the realization that you are seeking. If not, I’m sure a clever man like you will be able to find the right wish to restore your wife and your son. If you are correct and Adrien is merely infatuated, then his emotions will be no match for the power of the Miraculous.”

“And you are certain I will be able to harness the powers of the earrings after you devour the kwami?”

“Of course. The jewels are the catalyst for the wish, not the creatures currently inhabiting them.” Kaibliss looked back at Ladybug and winked.

He was lying.

No.

He was toying with them. Both of them.

Just as Tikki had warned her he would.

Ladybug tried to laugh mockingly but it came out as a soggy cough. She felt a bubble of blood pop against her lips. She still couldn’t feel anything below her neck.

“So that’s it?” She spat as Hawk Moth re-entered the frame. “That’s what the last five years boil down to? You want to get back with your ex and you want dinner. That’s the evil scheme? That’s the master plan?” She rolled her one eye. “Gotta admit, this is kind of disappointing.”

“Shut your mouth you ignorant whore!”

“Now, now, Gabriel, that’s no way to speak to a lady.” Kaibliss bowed to Ladybug. “Our goals may seem meagre, darling, but I assure you we are quite sincere.” He turned and walked out of her view.

“Kaibliss, get back here!” Hawk Moth cried. “I swear, plotting with you is almost as bad as plotting
“I’m not leaving. I am merely preparing us both some refreshments.” Came the patient reply. “This has been a stressful evening for everyone. Take a seat, old friend, and drink this. It will help you collect your thoughts.” He handed Hawk Moth a glass of clear liquid and returned to standing a few feet in front of Ladybug. “Now, my dear, I’m sure a clever thing like you can anticipate what comes next.”

“Don’t tell me.” She rolled her eye again. It was the only facial expression she could manage so she milked it for all it was worth. “You’re gonna monologue, aren’t you?”

“I’ll try to keep it brief, I promise.” He knelt before her as if in prayer.

Ladybug took a moment to remind herself who and what she was.

She was Ladybug.

She was a superhero.

She was a warrior.

Her enemy was in front of her.

Her enemy had been Manchurian Candidate-ing her partner for years.

For twelve fucking years.

He thought he could disarm her by paralyzing her and tying her up with her own yoyo and acting like a ghoulish fiend from a 1980s slasher flick? Please. So long as she could breathe, think and feel, she had her weapons. So long as she had her earrings, she would never surrender. That’s what it meant to be Ladybug.

And Ladybug always had a plan.

“Le-let me save you the trouble.” She tried to smirk, stumbling a little because she hadn’t realized how much blood had collected in her mouth until she opened it. “I’ve learned a lot about you since yesterday, Kaibliss.”

“Oh?” He arched an eyebrow. “Do tell.”

“You’re a killer. We did some research, found a paper trail leading back to 1957 and boy, dead and missing children follow you around like a bad smell, huh? Guess you don’t have to worry about subtle when you can just enthral the cops who come looking for you afterwards.”

“Subtlety is for lesser beings, wouldn’t you agree, Miss Lucky Charm?” Kaibliss eyes were lidded as he leaned towards her. She worked her jaw, testing the limits of her mobility.

“I know you’re not going to kill me unless I allow it.” She whispered as he came closer. “I know it’s not really me you’re after.”

“You seem to know so much.” He ducked his head and she lost sight of him. She tried not to panic and focused instead on what she could see: Hawk Moth. He was watching them over the top of his glass. He looked…disgusted? She realized she was moving slightly, swaying back and forth. Kaibliss was touching her, somewhere down low she couldn’t see or feel.

Oh hell no.
Ladybug used the slight rocking motion to pitch her skull forward, and was able to look down and see the rest of her body for the first time.

Okay…that’s…not as bad as I thought it would be.

It was still pretty bad.

There were two bloody, blackened holes in her suit, one in her chest halfway between her right shoulder and her collarbone and another at the juncture of her waist and her hip. She couldn’t feel the puncture wounds but she knew they were deep and serious. Luckily, as long as she was in her suit the damage would be contained. And if the worst came to pass, well…being Ladybug came with certain perks. She wasn’t sure why she couldn’t feel the rest of her body, but she assumed it was due to the basilisk venom that Kaibliss had mentioned earlier.

Speaking of which…

The snake was far more disturbing than the wounds it had delivered.

He knelt at her side, burrowing his nose into the wound on her hip and smearing his face with her blood. When he looked up at her his eyes were wide and glassy, as if he was drunk. If she hadn’t been paralyzed from the neck down she would have shivered with revulsion. If she hadn’t been paralyzed from the neck down she would have ripped him to pieces. He smiled at her and his sharp too-many teeth were red and glistening.

“Do you know what I’m going to do next?” He asked her.

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**Earlier That Day**

**(Saturday)**

“Marinette! This is extremely serious.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Tikki. I’m using humor to cope. It’s a human thing. Please tell me what you need to tell me.”

Tikki sniffed disapprovingly. “It all began 500 years ago. No one knows where he came from, exactly, but he’s not from our universe. He arrived on Earth already looking for Ladybug, but in the process of searching for her he discovered a fondness for kwamis. His hunger and greed are insatiable, and he is immortal so he has nothing but time. He has been hunting us ever since and is responsible for countless deaths. You must be careful, Marinette. Kaibliss has…he’s…he’s attacked my Chosens before.”

“When you say he came here looking for Ladybug…?”

“It’s something he says. I don’t know if it’s true. He claims he’s searching for Ladybug every time he captures one of my Chosen, and then he announces she’s not the right one. And then he…and then I lose her.”

Marinette’s eyes widened with fear. “He eats superheroes?” Maybe it had been a mistake not to go
Tikki shook her head. “No. Well, sometimes, but only as a means to an end. And I don’t know if he ate the other Ladybugs because I…wasn’t there by that point. It’s us kwamis he’s after, and he can’t get us if he kills the Miraculous Holder first and we return to our inert state.”

Marinette took a seat on her chaise. “Why not?”

“It’s complicated…”

“So break it down for me.” Marinette said in her Ladybug voice. “Kaibliss eats kwamis, let’s start there. How does he do it? Can’t you just phase out of his body?”

“Normally. But it is harder to control my corporeal form when I am sick or weakened.” Tikki drifted over and landed in Marinette’s open hands, hugging her Chosen’s thumb for comfort as her opulent eyes clouded with dark memories. “Kaibliss uses the Miraculous Holder to drain a kwami of our power to the point of atomic cohesion. Then, when we are too weak to escape, he…he can…he…”

She shook her head furiously. The words were too awful to say in this bright warm room where she had always felt so welcome and safe. Marinette stroked the pad of her thumb across the round of Tikki’s head in a soothing gesture.

“It’s okay, Tikki, I get the idea. But you said you can still sense Plagg, right? So he isn’t…”

“Plagg is alive. He is unaware of what has happened, but I can tell that he is alive and unharmed. Besides, he is immune to basilisks. They cannot sense him, see him or smell him and he is able to counteract their influence in humans.”

“Why?”

“I’m not entirely certain. Something about Plagg being the antithesis of the source of a basilisk’s power. He’s never given me a satisfactory explanation. It’s…it’s a sensitive subject.”

“Hmm…” Marinette wanted to push but she knew her little red friend needed a gentle touch. “How does Kaibliss ‘use’ the Miraculous Holder?”

Tikki shuddered again and squeezed her large eyes shut as tight as she could. “He…when she’s in the suit, my power—the power of creation—protects her from mortal injury. As you know.” Tikki sniffled. “So he…he hurts her, so much so that it takes all my strength just to keep her alive and then he…he…”

“It’s okay, Tikki.” Marinette tried to make her voice sound as confident yet comforting as possible. “Take as much time as you need.”

Tikki inhaled deeply and braced herself.

“He…”

***

“You’re going to offer me a choice.”

Ladybug’s voice rang clear throughout the shattered ballroom as she answered the snake’s question.
“You’re going to smile and simper and explain in the most round-about way possible that it is me or my kwami. That I can drop my transformation now while Tikki is still strong enough to escape and allow your venom to consume me. Or I can wait, bide my time and hope that Tikki is able to neutralize the venom before she’s too weak to maintain the transformation and falls into your clutches. I know you’ve done this, or some version of this, once a century for the last five hundred years. You won’t kill me because if you do that you’ll have to start over with a new Ladybug in another hundred years. You can play as many twisted mind games as you want, but you and I both know that if I die you lose.”

His smile got horrifically wider the more she spoke. He was clearly delighted, as if she were a clever bird who had learned a new phrase. He crawled up her sensationless body, using his nose to slither a bloody trail from the wound on her hip to the wound on her shoulder.

A little closer...

“Tikki told you about me. I’m ever so pleased. It’s a shame I won’t get to see her again this time, but if you’re a very good girl perhaps we can discuss visitation rights. Once everything’s settled, obviously.” He leered. “What else did she tell you about me?”

Ladybug stretched her jaw. “She told me that you’re a creep, that you’ve been stalking her for generations and you’ve got this bad habit of popping up every hundred years and trying to murder her.”

“What I plan on doing is so much more permanent than murder.” Kaibliss chuckled, nuzzling his bloody snout into her armpit and inhaling deeply. “I can smell her on every inch of you…it’s your suit. It’s so her. It reminds me of home. Did she tell you about the others?”

That’s right, motherfucker, keep moving closer...

“Oh sure.” She spat. “You’ve offered this choice to five Ladybugs before me and every last one of them gave up their lives to save Tikki. What makes you think I’m any different?”

“You tell me, princess.” Kaibliss slid down her shoulder and twined his neck against hers until they were cheek to cheek, hissing with pleasure the entire time.

Closer, closer…and...NOW!

Ladybug attacked, pearly whites flashing as she chomped down on his ear and used all her strength to jerk her head back again, ripping the delicate appendage off his façade. Kaibliss wheeled away from her, clutching the side of his face and laughing. She spat the lump of cold meat onto the floor. It vanished as soon as it landed.

“Well done, Ladybug!” Kaibliss crowed, removing his hand and waggling his fingers in the air around his unblemished ear.

Ladybug cursed herself. Right. Glamor. Not a real face, not a real ear. Maybe she was losing more blood than she thought, if she was forgetting something so important…

She still couldn’t feel anything below her neck.

She still couldn’t move.

“That’s what I like about you.” The snake continued. “You’re unpredictable. You’re…what is the parlance you younglings are so fond of currently? Ah. Of course. You are fierce. The others all chose to sacrifice themselves to save Tikki, but you’re not going to do that. No, you’re going to hold...
“out as long as you can because you have something the other Ladybugs never had. At least not by the time I found them.”

She refused to give him the satisfaction of asking what he meant.

“Wha’sh she got then?” Hawk Moth slurred from behind his glass.

*God dammit Gabriel.* She was burning all her Agreste fashion magazine clippings as soon as she got home.

Kaibliss didn’t break eye contact with Ladybug as he answered. “She has hope.”

*If* she got home.

***

Plagg removed himself from Adrien’s nostril with a loud squelch.

“EWWW!”

“I’m with Chloe on this one.” Alya muttered as her complexion developed a greenish tinge.

“Zip it, you two.” Nino hushed them, his worried gaze fixed on his best friend. “Adrien? Buddy? You with me?”

Adrien was keeled over on the grass, his arms wrapped defensively around his knees. He’d been struggling a moment ago but now he was motionless. Nino had been forced to hold him down and his hands were still resting on Adrien’s shoulders. He tried giving a supportive squeeze.

Adrien exploded. He grabbed Nino’s arm and flipped him over his shoulder. Nino landed heavily, upside-down and on his back. The blonde used the momentum to propel himself to his feet. They all braced for another wrestling match but he just stood there, staring past them with a dazed expression.

Nino cautiously picked himself up and brushed himself off. He glanced at the other humans, unsure of what to do next. The clearing was deathly silent. Even the urinating cherubs on the fountain were holding their breath.

Alya cleared her throat. “Chat Noir?”

Shattered emerald eyes snapped to hers and…

“*Purr*-esent and accounted for, foxy lady. What’s your exit strategy?”

Chat was back.

Alya blinked. “Uh…Chloe’s butler is standing by with the limo.”

Adrien gave a brusque nod, his eyes darting away. “Rendezvous?”

“The hospital in the village.”

“Good.” He shook out his arms and rolled his shoulders. “Alya, you’re in charge. Keep these two
safe and out of trouble. *That means you, Chloe.* Ladybug and I will meet you there.”

“Now wait just a goddamn minute—”

“You can’t seriously expect us to leave you—”

“Excellent plan, Adrikins, I’ll text—”

“Kid, I understand the urgency of the situation better than anyone but you need to take a minute and process—”

“Claws out.”

***

She was bleeding.

She wasn’t supposed to be bleeding, not like this, not from the inside.

Her suit was supposed to protect her. Not like how Chat’s suit or Rena’s suit protected them, extremely well but only to an extent. The Ladybug suit was special. She never received more than superficial injuries, even when she should. It was only natural since she was the Miraculous Holder with the power to bring people back to life.

Most of the supervillains she fought didn’t cause much bloodshed, but every once in awhile the death toll was so staggering that the sheer numbers kept her up for weeks afterwards.

According to some estimates, over 400,000 people died the day the broken-hearted Syren drowned Paris under an ocean of tears. Ladybug had brought every single one of them back to life in an instant. And she did that every day. People died and she brought them back to life with a quip and yoyo trick and no one ever questioned it.

That was her power, the power of creation.

That power was supposed to keep her safe while she was in the suit. Tikki had already warned her that the suit’s magic could not protect against basilisk venom, but the kwami was handling that problem herself. Marinette was only now realizing how naïve she’d been not to take her injuries more seriously, but they hadn’t seemed that bad. She’d had worse. Ladybug had been dropped off the top of the Eiffel Tower and crushed between the teeth of anthropomorphized bulldozers. The wounds from the snake’s fangs were deep, but her suit would protect her.

Or so she thought.

“How long does a princess wait for her prince charming?” Kaibliss whispered in her ear at one point. His breath smelled like her mortality. “Long enough to heal all her wounds? Long enough to drain Tikki of all her strength, leaving her weak, vulnerable, *malleable*? Help me out here, sweetheart. It’s been so long I’ve forgotten how the story goes.”

“Yuh…You’re not getting T-Tikki. Over m-my dead body…”

“My dear sweet Ladybug. You really have no idea what’s going on, do you?” Kaibliss simpered. “I’ve waited for this moment for so long, I have no intention of letting you die easily. Make no
mistake, you’re at my mercy now. But it won’t be quick and it won’t be painless.” He kissed her wounds. “You will both suffer, as I have suffered. It is your destiny.”

What is he talking about?

“I’ve gone to great lengths to find you, my pet, but in the end it was your own folly that led me to you. For a being such as myself, the nature of the Black Cat magics is exceedingly distasteful. Though of course I always knew that Adrien would be the key, his magics have shielded you from my detection for years. If not for your actions on Thursday night, you might have retained your freedom a little while longer.”

What is he saying? I don’t understand…

She swallowed and she spat but her mouth kept filling up with blood. When she managed to fling a liquid mouthful at an angle so it landed on the floor where she could see, the color was dark. Almost black. This blood wasn’t coming from her chewed-up tongue as she had originally assumed. This blood was coming from very deep inside her.

And she wasn’t thinking clearly. It had taken her awhile to realize this, but forgetting that Kaibliss’ face was a glamor had been a big clue. She didn’t know why her suit wasn’t working, but she knew that she was hurt far more grievously than she had initially assumed. She could sense the edges of the void lapping against her consciousness. She struggled not to be pulled under again. She didn’t want to spend the rest of her life—however long that was—wondering what the monster did to her when she wasn’t looking.

She had a plan.

No…that wasn’t right…

She had plans. Plural. She and Tikki had discussed those plans at great length earlier in the day.

Only…Marinette couldn’t currently remember what any of those plans entailed.

Which…wasn’t a good sign…

Kaibliss and Hawk Moth were arguing again. Gabriel’s increasing levels of intoxication did nothing to settle his temper.

“Just get it over with!” He bellowed, a flush peeking out from underneath his mask. “It doesn’t matter now so just devour her and be done with it!”

“Impatience is your vice, old friend, not mine.” The pale man calmly replied as he refreshed Hawk Moth’s drink.

Gabriel snatched the refilled glass from Kaibliss’ hand and drowned the contents in one gulp before chucking it at the wall. Broken shards skittered across the floor.

“Then where’s my son?!” His scream ricocheted throughout the cavernous hall. “If you’re so smart—where’s Adrien, huh?”

Creeeeeaaak BOOM

One of the broken ballroom doors tipped over and thudded to the floor in a cloud of plaster dust. A tall young man wearing a dirty dinner jacket and tight black jeans shuffled into the room. His blonde head was lowered and his limp hands stretched out awkwardly in front of him. His feet never left the
ground as he dragged himself forward in a stuttering lurch.

“You were saying, Gabriel?” Kaibliss asked, a twinkle in his eye.

_Danger_

Hawk Moth gaped at Adrien. “Wha…why…huh…heh…heh heh…hee hee bwa…mwa-mwa-MWA-HA-HA-HA-HA!!”

Black spots swam in Ladybug’s vision as her arch nemesis dissolved into maniacal cackling. Unbeknownst to her, he had howled the exact same laugh into his after-dinner bowl of cheerios two nights ago when she dropped her transformation in front of his security cameras.

“What’s so funny, old friend?” Kaibliss asked, tracing his hand up and down Hawk Moth’s spine. “I’m sure we could all benefit from hearing a good joke after such a stressful evening.”

The room was getting darker, or maybe it was just her vision that was fading, but Ladybug could still discern the red sheen of her blood smeared across his face.

Hawk Moth ignored Kaibliss and turned to Ladybug. “There! You see!” He screamed, jabbing his cane at Adrien who had shuffled to a pause halfway between Ladybug and his masked father. “Open that one good eye of yours, Ladybug! Open it wide and take a look! _Look_ at how you have _failed_! Deal’s off, Kaibliss, you can’t eat her yet.”

“Whatever could you mean, Gabriel?” Kaibliss asked innocently. Almost playfully.

_DANGER_

“Can’t you see?!” Hawk Moth had drunkenly stumbled into his moment of triumph and he was loving every second of it, like a preteen who was accidentally served champagne instead of sparkling cider and decided to roll the dice. “I should have realized sooner! The robot may be able to _capture_ the akuma but that does not mean the robot is able to _purify_ the akuma! MWA-HA-HA-HA! Adrien is still under the influence of Maître Death! He is a mindless drone who will do whatever he is ordered to do! I have _TRIUMPHED_ and you, Ladybug, have _FAILED_!” The jeweled crown of his cane whipped through the air to point at his son. “Adrien! Bring me Ladybug’s Miraculous!”

Adrien zombie-slouched towards Ladybug. She couldn’t see his face, could barely see anything at all. Had someone turned off the lights? Why was Adrien here? Where was Chat?

Hawk Moth’s evil laughter echoed in her ears and she started to whimper as Adrien came within reach.

“No…p-please…n-not suh…”

Adrien brushed up against her and slumped so that his forehead was pressed into her collarbone. His arms slowly lifted up her sides towards her earrings.

She could still see Kaibliss smiling with too many teeth over Adrien’s shoulder.

_DANGER_

“Adrien…n-not safe…please, Chat…I n-need Chat…”

“I’m right here, milady.”
The flash of spring-green brilliance was too much for her and she tumbled into the void, blinking in and out of consciousness.

Screams.


“Cataclysm!”

Shattering, scattering, skittering shards of starlight—then flying.

Then running, fleeing, jumping, more flying.

Then pause. Breathe.

Then open both eyes.

Then see two all-green eyes and a black mask.

“Ch-Chat…”

“Hush, bugaboo. Save your strength.”

“You…p-protect Tikki—”

“Milady, don’t try to talk, please—you’re…fuck, you’re hurt, Ladybug, you’re hurt real bad.”

“Chat, I’m sorry, I’m so, so, so—”

“What are you sorry for? Just hold on until we get to the hospital, okay? Just hold on…”

“I love you…”

“Wh-what? Why are you—no! Stop!”

Pink light. Leather suit into silk gown, both red now.

“NO! No, no, why did you do that, you’re not healed—oh fuck, that’s a lot of blood. Hey, Marinette? Open your eyes. C’mon, I need you to look at me, princess.”

“I love you, I love you, I…love…”

“Open your eyes, Marinette, please, I need you to stay with—fuck what is that?! Hey! Marinette! Wake up! No, no, please don’t do this to me—please don’t let me be too late—please, you have to open your eyes. C’mon Ladybug, c’mon Marinette, I know you can do this, just open your eyes, PLEASE!”

Please...

Her last thought was: Thank you…
Hawk Moth lost his strength to despair and sank into a miserable puddle amongst the glass shards scattered across the dance floor. Chat Noir had escaped with Ladybug by Cataclysm-ing her yoyo and jumping straight through the glass ceiling, thus fulfilling one of the two literary tropes that had been so temptingly presented to him at the start of the evening. Gabriel’s alcohol-induced haze had left him powerless to intervene and Kaibliss was no help at all.

“My plan failed.” He moaned. “Again.”

Kaibliss stood beside him. “You have a creative streak a mile wide, old friend, but you are not very observant. An unfortunate combination from your perspective, I’m sure.”

The shadows along the walls grew longer and darker.

“I, on the other hand, have always found your predisposition for haphazard chaos to be extremely useful. Tonight, for example, a more observant supervillain would have paid closer attention when the superhero who is famous for always having a backup plan started monologuing. But not you, no, you were far more concerned with whether or not the son you have neglected, exploited and assaulted for years will still be your obedient lap dog after you murder the love of his life. That’s what I like about you, Gabriel. You’ve always been so accommodating of my needs.”

Hawk Moth tried to stand up when he heard the rattling.

“Funny thing, basilisk venom. Almost alive in its own right. Able to protect itself, defend itself against interference. Normally it’s dark of hue and viscous in nature, but when combined with alcohol it turns as clear and fresh as snowmelt.” Kaibliss’ form began to change. “I’m grateful to you, old friend. I can’t think of anyone I would rather share my last night in this world with than you.”

Hawk Moth couldn’t move.

“Did you enjoy your drink, old friend? Are you ready to move onto the main course?” The basilisk asked as it coiled around its frozen prey. “I offer you a choice, Gabriel. Your kwami or your life.”

***

Chapter End Notes

And thus...Nooroo died.

I'm not going to write that scene cuz when I tried I found it too upsetting and complicated. But that's what happens, just so we're all clear. And for the record: I like Nooroo. This is not about being anti-Nooroo. This was necessary for the plot.

Confession Time: This entire story may or may not have begun with the thought "You know what would be funny? If Plagg had to crawl up Adrien's nose for some reason."

Honestly, though, this is one of my favorite chapters in the whole story and I'm so excited to finally post it! I'm going to have limited internet access next week. I'm still shooting for two updates, but please subscribe since I might not be able to post on my usual days.
Next Chapter Title: The Cat Came Back
Next Chapter Tease: “Is she okay?”
The Cat Came Back

Chapter Summary

Adrien is #NotOkay

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer:

(The Author sits on the ground with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and a mug of soothing tea clenched in her shaking hand as she stares directly through the fourth wall)

Ladybug: Uh…Banng? Are you okay?

Author: Yeah, yeah. I’m fine.

Chat: Are you sure? We’ve never seen you like this.

Author: Yeah, yeah, it’s just…the AO3 servers were down for awhile…like…a long while…

Mr. X: Oh boy. This is a classic case of fic-deprival. I’ve seen it a thousand times. Step aside, please.

Author: Is…is it my fault? Did I break the internet with my awkward disclaimers? Was it cosmic punishment for not wanting to admit that I don’t own Miraculous Ladybug or any related properties/content? Did I anger the gremlins with my hubris?

Mr. X: Hush now, you’re being irrational.

Author: …what did you just call me?

Chat and Ladybug: Uh-oh.

***

The Cat Came Back

“The man around the corner swore he’d kill the cat on sight

He loaded up his shotgun with nails and dynamite
He waited and he waited for the cat to come around

Ninety-seven pieces of the man is all they found”

12:47 AM Sunday

A pair of security guards chatted about the latest hospital gossip as they ambled outside the emergency room doors. There wasn’t much to talk about—there was the traffic, the weather, there was a rumor going around that paychecks were going to be late this week, but that was always a rumor. They spent a few minutes speculating wildly as to which doctor was sleeping with which administrator and the true identity of the mysterious syringe-and-surgical-tape burglar, and after that the conversation dried up, their supply of reasonably-appropriate topics thoroughly exhausted. Their shift was long and the rumor mill wasn’t producing as much as it used to.

“Allo.” Said the first security guard. “What’s that?”

“What’s what?” Asked the second security guard, squinting into the shadows surrounding the parking lot.

A fair young man dressed all in black was charging towards them at full speed, emerging from the inky darkness like a sea monster rising from the deep. His head was bowed and his brow was furrowed in concentration. His cheeks billowed as he poured every ounce of himself into reaching the hospital entrance as fast as possible. In his arms he cradled a motionless young woman, covered in red from head to toe. Though his eyes bulged and his veins throbbed, the young man’s grip on the girl was tender, trembling, terrified.

The two security guards gaped in slack-jawed silence as the young man fell to his knees before them. He didn’t slow down—he just flipped his legs up mid-lunge and crashed to the pavement, pulling the young woman tight against his chest and deftly tucking her head under his chin to shelter her from the impact. He looked up at them, his green eyes two wildfires burning in an objectively-handsome yet shock-white face.

“Help.”

12:55 AM
They took her away from him.

He tried to follow. They wouldn’t let him.

“That’s the operating room, sir, you can’t go in there.”

They put her on a gurney and wheeled her away as he watched—helpless, useless, powerless. Medical personnel buzzed around her like a swarm of flies, but the codes and shorthand they barked out was nothing more than meaningless jumbles of syllables and numbers to Adrien. He didn’t know what any of it meant.

They were taking her away from him to do god knows what to her and he didn’t even know what they were saying…

The gurney rolled through a set of double doors and now he couldn’t even see her, couldn’t stare at the minute fall and rise of her chest to convince himself she was still breathing. People were talking to him, making inquiries, issuing instructions, but Adrien couldn’t hear them over the soft whooshing of the doors clunking shut.

So much blood…

Plenty of it had come from her wounds, but more had poured out of her mouth, a river of red running down her chin and flooding her gown. But it wasn’t the too-much blood that scared him most. It was the other thing, the thing inside her, that chilled him to his core. When he ripped the fabric of her dress to check her wounds he had seen something black and writhing under her skin. Like vacillating spider webs branching out from where the basilisk’s fangs had sunk through her suit and into her vulnerable flesh.

What was the standard operating procedure for basilisk venom?

“—sir?”

“Huh?” Adrien blinked at the nurse who had just asked him a question.

“I need to know the young lady’s name, sir.” The nurse repeated in a tone that was both compassionate and businesslike. She’d had years to perfect the nuance.

“Marinette.” He mumbled. He looked down at his hands. They were dark and sticky with her blood. “Marinette Dupain-Cheng.”

“And are you a family member? Her boyfriend?”

“I’m—I’m her partner.”

“As you like it, sir. I need you to help answer some questions and then I have some paperwork I need you to sign. Can you come with me, please?”

“I…” Adrien looked back at the double doors. He felt a twitch in his breast pocket as Plagg nuzzled into his Chosen, offering some small comfort to both the human and the unconscious red bug curled up in his paws. “I need to be here when she’s…”

The nurse softened with sympathy but she kept her demeanor professional. He was grateful for that. The last thing he wanted was empty comfort from a stranger. “She’s going to be in there for a long time. You can come back and keep waiting when we’re done.”
So much blood…

“Can I wash up first?”

“Absolutely. There’s a restroom right this way.”

***

1:30 AM

N: Dude! Pick up ur phone!
N: Ur scaring us pls text me back
N: I can see that u read my text. Fu2.
N: FYI we’re gonna be late.
N: Nothing to worry about. u2 stay safe
N: If ur dead I’ll kill you…

A: @ hospital

N: Dude! You’re alive!
N: You got bug?
N: Dude?
N: Duuuuuuuude…
N: Not cool dude

***

1:36 AM

Waiting.
Paused.
Suspended.
Apprehended.
In stasis, on hiatus.
Behold. An individual during intermission.

Adrien waited and he stared at the double doors and he waited and he sat in an uncomfortable chair and he waited.

He remembered.

He remembered everything.

***

1:42 AM

Try to breathe but nothing happens.
Land on the ground but somehow keep falling.
Try to scream but nothing happens.

When Plagg brought Chat back, he brought the rest of Adrien along with him. All the missing pieces, all the scattered moments. Every unspoken word, every forgotten face. Adrien collapsed on the pavement outside the hospital, choking on his voiceless cries. His body convulsed as the full weight of twelve years worth of traumatic memories slammed into him at once, shocking his system like a jump scare in a horror movie.

The twice-as-many hours spent working as he remembered the next day…

The maids and cooks and tutors who raised him and cared for him and made him feel safe when he was small, who were all inevitably dismissed if he admitted to any kind of affection for them.

He remembered how many of them just mysteriously disappeared overnight. He remembered forgetting their names by morning. He remembered that sometimes loved ones came looking for them and he remembered saying that he didn’t know…

He remembered that this had happened dozens of times, that Chloe had tried to warn him every time, that he had laughed at her every time.

He remembered his father giving the snake permission *every single time.*

He remembered the moment he realized his father was the man who had been terrorizing his city and his lady for the last five years. His own father, the monster in his nightmares.
He remembered the night his mother left. He remembered the bruises on her arm the night before.

He remembered the basilisk. The smirks, the sneers, the hand closing around his neck, the whispers in his ear. *You deserve this.*

He remembered his cleats and what he wasn’t supposed to see in the hotel room when he was six.

He remembered the blood.

So much blood…

***

Tokyo, Japan

9:00 AM (local time) Sunday

“Ohayo gozaimasu! It’s 9 o’clock on the dot here in beautiful Tokyo. We begin today’s news with disturbing reports that emerged in the last few hours of a giant robot wreaking havoc in the French countryside. Unconfirmed eye witness accounts suggest that the robot is either working with or is piloted by a group of unsupervised teenagers, some of whom are alleged to be wearing costumes. This is a problem we the people of Tokyo understand only too well. Our hearts go out to our friends in France during this difficult time."

***

2:07 AM Sunday

Wheeeee-oooooo wheeeee-oooooo wheeeee-oooooo~

Adrien managed to get his breathing under control and get back on his feet by the time three ambulances came screeching into the parking lot, sirens blaring. A horde of orderlies, nurses and doctors came charging out of the hospital as stretchers were loaded onto the pavement. Adrien watched the chaos unfold as if from the other side of a dream. The victims from the first two ambulances were rushed inside the hospital immediately, but the man in the third was left on his own for a moment, as he was conscious and in much better shape than the other casualties recovered from the chateau. He sat on the end of his stretcher, a silver aluminum blanket wrapped tight around his broad shoulders, his left hand curled against his chest as he stared into empty space.

Adrien put one foot in front of the other and walked towards his father. With his silent footsteps and his dark clothes, no one observed his approach. When he was only a meter away, Gabriel looked up and finally noticed him.
Father and son, parent and child, person and person, stared at each other. The three feet of space between them yawned like a bottomless chasm, like a thousand lifetimes. Gabriel’s face was pinched with shock and horror. Adrien’s was empty, expressionless, emotionless, revealing nothing.

“Adrien…” Gabriel didn’t seem surprised by his son’s appearance. Too much had happened already that night. He didn’t have it in him to be surprised anymore. “Please, son, you’re all I have left now. Kaibliss, he turned on me. He…” Gabriel gagged. His clasped hand twitched and unfolded to reveal a large broach in the shape of a moth. An ugly crack ran down the center of each wing. “He took my Miraculous…”

Perhaps it was his shock that made Gabriel think he could yet salvage the situation. Perhaps he was too far gone to see anything outside of himself. Perhaps he had always been that way, and Adrien was seeing his father clearly for the first time.

WHAM

Adrien’s first punch ineffectually clipped Gabriel on the jaw. The second knocked him clean off the stretcher and onto the pavement. The first kick shattered his nose and eye socket. The second broke a rib and punctured a lung. Gabriel screamed. Adrien kept going, grim-faced and ice cold. He wanted to see his father bleed like he made her bleed, from the inside. He wanted to keep the promise Chat Noir had made to Hawk Moth when they met a month ago: I’ll kill you if you hurt her!

Then Adrien was tackled by a pair of security guards and everything went black.

***

2:21 AM

Chloe, Nino and Alya sat in the back of the limo as Jean the Butler drove them to the hospital, all three immersed in their phones.

Alya was talking to the frantic mayor of a town 20 miles away. “Stop crying and listen to me! As I keep telling you, the giant robot is not—I repeat, NOT—on a rampage. The giant robot is trying to find the supervillains who are on a…yes, well, I understand there’s been some property damage, but what do you expect—no, no, listen, like I said, Ladybug will fix all the damage when—she hasn’t done it yet because she’s busy!”

While Alya tried to soothe the terrified masses, Chloe had far more immediate concerns. “Daddy? We’re going to be at the hospital forever probably and I cannot be seen eating in the cafeteria like some member of the proletariat. I demand that you send a private chef immediately…why should I care where they set up a kitchen? That’s their problem. Oh! Hold on, Daddy.” Chloe leaned towards Nino as his phone buzzed. “That him?”

“Yeah, finally…uh…” Nino’s exasperated growl died in his throat as he read and re-read Adrien’s text. “Uhhhh…team? We have to turn around…”

“What? Excuse me, Mayor, I’ll call you back.” Alya hung up and pointed out the window. The hospital lights flickered through the tinted glass as the limo pulled into the parking lot. “Why? We just got here.”
“Yeah…” Nino squinted at his phone on the off chance doing so revealed some hidden alternate meaning to the text. “Here’s the thing… I dunno about Marinette, but Adrien’s not at the hospital anymore.”

“What?!” Both girls cried in unison.

“Yeeaaah… Adrien’s been arrested. He texted me before they took his phone away. We have to go pick him up at the police station.”

Alya’s jaw worked silently but Chloe had no trouble at all adjusting to this new information. She crawled to the front of the limo and banged on the partition.

“Oy! Turn it around, Jean-Klaus, we’re a-goin’ to jail!”

***

3:08 AM

Waiting.

Earlier he had waited in the waiting room.

Now he was waiting on a cold stone slab in the local drunk tank.

Earlier was better.

He regretted not finishing the job before the guards pulled him off his father. Yet another broken promise.

He remembered promising Chloe that he would start keeping a diary when they were nine. He never even opened the elegant leather journal she gave him. He had assumed that she wanted to read his innermost thoughts purely for snooping purposes, and yeah, that had probably been a factor in her thought process. But mostly she had been trying, the best way she knew how, to create documentation of the many illicit hours Gabriel Agreste forced his young child to work as a catalogue model when Emilie was out of town.

Adrien remembered being so tired he could barely move, passed along through wardrobe and make up like a dress-up doll, forced into wigs and make up and costume changes that would theoretically allay suspicion if anyone noticed how many of the Agreste brand promotions featured a single underage model. His father had been careful to erase any evidence of his criminal activity. And as Gabriel’s personal lawyer, Kaibliss was always close to the action, only a phone call away.

If Adrien had kept his promise, he’d be able to use his diaries as evidence supporting his claims.

Maybe, if he had kept his promise, they’d even have a list of names for all the people in his life who had gone missing over the years. Even though he could now remember each and every face, many names continued to elude him. Some of them he’d never known to begin with.
FUCK HIS PROMISES. WHAT A WASTED EFFORT.

ADRIEN LAY ON HIS BACK IN THE CELL, STARING UP AT THE LIGHTNING BOLT CRACKS IN THE CEMENT CEILING, WAITING. HIS LEFT HAND WAS CUPPED OVER THE BREAST POCKET OF HIS DINNER JACKET, WHERE THE KWAMIS REMAINED SAFELY HIDDEN.

“She still there?” Adrien whispered.

“Uh-huh.” Plagg confirmed.

According to Plagg, when a miraculous holder died the contract between Chosen and kwami was broken and the kwami immediately reverted to an inert state (this explanation had come with a series of very pointed looks, one for each time Adrien had died and been brought back to life by Ladybug). Which meant that as long as Tikki was still cuddled up with Plagg in Adrien’s pocket, Marinette was still alive. But Tikki hadn’t woken up since Marinette’s transformation and this frightened both of them.

Marinette was still alive, but something was wrong.

Something was wrong and he wasn’t there.

He hated that he wasn’t with her. Showing up when she needed him was his job. Chat showed up for Ladybug and Adrien showed up for Marinette. And he loved doing it and sometimes it was hard but it was worthwhile and it made him feel useful, which was something he needed.

And he really fucked it up this time.

He never truly forgot the memories that Kaibliss stole from him. He just…ignored the thoughts he wasn’t allowed to have. He briefly wondered if his notorious susceptibility to mind control was a symptom of multiple basilisk enthrallments or if he’d been born this way. Maybe it was genetic and he’d inherited it from his father. That would explain a lot.

But he couldn’t explain his own actions, how irresponsible he had been, why he allowed his fear to control him for the last month. His memories were all jumbled up now—different thoughts and perspectives crashing together and exploding into something new like particles in a super collider—but he knew that he panicked after learning Gabriel was Hawk Moth.

If there was any justice in the universe, the fight with Chloe would have forced him to realize his memories were false. He couldn’t explain why he hadn’t listened to her, at least enough to hear what she was saying. There was no justification. No excuse. He’d still been Chat then. Chat Noir was supposed to know better than to let his negative emotions dictate his actions, even if he didn’t understand why he was so angry and scared. He was supposed to take responsibility.

Instead, he isolated himself. He avoided Nino and Alya like the plague and snarled every time Chloe came within ten feet (the fuzzy notebook ever present in her hand). He even distanced himself as Adrien from Marinette, snapping at her to mind her own business every time she asked if something was wrong. Then he turned around as Chat and plastered himself over her (usually as Ladybug, but a few times as Marinette) like a human Kevlar vest. He knew he was making her confused and uneasy. Knew he was making her doubt herself because she refused to doubt him, even when she should. Knew he was getting her all wound up and he hadn’t been able to stop himself until they both unraveled.

Adrien was terrified that part of him had done it on purpose. He wanted her to break her rules and reveal herself more than anything, more than sleep, more than air. Had some part of him thought that
Kaibliss’ return would force her hand? Was that why he had refused to let Chloe help him? Why he had avoided his friends for weeks? Why he had repeatedly tried to provoke the person he loved? Was it all just a sad, desperate cry for help? Was he really so pathetic?

The worst part was, Adrien did not think his father would have caught him if he had not been so distracted the day of the matador akuma. Distracted by another unvoiced argument with his partner over secrets and rules and wishes. Their cooperation had been stilted as a result, off-kilter, off-balance.

Oh irony of ironies, that much reviled secrecy was the only thing that kept him from giving Hawk Moth her name and home address that very same evening.

Then Thursday happened.

Wow.

Just.

Wow.

He really fucked that one up.

The second the Ladybug mask disappeared, he lost it. He completely and totally lost it. Half of him immediately went numb with a paralyzing terror that he didn’t understand and the other half burst into flames. When he thought about that moment now, with his memories intact, he got a headache. Too many thoughts, too many emotions, all at the same time. Too many moving parts to make sense of the whole. One part is jumping up and down and shouting ‘Hawk Moth! Hawk Moth!’ repeatedly under a flashing neon sign. One part is screaming at him to grab her and run as far away as possible, head north where it’s too cold for butterflies to follow, send for her parents once they find a good hiding place. One part is just screaming—that was the part that got to the surface quickest, that she had to muzzle like a howling dog. And then there’s the part of him that couldn’t stop smiling because Marinette is Ladybug and she finally, finally, finally told him.

He’d been trying to say something along the lines of: My dad is Hawk Moth and there are at least sixteen different security cameras pointed at us right now so we need to think very carefully about how we proceed.

But that was not what came out of his mouth.

And then he tackled her.

Sure, he needed her to stop and listen to him because they were in serious danger that she seemed blissfully unaware of—but what the actual fuck, Adrien? Use your words.

And then he called her Ladybug, which even at the time he knew he shouldn’t do. Marinette may have given herself away to Hawk Moth, but he was the one responsible for alerting half the neighborhood.

Friday and Saturday felt like nightmares, the kind where you never manage to open your eyes properly.

And now he was awake and he was waiting and she needed him and he wasn’t there.

His fingers twitched over his pocket.
“Plagg—”

“She’s still here, kid.”

For now.

A few minutes, Plagg added: “This isn’t your fault.”

Adrien didn’t respond so Plagg repeated himself.

“This isn’t your fault, kid. The snake had no way of knowing you would become Chat Noir when the enthrallments started. You didn’t lead him to her. It’s just a weird coincidence.”

“He was hunting Ladybug the whole time.” Adrien argued in a monotone voice. “He told me he wanted to make us suffer.”

“He’s been hunting her for 500 years, kid. It’s what he does. It’s not about you.” Plagg sighed. “Don’t do this to yourself, Adrien. Don’t shoulder blame that isn’t yours. I’ve lived a long time and I’ve met a lot of monsters. You’ll drive yourself off the deep end trying to apply rationality to their actions.”

“He’s still out there…”

“He’s always out there. Luckily, he’s an old fashioned monster who plays by the rules. He gets one shot at her, once every hundred years. He won’t bother you again.”

“I can’t trust that.”

“So, what? You want to go on some half-baked hare-brained revenge quest? Kaibliss has killed five Ladybugs already and I helped bury all of them. Trust me, you wouldn’t be the first Black Cat to try. Let me save us all some trouble and heartache and skip to the end: it doesn’t work. Because he’s older and stronger and he had no boundaries, no scruples, no attachments and no limits. Let it go, kid. Focus on what’s in front of you and forget about chasing shadows.”

Adrien didn’t want to argue anymore, at least not with Plagg.

“Is Tikki still there?”

“Yeah.”

“Is she still unconscious?”

“…Yeah.”

“What does that mean?”

“…I don’t know, kid. I’m sorry, but I just don’t know.”

Adrien jolted upright when he heard a loud clang and a deep voice bark, “It’s your lucky night, pretty boy. Your friends are here to bail you out.”

Adrien rolled off the slab and followed the cop out of the cell and into the lobby. Nino waited for him by the front desk, anxiously twisting his hat in his hands. Neither boy said a word until they were out of the police station.

“Dude. What the fuck?”
“Did you bring the stuff?” Adrien bit out, not looking at Nino as they approached the limo. Chloe stood outside the back doors, tapping her foot on the tarmac impatiently.

“Yeah.” Nino popped open the trunk to reveal a small mountain of Camembert. “You’re lucky everyone in class except Nathaniel got you the exact same birthday present.”

“Excuse you, I did no such thing.” Chloe sniffed. “My mere presence is a far better gift than any stinky cheese.”

“Okay. Everyone except Nathaniel and Chloe and Chloe’s present is that she found your Miraculous.” Nino sighed as Plagg phased out of Adrien’s jacket and swan-dived into the trunk. “Adrien, buddy, help me out here. What the hell happened? Is Nette okay? We left Alya at the hospital but they’re not telling her anything.”

Adrien placed a trembling hand over his pocket. He could feel Tikki’s warmth radiating through the fabric. She hadn’t woken up yet and she was starting to feel heavier, more solid. He didn’t know if that was good or bad or just his imagination.

Plagg answered for him through a mouthful of cheese. “Kaibliss caught her. She’s wounded but she’s a fighter. She’ll come back swinging, mark my words.”

“Okay.” Nino frowned at the kwami. “So why did Adrien get arrested?”

“Let me put it this way—Hawk Moth won’t be a problem anymore.”

“Well, whatever Adrikins did to make that happen has gotten him banned from the hospital.” Chloe scowled.

“Fortunately, Chat Noir is back in town.” Plagg smacked his lips.

“You ready?” Adrien asked.

“Yeah. Give Tikki to Glasses before you transform, though, or she’ll end up stuck in your zipper.”

“Time out!” Nino cried, making a T with his hands. “Hold on, okay? Just wait until…can we at least move away from the police station and its many security cameras and bright lights before you transform? Please?”

“Oh.” Adrien blinked. “Yeah.”

“I swear, it’s like you don’t even care anymore.” Nino sighed.

“Good looking out, Glasses.” Plagg nodded approvingly.

“You might as well come with us anyway.” Chloe said as they loaded into the limo. “It only takes a minute to get anywhere in this dinky town.” She banged on the partition. “Drive, Jean-Watson!”

***

3:36 AM
Alya was waiting inside the front entrance when they arrived. Nino expected a fuss when one of the two patron superheroes of Paris casually strolled into the rural community hospital, but the hospital staff barely blinked. It was just as well that they weren’t in Paris tonight. Anyone back home would have immediately realized something was wrong from the way the typically-suave Chat Noir was holding himself—green-eyes heavy lidded and arms wrapped tight around his middle. He wasn’t strutting or winking or flirting, and he didn’t even try to vogue. This was unprecedented for a public appearance by Chat Noir, but no one seemed to notice except his friends. Back home, his reserved behavior would have triggered widespread panic.

“Any news?” Nino asked his girlfriend quietly.

Alya shrugged. Her eyes were red and she looked as exhausted as they all felt. “She’s out of surgery, but they won’t tell me anything else and they won’t let me see her.” She glared at the nurse behind the desk. “They’re saying they’ll only talk to immediate family members.”

Chat leaned on the desk and smiled disarmingly at the nurse. Even though he was only able to muster half his usual charm, there was enough of a twinkle in his eye to wobble even the steeliest of knees. “Maybe you’ll make an exception for me? Chat Noir, at your service.”

The nurse arched an unimpressed eyebrow. “I’m sorry, sir, but unless you’re on the list of approved persons I cannot release any of Miss Dupain-Cheng’s medical information.”

“Ridiculous, utterly ree-diculous.” Chloe spat, puffing up like an offended pigeon.

Nino sighed and pulled his wallet out of his pocket. “Nino Lahiffe.” He said, placing his driver’s license on the counter. “My name should be on that list.” He could feel his friends’ curious stares boring into him as the nurse checked her records.

“Ah—yes—here you are.” The nurse nodded at her computer screen. She waved over a young man in scrubs. “Could you take Mr. Lahiffe to see Dr. Riviere?”

“Can I see Marinette first?” Nino asked quickly. “Is she okay?”

“I can’t answer that, I’m sorry. Dr. Riviere will explain everything.”

“Right this way, sir.” The second nurse waved Nino towards a side door.

“He’s coming with me.” Nino grabbed Chat’s arm and yanked him close. His friend was stiff as a board under his fingers.

The nurse frowned. “If he’s not on the list—”

“I’m his bodyguard.” Chat interrupted, springing back to life momentarily.

“Yeah.” Nino nodded. “Can’t go anywhere without my bodyguard, right? That would be like asking me to leave my shadow behind or something else equally unrealistic.”

“You won’t even know I’m there.” Chat added reassuringly.

The nurse cast a skeptical glance at Chat’s outfit but relented with a shrug. “Fine. This way, please.”

“Wait!” Alya shouted, chasing after them. “I’m coming too!”

Nino reached out and wrapped her in a tight, brief hug. “Nette needs you to stay here and mind the store, okay? Keep Chloe out of trouble. I’ll text you as soon as I know anything.”
Alya sniffled and nodded but Nino could tell she wasn’t happy about it. His feelings of guilt and regret intensified as the nurse led them down a long hallway. Even though Nino was keeping his gaze straight and forward, he could still feel Chat’s suspicious glare burning holes in his hat.

Nino sighed. “Okay, here’s the deal.” He whispered quietly enough that only Chat, with his super-powered senses, would be able to hear. “Sometimes, not often, I get a phone call from Marinette, saying ‘I’m at the hospital, come get me, don’t ask questions.’ I have a truck, I come get her, I don’t ask questions. Sometimes there’s paperwork so Marinette pulled some strings and got me listed as next of kin. In case this comes up later, I’m also her emergency contact and I’ve signed some stuff as a witness. I didn’t tell you because we don’t talk about this stuff and also it’s none of my business. Now you know and I kinda want to say sorry for not telling you sooner but I also don’t think I need to cuz it’s her choice whether she tells you this kind of stuff or not. Sorry.”

Chat was silent for a long time. “…She still there?”

Nino absentmindedly scratched his hat, gently brushing against the little red kwami snuggled on the top of his head. “Yeah.”

Dr. Riviere was waiting for them outside a private room at the end of the hall. Chat probably would have plowed right through him if Nino hadn’t stopped him with a gentle touch on the shoulder. The tall man in the long white coat ogled the young superhero.

“Oh. Good.” They both heard him mutter under his breath. “Context.”

The lump in Chat’s throat throbbed with dread.

“Doctor?” Nino asked hesitantly. “What’s going on?”

Dr. Riviere sighed. “You are Mr. Lahiffe?” He confirmed. Nino nodded. “And you I recognize from the news.” He added to Chat Noir. “I’ll explain what happened as best as I am able, but I’m guessing you two have a firmer understanding of the situation than I.” He placed a hand on the door and hesitated. “I should warn you—Miss Dupain Cheng has not regained consciousness since being admitted to the hospital and while her condition appears stable at the moment, we still don’t know the precise nature of her…affliction.”

Nino nodded mutely, increasingly wary of the burgeoning cat boy-shaped black hole standing beside him.

Chat shoved past them when the door finally opened, his glowing eyes snapping to the motionless figure in the narrow bed. He came to a trembling halt a few feet away, staring down at Marinette with such intensity it was a miracle the bed didn’t burst into flames.

The room was deathly silent. No monitors, no displays, no readings, no soft gentle beeping to assure Chat that her heart was still beating. The room was dark, the only light coming from a tall lamp in the corner, as if they were afraid of disturbing her. Marinette lay still as a statue underneath a thin blue blanket tucked up to her chin. Her feather-soft black hair was down, splayed limp across her pillow. It looked clean and slightly damp. The blanket folds draped over her frame, bunching slightly around her chest where her arms were folded in an X. Her eyes were closed, long lashes pressed against drained cheeks. The purple hue of her eyelids matched the blue tint in her slightly parted lips. She looked as fragile as an origami crane fluttering through a hurricane. She looked cold and endangered and far too small to carry the weight of the world on her shoulders. When Chat Noir beheld the figure in the bed, he didn’t see Ladybug and he didn’t see Marinette. He saw a person, caught between girlhood and womanhood, alone and far from home and broken into pieces.
Because of me.
In Chat’s mind, he whimpered and cringed away from her terrible stillness. In his mind his hands remained sticky with her blood. In his mind he was still standing on the top of the glass dome, looking down on his worst nightmare.

To Nino, it was as if the lights had been turned off. One minute Chat Noir was there, and the next he was gone. Shut down. Checked out. Scarpered off to some distant twilight zone in his own brain, leaving Nino here to deal with the doctor and the talking and the please-still-be-breathing body in the bed.

But Nino wasn’t President of the Adrien Agreste Emotional Support Team and Lord Commander of the Marinette Back Up Battalion for nothing.

Was this his greatest challenge yet?

Hell yeah.

Was he up to the task?

*Fuck* yeah.

Having sufficiently amped himself up, Nino turned to face Dr. Riviere. “Okay.” He said, a little surprised and a little proud at how calm he sounded. “Tell us what happened.”

Dr. Riviere nodded. “Miss Dupain-Cheng was admitted with extensive trauma to the upper and lower abdomen. She also appeared to be infected by an unknown pathogen. The injuries to her abdomen are…repaired.”

Nino’s heart stuttered at the doctor’s slight hesitation. “What does ‘repaired’ mean?”

He was pretty sure he knew what ‘repaired’ meant. But Nino would sooner slit his own throat than let Adrien find out about the night Marinette was hit by a car. Especially *now.*

Dr. Riviere sighed and frowned balefully at Marinette in a way that made Nino really grateful Chat wasn’t paying attention to them. The doctor looked at her as if she was a problem or a burden or a threat.

“I mean—I don’t know what I mean. The wounds vanished, as if by magic. Which, now that I see you...” He gestured toward Chat Noir. “I’m more inclined to consider as a credible theory than I was when Dr. Blankfort first mentioned it.” His dark eyes swung back towards Nino, his mouth twisted with confliction as if he wanted to say more but knew better.

“The unknown pathogen spread after her injuries repaired.” The doctor continued, the conflicted expression slipping away. “We have not been able to identify it. There have been...complications.”

“What does ‘complications’ mean?”

The doctor did not look happy about the question. “Our attempts to intervene have been rendered inert.”

Nino shook his head, careful not to jostle Tikki. “I don’t really know lingo, doc. You’ll have to use plainer language.”

“Believe me—I’m about as far removed from medical lingo as I can get without losing my license.”
Dr. Riviere shook his head regretfully. “It would be easiest if I show you, but I must warn you—it will be a singularly unpleasant experience.”

“Dude. You’re describing my whole week. Let ‘er rip.”

Dr. Riviere heaved a regretful sigh, as if this was the last thing he wanted to be doing, and gently lifted the blue blanket, revealing Marinette’s torso and crossed arms. Chat’s pointy ears twitched as the venom-infected skin was revealed, but otherwise he stayed lost.

Nino’s eyes widened and his stomach clenched with fear and revulsion when he saw what the basilisk had done to his friend. “What the fuck is that?” He whispered, more to himself than to anyone else.

Rivulets of throbbing black viscid coiled down Marinette’s arms and peeked from the collar of her paper-thin hospital gown, creeping up her neck. The venom wrapped itself around the veins under her skin and squeezed, constricting her from the inside. And it was moving. Writhing and wriggling and wrong.

“We don’t know.” Dr. Riviere answered. “And every time we try to find out, this happens. Please brace yourselves…” He pulled a syringe out of his pocket and slowly lowered it towards Marinette’s arm.

Before he could make contact, panic set in.

Nino’s throat closed up and his lungs stopped working. He fell to his knees, gagging and choking on a miasma of seething terror that settled over the room. He cried out, throwing his arms up as if to shield against the mindless fear that bore down on him, threatening to crush him like a bug.

And then…

It was over.

The fear was gone as soon as it had arrived, leaving Nino and Dr. Riviere gasping for air on the floor with tears streaming down their faces.

Chat hadn’t even flinched.

Nino’s hands flew to his head and he sagged with relief when his fingers landed on Tikki’s round warmth. Still there, still there, she’s still alive.

Dr. Riviere scrubbed his face and stood up with a mildly embarrassed cough.

“As you can see…we have been unable to extract a sample of the pathogen.” He continued brusquely, not meeting their eyes. “There have been complications.” He gently pulled the blanket back up to Marinette’s chin, hiding the monstrous tendrils once more.

There were two padded wooden chairs on the far side of the room. Nino yanked one over and took a seat by the foot of the bed. “Is that also why she doesn’t have a heart monitor or an IV or any of the other things I thought you were supposed to get in a hospital?”

Dr. Riviere nodded. “We also had to find an old bed for her. The psychological phenomena occurred when we tried to put her in one of the new smart beds. It’s almost as if the unidentified pathogen knows we’re trying to check her vitals no matter what tools we use.”

“Do you know what it’s doing to her?” Nino asked.
The doctor shook his head. “No. We’re trying, but…”

“It’s complicated. Got it.” Nino sighed. “So what now?”

The doctor glanced between Nino and Chat. “Honestly, gentlemen, I’m not sure if there’s anything more we can do for her. We’re a small community hospital with limited resources. I’d recommend her for a transfer if I had any idea where to send her. But…” He gave Chat a hopeful look. “If there’s someone you can call? Someone who knows about…” He waved his hand at Chat’s suit. “You know. Stuff?”

“Uh…” Nino shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Could we have the room?”

Dr. Riviere appeared affronted by the request but he relented after another glance in Chat’s direction. “Alright. I’ll try to rustle up some coffee. You boys look like you need it as much as I do.” He paused at the door. “Mr. Lahiffe? If you could step outside with me for a moment?”

Nino looked askance at Chat but his friend didn’t respond. Nino nodded glumly and followed the doctor into the hallway. As soon as the door had clicked shut the older man whirled around and glared witheringly. Nino was taken aback by this sudden change in attitude.

“What the hell are you people thinking bringing a superhero to the hospital?” Dr. Riviere growled. “Do you have any idea the kind of strain this puts on us? Half my staff has gone home due to emotional distress. Some people will never be the same. Dr. Patel has been a surgeon for over 40 years, one of the best, and after tonight I don’t know if she’ll ever set foot in an operating room again.”

“Marinette’s not a superhero.” Nino bristled. “You’ve got no proof.”

“No?” Dr. Riviere arched an eyebrow. “Let me tell you exactly how her injuries repaired. We had almost finished prepping Miss Dupain-Cheng for surgery when the anesthesiologist approached her with a needle and the first panic attack hit. We’re all on the floor, nurses, surgeons, everybody, trying to figure out what the hell just happened, when all of a sudden her body was engulfed in sparkly pink light. Then the operating theater was filled—filled—with thousands of beetles. I cannot emphasize enough how inappropriate and alarming that was for us.” He crossed his arms. “By the time the beetles were gone, her wounds had vanished and the pathogen had spread. We were worried about chemical weapons. We were one minute away from putting the entire village under quarantine when Chat bleedin’ Noir walked in. At least now we have some context, for the pathogen and the beetles. Out of respect I won’t name her, but let’s just say the beetles were of a very identifiable variety. Spots and everything. You’re lucky we’re professionals with some ethical standards, because everyone figured it out. And for what? We haven’t been able to do much other than wash her hair and change her clothes.”

Nino blanched. “I…understand.” This was why Tikki said no hospitals that night.

Dr. Riviere softened. “I’m sorry for losing my temper. It’s been an unusually stressful evening. But for the future, you kids need a better contingency plan than a normal hospital.”

“Do you think she’s gonna make it?” Nino whispered, ashamed of asking.

Dr. Riviere grasped Nino’s shoulder and gave him a sympathetic squeeze. “I honestly have no idea. Any answer I give you would be a mere guess. Based on the spread of the pathogen, I’m concerned. But my expertise is medicine, not magic. I’m sorry.”

“But if you had to guess?”
“If you put a gun to my head…I’d guess no. Maybe she’ll be dead by morning. Maybe not. I honestly have no fucking clue and I’m not telling him that.”

“…Okay.” Nino turned back towards the door and squared his shoulders. “Okay.”

“Good luck.” Dr. Riviere told him as Nino slipped back into Marinette’s room.

Chat still hadn’t moved.

Nino made sure the door was securely closed behind him before he whipped off his hat and eased Tikki under Marinette’s blanket. The kwami snuggled closer to her Chosen’s side without waking up. Nino turned to his stricken friend.

“Chat?” He asked softly. “You with me, buddy?”

Chat finally acknowledged him, blinking twice and ripping his gaze away from the bed for the first time since he entered the room. The pain Nino saw in those all-green eyes took his breath away, but he forged on as best he could.

Someone needed to be looking on the bright side tonight, and if he didn’t do it, who would? Chloe?

“I don’t think it’s as bad as it seems.” Nino began, wishing it was Chloe having this conversation instead of him. “We need to decide what to do next. And we need to start with you telling me exactly what happened.”

Chat’s gloved hands clenched into fists. The pain in his eyes transformed into a firestorm of rage. Nino gulped, forcing himself to remember that it was still Adrien behind the mask.


Nino gasped. “What?”

Chat took a menacing step towards him. “You planned this. You left her behind on purpose.”

“No!” Nino took an unconscious step back. “I mean, we did, but she was only supposed to make sure they didn’t follow us until we found the ring. Then we were going to rendezvous and come up with a plan to confront Hawk Moth before he could return to Paris. She wasn’t supposed to get caught!”

“You used her as bait.”

“No!” Nino shuddered at the suggestion, shaking his head in fervent denial. “Alya and I didn’t know that Kaibliss was targeting Ladybug until Plagg told us! If Marinette knew, she didn’t share. Please, you’ve got to believe me, I never would have agreed to leave Ladybug alone if I knew how much danger she was in.”

“Funny, I distinctly remember telling you it wasn’t safe on numerous occasions.”

Nino nodded, desperate and guilty. “I know. You did. And I’m sorry I didn’t do a better job of listening, but I’m listening now. What happened to Nette?”

Chat’s upper lip pulled back, razor sharp fangs glinting in the lamplight.

“What do you think happened? He caught her. You want to know what I saw when I got to the roof and looked down? I saw her...” He jerked his thumb towards the bed, his whole body shaking with
an emotion so raw and scorching Nino couldn’t even name it. “Strung up with her own yoyo. Hurt. *Defenseless.* I saw him…” Chat choked and for a second Nino and the hospital and the body in the bed all flashed away and he was back on the wrong side of the glass dome, watching Kaibliss press his face into Ladybug’s wounds and…*play.*

“You left her there to die.”

The words fell from Chat’s lips like a condemnatory gavel.

Nino flinched.

Then he got angry.

“Dude! We found out the party was a trap *on the bus!***” Nino shouted, striding forward until he was right in Chat’s face, daring him to take the punch he was so obviously trying to hold back. “And until Plagg came back, we assumed it was a trap for *you!* Was this Ladybug’s best plan ever? *No!* Clearly not! *But we are all doing the best we can!*” Chat hissed but Nino continued without losing his momentum. “We found your Miraculous! We broke your enthralment! On a *hunch* we showed up with a giant battle-mecha that can take on seven akumas at once! Hawk Moth? Done. Gone. A non-issue. I think we’re doing pretty good considering. And news flash dude!” Nino filled his lungs. “MARINETTE ISN’T DEAD!”

Now it was Chat’s turn to flinch.

Nino hoped that meant he was getting through to him.

“She’s still breathing, still *fighting,* and I can’t for the life of me understand why you’re so ready to give up.” Nino grit out.

Chat turned away, the fire fading as the pain seeped back. “I didn’t give up. *She* did.”

Nino faltered, his face scrunching up in confusion. “Huh?”

Chat’s body sagged as if the weight of his armor was suddenly too much for him and he slumped into the chair Nino had dragged to the foot of the bed. “I didn’t…I didn’t make it in time and she knew it. She…fuck, Nino, she dropped her transformation too early and she did it on purpose. She…she was saying goodbye and I kept telling her to stop and let me *fix* it and she…” Chat covered his mask and tilted his head back, helpless, hopeless. “She gave up…”

*That doesn’t make any sense.*

The words were on the tip of his tongue, but Nino held them back just in time. His eyes darted between his two friends, both desperately hurting in very different ways.

He wasn’t there. He didn’t know. His opinion wouldn’t make a lick of difference in this moment.

And yet…he had to say *something.*

“I guess that makes me smarter than both of you.” He croaked. “Cuz I’m never gonna give you up.”

Nino looked at his oldest friend in the entire world.

His *first* friend in the entire world.

She was so still, so pale.
So lifeless.

She was barely breathing. The slightest flutter of her ribs under the blanket was the only way to tell.

But it was nothing he hadn’t seen before, and he knew her too well to believe she would ever give up.

*I’d feel it.* Nino told himself. *I’ve known her my whole life. If she was really dying, I’d feel it in my bones.*

His warm eyes flicked back to Chat, who was glaring at him, tensed in the chair as if preparing to pounce.

“Never gonna let you down.” Nino continued, to make certain the Rick was properly rolled.

For a second, he thought Adrien really was going to to punch him.

“Get out.” Chat hissed instead, eyes flashing dangerously.

“Yup!” Nino saluted, pleased that he’d pulled Chat out of his downward spiral and wise enough to know when to stop pushing his luck. “Fair warning though—I reckon you’ve got about 25 minutes before Alya hacks her way in here with a chainsaw. I’m gonna go try and head her off.” Nino fled, casting one last nervous glance at the bed before closing the door.

Chat turned around to face Marinette…and waited.

***

Nino found Chloe alone in the waiting room.

“What’s the stitch?” He sighed as he collapsed in the seat across from her.

“It’s a good news bad news situation. Which do you want first?” Chloe replied, her voice strained and waspish.

“Give me the good news first, I could use some.”

“The good news is that there’s only one akuma left and that Luxembourg is mostly trees anyway, so who cares. The bad news is that Mecha-Class accidentally invaded Luxembourg because ‘giant robots’ don’t have ‘EU citizenship’ or ‘travel permits’ and apparently that qualifies as an international incident these days because people are wimps. Alya’s on the phone outside trying to talk some sense into those crybabies at the UN. The limo is a functional SCIF, by the way, so you can thank me for ordering Daddy to send it.”

Nino groaned and gave up. Not about anything specific, just in general. He was giving up on everything in general at this point.

“Not that I care…but how is she?”

Nino’s eyes darted up to stare incredulously at Chloe as she examined her cuticles with practiced disinterest. Nino had never heard Chloe directly verbalize concern over Marinette’s wellbeing and the three of them had known each other since they began schooling. Under any other circumstances
he would have jumped at the opportunity to tease the prickly socialite.

But not tonight.

“Marinette died last summer.”

The words he didn’t want Adrien to hear were pouring out of Nino before he could stop them.

“Or maybe not. I don’t know. I think she might have been technically alive, but at a certain point you’re just splitting hairs. And I was there and I saw it happen and there was nothing I could do to help. I couldn’t even find them a proper hiding place. All I could do was wait, because Ladybug’s kwami said she could save her and I had no choice but to trust them.”

Chloe watched and listened as Nino unloaded. She realized this was the longest she’d gone in quite some time without interrupting someone who wasn’t talking about her. She gave herself a mental pat on the back for being such a helpful, considerate friend.

“And she did it. It took hours, but when it actually happened it was instantaneous. Light, bugs, boom. Nette was back, like nothing ever happened. And I’m pretty sure the same thing happened tonight only it wasn’t the same because we’ve had lights and bugs but Nette’s still hurt, maybe even dying, and I don’t know. I just don’t fucking know.”

A warm hand pressed down on Nino’s shoulder and he looked up to find Alya standing beside him. He hadn’t noticed her return but he was infinitely grateful for her comforting presence.

Alya was silent for a moment and when she spoke her voice was hushed and hesitant, as if she were afraid of being overheard or condemned.

“Sometimes people send death threats to the Ladyblog. Usually it’s in an email, sometimes in the comments. The worst of it was a couple years ago, right after I posted an interview where she briefly mentioned having Chinese heritage and the internet lost its shit once people figured out that whoever Ladybug was, she wasn’t white. Remember that?”

Nino nodded and Chloe shrugged.

“Ladybug and I had a conversation around that time, about what would happen if anyone tried to carry through on their threats. She said that when a Ladybug is in crisis, the bond between her and her kwami turns into a power source that she can draw strength from.” Alya tried to smile at Nino, but the gesture failed and turned into a grimace. “I don’t know if this helps or not, but it’s not a question of Tikki saving Marinette. It’s about Marinette and Tikki working together.”

“But wasn’t Tikki with Adrikins all night?” Chloe pointed out. “Would that make a difference?”

“Maybe.” Chirped a voice from Alya’s hair. Trixx stuck his nose out from her curls. “Maybe not. It depends on Tikki and Marinette, and how strong their bond is.”

“So what does that mean?” Nino asked the fox kwami.

Trixx sighed. “It means we have to wait and see.”

***
Ladybug dreamed.

She dreamed of her time in the earth.

She dreamed of being deep down in the darkness, the weight of the mountain, the shifting of the tectonic plates. Sinking. Rising. Quaking.

She dreamed a glacier came and asked her if she wanted to meet the sky. She said no thank you and that she was very happy deep down in the darkness of the mountain. The glacier listened to her and let her be. The men did not.

She dreamed they came with blades and spades and dynamite. She dreamed they shattered the deep darkness with bright lights. She dreamed of hacking lungs and broken bones and blackened blood seeping, seeping, seeping under the mountain. As they pulled her from the earth she cried out to them and asked why they would hurt themselves to hurt her. The men did not answer.

She dreamed of weighting and sorting and boxing and moving and waiting.

She dreamed that she was burning. She dreamed that she was laid out on a pyre built from the bones of her mountain sisters. She screamed as the heat of their embers consumed her. She felt her body change—no more embers, no more sisters, the fire was inside her now. She dreamed that she was blissfully molten.

She dreamed that she was drowning. She dreamed that she was plunged into brackish water. She dreamed the water boiled as she froze.

She dreamed of waiting.

She dreamed of being chosen.

She dreamed of flesh and bones and brains and intestines and eyeballs and fingers and blood blood blood. She dreamed of stabbing and slicing and hacking and piercing and cutting and sundering and smiting.

She dreamed of warm leather home and warm calloused hand.

Of whetting stones and fine oils.

Of smoke and campfires and sad songs and tender care.

She dreamed of being one. She dreamed of being part of something else.

She dreamed of darkness.

She dreamed of the end.

She dreamed of stone.

Of bone.

And dust.

Of waiting.

And fear.
Of loneliness.
And hoping…

Ladybug dreamed she was a sword.
And then…

4:28 AM Sunday

Marinette woke up.

***

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was brought to you by: Every time Mulder freaks out about Scully being hospitalized and tries to beat someone to death in a parking garage. Bonus points for anyone who caught the references to: Sabriel by Garth Nix, Parks & Recreation and Kim Possible.

Bonus Shark Jumping Prevention: That dream tho.

Next Chapter Title: The Girl Who Lived
Next Chapter Tease: “Chat, what’s wrong?”
The Girl Who Lived

Chapter Summary

In which, despite several attempts, Marinette never actually manages to get out of bed and Adrien is still #NotOkay.

Chapter Notes

Please see Announcement in end notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Disclaimer:

Author: How dare you say that to me!

Mr. X: You’re still being irrational!

Author: You did it again!

Ladybug: Banng, since you’re in kind of a rush, maybe hurry things up a bit?

Author: Fine. I don’t own Miraculous Ladybug or any associated/content or property. YOU DWEEB!

Mr. X: Eeeek! Someone save me!

***

The Girl Who Lived

***

This is a story of six sisters.
All the Ladybugs are siblings, but not all are sisters. It just so happened that these six were.

The first sister died alone in a cave deep beneath a mountain, far from home.

The second sister died alone on a battlefield, the last soul still breathing. Until she wasn’t.

The third sister died alone in her bedroom, her loved ones in pieces around her.

The fourth sister died alone submerged in a vat of honey. It was never entirely clear how that came about.

The fifth sister died alone in the catacombs, lost in the darkness and bones.

The sixth sister did not die.

Because she was not alone.

***

Marinette slowly opened her eyes.

Both eyes.

Which was a relief.

Then she thought: wait, why does this room smell like a hospital?

Marinette blinked up at the white tiled ceiling for a split second of mystification and then the memories came rushing back. She gasped her way to full consciousness, immediately on alert for danger. The last thing she remembered clearly was Kaibliss smiling when he had no business being pleased. Her torso heaved as she tried to sit up but her quaking muscles failed her and she collapsed on the bed. Her field of vision was suddenly filled with two collapsing stars whirling in an inky black sky.

“Chat Noir?” She whispered in awe, scarcely daring to believe it was really him.

He was back. He was home. Oh thank god, it hadn’t been a dream.

His eyes grew larger and darker with some emotion she could not identify and he made the smallest, saddest sound she had ever heard at the back of his throat. She immediately assumed they were under attack.

“Chat? What happened? Where are we? Where’s Alya? Wha—”

“Hush, Marinette. Don’t strain yourself.” He shushed her, his gaze never breaking from hers. He bent over her but he didn’t try to touch her, keeping his hands clasped tightly behind his waist. “Calm down. Everyone else is safe. We’re in the hospital.” His voice was more air than sound, half a step removed from silence. The expression on his masked face was unreadable, impenetrable. Her fear spiked, as it always did when she couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

“Tikki? Tikki! Where’s Tikki?” She cast her head from side to side, searching for her kwami.

“She’s right next to you. Right there.” He whispered, flicking his tail in the direction of her elbow.
“Marinette?”

Marinette’s heart soared at the familiar lilting warble. She lifted up her blanket to peek down at the kwami nestled in the crook of her arm. She heard Chat jump away, retreating as if scalded, but she didn’t look up at him. Tikki and Marinette exchanged identical grins filled with relief and exhaustion.

“Thanks, Tikki.” Marinette whispered.

“Thanks for trusting me, Marinette.” Tikki yawned.

“Get some rest.” Marinette said as she gently lifted Tikki to a box of tissues on her bedside table. The simple motion took a tremendous amount of effort, but she was gratified as her kwami curled up in the soft paper and immediately began to snore. “You’ve earned it.”

She found the strength to prop herself up on her pillows and finally look at Chat.

He wasn’t looking at her.

He stood at the foot of the bed, ears flat against his hair, arms crossed, shoulders hunched, jaw clenched and his head jerked to the side as he very obviously and purposefully did not look at her.

Every line in his body radiated distress.

Marinette’s relief ebbed and her heart sank. “Chat?”

He flinched.

She frowned. She just wanted to bask in the glow of his return, but the way he was acting…

“Chat, what’s wrong?”

His hands flexed, claws biting into his upper arms. “What’s wrong…” He repeated mockingly. His tail twitched with agitation and he glowered at the wall. “You shouldn’t have come tonight. You should have stayed home in Paris where it was safe.”

She tried to smile playfully. “And miss your birthday party?”

“I never sent you an invitation to the party.”

Marinette’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline and she swallowed her smile.

She had wondered about that particular oversight more than a few times over the last month. She waited and waited, checked the mail every day, but her card never showed up even after all their friends had received their invitations. So he had neglected to send her an invite on purpose, after all. She’d convinced herself that was just her paranoia talking.

“I noticed.”

“I never asked you to come.”

True. Adrien had never officially invited her, formally or informally. Her attendance had been a universal presumption nevertheless. She hadn’t realized his reticence held deeper meaning until it was too late.

“I came anyway.” She responded slowly, uncertainly.

“I told you it wasn’t safe.” His voice kept getting harder and sharper. More snap. More crackle.
Sooner or later he was going to pop.

“I know.”

“When did you come?” He spun around and stalked away from her. She frowned at his jagged shoulder blades, confused and disturbed.

“Because you were in danger?”

She didn’t mean it to come out like a question.

“I WAS BAIT!”

Marinette winced at his tormented scream. He paced the room, never looking at her in case he imploded at first sight.

“I was bait and I tried so hard to warn you and you didn’t listen because you never listen to anyone other than your own damn self!” Chat’s hands flew through his hair and his voice got louder and louder as his movements became increasingly frantic. Marinette’s eyes widened with growing alarm. “But what the fuck do I know? I’m the schmuck who wouldn’t listen to Chloe the hundred or so times she straight up told me ‘Adrikins, you’ve been hypnotized by a giant snake!’” His voice peaked in a nasal falsetto as he repeated Chloe’s mantra. “All you had to do was not show up! Their entire plan was contingent on you showing up to rescue me and you fell for it! And don’t try to give me that bullshit about not knowing that Kaibliss was targeting you, because you knew what he was doing and you sure as fuck knew that’s what Hawk Moth was doing.”

Marinette slowly eased herself further up her pillows, bracing against the headrest. “Chat, please calm down and let me explain—”

“Don’t you dare.” He spat, squeezing his eyes shut and wincing with his whole body as if she’d struck him a mortal blow. “Don’t you dare try to justify this to me.”

“Justify what? I don’t understand…”

“I heard you, Marinette! You fucking told him you were going to sacrifice yourself for Tikki! Your exact words were ‘over my dead body!’”

Marinette felt a bottomless pit open in her stomach as understanding slowly dawned. She began to struggle with the blanket, trying to get out of bed so she could physically reach him, maybe get through to him. Her strength was so depleted that even the feather-light fabric was a heavy burden. The loose cotton drawstring pants the hospital had dressed her in tangled and twisted around her legs, further weighing her down. “No, Chat, it’s okay—”

“There is nothing okay about you martyring yourself!” He howled, cringing away from her as if she were poison. Then he laughed and the cruel scratching noise ripped something open deep inside her. Marinette’s eyes burned with unshed tears and her movements grew desperate as he continued to rant and pace. “But hey, gotta keep up the tradition, right? There’s always next century. Maybe the seventh Ladybug the snake traps will be able to break the cycle. Plagg told me all about Kaibliss’ games. Seems like the smart choice would have been to stay home, sit this round out, but you had to measure up, right? Congrats on solidifying your legacy. Now you’ll have something to say to your predecessors when you meet them. So will I—five Ladybugs, right? Guess who buried them.”

That was a low blow. He knew she was scared of not measuring up to the other Ladybugs. He knew it was a sore spot for her, that she’d taken risks in the past, but not this time. She hadn’t meant to get caught. She had gotten careless—the way she always got careless about her own safety whenever his
was in jeopardy. Surely he, of all people, would be able to understand that.

“That’s not—this wasn’t about some kind of vendetta.” Marinette gasped as she finally managed to yank the blanket off. “I chose to rescue you despite the risk because I love—”

Before she could finish saying the words, Chat let loose a furious, guttural roar and spun around, lashing out at the wooden chair at the foot of her bed. He sent it flying with a swift kick and it crashed violently into the wall by the door. Marinette froze, her blue eyes wide and horrified.

His shoulders trembled and he ripped at his hair as he huddled in the corner of the room, hiding from her. When he spoke, his voice had the same vulnerability of a child fleeing a bad dream. His bitter words stung her soul like acid. “Stop saying that. You’re dying and I can’t…you think it’s what I want to hear but I c-can’t…you think you’re helping but you’re not.”

The bottomless pit in her stomach threatened to swallow her whole as she realized what he meant.

After all that brooding and fantasizing and quibbling over how and when to tell him how much she loved him…

After all those times she swore to herself that she wouldn’t hurt him, that she’d get it right the first time, that she’d find the perfect words to let him know…

After not talking about it and wanting to talk about it and not talking about it because what if, what if…

After all that…and she had let him think that by ‘I love you’ she meant ‘goodbye.’

I really fucked up this time. Marinette realized.

“No, Chat, you’re wrong. That’s not what I meant. I’m not dying. I’m okay.”

He kept his head bowed low. “The venom…” He choked out, the sentence disappearing with a tiny sob.

“No, Chat, please, it’s okay, look—I’m not dying—Tikki healed me—the venom just took longer, that’s all.” Marinette pawed and pulled at her hospital gown. “I didn’t sacrifice myself! That was never part of the plan! Not even an option! Honestly, at this point, I’m not even sure if I can die. Please, Chat, please look at me!”

She was beside herself. Every superhero spent time plotting their famous last words, and she was no exception. It was the sort of thing you wanted to be prepared for as a professional planet-saver (or, in her case, Paris-saver). Everyone knew that ‘I love you’ was off the table. You couldn’t tell someone you loved them for the first time right before you died under tragic and mysterious circumstances. Especially if you meant it. That was how you broke people. And if she hadn’t been so focused on protecting Adrien from the monsters, she might have realized that he also needed protection from her own hubris. She felt as if she’d never be able to apologize enough, but she was willing to try. She finally managed to get her arms inside her gown and began lifting it over her head.

Three things happened at once.

One: The door opened and Alya and Nino walked in.

Two: Marinette swung her feet onto the floor and tried to push herself up off the mattress as her gown slipped over her shoulders, revealing the smooth plane of her stomach and the ivory swell of her breasts.
Three: Adrien finally looked at her.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!”

Marinette ignored the three voices screaming in unison and continued struggling to remove her gown. If she could just get him to look at where her wounds used to be, he would see for himself how much better she was. She had to get through to him, had to prove to him that she was still very much alive, that she wasn’t leaving him, that she was nowhere near the brink of death. She didn’t even notice that she was bare underneath her gown.

“Girl, get back in that bed!”

“It’s okay—Tikki took care of me—it’s okay, Chat—I didn’t—I wouldn’t!” She cried as the gown twisted around her head and shoulders, trapping her inside a paper-thin cocoon.

“Don’t just stand there, Nino, go get help!”

Cool calm hands grabbed the gown and yanked it back down her torso. Marinette tried to resist as Alya gently yet firmly pushed her back into bed, but she was too weak. She heard Nino run into the hall and shout for a doctor, she heard Alya trying to soothe her in her best Big Sister voice, but she ignored both of them. All she could focus on was Chat’s face now that she could see it properly.

He was destroyed.

Because of her.

When she saw the tears stream down his mask, when she saw him place a clawed hand over his open mouth and stumble backwards, when she heard his broken whimper, she had no choice but to weep along with him.

What must he think? That she was having a brief moment of consciousness before kicking the bucket? That he was going to watch her die wide awake and frantic and pleading? That there was nothing anyone could do to stop it? That he’d been too late, that she’d given up? That she was going to leave him alone without ever…

No.

She wouldn’t let him think that.

She wouldn’t let him hurt that way.

“Alya—let me go!” Marinette ordered with such ferocity that Alya jumped away before she had a chance to think about it. “Chat Noir, look at me this instant!”

His burning, flooding gaze snapped to her and she yanked up her hospital gown without a care for modesty. She twisted so he would be able to see the exact spot on her waist where one of the basilisk fangs had ripped her open.

The wound was gone.

The venom was also gone.

With a broken-hearted gasp, Chat lunged to the bed and grabbed Marinette’s arms, holding them out as he gaped down at her unblemished skin. The black rivers that had been draining her of life only ten minutes ago were gone, vanished without a trace as if by magic.
“I know I fucked up but I would never say ‘I love you’ only because I was dying. I wouldn’t leave you like that.” Marinette sobbed, allowing the hem of her gown to fall to her hips. “What I said to Kaibliss wasn’t what it sounded like. I was only trying to provoke him. I’m so sorry, Chat, please forgive me.”

He released her arms and lifted up her hospital gown enough so he could see her stomach and her waist—the same spot he had seen when he ripped her dress. His eyes flickered up and down her body and she watched him examine her, holding her breath and hoping. He traced the blue lavender lattices of her veins, unobstructed and unmolested. Filled with red blood pumped by a beating heart. Filled with life.

For a second she thought she saw something spark behind all his grief and anger and blistering pain. Then he whirled away from her and dashed towards the door.

“Riviere!” Chat hollered. “Riv—”

“I’m here, I’m here. Jeez, you boys must really want that coffee—oh.” Dr. Riviere froze in the doorway, two steaming mugs in his hands. His eyes landed on Marinette and narrowed suspiciously. “I see. There aren’t going to be more bugs, are there? Because I’ve had fifteen pathogen-induced panic attacks in the last three hours and I honestly can’t handle more bugs tonight.”

“No…” Marinette ducked her head shyly. As much as she appreciated Tikki’s prodigious healing abilities, it was embarrassing to hear the specifics discussed so bluntly by an outsider. “No. The bug part is over.” She glanced meaningfully at Alya and her friend casually reached for a tissue, surreptitiously slipping Tikki up her sleeve.

Dr. Riviere grinned with heartfelt relief and handed the coffee to Nino, who placed the mugs on Marinette’s bedside table. “Alright, then, Miss Dupain-Cheng. How are you feeling?”

“Fine.”

“Please.” Alya scoffed. She was the only person in the room who hadn’t seen the basilisk venom before it vanished and therefore had no idea how much closer to ‘fine’ Marinette was now compared to a few minutes earlier. “You can barely lift your arms.”

“I’m a little achy.” Marinette admitted, glaring reproachfully at her friend. “It’ll pass.”

Dr. Riviere pulled a stethoscope out from under his collar and approached the bed slowly. “You sound like you know what you’re talking about.” He remarked in an idle tone, as if making a casual observation about the weather.

“I do.” Marinette replied, unsure what to make of the doctor. She glanced at Chat, but he was no help. He was pacing again, this time with his hands tightly clasped behind his head and his eyes blown saucer-wide as he stared at something only he could see.

“Good. That makes one of us.” Dr. Riviere smiled at her ruefully and held up the stethoscope. “May I?”

Marinette nodded and sat up a little taller so that he could slide the cold metal underneath her gown and against the bare skin of her back. She hissed slightly when she felt the icy touch, and she saw Chat reflexively jerk towards her before stopping and turning away again. She bit her bottom lip. She needed to calm him down and make him understand. Everything else would just have to wait.
But first she had to get rid of all these other people.

*This* was why she didn’t like hospitals. Everyone always made such a fuss when you were healed by the ancient creation goddess you kept hidden in your purse instead of their unpleasant serums and needles and scalpels. *Pshaw.*

Dr. Riviere removed the stethoscope from her skin and pulled a pen out of his pocket. “Look at the tip of the pen without moving your head, please.” He told her softly as he moved the pen back and forth through the air and she followed it with her eyes. “Good. Well, your heart and lungs sound strong and clear. I could check your reflexes if you like, but if you don’t mind I’d rather hold off on any blood tests or brain scans until my staff has recovered from our previous attempts.”

“No…” Marinette’s eyes widened in alarm. “That won’t be necessary.”

Dr. Riviere shrugged. “Makes no difference to me. My shift will be over by then.” He frowned at her and straightened up. “You say you feel a little achy? But no pain?” She shook her head. “Dizziness? Disorientation?”

“I’m a little tired and my muscles are sore.” Marinette said. “I need to rest and replenish my electrolytes. I’ll be good as new in a day or so.”

He gave her a long hard stare. “You speak from experience?”

She hesitated before nodding, not wanting to give too much away.

The doctor shrugged. “Good enough for me. Is there anything else I can do for you, Miss Dupain-Cheng?”

She opened her mouth to say no thank you but before she could speak—

“What the fuck?”

They all turned to stare at Chat, who was glaring at Dr. Riviere in a manner that promised impending doom. Dr. Riviere raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“Is something wrong?”

“That’s it?” Chat glanced between the doctor and Marinette. “You’re done?”

“Unless Miss Dupain-Cheng has a specific need, I don’t see what—”

Chat slammed his fist against the wall. Only Marinette managed to refrain from flinching. “How the fuck did you go from ‘she’ll be dead by morning’ to ‘good enough for me?’”

“You said what?” Marinette joined her partner in glaring at the doctor, though it was a relief to learn that she wasn’t the only one responsible for giving Chat the worst possible impression.

Dr. Riviere’s eyes widened. “I never said that.”

“Yes you did! When you and Nino were talking in the hall!”

“Oh, Nino winced. “The pointy ears aren’t just for show.” He muttered apologetically to the doctor. Nino shrugged and shook his head ever so slightly at Marinette, hoping she would understand that he had never agreed with the doom-and-gloom outlooks of the superhero and the doctor and that he’d been rooting for her the whole time. The half-smile she offered in return told him that she got the message.
“To be fair, I said *maybe*, but I can see why you might be upset.” Dr. Riviere appeared mildly embarrassed. “I’m sorry. If I had known you could hear me, I would have been more careful with my language.” He shrugged. “But if Miss Dupain-Cheng says that she is on the mend, I must take her word for it. I don’t have anything else to go on.”

Chat moved towards the doctor with a snarl but Nino stopped him before he could get close. “Are you trying to get Chat Noir banned from the hospital too?” He hissed in Chat’s human ear. He felt Chat’s muscles tense under his fingers, but the superhero held himself back from lunging at the older man.

“I want a second opinion.” He announced instead, crossing his arms and sticking out his jaw stubbornly, ignoring Marinette’s exasperated scoff.

Dr. Riviere threw his hands in the air. “Great! Wonderful! That’s been my advice since you got here! Call anyone you like! I’ll sign any transfer request you put in front of me! Now if you’ll excuse me, I have other patients with non-magical medical problems that I can actually help them with. I’m glad you’re feeling better, Miss Dupain-Cheng. I’ll check back in before my shift ends.”

*One down, two to go.* Marinette thought as the doctor left the room.

“Chat, please listen to—”

“Chloe.” Chat gasped, spinning towards the door. “I need Chloe.”

Marinette scowled. *This again?* She thought petulantly as Chat barreled down the hallway, shouting Chloe’s name.

“What do you want?” They heard an impossibly loud voice screech from a distant part of the hospital.

“Chloe! Get your butt over here right now!” They heard Chat thunder back.

“I’m busy!”

Marinette groaned and rolled her eyes. “Nino, bring him back and tell them both to use their inside voices.” She snapped. Nino nodded and hustled out the door. Marinette turned towards Alya, half demanding answers, half seeking reassurance.

Her friend gave her a tired smile and handed her a water bottle.

“Welcome back, red.” Alya whispered. “I brought your purse too.” She opened Marinette’s purse and slipped Tikki inside, shutting the clasp and laying the bag gently on the bedside table next to the lukewarm coffee.

“Thanks for minding the store, orange.” Marinette gratefully sipped the water. “What’s our status?”

“As of half an hour ago, all the akumas are captured and Gabriel is somewhere in this hospital getting fitted for a full-body cast as we speak. Or something to that effect. The staff here are damn tight-lipped when they want to be.” Alya sighed. Marinette’s eyebrows shot up and she almost choked on the water in surprise.

“What?” She gasped. “How did that happen?”

“I don’t have the details.” Alya shook her head disapprovingly. “But Adrien’s been banned from the hospital. Thus…” She pointed at the mask-region of her face.
Marinette nodded. She’d get the full story out of him soon enough. “Kaibliss?”

“Unknown. But I doubt he’ll be able to get to you or Tikki in a place like this.” Alya glanced around at the hospital room before winking at Marinette. “Especially since we’re not leaving you alone ever again.”

Marinette laughed. “Right.” Her laughter died when she saw the look on Alya’s face. “Alya. You have to leave me alone at some point.”

“That’s what you think.” Alya replied half-seriously, not meeting her eyes. Marinette reached out for Alya’s hand. Alya let her, staring down as their fingers laced together.

“Hey.” Marinette whispered. “We’ve talked about this before, right? About what happens when I get really hurt? Tikki takes care of me. As long as I’m Ladybug, I’ll be fine.”

Alya sniffed, her eyes welling with tears of exhaustion and relief and frustration and hunger and a million other emotions that she was feeling all at the same time. “We’ve talked about what happens when Ladybug gets really hurt. We didn’t talk about all the other parts. And I didn’t realize until tonight how important those other parts are.” She took a deep breath. “I… I didn’t call your parents. I made sure the hospital didn’t, either. I thought that was for the best but I realized that I didn’t know what you would have wanted me to do and…” A scalding tear rolled down her cheek and plopped down on the top of Marinette’s hand. “I…I didn’t call your parents. I made sure the hospital didn’t, either. I thought that was for the best but I realized that I didn’t know what you would have wanted me to do and…” A scalding tear rolled down her cheek and plopped down on the top of Marinette’s hand. “I kept remembering when I got my appendix out a few years ago, and the first thing I said when I woke up after the surgery was where’s my mom. And I kept going over that in my head, what if you needed your mom, what if I’m the one who…cuz I remember, when I woke up, it was like I was a little kid again and all the magic stuff, all the superhero stuff, none of that mattered. I was scared and I wanted my mom. And she was right there. And I kept thinking, what if, for you…what if, when you needed your mom, she wasn’t there, and it was because I made the wrong call?”

Marinette slipped her hand around Alya’s wrist and yanked her friend down into a fierce hug, holding on as tightly as her shaking muscles would allow. “It’s okay.” She whispered. “You made the right call.”

Alya gave a wet chuckle. “Thanks, but you’re not getting off that easy. Constant supervision. From now on. That’s the deal.”

“I’m not agreeing to that.”

“It’s not a negotiation.”

Alya pulled away as Nino dragged Chat into the room kicking and screaming by the tip of his tail.

“Let me go, Nino!” Chat yowled. “I’ve got to—Alya! Give me your phone!” He lunged at Alya, knocking Nino to the floor in the process. Alya yelped as he grabbed her by the waist and started pawing at her pockets.

“Get off!” She shoved him lightly. “What do you need it for?”

“Gotta make a call.” He growled,-glaring at the rectangular lump in her front pocket. “Need Chloe.”

“I’m right here.” A haughty voice snapped from the doorway. Marinette let loose a resigned groan and sank further into her pillows as Chloe marched in. “What do you want? Do you have any idea how annoying it was to get past security? I am very busy and I don’t have time for—”

“Chloe!” Chat pounced on her. She gaped up at him, too startled to continue scolding. “Listen to me
very closely because I’m only going to say this once. There is a man. He is called Master Fu but he
might be using a different name. He is currently on a cruise ship—I don’t know what it sails under—
somewhere near the Galapagos Islands. He has an EU passport and is originally from Tibet. He is
over 180 years old and looks like he’s around 70. He has a goatee and a small moustache. I have
only ever seen him wearing a red Hawaiian shirt so I assume that’s what he’s wearing now. That is
all of the identifying information I am able to give you.” His claws bit down into her shoulders. “I
don’t have any way to contact him but I need to talk to him and I need you to scream at people until
that happens. Chloe. Can you do that for me?”

“On it.” Chloe snapped her fingers and pulled out her phone. Chat slowly exhaled with relief,
knowing that if anyone could hunt down the vacationing Guardian it was Chloe, and released her.

Chloe threw one mildly curious glance in Marinette’s direction and nodded brusquely when
Marinette gave her a sheepish thumbs-up. As she walked out the door, Chloe turned and delivered
unto Chat Noir the smuggest facial expression imaginable. She knew it was the smuggest facial
expression imaginable because she had spent years perfecting it in her compact mirror.

*Told you so.* Her face crowed.

*Not now, Klo.* He glared back.

Meanwhile, Alya and Marinette were having their own private conversation in Eyeball Language.

*Do you have Fu’s number?* Alya’s brow asked with a wiggle.

*He doesn’t even have a landline.* Marinette’s nose shrugged.

Nino felt a little left out.

“Okay, well, on the off-chance Chloe doesn’t manage to track down a random geezer drifting in the
Pacific Ocean…” Nino grumbled sarcastically, all too aware that he had skipped bedtime and was
standing on the wrong side of sunrise. “I say we ask Marinette what she needs.”

Nino and Alya looked expectantly at Marinette, but Chat did not.

He kept his eyes firmly planted on his toes as he moved to stand on the opposite side of the room, as
far away from her as possible.

Marinette closed her noon-sky eyes, took a deep breath and tried to think Big Picture.

“I need to transform and cure the damage from the battle, but I’m not ready yet.” She admitted
gradually. “I’m going to be fine, *I promise.* But Tikki needs to recharge and I’m no use to anyone
when I’m all noodley.”

She opened her eyes.

Chat was still glaring at his boots, his cat ears flat against his skull. She couldn’t tell what he was
thinking, but she could taste the intensity of his emotions in the air like a burgeoning storm.

Nino’s stare was penetrating, patient and measured. His peace of mind was born, as the doctor had
put it, from experience. The tiny determined nod he gave her was a soothing balm on the sting of her
partner’s unmitigated despair. At least *someone* still trusted her to make decisions about her own
body.

Then she looked at Alya. And for a second she assumed that the Ladyblogger had summoned Sabine
Cheng in spirit if not in body, because Marinette’s best friend was giving her the most maternal hairy eyeball she had ever been subjected to.

“What you need is to drink more water.” Alya bossed firmly, pushing the plastic bottle back into Marinette’s hands. “Then you need to sleep. Don’t give me that look. For at least a few hours. Then you need to eat something and at some point you need to take a shower.”

“Alya, I have to fix—”

“Don’t test me, girl. I will strap you to that bed so fast and you won’t be able to do a thing about it until you feel better. Either way, I win.” Alya’s tone left no doubt that she would carry through on her threat if provoked. “You need to rest. So you’re going to take the next, oh…let’s see…” Alya reached for her phone to check the time and quickly glanced at her notifications. It took a full minute to scroll through all of them. “…yikes…”

“Yeah, I think Chloe’s trying to deal with it.” Nino groaned. “So you might wanna get back out there as soon as possible…”

“What’s wrong?” Marinette asked curiously, reaching towards the phone. Alya gently batted her hand away and her wrist fell limp on the mattress like a bedraggled dragonfly.

“Nothing you need to worry about for the next…couple of hours.” Alya muttered distractedly as she began typing away on her phone. “Yeah, I think I can give you a couple hours, maybe even a few… if I can keep the military on stand by, and get Max on the air for an interview by morning, then Chloe’s dealing with the UN…”

“The UN? What?!” Marinette tried to sit up but only managed to bump her head on the plastic bedframe.

“Don’t worry, red.” Alya shut off her phone and winked. “Our team-up has become more of an expanded universe situation, but it’s my storyline, not yours.”

Marinette groaned. “I regret ever using a pun with you.”

“Too late. It’s an illustrative metaphor. Now…you’re going to make good use of the next few hours and take care of yourself. Meanwhile, I am going to take care of this mess and hunt you down a change of clothes. And you!” She rounded on Nino, who jumped slightly and pointed at his own nose with his finger. “How’s your German?”

Nino shrugged. “Nicht sehr gut.”

“It’ll have to do. Come on.” Alya grabbed Nino’s arm and dragged him out of the room. She paused briefly in the doorway and glared at Chat. “I know I don’t need to tell you this, but that girl? My girl?” Alya pointed at Marinette. “She doesn’t leave your sight, not for a single measly second. Capisce?”

He stared back at her, and whatever Alya saw in his eyes was a good enough answer to satisfy her. With one last command to rest Marinette, Alya shut the door.

The room was suddenly, shockingly quiet.

Marinette waited for him to speak first, but it soon became clear that waiting was pointless. It was strange—usually, when they needed to have a difficult conversation, he announced that he would allow her to begin and then a minute or so later, when he could no longer contain himself, he would tell her exactly what was on his mind. But not this time. The only sound emerging from his lips was
his labored breathing, each throaty rasp adding another knot to the coils in her stomach.

He wasn’t okay, because she wasn’t okay.

And even though she was going to be okay…he didn’t believe her.

And he didn’t know where to start.

Which meant it was up to her.

“I love you. I’m not just saying it. I don’t care if you want to hear it or not. I. Love. You.”

The words emerged from her lips like a challenge. Chat’s gaze locked with Marinette’s and she stared him down, daring him to argue. He didn’t, choosing to remain frozen on the other side of the room instead.

He waited…

“I’ve loved you since the second day we met.” She continued. She could feel her cheeks burning, but she never broke eye contact. She could do this. She had to get this right. She’d never find words better than his letters but she had to try. “I have been ridiculously, ecstatically, deliriously in love with you for as long as you’ve been in my life. You’re the most beautiful and incredible person I’ve ever met and I love every single part of you and if you didn’t already know that after everything we’ve been through then that’s my fault and I’m sorry. I made some mistakes tonight, I admit that. But I’m not sorry for coming because you’re here. You’re you again, every part of you. And I hate that you’re hurting because of me but I’m so, so, so happy to see you, Chat Noir.”

He waited…

“You’re angry. Okay, I understand. And under the circumstances, you have every right to be angry. But I wasn’t trying to hurt you, Chat. I was scared. I didn’t know what had happened, you just…didn’t exist anymore. I was desperate and…and maybe I’ve been rash…okay, definitely, but…”

He waited…

She gulped. The burning of his gaze was too intense, too raw, cut too deep. She broke away, staring down at her hands as she fiddled with the blankets. “You’re mad at me for putting myself in danger, and I get that. How do you think I feel when you—” She slammed her lips shut.

Whoops.

The cautious pun hit Chat like a lightning bolt and in three long strides he was at the foot of her bed,
head lowered, shoulders hunched, gripping the frame so tightly that the plastic bent under his claws.

“Stop pushing.” He snarled. “You have no idea how hard it is not to fall apart right now, and you keep pushing…”

“So fall apart. No one’s stopping you.” Marinette eased her hands under her side and shifted into a crouch on the bed. It was difficult but she managed. Chat shook his head, his bangs obscuring his mask. “It’s okay, Chat. If it’s too much, it’s too much. We don’t have to deal with everything tonight. You get to fall apart for a little while, and I’m here to put your pieces together again when you’re done.” She crawled forward but he didn’t notice what she was doing until she reached out and tried to brush the hair away from his eyes.

“Marinette, no…” He moaned helplessly, coming around the side of the bed and resting his hands on her shoulders without looking directly at her. Marinette had just about had it with his shifty-eyed behavior. It was time to take action. “You need to rest.” He sighed as he tried to pressure her back onto the pillows. Marinette wrapped her arms around his neck and locked her fingers together before he could blink. He froze, wanting to run away, wanting to collapse in her arms, wanting to cocoon her in bubble-wrap and stick her in a vault somewhere safe and far away from him and his bad luck. Marinette was having none of it. She held on to him like lichen clinging to a boulder in the tundra.

“Let go.” He breathed, his voice cracking with despair.

“No.” She refused, even though they both knew she was still too weak to hold on if he pulled away. “Talk to me.”

“Now she wants to talk.” He muttered sarcastically, but she didn’t miss the way he almost imperceptibly tilted his face into her shoulder. She could hear his pulse galloping behind his ear, feel his muscles quivering under her touch.

“Yes. Now.” She croaked. “Because we’re both here and we’re both whole and the last few days have been the scariest of my life.” Her arms shook as she tightened her grip. “I thought I lost you…”

“Marinette, please…” He almost sobbed. “You’re not…I can’t…”

“Talk to me, kitty. Please, please talk to me.”

“N-no, you d-don’t understand…”

Chat’s hands fisted in the blanket on either side of her waist as the strength slowly drained from his body and he slumped into her.

“Then make me understand.”

The order was pure Ladybug and while Adrien might have been able to resist, Chat Noir could not. The instinct to follow wherever she led was too strong.

“It’s too much…” He admitted reluctantly. “I remember…everything, all at once, and it’s too damn much…”

“We don’t have to deal with everything tonight. Pick one part of it. Pick the part that I can help you with.”

“Fuck, Marinette, please…you don’t need this right now, okay? It’s more than I can handle and I’m not the one who…” He gagged, clenching his entire body against the mental image of her, bleeding and ensnared.
“Haven’t we already established that I’m the only person who knows what I can and cannot handle?” She asked primly. She shifted to the side and he instinctually followed her until he was half-on, half-off the bed, keeping his face buried in the pulse point at her throat. “You have to believe me, Chat. I’m fine. I’m safe. I’m not going anywhere. Not without you.”

“How can you possibly be fine after—?!?”

She winced as he hissed and clamped his lips shut. He slowly lifted one of his hands and rested it on her side, hesitantly brushing against the spot where the basilisk’s fang had pierced through her suit.

“Oh kitty…” She sighed, aching for him on top of her own pangs and twinges. “How much did you see?”

“Enough.” Came the vicious snarl, offering her a glimpse of the violent hurricane of emotion swirling behind his mask.

Marinette sighed again and threaded her fingers through his hair. “I said I wanted to talk. This is as good a place to start as any…” She pulled back from him enough so she could meet his gaze. “Tikki told me about her history with Kaibliss, and about the other Ladybugs he’s attacked. We talked about the risks and we talked about what he might try to do if he caught us. A lot has changed over the last couple centuries, and the circumstances tonight were completely different from the circumstances of the last five Ladybugs who faced him. Tikki thought we could handle it, and so did I.”

“So what happened?” He asked, and the knots in her stomach loosened a little further. At least he was listening to her.

“I got distracted and Kaibliss snuck up on me.” It wasn’t her proudest moment, but that hardly mattered now. “I came to in the ballroom, thinking: okay, onto the next plan. Turn Hawk Moth and Kaibliss against each other.” She winced at the incredulous look he gave her. “That was a miscalculation. Chloe explained how Hawk Moth had been feeding Kaibliss all these years. I assumed that meant he was the dominant one in the relationship. It didn’t take long to figure out how wrong I was. But I always had a plan. You rescued me in time, so Tikki was able to drop the transformation earlier and save her strength enough to heal me in one go. Though I guess the venom took longer, because of how the magic works, but that was one of the risks we discussed. Tikki said it’s like in old movies when the heroes destroy the evil robot by presenting it with a logical fallacy and it overloads the system. If you didn’t show up, I was going to hold out until I was fully healed and Tikki was too weak to maintain the transformation. Then when Kaibliss was distracted by Tikki, I was going to overpower Hawk Moth and use the Moth Miraculous to give Tikki the power to send Kaibliss back to his own dimension for good. We had the whole thing worked out step by step, and Kaibliss just kept making it easier by getting Hawk Moth drunk…” She frowned and her gaze grew distant and contemplative. “My memories get kinda foggy at the end, but it was almost as if Kaibliss was hunting Nooroo instead of Tikki…”

“Nooroo’s dead…”

Marinette’s blood chilled with horror as the words filtered through her ears. She grabbed him a little closer and placed her chin between his cat ears. He huddled against her as she processed this information.

Pity.

Mixed with a lot of guilt and a dash of relief and an ounce of shame and a squeeze of grossed out.

But mostly, she felt pity.
She had never met the Moth kwami, but she knew he didn’t deserve to meet such a grisly end any more than he had deserved to be under Hawk Moth’s control all these years.

“I’m sorry for him.” She said eventually, thinking very carefully about her words. “Maybe I should have tried to do more for him when I had the chance… but I won’t apologize for my priorities.” Her hands came up to rest on his shoulder blades as she held him dearly. “You come first, Chat.”

“That’s not fair…” He breathed into her skin, his voice caught between wonder and despondence.

“How so?” She asked with a puzzled frown. Of course it was fair. Or maybe fairness didn’t have anything to do with it. Either way, his response made no sense to her.

“You c-can’t treat me like… I’m not…” His stuttering breath tickled her collarbone. “You d-don’t understand. You d-don’t know wh-what I…”

She waited…and, as always, he eventually cracked.

“I tried to kill my father.”

Marinette’s eyes widened slightly at the confession, but she gave no other reaction, barely even breathing as he crumbled. Chat’s knees buckled and he slipped onto the floor, his hands remaining fisted in the blankets on either side of her. She caught him, sliding her legs off the edge of the mattress and cradling him in her lap.

“I tried to beat him to death in the parking lot. And I’m not sorry and it wasn’t because he’s Hawk Moth. And every time I look at you I remember that he’s somewhere in this hospital, hopefully with a tube shoved down his throat, but he’s still breathing and he’s in the same fucking building as you and I can’t handle it. I can’t. And if Alya or Nino were here to watch you I’d leave you behind in an instant to go find him and rip him to pieces with my claws… oh god, Marinette, I want to kill him…”

His jaw unhinged as he trailed to a wrenching finish and stared up at her, his glowing green eyes desperate and filled with shame. He trembled and braced himself for her rejection, her disgust, her dissolution of their union. He waited for her to condemn him. To tell him that not only was he the son of a monster, that he was a monster too. He waited for her to tell him that she couldn’t possibly love him anymore, couldn’t be his partner anymore. That it was over. That they were done.

Marinette stared down at him blankly for a moment, then cocked her head to the side and offered him a smile that would turn a lesser man to stone.

“Okay.” Her voice was dark chocolate and sea salt, her voice was lava and thunder, her voice was power and danger and the absolute end of him as she said, “Let’s kill your father.”

Chat blinked up at her in a daze as she trailed her fingertips across his jaw and up the side of his head to play with his pointy ears. Even though he heard her clearly, he couldn’t comprehend the meaning of her words. “What?”

She arched an eyebrow and he shivered. Sparks shot down his spine at the way she was looking at him. There was a darkness moving in her eyes that he’d never seen before, and it lit a fire under his skin.

“We’re off the map, Chat Noir. Hawk Moth is your father. He’s hurt you in ways no human being should be able to hurt someone. I don’t know what’s right and what’s wrong in this situation, and at this point I don’t care.” She curled her fingers under his chin and pressed her thumb against his bottom lip, anchoring him in place.
Not that he was going anywhere.

He’d never been so utterly convinced that Marinette Dupain-Cheng was an actual literal goddess as he was in that moment.

And then she said:

“You want your father dead? I’ll bring you his head on a pike.”

And he realized that people like Ladybug were the reason the ancients invented religion in the first place.

But she wasn’t done.

“You want your father to spend the rest of his life rotting in a cell? I’ll build his prison with my own two hands.” She leaned down and her breath ghosted across his mouth as he closed his eyes. “And if you change your mind tomorrow and decide you want to give him another chance…” Her lips brushed against his left eyelid, then his right. “I will call every damn therapist on the planet until I find the person who can fix whatever is broken inside him.” She pulled back slightly and pressed a chaste kiss to the tip of his nose. “Whatever you want, whatever you need. Name it, my love, and I will make it happen.”

Oh.

Break.

Crack.

Shatter.

Adrien fell apart.

“I’m sorry!” Chat wailed, wrapping his arms tightly around her waist and rising onto his knees so he could burrow his face in her stomach. “I’m sorry, Marinette! I’m so sorry! I’m sorry for being such a jerk lately, I’m sorry for not trusting anyone, I’m sorry for how I handled things on Thursday, I’m sorry for resenting your rules and pushing you to tell me and then when you were finally ready I messed it up and—”

“I read your letters.” Marinette admitted guiltily. She wasn’t sure if she should tell him this, but she wanted to stem the flood of unnecessary apologies falling from his lips. He had nothing to feel guilty about, and the only of his actions that had actually hurt her had already been resolved. She wanted to start putting his pieces together again. There wasn’t a moment to lose.

Chat didn’t know what to expect when he pulled away and looked at her face, without flinching or flashing back to the ballroom for the first time since she woke up. He certainly wasn’t expecting her to be gazing down at him with the softest bluest eyes and the brightest most love-struck smile he’d ever seen, on her face or anyone else’s. A blush roared across his cheeks long before he realized what she was referring to.

“After the bus left, I searched your house for the ring. No one saw me!” She added quickly as his ire flared. “I was careful. When I checked your room, I found…” She reached a shaking hand into her purse and pulled out two creased envelopes, one addressed to Ladybug and one addressed to Marinette. His mouth parted slightly in surprise and recognition. Marinette bit her lip nervously. “I know I shouldn’t have opened them without asking but…”
“It’s alright.” He whispered, still staring dazedly at the envelopes. “I wrote them for you…” He gulped, suddenly anxious in an entirely different and far more pleasant kind of way. “Do you…like the letters?”

“I love the letters.” She gushed. “It was such a good idea to write them. Simple and perfect. All of my plans were too overcomplicated.” His blush deepened.

He remembered the night he wrote the letters.

The first night under his father’s roof after winning the war to end his career. The first night back in the cold empty silence instead of the cheery take-out-and-video-games in Nino’s flat.

And the only way, the only way, he could stand it was by thinking about her.

And all the things he wanted to tell her.

Until Plagg begged him to stop, please kid, talk about anything else.

But she wasn’t ready.

So he wrote it down.

Just in case.

And then he shoved the letters in envelopes and threw the envelopes on the top of his bookshelf. He never forgot about them sitting up there (until, of course, he did) but he didn’t think about them often either. He was waiting for his lady.

“I didn’t…” His mouth was drier than he realized. He swallowed and tried again. “I didn’t plan on giving you both of them. It was just in case…”

“I’m glad you wrote both.” She assured him quickly. “Even though I knew, I didn’t know, y’know? And I was so scared of being wrong and hurting you.”

He shook his head, unable to speak. She couldn’t possibly hurt him, not that way. She knew him too well.

“But I’m really happy that I got to read both of them, even if that wasn’t your intention.” She continued. “I…they’re beautiful, both of them, and I think I needed to…” She faltered, trying and failing to find those pitch perfect words she’d been struggling over for so long. She gave up and went simple. “It’s like a piece of what we were. A message from you and you to me and me before…everything changes.”

...Oh?

The storm clouds parted and the dawn broke and the withered tree bloomed once more as Chat stretched a trembling claw to caress the side of her face.

“Are we going to change?” He asked her as hope flared unexpectedly, brilliantly, terrifyingly in his breast.

She caught his hand in hers and pressed a tender kiss to his knuckles. “Do you want us to change?” She whispered into the black leather.

Chat made a noise that was part hysterical laugh, part aching sob and part undone moan. He surged onto the bed, delicately lowering her to the pillows before swinging his left leg to pin against her
right side. He crouched above her on the narrow cot, staring down at her with so much ravenous hunger she thought he might devour her.

She didn’t think she’d mind if he tried.

Not so long as she got to devour him in return.

“I want to kiss you.” He growled, groaned, declared, admitted, demanded and pleaded.

“Please.” She reached up for him eagerly.

She didn’t have to reach far. He fell into her, a super nova of teeth and tongue and too much and don’t care and love you and more now. His hands curled into fists in the blanket beneath her as his lips rolled against hers. His tongue plunged into her mouth with fervor, his breath heavy and ragged. He pulled and pleaded and nipped and sucked, as if he was trying to bring her inside him. Her hands roamed up and down his spine, into his hair, tracing the shell of his human ears and making him growl into the kiss, sending buzzy shockwaves through her nervous system. So many years of pent up feeling came pouring out of him and she welcomed every drop like parched earth welcoming the rain. He tasted and savored and coaxed and explored and pressed and pulsed and drank her all up. She moaned into his mouth, wanting more, more, more. Eventually he broke away from her lips and began pressing desperate delirious kisses along her jaw and down her neck.

“I want to hold your hand.” He keened into the pale flesh under her ear.

“Please…” She gasped, arching into his touch.

“I want to tell everyone that we belong to each other.” He rumbled as he trailed his mouth across her clavicle.

“P-Please…” Her cheeks flamed poppy red at the thought, but if he wanted that then she wouldn’t mind, not if it made him happy.

“I want to take you out on dates.” He nipped at the base of her throat before running his tongue soothingly over the tender mark. “I want to take you dancing.”

“Please.” She whispered. She wanted that too. Wanted movies and ice cream and sunsets and made memories.

“I want to love you, Marinette.” His words sounded like a prayer as he peppered her face with adoring kisses. “Please, Marinette, please can I love you now?”

“Yes!” She cried, pulling him down to meet her lips. “Please, please, please love me!”

“Yes!” He vowed, and she could taste his promise in his mouth. “Thank you, milady, thank you, thank you, thank—”

“Please, Chat, I’m so tired, please.” She begged. “No more talking. Just let me love you.”

Her wish was his command.
This is a story of six brothers.

All the Black Cats are siblings, but not all are brothers. It just so happened that these six were.

The first brother buried his lady in the fertile earth of the valley at the foot of the mountain far from home.

The second brother buried his lady in an unmarked grave along with the rest of the soldiers, and nothing ever grew on the ground watered by his tears.

The third brother buried his lady beside the pieces of her loved ones and planted a rowan tree to watch over her and her family since he no longer could.

The fourth brother placed his lady in a pale grey boat along with her glaive and her furs and he set the boat on fire before pushing it out to sea.

The fifth brother searched and searched the catacombs but he never found his lady in the darkness. He spent the rest of his life tending to the dead, for it was easier to see his lady staring back at him from each and every empty skull than to admit he had lost her amongst the bones.

The sixth brother held his lady close and loved her with all his might.

Because he was the one who made it in time.

***

Chapter End Notes

This was, by far, the hardest chapter to write. It's basically 25 pages of expository dialogue and I *really* hope folks found it readable and not too boring.

Okay, announcement time...

This is a good news/bad news situation.

The bad news: There aren't going to be any new chapters next week. I need to catch up on edits, rewrites and life stuff so I'm taking a week off. Also, y'all have had some great comments and I want to make sure all your questions are addressed and that the ending of this story is as strong as the beginning, and this is a good point in the story for a brief recess. Chapter 10 will be posted on the 23rd.

The good news: (in addition to the obvious benefits of quality control) I had an idea for a fun way to introduce the next section of this story (Chapters 10-13) so next week I'm going to post Special Bonus Content which you'll be able to find in this fic and on my ML side blog: https://www.tumblr.com/blog/akumatizethisblog

Watch this space!
Bonus Content

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Drum roll please...
Coming next week...

No one to tell us no...

Or where to go...

Cuz now I'm in a whole new world with you...

Marinette finally faces the music and Adrien is way too enthusiastic about the whole situation.

Basilisk A Miraculous Ladybug fan adventure by Interroba
Next Chapter Title: See You On The Flip Side

Next Chapter Summary: This is where all that foreshadowing starts to pay off.

Next Chapter Tease: "What have I done?"

Chapter End Notes

See you on the 23rd!
See You On The Flip Side

Chapter Summary

This is where all that foreshadowing starts to pay off.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer:

Author: Okay, Mr. X. I’ve taken some time to think about it and I’ve decided to forgive you.

Mr. X: Sorry, you’re going to forgive me?

Author: That’s right.

Mr. X: For what?

Author: For calling me irrational. Which is sexist and if you do it again I’ll kick your ass, but in the meantime I forgive you.

Mr. X: Oh…okay?

Author: Don’t you have something you want to say to me too?

Mr. X: Uh…I’m sorry you don’t own Miraculous Ladybug or any associated content/properties?

Author: No…that’s not what I meant…ugh, never mind.

***

See You On The Flip Side

***
“Finish it.” The words hurtled out of Hawk Moth’s mouth like bullets as he turned his back on the boy tied in the chair underneath the butterfly window. Kaibliss nodded and stepped forward.

“I won’t let you get away with this!” Adrien shouted, struggling against the ropes that bound him. Hawk Moth ignored him, though it took a great deal of effort not to spin around and strike the blow he’d been holding back all night.

“This will take some time, old friend.” Kaibliss said softly. “There is no need for you to stick around. Go upstairs, get some rest. I will alert you as soon as I am finished.”

Hawk Moth jerked his head in acknowledgement and left, not trusting himself to remain another moment in the company of his traitorous offspring. Adrien’s bloodshot eyes burned as Kaibliss approached the chair.

“This plan won’t work.” He spat furiously.

Kaibliss threw back his head and laughed. “No, I don’t imagine it will.” He smiled as he knelt on the floor in front of Adrien. “Your father has many fine qualities, but foresight has never been among them.”

“Then why are you—”

“I have my reasons.” Kaibliss cocked his chin and smirked. “My dear boy, if I didn’t know better I’d think you were trying to keep me talking. It won’t do you any good, you know. Your memories will be erased and you will cooperate with your father, one way or another.”

“You can’t make me—”

“Yes, actually, I can. And I will.” Kaibliss rested his hands on Adrien’s knees. The boy flinched at the cold, clammy touch. “This is happening, prince charming, and there’s nothing you can do to stop it. The best thing you can do is find yourself a good lawyer tomorrow morning. You’re going to need one. Assuming Ladybug doesn’t decide to make a clean job of it and simply kill your father, of course.”

“What are you—”

“All manner of hell is going to break loose on your eighteenth birthday, Adrien, and you’re not going to have a Ladybug to magic away the mess afterwards. Superheroes need lawyers just as much as supervillains. You’re going to need someone on your side once Hawk Moth is vanquished.”

“Are you offering?” Adrien asked sarcastically.

“Not at the moment.” Kaibliss winked. “I’ve never been on your side, Adrien. But since we’re having this little chat, and since you won’t remember any of it afterwards...there are a few things I’ve been meaning to say to you.” He placed his hand on the back of Adrien’s neck and forced the boy to stare directly into his eyes. “I’ve waited 500 years for Ladybug to find you. So long I’d almost forgotten what you looked like. Now the actors are in their places and the show is about to begin.
When the moment arrives, it will feel sudden to you. But I want you to know that it isn’t sudden at all. This has been a long time coming. I’m patient, I’m careful, I’m been happy to wait. I set up the dominos one by one and then, when you least expect it, I knock them down. When your guard is lowered and you think you’re safe, I’m going to take her away from you because that is what you did to me. And you won’t be able to stop me, because you have no idea what I’m talking about. Sweet dreams, Adrikins. See you on the flip side.”

***

Golden sunlight trickled through the window and lured Adrien from his slumber. He woke up aching and sore from sleeping in a too-small hospital bed while wearing his suit. He woke up deliriously happy, the love of his life wrapped in his arms. He opened his eyes and found her pressed against him, and if he had any lingering doubts about Marinette’s vitality they quelled in that moment.

Marinette was alive. Marinette was Ladybug. She loved him as much as he loved her and she wanted him to love her as much as she loved him.

It seemed like everything was going to be okay.

Chat took his time examining his lady’s sleeping face. He’d seen it before on a few occasions, but never like this—first thing and a few inches away. The two superheroes (one masked, one not) lay on their sides, face-to-face with limbs entwined. It was the only way they could both fit in the bed without him crushing her in their sleep. Her head was nuzzled into his shoulder, his arm wrapped around her waist. Vibrancy had returned to her complexion, the ashen pallor from last night long gone. He chuckled internally as he realized for the first time that Marinette looked a lot like her mother when her hair was down.

The bed was too small to fit two people comfortably. The plastic frame was jutting awkwardly into his hip, but Chat hardly noticed. He only had eyes for the radiant creature nestled against his breastplate. Maybe he should have gotten out of the bed and let her have more room to sleep, but they’d both dozed off in a warm glow of kisses and love yous and even now he couldn’t bring himself to stop holding her.

He had five years of wishing to make up for. He didn’t think he’d be letting her go anytime soon.

“Hello, Chat Noir.”

Chat jolted slightly at the sudden unfamiliar voice, but stilled his movements when Marinette sighed and snuggled impossibly closer, still fast asleep. He spotted a red blob waving at him from the bedside table and he relaxed as recognition dawned.

“Hello, Tikki. It’s nice to finally meet you.” He whispered softly because he did not want to wake Marinette until he had to. Tikki approved. Marinette had earned her rest ten times over.

And Chat didn’t even know that Marinette hadn’t slept for more than a few minutes at a time since Thursday.

Tikki decided it was best not to tell him. He already had enough reasons to be concerned. They all did.

“Likewise.” She sighed. “I believe that I owe you an explanation.”
Chat glanced at the snoozing bundle of sunshine in his arms. “Can it wait?”

Tikki beamed at him. “I’m so happy for you both.” Then her humungous eyes darkened. “But no, I don’t think this can wait.”

Chat slid up the pillows into a slightly more vertical lean, easing Marinette into what he hoped was a relatively more comfortable position on top of him. He nodded at Tikki to continue.

“As you know, I’ve faced Kaibliss with five Ladybugs before Marinette and each time it ended fatally.”

_Glass dome. Look down. Tied up. So much blood._

Chat took a deep breath and concentrated on the warm weight of Marinette draped across him. He couldn’t feel her heartbeat through his suit but when he placed his hand against her back he could feel the steady rise and fall of her lungs. The visions of the previous night dissipated, but the ache of them lingered. That would have to be enough for now.

“Plagg told me about the others.”

Tikki’s entire form was downcast as she murmured. “He’s never talked to me about what happened after…”

Chat looked away, overcome with sympathy for Tikki’s sorrow but also understanding Plagg’s reticence. Mostly, all Plagg knew was where the graves were hidden. But those secrets belonged to the Black Cat and no one else. He understood why Plagg wouldn’t talk to Tikki about these memories. He didn’t want to talk to Marinette about Kaibliss’ other victims either. Not the Ladybugs, not the young women his father brought to his so-called business meetings, not the household staff who mysteriously vanished in the night. He didn’t want anything having to do with Kaibliss being associated with Marinette in any way, shape, or form.

But that wasn’t really an option now, was it?

“Why…” He faltered, worried about offending Ladybug’s kwami. But he had to ask. “Why would you bring her here, knowing…?”

Tikki looked miserable as she gave him an understanding nod. “The others…they were alone. The situation was always desperate. And there was never enough time to find help before…before I returned to my inert state…” She shuddered and refocused on the present. “The circumstances last night were entirely different. The others chose to sacrifice themselves without discussing it with me ahead of time, leaving me with no practical recourse other than to flee. But Marinette…” A fond smile spread across her features. “Marinette’s special. She trusted me. We timed the reverse transformation so that I would be able to rest until I had enough strength to heal all her wounds at once. If you hadn’t brought her to the hospital, she might not have survived long enough. You kept me safe so I was able to focus my energies on healing her and because of you, and all your friends, I was able to save Ladybug and break the cycle. And I need to thank you for that, because I’ve been trying and trying for five hundred years and it’s never been good enough. Thank you for helping us, Chat Noir.”

“I didn’t…” Chat croaked, his throat closing with emotion. He was unexpectedly moved by her gratitude. It was somewhat strange to interact with a creature who was so like Plagg and yet also so very not anything like Plagg. He also did not believe that he deserved to be thanked. “I didn’t do much.”
“That’s not true.” Tikki shook her head. “And I don’t only mean last night, Chat. Thank you for everything.”

He didn’t know what to say, so he nodded and returned his attention to Marinette.

He had tried so hard…

He had spent every waking moment struggling with himself. He tried to sabotage the birthday party so many times. If he kept acting strange, surely Nino would notice, right? If he kept drawing attention to Chat’s self-sacrificing behavior, eventually Alya would ask what was going on, right? If he kept provoking her, sooner or later Chloé would explode publicly and reveal the awful truth to everyone in earshot, right? He remembered closing his eyes and putting Marinette’s invitation in the trash can instead of the mailbox, tricking his conscious mind so as to protect her. It hadn’t worked, she’d come anyway, but he had tried.

“Mrmph…”

Chat tucked his chin and grinned as Marinette yawned, nuzzled into his chest and then opened her eyes, blinking up at him with momentary disorientation.

“Morning bed bug.” He said cheekily.

Marinette groaned and flopped her head down again. “Only someone who has never had to deal with actual bed bugs would think that’s cute.”

Chat’s grin widened. He had long suspected that Marinette was the kind of person who woke up grumpy, and now he had the proof.

“How are you feeling?” He asked.

“Better.” She murmured into his suit, luxuriating in the warmth of his embrace. “Still a little weak, but much better.” She lifted her head and rested her chin on his abdomen, examining his face. “You’re still transformed…”

His eyes darted away. “Yeah…Adrien’s banned from hospital property, so…”

“We should get going then.” Marinette sighed.

Chat’s gaze jerked back to her with alarm and his arm tightened around her waist. “You need to rest until you’re fully healed.” He admonished.

“I can rest just as well on the trip home as I can in this hospital bed. Maybe even better.” Marinette snorted. “You just don’t want to get up.”

He smirked. “You caught me, princess.”

A tendril of unease wormed its way through her mind at the nickname, but Marinette shoved it away firmly. She was fine.

She was fine.

“I hate hospitals and I bet Plagg’s exhausted, so too bad.” She teased as she pushed herself up and swung her feet off the bed. He whined petulantly at the loss of her warmth and she swatted his leg playfully. “Come on, kitty. Let’s go find Alya. Hopefully she’s found me a change of clothes by now.” She nodded at Tikki who jumped into Marinette’s purse, which she grabbed off the bedside
table as she passed. Suddenly remembering that when he transformed back he would still be wearing his bloodstained party outfit, Chat followed her and silently hoped that Alya had thought to find clothes for him too.

They didn’t have to search far. When Chat opened the door and peeked cautiously into the hallway while Marinette rolled her eyes at his zeal, he found Nino and Alya slumped against the opposite wall, fast asleep. Marinette cursed and pushed past him. Chat was pleased that she was strong enough to do so. She really was almost better.

“Alya, Nino, wake up. You can’t sleep here, it’s a hallway.” She murmured as she gently shook them both awake. Nino groaned and pulled his hat further down his face but Alya jolted upright, instantly alert.

“It’s piloted manually!” She shouted in furious, heavily-accented English. “It doesn’t even have an AI interface!”

Marinette leaned back. “What?”

“Huh?” Alya blinked, then groaned and rubbed her hand across her tired face. “Sorry. I dreamt I was still arguing with the BBC about the technical distinction between a robot and a mecha…”

“I take it Mecha-Class has been getting some unwanted attention?”

“That’s one way to put it. International outcry is another.” Alya wrinkled her nose. “I don’t get it. We never get this kind of attention in Paris—and you’ve fought actual giant robots.”

“It’s the novelty, babe.” Nino muttered, reassuring her without waking up all the way. “They’ll get over it…”

Marinette sighed. “How long have you two been sleeping out here?”

“I dunno. What time is it?” Alya checked her phone. “About…20 minutes.” She glanced hopefully at Marinette. “I hate to ask, but since you’re on your feet again, do you think you could…?”

Marinette bit her lip. She wanted to let Tikki rest and recharge more before transforming and performing her Miraculous cure, but if her classmates needed her she didn’t have much of a choice. “I need sweets. Anything with sugar but preferably cookies.”

Nino sighed, gave up on sleeping and stretched out his legs. “I can go rustle something up in the cafeteria.” He offered. “I’ll get something for both of you while I’m at it.”

“Thanks.” She smiled gratefully.

“It’ll really help.” Alya relaxed. “I keep telling people that the cure will fix the battle damage, but I guess seeing is believing.” She slid up the wall with a groan. “Okay. Marinette, why don’t you get washed up while Nino scrounges breakfast and I’ll be back in a few minutes with the clothes. Chat—I’ve got the shirt you were wearing on the bus and the dress pants you never put on. It was the best I could do.” She turned to Marinette. “Did he tell you the ring was in his jeans pocket the whole time?”

Marinette swiveled to gape at Chat. “You kept it in your pocket?”

He shrugged awkwardly. “It was the best I could do at the time.” He muttered, staring at the floor.

“Don’t sweat it, dude.” Nino stood up and clapped a hand to Chat’s shoulder, snapping him back to
the present. “All’s well that ends well, right?”

“…right.” Chat nodded.

“Go on, shoo.” Alya waved them back inside the private room.

“But I can—” Marinette wanted to say that she could help, but Alya wasn’t hearing it.

“The more you rest, the sooner you can fix this mess and we can all go home.” Alya bossed. “So you focus on you and let me handle the super side of things for now.”

Marinette saw the deep bruises under Alya’s eyes and the tight worry lines drawn around her mouth and very much wanted to protest, but Nino and Chat agreed with Alya and she was swiftly outmaneuvered. She found herself being bundled towards the bed by Chat before she could blink.

“Wait, Chat—”

“Marinette, for the last time, you need to re—”

“No, I need to use the bathroom.”

“Oh.” His disapproving frown vanished and was replaced by a light blush. “Right. Sorry. Uh…how do you want to…”

“It’s right over there.” She said helpfully, pointing at a narrow door in the corner of the room that Chat hadn’t even noticed until this moment. She pulled away from him and headed towards the bathroom, returning her purse to the bedside table.

The bathroom was a tiny cubicle with a toilet, a sink and a shower stall. A small oval mirror hung on the wall above the sink and a cord that would summon a nurse if pulled dangled above the toilet. Marinette moved to close the door behind her but a black clawed hand snapped out and held the panel open.

“I’m not leaving you alone, Marinette.” Chat said fiercely, his glare challenging her to argue. “The door stays open.”

It was a challenge she was more than happy to accept.

“You can’t be serious.” She snorted, crossing her arms and arching a skeptical brow.

“Kaibliss is still out there.” He reminded her. “I’m not leaving you alone again until I know it’s safe.”

“And what if it’s never safe?” She countered. “We’re superheroes. Danger comes with the mask. It’s part of the deal.”

He frowned. “This is different.”

“Don’t care.” She snapped. “How would he get me in here, anyway? There isn’t even a window.”

Chat rolled his eyes and looked exasperated. “He’s a snake.”

“So?”

“So I have watched enough creature features to know that that shower drain is a point of entry.” He stuck his jaw out stubbornly.
“Oh for the love of…” Marinette gritted her teeth. “I’m not leaving the door open, Chat. We haven’t reached that point in our relationship yet.”

Her gentle teasing seemed to momentarily knock him off-kilter, which was exactly her intent.

“Oh. Right. Um…” He stuttered and blushed, as if it was only now occurring to him what she needed the bathroom for. “Right. Yeah. I guess… I guess you’re right. But…” His claws tightened around the panel. “Could you… talk to me?”

“Talk to you?” She asked, half embarrassed, half amused.

He nodded. “Or sing or something. That way I’ll know you’re still there…”

“Alternatively, you could have a little faith and give me a few minutes of privacy.”

“…”

“Ugh. Fine. I’ll sing something if you’re going to be like that about it.” Marinette frowned and tried to think of the perfect song, the song that would encapsulate all her emotions, the song that would cause him to experience those exact same emotions.

Her bluebell eyes lit up and she began to croon.

“This is the song that never ends, it goes on and on my friends…”

Chat grinned and flashed her a thumbs up.

“Purr-fect.” He chuckled as he shut the door. He sat down on the floor and twitched his ears towards the panel, listening closely.

“Some people started singing it, not knowing what it was! AND THEY’LL GO ON SINGING IT FOREVER JUST BECAUSE this is the song that never ends, it goes on and on my friends…”

And on it went.

Alya returned soon with Chat’s clothes and an outfit for Marinette that consisted of a white t-shirt, clean underwear and a pair of black overalls with deep pockets. The clothes had theoretically been donated by a mysterious benefactor, and Marinette chose not to question Alya’s shifty-eyed explanation.

She also brought a wheel of Camembert that she had fished out of the limo. She firmly ordered Chat to go into the bathroom and let Plagg eat something while she watched Marinette— and it wouldn’t kill you to take a shower while you’re at it.

Chat stood in the tiny bathroom and tried not to feel excluded. He placed the clothes on the floor and sighed. “Claws in.”

Plagg flew out of the ring with an exhausted wail.

“You’re a sadist!” He cried, panting on the tiled floor. “I demand to speak with your manager!”

Adrien rolled his eyes and handed Plagg the cheese. “Eat up, because you’re going right back in.”

“You know this wouldn’t be necessary if you hadn’t—”

“I know, okay?” Adrien snapped, running a hand through his hair. “I know…”
“Good.” Plagg said through a mouthful of cheese. “So long as you understand. By the way…Alya’s right. You really need a shower.”

“Marinette has no idea how lucky she is to have Tikki instead of being stuck with you.”

“I missed you too, kid.”

Adrien turned on the shower and hopped inside. The lukewarm spray pattered on his skin, washing the sweat and stains of battle down the drain. The water pooling at his feet turned a muddy grey as he scrubbed himself furiously with a complimentary bar of cheap soap. He kept going until the soft white block had completely dissolved, until even the suds had vanished. He still didn’t feel completely clean. He wondered if he would ever feel clean again.

*It’s not over yet.* Adrien thought, resting his forehead against the alabaster wall. *Marinette’s right—it might never be over. What if it keeps getting worse? How am I supposed to cope?*

With a sigh, Adrien turned off the water and emerged from the shower, naked and dripping. Plagg yawned loudly and stretched his limbs, making a show of his preparations for returning to the ring. Adrien ignored him as he pulled his black dress slacks on, one leg at a time.

Out of habit more than anything else, Adrien glanced at his reflection in the mirror hanging over the sink.

He saw cold eyes in a steel mask glaring back at him.

*SMASH*

“Shit.”

“Remember what I said about taking time to process? This is why.”

“Stuff it, Plagg.”

“Chat? Are you okay?” Marinette called through the door. “We heard a noise.”

“I’m fine!” He hoped he sounded calm as he cursed himself and searched the tiny bathroom for a place to hide the now-broken mirror. “Just a second!” He gingerly lifted the glass oval off its hook and stuffed it in the narrow gap between the toilet and the wall. One jagged shard, roughly the same size and shape as a cigar, had fallen into the basin of the sink. In a panic, Adrien grabbed the shard and stuffed it in his pocket, knowing it would safely dematerialize along with his clothes once he transformed. “Claws in.”

Flexing his freshly-gloved hand, he opened the door and smiled at Marinette. “Ready to go?”

“Almost.” Marinette shot him a concerned look but didn’t ask about the suspicious noise again, filing the memory away for later analysis. “One of the doctors stopped by when you were in the shower. They want to run a few tests before they’ll discharge me.” She winced apologetically but Chat nodded approvingly. He liked the idea of tests. He would feel much more secure about her wellbeing if there was science to support the conclusion.

Hopefully.

***
The hospital was on the outskirts of the village, where the dilapidated community met fallow pastures and a few acres of old growth forest that had inexplicably survived the brunt of European history and the ever encroaching urban sprawl of the French capital. A large grassy meadow stretched out behind the complex, bordered in the distance by a row of hedges that kept the neighboring farmers’ sheep from wandering into the emergency room. Happy bees lollygagged drunkenly amongst the purple and yellow wildflowers that speckled the grass. Birds and rodents made merry in the grasses and hedges, burrowing for safety and singing for sex. It was a picture perfect example of the pastoral ideal, like a mass-produced landscape you might find hanging on the wall of a cheap motel room.

An old stone well stood in the precise center of the meadow. The well had been there for as long as anyone could remember, long before the hospital bought the meadowland with plans for an expansion that never materialized. The well was dry. Had been since The War, according to the old timers. No one could agree on which war said old timers were referring to, including said old timers. According to the town historian (who was officially just the postmaster but he fancied himself an amateur archivist and it wasn’t as if anyone else cared enough to claim the title) the war being referred to was the Thirty Years War, which ended in 1648.

He was also wrong. By several hundred years.

There was no denying that the old well in the center of the meadow was spooky, the only blemish in the idyllic field. Moss grew up the damp stones and when the wind blew across the opening the well moaned in protest. Sometimes people heard dripping sounds, even though the well was empty. Sometimes people heard whispers, even though there was no one else nearby. The only people who ever willingly approached the old well were local schoolchildren, making dares and egging each other closer. Hearts hammering and hands clammy, the children always fled before making contact. Trying and failing to reach the well was a rite of passage in the village. This was partially because those who actually touched the well rarely made it out of childhood alive.

Everyone agreed that the old well behind the hospital was creepy. Even the bees in the meadow steered clear. Occasionally someone would suggest boarding it up and while this was generally considered a good idea, for whatever reason no one ever followed through.

Almost as if they forgot. Almost as if they weren’t allowed to think about the old stone well too much or too often.

Almost as if they had good reason to be afraid, even though no one could remember why.

***

Breakfast was a mostly silent affair, everyone either too tired or too lost in their own thoughts to converse more than was absolutely necessary. Before long a nurse came to collect Marinette. Alya went with her, but Nino held Chat back when he tried to follow.

“We need to talk…”

Nino wanted to talk about Gabriel. Chat did not want to talk about Gabriel but he realized that this conversation was probably going to happen before they left the hospital, one way or another. Either he could have this conversation now with Nino, or he could wait and have it with Marinette. Which
was not an option because if she went all Bow Before Ladybug Goddess of Love and War on him again, Adrien was going to lose his soul.

“You can stay with me as long as you want, you know that.” Nino told him. “I can even pick up some of your stuff from your room and bring it to the apartment if you don’t want to go back to the mansion yet. Alya said she knows a good lawyer you can trust. You don’t have to make any decisions for at least a week, but at some point…we need to know what you want to do about Hawk Moth.”

“…have you seen him?”

Nino really wished he could read Chat the same way he could read Adrien, but the mask hid so much more than his friendly features.

“No.” He admitted. “I spoke with Dr. Riviere before he went home at the end of his shift this morning.”

“…what did he say?”

“Uh…” Nino yanked nervously at the brim of his hat. “Mostly he made sarcastic references to Hellenistic mythology. But he said your dad will most likely be kept in the ICU until the end of the week. The local police want to question him about what happened at the chateau, but if…I don’t know if you want to…or how you want to…I mean…what do you want to do?”

What did Adrien want to do about Gabriel?

His thirst for bloody vengeance from last night was muffled by the experience of waking up to sunshine and Marinette’s heartbeat, but his rage burned fierce as ever. He doubted the modern world would have any notion of what to do with a basilisk, but Hawk Moth was human. He ought to be dealt with in human ways, by human means.

But what on earth did that actually entail?

Chat realized he had no idea what happened to supervillains after they were unmasked. He only knew that superheroes were usually killed when the positions were reversed.

Was that what he wanted?

Was that even an option anymore?

Or had his chance evaporated with the midnight?

Did he want to consider other options?

Marinette said to take it one thing at a time…

“He’s in the ICU?” Chat confirmed. Nino nodded. “I want to leave him there to rot. For now, anyway…”

“Works for me.” Nino nodded again. “When we get back to Paris, you can come home to the apartment and then we’ll figure out what happens next.”

“Great. So now will you tell me what you and Alya have been up to all night?” Chat asked, eager to change the subject.

“Oh…right…erm…it’s kinda hard to explain, but…remember that old show Power Rangers?”
“Vaguely.”

“Right. Well, I think the best way to describe what happened with Mecha-Class is that we started at Power Ranger levels of absurdity and then it…escalated…”

“That’s a terrible way of describing anything.”

“Okay…well…we started with a giant robot—excuse me, if Alya hears me say that she’ll string me up by my pinky toes—we started with a *large semi-automated mechanized vehicle* facing off against seven supervillains, right? Right. Everything seemed like it was going good at first, but then the Battle Boys gave Mecha-Class the slip. So, cue epic chase scene, which admittedly ended up destroying a couple businesses and *maybe* crossed a few international borders. *Maybe.* We’re not actually admitting that on the advice of counsel. You still following me?”

“I think so…”

“Good. Because that was when word got out that Ladybug and Chat Noir were having the final showdown and…”

“And?”

“And…people wanted to…help?”

“What?”

“At first it was just Nadya Chamack. She drove out here with a film crew which, okay, that’s to be expected. She’s a journalist. It’s her job. But then Theo somehow got the brilliant notion that just because Max was helping that meant *everyone* could join in. Max makes robots, Theo!” Nino shouted, staring straight through Chat at something only he could see. “Max is part of the fucking team! I can’t—ugh!” Nino closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and collected himself. “Next thing we know, we’ve got entire caravans of folks who’ve been akumatized at some point in the past driving out from Paris to ‘help the heroes.’” He used air quotes and Chat snorted. “Last time I checked in with the rest of the class, Juleka’s mom had just showed up on the houseboat. She sailed it down the fucking Seine. She brought tents. I think half of them are planning to stay. Max and Nadya have been on air for the last three hours trying to convince everyone that the battle is over and its time to go home, but it’s turned into this enormous rambling disaster. People are setting up camp fires in the middle of cow fields and singing battle songs like they’re fucking *wandering knights* or something. The farmers are pissed—at one point I thought we were going to have a mob with literal pitchforks situation on our hands. It’s like if you crossed Burning Man with global economic forum protests. *Everyone’s* drunk. *Everyone’s* out of control. *Everyone* feels like they’re answering to a higher purpose. It’s a logistical *nightmare.* We essentially unleashed a violent horde of berserk Parisians on the countryside. And I’m warning you right now…” Nino stepped forward and clapped a palm to Chat’s shoulder. “I’m not taking the fall for this in court.”

“Duly noted.”

“I’m serious.”

“Relax, Nino.” Chat chuckled. “Ladybug will fix it.”

“I dunno, dude. If it was just the battle damage, yeah. But it’s so much bigger than that now. It’s about individuals making choices. I don’t know if that’s something that can be fixed with magic.”
Edith Patel was a person of steel nerves and steadfast hands. She had been the best surgeon at the hospital for years and was universally respected by her colleagues and her patients. She had two teenage children who lived with her estranged husband in Belgium and a pet pig named Susan who lived with her in her condo twenty miles away from the hospital.

She also had a debilitating phobia of bugs.

Beetles especially.

That was one of the things that had first attracted her to the surgical discipline—the opportunity to work in a strictly controlled, sterile environment where there was very little chance of her coming into contact with any beetles.

Until last night…

When there were thousands upon thousands upon thousands of beetles.

All throughout her surgery.

Landing in her hair.

Buzzing in her ears.

Flying down her throat.

She could still taste their bitter musk.

Dr. Patel didn’t think she could do it anymore. She doubted she’d ever feel safe in the operating room again. Who knows when the next beetle attack would come? It could be at any minute! She needed to get out of there, out of the hospital, out of the village, out of the country, maybe even out of Europe. She heard Antarctica was lovely this time of year, and the probability of surprise beetle encounters was about as low as it could get without leaving the planet entirely.

Hmmm…

Maybe the International Space Station needed a surgeon…

Dr. Patel was heading to tell her supervisor that she was taking a sudden leave of absence when she noticed an unfamiliar man in a brown suit kneeling in the hallway and sawing a hole in the wall.

“What are you doing?” She asked him.

“Electrical work.” He answered.

“Oh. Right then.” She nodded. That made sense. It made more sense than the twinkling beetle explosion, anyway. “Continue.”

“That’s the plan.”
It seemed like things were going good.

_Really_ good.

Some might say _too_ good.

Marinette was one test away from a clean bill of health and a happy discharge. She waited with Alya in a secluded room for an MRI machine to become available. The room had a few chairs and a private bathroom and a shelf of lockers in the corner. This was the last box they needed to check on the hospital’s list and Marinette was eager to leave. She went into the bathroom to change back into a hospital gown since she wasn’t allowed to wear her overalls into the machine. Tikki phased out of her purse as soon as the door was closed.

“How are you feeling?” They asked each other at the same time. Marinette grinned as Tikki laughed.

“I guess we’re on the same page.” Marinette chortled. “Ready?”

“Yes.”

“Spots on.”

Marinette transformed and Ladybug swiftly released her cure. The swarm raced across the countryside, covering miles and miles in the span of seconds. The glass dome at the chateau snapped back into place. The dozens of businesses and private residences that had been squashed flat by either the giant supervillains or the giant robot popped upright. Unbeknownst to Ladybug, the assembled people of Paris cheered and applauded as the swarm of magical beetles zoomed throughout the surrounding hills and fields. The locals remained, as they had been since the previous evening, perturbed and confused.

All seemed right with the world until Marinette transformed back, emerged from the bathroom and encountered the technician who had come to bring her to the imaging room.

“I’m sorry, mademoiselle, but you must remove your earrings.”

Marinette’s hands flew to her Miraculous. “But I never take off my earrings.” She argued. “They’re a family heirloom, they’re very important to me.”

“I’m sorry, but you can’t have any metal on you when you get in the MRI. It’s a giant magnet. The machine would rip your jewelry out of your ears.” The technician explained bluntly.

“Can’t I skip the MRI? It’s really not necessary. I feel fine.”

“Hospital policy, sorry.”

“…alright…” Marinette relented. With a mental apology to Tikki, she removed her earrings and hid them in her purse. At least Alya would be here to keep an eye on her Miraculous while she was occupied. To be extra safe, Marinette stored her purse in one of the small lockers in the waiting room, securing the door with a little plastic key that she was allowed to bring with her into the imaging room.

The MRI itself was uneventful. The procedure lasted around half an hour and Marinette passed the time listening to acoustic covers of Jagged Stone standards on special headphones the hospital had provided. Afterwards she quickly changed into her street clothes and returned to the waiting room to
meet Alya. When she opened the locker, the metal compartment was empty.

Marinette frowned and stuck the key in the locker next to the one she thought was hers. The key didn’t fit.

“…my purse is gone…”

“What?” Alya leaned over her shoulder to get a better look. “Are you sure that’s the right locker?”

With trembling hands, Marinette tried to open the rest of the lockers. The key didn’t fit any of them either. The room was deathly silent as Marinette returned to the first locker.

The empty locker.

She pushed on the panel at the back of the locker and it shifted to the side, revealing a roughly-cut hole large enough for someone to snatch her purse from the other side of the wall. The white fluorescent lights of the hallway buzzed through the opening.

Marinette and Alya stared at each other for a few seconds of stunned horror.

Marinette’s hands flew to her empty, barren ear lobes.

Alya blanched, her fingers clenching protectively around her own Miraculous. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t see—I never heard—I was awake the whole time, I swear, I—”

Marinette spun around and dashed out of the waiting room. She glanced at either end of the hallway. There was no side of Tikki, her purse or her enemy. Fighting against her rising panic and acting purely on instinct, Marinette turned left and hurtled towards a pair of double doors that opened onto a cement loading dock at the rear of the hospital.

Alya raced after her but Marinette was faster. By the time Alya reached the doors, Marinette was already flying through the tall meadow grass towards the shadowy figure that was standing next to an old stone well in the center of the meadow.

Alya suddenly remembered an old French folk legend she had stumbled across on Friday night when she was doing mind control research. Something about a basilisk who lived in a well and a fair young maiden who barely escaped with her life.

“Wait Marinette!” She screamed. “It’s a trap!”

Her scream wasn’t loud enough.

Meanwhile in the parking lot…

Chloe had just woken up and was none too happy to discover she’d fallen asleep mid-text, slumped over in the backseat of the limo like some mere homo sapien.

“Just look what it’s done to my hair.” She muttered furiously to her reflection as she clambered out of the car and stretched her aching muscles. She noticed Nino and Chat Noir walking out of the front entrance and ran to the trunk, where she hoped there was still a hairbrush buried under all that disgusting cheese.

It was the motion of rounding the car that caused her gaze to momentarily drift towards the side of the building where, from this angle, she could see a sliver of meadow and an old stone well and a shadowy figure that looked like—
Oh.

Oh. Em. Gee.

It was HIM.

It was the MONSTER.

It was that VILE ABOMINATION, that VESSEL OF CORRUPTION, that FESTERING PESTILENCE OOZING AND ROTTING HER UNIVERSE FROM THE INSIDE OUT.

As soon as Chloe spotted Kaibliss, she was six years old again, hiding in the closet from the very real thing that went bump in the night, and she was scared out of her wits but she was *Chloe Mother Fuckin’ Bourgeois* and she knew exactly what she needed to do.

This was her DESTINY.

Chloe turned purple, scrunched up her face, inhaled enough oxygen to power a fleet of hot air balloons, and released The Scream To End All Screams.

“SNAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—”

Nino slammed his hands over his ears and winced as Chat Noir broke into a run. A couple car alarms went off and a dog began to howl in the distance.

“—AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—”

People began pouring out of the hospital, demanding to know what was wrong. Chat Noir picked up speed as he neared Chloe and could finally see the same slice of meadow that she could. He hurtled past her just as Marinette got within arm’s reach of Kaibliss.

“—AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—”

Kaibliss winked at Marinette, waved her purse in a graceful swoop through the air and jumped into the well. Marinette lunged but she wasn’t fast enough. She leaned over the stone mouth, howling with rage. She barely hesitated before hoisting herself into the well. Both Chat and Alya were shouting as they raced towards her but neither of them could be heard over Chloe’s super-scream.

“—AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA—”

Black claws clipped black hair. Chat cried out as his hand closed on empty air and Marinette plunged into the darkness. He cursed and glanced up at Alya, who was stumbling to a stunned halt a few feet away. She could barely hear him as he shouted: “*Protect them!*”

“Wait!” Trixx wailed as he burst out of Alya’s hair. “Drop your—”

Chat couldn’t hear the kwami and he dived into the well.

“—transformation first!”

There was an explosion of blinding green light that also somehow managed to set off the fire alarm inside the hospital and shatter every window facing the meadow. Mass pandemonium ensued as Nino finally reached Chloe and put an end to The Scream To End All Screams by tackling her to the ground.
“—aaa-kuh.” She finished, to make a point.

“Got it, Chloe. Thanks.” Nino grumbled as he clambered off and helped her to her feet. “What the hell just happened?” He hadn’t arrived in time to see Marinette or Chat jump. He only saw the Ladyblogger, standing alone in a beautiful meadow filled with wildflowers and song birds.

Alya knelt down in the grass next to the old stone well and carefully scooped up the tiny black cat who was gasping and shuddering amongst the weeds.

Plagg blinked up at her. “What the hell just happened?” He snarled.

Alya gulped.

“This…was not the plan.” She began to explain.

***

Falling.

Darkness.

Falling.

Cold.

Then…wet.


Her insides were burning, her skin was freezing, her life was flashing before her eyes. Marinette erupted from the water and found more darkness. The stale air stung her lungs but she gulped it gratefully nonetheless. She glanced around but saw nothing other than stifling blackness. Had she gone blind? She could tell she was floating in a body of water much larger than an old stone well, but other than that her surroundings were a complete mystery. An underground aquifer, maybe?

This was bad. Jumping in after Kaibliss had been a rash decision, she knew that now, but she couldn’t just let him get away with her Miraculous. She was lucky Tikki was currently in her inert state, so there was no chance of the basilisk being able to eat her friend.

Assuming she got her earrings back, of course.

Which she would.

Trust yourself, Ladybug. Whispered a voice in her head that sounded exactly like Tikki.

Courage restored, Marinette focused on figuring out where Kaibliss had gone.

Marinette tried to be quiet and listen closely, but she couldn’t hear anything other than her own breathing. Then something large and solid brushed against her leg and Marinette screeched, flailing wildly at the unseen assailant.

“Stop! Stop! It’s okay! It’s me!”
Marinette froze. She still couldn’t see anything but that voice sounded like…

“Chat?”

“Yeah. Well…Adrien, now, I think. I can’t see anything so I think…” She heard a small splash as Adrien lifted his hand out of the water to touch his face. “Yeah—my mask is gone. I’ve transformed back somehow. Plagg? Plagg!...Plagg’s not here. Where are we?”

“I don’t know.” She admitted as she paddled in the direction of his voice. Her fingertips brushed against his outstretched arm and he grabbed her, yanking her towards him and wrapping his arms tightly around her shoulders. Marinette suddenly remembered that Adrien wasn’t a strong swimmer and her fear ratcheted up another notch. “Keep treading.” She urged him when his body went limp with relief. She felt him nod and he started cycling his feet under the water, doing his part to keep them afloat. Even pressed up against each other, she couldn’t see him at all.

Wherever they were, there was no light. None, nada, zip, zilch, zero. There was literally no light. Growing up in a major metropolitan area, true darkness was an unfamiliar and uncomfortable experience for Marinette. Even on the few occasions her family had gone camping when she was little, there had still been starlight to brighten the night. The darkness that surrounded her now was an entirely different animal; older, heavier, stilted. She felt trapped.

“Dammit Adrien, what the hell are you doing here? Guess you won’t be needing that lawyer after all, huh?” Hissed a familiar voice that seemed to come from every possible direction. “No…wait… wait, maybe you will. Ohhh…oh, I have an idea. I have a diabolical idea. Yes, this will work. This is going to make everything much more interesting. Well done, prince charming, well done. How grand, how splendid. How absolutely marvelous. I couldn’t be more pleased.”

Marinette and Adrien both stiffened with alarm and stopped treading, but she snapped out of it when he started to sink. She pulled Adrien close and pedaled her legs furiously as she glared in every which way, unable to tell where the voice was coming from.

“Give me back my purse, you creep.” She snapped. “You lost, remember? Your magic was no match for Tikki and me and the earrings are of no use to you without a Ladybug so give it back.”

“No, I don’t think I will. I said we could discuss visitation rights if you behaved. You have yet to prove yourself. Besides, how else will I blackmail you into keeping me company for the rest of your life if I don’t have something you want?” He sounded calmly amused, as if they were old friends ribbing each other good naturedly over drinks. It made her want to vomit.

“I’m not interested, Kaibliss. Give me my purse. Now.”

“Ah-ah, Ladybug. You had your turn to monologue. Now it is mine.”

“Keep him talking.” Adrien whispered in her ear. “I’ll try to find a way out.”

Marinette groaned. She hated supervillain monologues.

“I already know what you’re going to say, Kaibliss.” She announced loudly. “I told you—I have no intention of playing along with any of your games.”

“But this is a new game. Aren’t you curious? Aren’t you just dying to know the nuances of my scheme so you can pinpoint my weakness and exploit it to your advantage?” The basilisk’s hiss echoed all around them, each rasping lisp grating on Marinette’s nerves like fingernails on a chalkboard.
“Fine.” She tried to sound grudging. It wasn’t difficult. “If you’re so desperate to explain whatever harebrained scheme to murder Tikki you’ve concocted this time, go ahead. Enlighten me.”

“Oh, but I’ve never tried to murder Tikki. There would be no point. This is between you and me, Ladybug. It always has been.”

“Liar.” Marinette frowned, confused. Tikki had been very certain about the snake’s intentions.

“I rarely lie, and never to you, my dear. That wouldn’t be anywhere near as much fun. It is much easier to let others make their own assumptions than to invest time and energy maintaining a deception. Allow me to explain…”

“That’s good.” Adrien whispered in Marinette’s ear. “Keep it up.”

At least Adrien was getting something out of this. Marinette, on the other hand, felt like an inquisitive mouse in the second between finding the cheese and springing the trap.

The snake kept talking.

“You wronged me long ago, Ladybug. You hurt me, and so I have dedicated the last five centuries of my eternity to seeking retribution for that injury, as is my right. For awhile my quest was simple, straightforward. But then I came for you and instead I found…a distraction. Kwamis are unique to your universe, my dear, and they are a most exotic delicacy. It is true that my passion for the sweet nectar of kwami flesh has consumed much of my attention for the last five hundred years. I have behaved like a base animal and not a civilized being. I won’t deny it, and you wouldn’t believe me if I did.”

Adrien pushed on Marinette’s waist ever so slightly, nudging her sideways. She tried to float in the direction he indicated without being too obvious about it. Kaibliss kept talking.

“But I most ardently hope you will believe me to be sincere when I say that Tikki is special. I would never eat her; no matter how desperately I might want to. And I assure you…” The hiss grew warmer with emotion as he said, “I want to taste her flesh most desperately. But…I meant it when I told you that what I intend to do is so much more permanent than murder.”

Primal deep-down fear lanced through Marinette’s bones as the snake said:

“I intend to utterly eradicate the lot of you.”

The hiss got louder and more irrational at Kaibliss got swept away by his own monologue. “I intend to put an end to the foul Ladybug line, once and for all! If I merely ate Tikki, she would continue to exist as part of me and that’s not good enough. Not nearly. She must be vanquished. The Ladybug must be destroyed in all her forms and variations! Only then will I be vindicated! Only then will Bilakiss be avenged!!!!”

“You’re not saying anything new.” Marinette spat, mostly because if she said nothing her fear would overwhelm her. Talking gave the illusion that she still had some kind of control over the situation.

“Forgive me, my dear, sometimes I get lost in my memories. You will understand when you are older. Now, where was I? Oh yes, of course. You are both probably wondering where we are. It is a good question. The answer is rather complicated. We are where we were which is someplace entirely different. Picture a flea standing on a tight rope. The flea can go in several directions—”

“We’re in a parallel universe.” Adrien interjected, directly addressing the snake for the first time since Thursday. “Your universe.”
“What a smart boy you are!” Kaibliss crooned from the darkness. “However did you guess?”

“Fuck you.”

“Tsk, tsk. You used to be such a nice boy, Adrien. I wonder what happened. But yes, you are correct. The old stone well behind the hospital is a portal between my universe and yours. Beings like myself are able to pass through the portal as we see fit, but lesser animals such as humans are only able to use the portal once every hundred years during a very small window of opportunity. That window has now closed. Even if you were able to find the portal again, which seems unlikely since on this side the portal is at the bottom of the subterranean lake you are currently floating in, you will not be able to use it for another hundred years. That, my lovelies, is Rule #1 of our little game. There are three rules and Rule #1 is: You can’t go home.”

thump

Marinette jolted when her foot hit stone and she was suddenly standing on solid ground. They were headed for some kind of shore. She hesitated, fear in every tensed muscle. The waters were still up to her chin but if they went any further Kaibliss would definitely notice what they were doing, assuming he hadn’t already. She was afraid of how the monster would react once he realized they were angling to escape. Adrien did not share her qualms about getting out of the water and kept pushing her forwards.

“You don’t seem surprised. I suppose Rule #1 is rather obvious, isn’t it? Rule #2 is equally simple but perhaps slightly less expected. Rule #2 is: You must stay alive as long as possible. Oh—did that pique your interest, Ladybug? Are you surprised that I don’t intend to slaughter you here and now, rip you limb from limb and devour you whole in the darkness?”

Marinette was surprised. But it wasn’t because of Rule #2 or anything else Kaibliss had to say. The second she stepped out of the water and placed her bare foot on dry stone, she forgot the basilisk was even there. A wave of familiarity surged up from the stones, into the soles of her feet, up her legs, into her breast, shaking her bones and setting her blood on fire with the force of it.

Home.

She felt like she was home.

For an instant. And then it was gone, leaving her shaken and confused and still suffocated by the darkness but, somehow, someway, no longer lost.

For some reason (that she really didn’t have time to think about at the moment) she now knew where she was.

Well…sort of.

She was standing on the eastern shore of an enormous underground lake exactly 7.46 hectares across and precisely 0.8 miles beneath the earth’s surface. This lake was connected to two others via a series of natural and man-made aquifers and tunnels, some of which were dry, three of which connected to the surface, and if she used the tunnel entrance 20ft to her left and booked it she could be above ground in twenty minutes and then…

And then she didn’t know what would happen. Her sudden insight began and ended with what was under the mountain.

Which was super weird, but one thing at a time.
Armed with her newfound and inexplicable knowledge, Marinette slipped her hand into Adrien’s and squeezed. *I have a plan.* She tried to tell him with her fingers. *After you, milady.* His tight grip squeezed back.

“Leaving so soon, my pretties? I haven’t even explained Rule #3 yet.”

“Since I have no intention of playing your game, there’s no point in listening to your rules.” Marinette said with a lofty confidence she did not feel. She inched along the cave wall, groping sightlessly until she found the tunnel entrance.

“In that case, I will keep the purse. You can have it back when you’re ready to finish our conversation. See you soon, Ladybug.” The hiss faded as Kaibliss retreated. “Good luck. You’ll need it. Oh…and Adrien? Be a dear and give the Sunset Guard my best.”

Marinette ran. She hated leaving her earrings behind but she had no choice. She couldn’t face Kaibliss like this—unarmed and fumbling. She needed daylight and fresh air and open spaces. She needed a weapon, something sharp and pointy and *dangerous.*

Adrien held onto her hand with a vicelike grip as they ran. They both stumbled a few times in the dark but when one hit the ground the other was there, hauling them back on their feet and pushing onwards. *Faster, faster*—the dark tunnel coiled around them like a python and even though Kaibliss was gone they could still hear him laughing.

The stones beneath their feet tilted sharply upwards. The climb became treacherous as stone gave way to earth and the tunnel got smaller and smaller. Dim light shaded the blank darkness as they approached the surface. Suddenly, they burst out of a hole no larger than a badger’s warren in the side of a muddy riverbank. Adrien flung himself onto the damp ground and gasped for air, grinning with relief at the fading stars high above. Wherever they were now, dawn was only just beginning to break.

Marinette, panting and frantic, threw herself at the muddy bank. She clawed at the soil and rocks held together by fragile roots until the earth crumbled and the opening caved in. The entire bank sagged and Adrien scrambled to his feet with a yelp. He grabbed Marinette around the waist as the bank groaned and gave way, the earth sliding and tumbling down and filling the tunnel with soil and sludge. A humungous cloud of dust ballooned into the air. It clogged their throats and blinded their vision. They coughed as a few pebbles rolled from the settling mound and bounced off Adrien’s shoe.

“I don’t think he was following us, anyway.” Adrien commented wryly when his lungs were clear. He stared down at his partner, his large hands wrapped around her narrow waist. Marinette was flushed and breathing heavily, soaked from head to toe and covered in grime. Her eyes were glassy as she cast her head from side to side and took in their surroundings. Adrien followed suit.

They were standing at the foot of a towering, snow-capped mountain, so dominating it hurt Adrien’s neck to look up at it. The mountainside was bleak, black volcanic stones mottled by lichen and pale spindly tussocks of grass. A few yards above them the rock turned to earth and mud and slumped down to the mossy, gravel-strewn riverbank where they currently stood. A wide band of sleepy silver wrapped around the mountain, framing their narrow strip of soggy beach. A thick hushed forest loomed on the other side of the river, severe and uninviting.

Marinette pulled away from Adrien and took few steps towards the water. She stared at the unfamiliar landmark for a moment before tilting her head back and gazing up at the lilac sky. She gasped and paled.
Adrien looked up and saw two crescent moons locked in a celestial tango, fading fast as an unfamiliar star snuck up on the horizon.

“Adrien…”

Adrien’s chin jerked down at the breathy quivering way she said his name. He’d never heard her sound like that before, as if she was broken and lost. She was always calm and collected in the face of the unknown. Even when he knew that she was as scared as he was, she never let it show. He’d seen her talk herself out of being scared so many times he’d almost forgotten she could get scared—but of course she could. Most people would in this situation. His gaze locked with hers and she stared at him with stricken bluebell eyes. She lifted her hands and swept them wide in a helpless gesture as she asked, “What have I done?”

Well…

*It seems like you’ve gone and stranded us in a parallel universe, Bugaboo, with little to no chance of ever going home again. On the bright side, I’m pretty sure this makes us about even on Recent Monumental Fuck Ups.*

He should probably think of a better way to phrase that.

A slow, almost jaunty smirk spread over his face and Adrien stuck his hands in his pockets. “Weeeel…”

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Chapter End Notes

Welcome to Act III, dear readers.

Okay. So. Do people have questions? It's okay if people have questions at this point. Ask and I will do my best to answer. I think this Through The Looking Well thing is a creative risk, but hopefully I'll pull it off.

This fic isn't an AU, though at this point that distinction gets a little wobbly. What counts as an AU, what counts as canon divergent, what counts as canon-compliant speculation? Parallel/alternate/evil dimensions/universes/worlds/planes of existence are a mainstay of the superhero genre, so on those grounds I think sending Marinette and Adrien into a parallel universe is totally fair game. In terms of fic writing...if I didn't already have the rest of the story written out, I'd be worried about this plot getting away from me. But that's why I took the time to finish the first draft from start to end before I started posting, so that I could keep the plot ship-shape and moving along.

Ack! I've been building towards this plot twist since literally the first sentence of the fic, and I'm still really nervous about it. By the way, we still have two or three major plot twists left, so stay frosty.

Next Chapter Title: The Toad Princess
Next Chapter Tease: "You’ve got a lot of nerve for someone who’s been dead for 500 years."
The Toad Princess

Chapter Summary

What is even happening right now?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer:

Author: So, we’re about three-quarters of the way through the fic, how are the two of you doing?

Chat: Okay, I guess.

Author: You’re sure? You guys have been comfortable? All your needs have been met?

Ladybug: Except for not being allowed to leave, everything has been lovely.

Author: Great, great. So, I’ve been thinking...while it is true that I do not own Miraculous Ladybug or any associated content/properties, I do own this Inspiration Castle. And I think it’s time to make a few changes.

Ladybug: What are you saying?

Author: I’m saying I need you to start paying rent.

***

The Toad Princess

***

A brand new world.

It wasn’t something you saw every day.
Marinette had seen a lot over the last five years—strange things, weird things, terrifying things, miraculous things. She’d seen cruelty given flesh and hope given form. She’d seen people at their best and their worst. She’d seen the things that lurked in the darkest recesses of the human imagination.

But she’d never seen anything like this.

And it wasn’t much of anything to begin with. Only wilderness. A mountain, a river, and a forest on the other side. Above, a periwinkle sky and an orange sun. The landscape was calm, tranquil, beautiful even.

Marinette had never been so scared of anything in her entire life.

She hadn’t realized it was possible to be afraid of an entire planet, of rocks and stars and sky. Now she was wracked with a terror as domineering as the mountain. She knelt on the riverbank, hiding her face in her hands, trying to reverse the last 24 hours through willpower alone.

If only she hadn’t jumped in the well.

If only she hadn’t taken off her earrings.

If only she hadn’t left Paris.

If only, if only, if only…

Adrien was no help at all.

“Can’t you see how this is a good thing?”

“How? How is this a good thing?”

“We’re free!” A happy smile spread across his face. “Kaibliss tried to separate us, tried to take you prisoner, but he failed. We don’t have to play his game because we’ve already won.”

Marinette wasn’t following this line of logic.

“He probably thinks we’re still lost under the mountain—which we’re not, thanks to you. We’re finally out of his control!”

Marinette reluctantly looked up as Adrien knelt before her, still beaming.

“Whatever happens next is entirely up to us, milady.” His smile softened as he reached out and brushed his thumb across the trail of tears sliding down her cheek. “I’m not saying that the future will be easy, but we’re smart. We’ll figure it out.”

“Figure what out?”

“How to survive, what to do, where to go. We have an entire world to explore. Might as well get started.”

“What are you talking about? We can’t just walk away!”

“Of course we can.”

Marinette heard acceptance in his voice and the sound of it transformed her fear to anger.
“And what if we never figure out how to get back home, huh? What then?”

Adrien looked up at the mountaintop. The morning sunlight reflected off the snow and the peak sparkled like a diamond. The gentle breeze rustling through their hair carried the scent of pine and the promise of summer from the forest on the other side of the river. The whole effect was rather majestic.

Sure, finding himself transported to a new and unfamiliar world wasn’t ideal. But just because something was unfamiliar did not necessarily mean it was dangerous. Unlike Marinette, Adrien didn’t see any reason to be afraid of this new world.

What was there to be scared of?

A world without responsibilities and obligations?

A world without hard choices and unanswerable questions?

A world without journalists and lawyers and countless other authorities demanding a reckoning?

A world without grieving families who were owed an explanation that he didn’t know how to give?

A world without hospitals?

A world without fathers…

“Would that be so bad?” Adrien asked softly. Marinette flinched.

“Yes. It would.” She replied flatly, shoving his hand to the side and pushing to her feet. Adrien sighed as she paced away from him.

“Marinette…”

“No! How dare you even suggest it! How can you just give up like that?”

“I’m not giving up.” He argued. “I’m being realistic.”

“Since when does ‘being realistic’ mean admitting defeat?” Marinette snapped. “We can’t just stay here, Adrien. We have to get my earrings back. We have to go home. We have to—”

“We don’t have to do any of those things.” Adrien interjected, his voice patient yet firm. “That’s exactly what Kaibliss expects us to do. He said it himself—he said he was going to keep your purse so that you would have a reason to chase him.” He rose to his feet and walked towards her. She turned to face him as he approached, hesitant and fragile but not ready to yield. “We can go anywhere, do anything. Why would we do the one thing we know he wants us to do?”

“Because Tikki is my friend and I’m not leaving her in his clutches!”

“Tikki isn’t in any danger so long as she’s in her inert state. You know that as well as I do, or you wouldn’t have run away down there.”

“And how long before he finds some other poor girl to wear the earrings and then eats both of them?”

“We don’t know if the Miraculous will work in this universe. Plagg didn’t even make it through the portal, so it seems unlikely.” Adrien frowned thoughtfully. “We also don’t know if there are any other humans in this universe.”
“So your solution is to just leave her there?”

“My solution is that we live to fight another day.” Adrien nodded. “Be practical, Marinette. What can either of us actually do about it now?”

Nothing.

The answer was nothing and Marinette hated herself for agreeing with him. But what choice did she have? She had no powers, no weapons, no allies, nothing.

Nothing…save the boy with sunshine in his hair and adventure in his eyes.

He was excited about this new world, Marinette realized. Excited to explore, to learn, to discover whatever the future held in store. Marinette’s instincts were telling her to turn around and confront the monster, but…

But it was following her instincts that had gotten them into this mess in the first place.

“…Alright.”

Adrien looked just as surprised by Marinette’s acquiescence as she was to hear herself say it. She wanted to keep fighting, come up with a brilliant convoluted scheme that would save the day and fix everything for everyone, like she usually did, but…

But she was just one person.

She was just Marinette Dupain-Cheng.

And Marinette Dupain-Cheng was tired.

Marinette Dupain-Cheng had been through hell and now Marinette Dupain-Cheng was completely out of her depth. She was confused, overwhelmed, under siege, lost at sea and the confidence in Adrien’s smile was her only life line.

She wouldn’t let go.

“Really?” Adrien asked, reaching out and taking her hand. “You won’t try going after him? You mean it? You’re not gonna knock me unconscious or run off the second my back is turned or wait for me to fall asleep and—”

“Yes, Adrien, I mean it.” Marinette sighed, trying to ignore the little voice in her head calling her a traitor and a coward. “You’re right. If I went after him now, it would be a suicide mission. There’s no point. For the time being, we’ll do things your way.”

“You won’t regret this, Bugaboo.”

I’m already regretting it, kitty.

“So, what now?”

Adrien grinned and shrugged. “I dunno.”

“Adrien.”

“What? I’m being honest.” He laughed. “I guess we should probably keep running away. I mean, I don’t think he’ll follow us, because he’s an asshole but luckily he’s an overconfident and lazy
“asshole. He won’t bother chasing us so long as he thinks we’re coming after him.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“As sure as I can be. But I think it’s best if we’re as far away as possible before he figures out that’s not happening.”

“Where will we go?”

“Anywhere we like! Pick a direction.”

He might as well have asked her to lasso the sun. Marinette stared at him, her eyes swimming with frustrated tears. Seeing her helplessness, Adrien’s expression grew gentle and he pulled her into a tender embrace.

“We’re going to die here.” She sobbed.

“Not necessarily. We’ll figure something out.” He promised as he pressed soothing kisses into her hair. She was probably right, but…

_One thing at a time._

“Adrien…” She whispered into his shoulder once her tears had dried. “What are we going to do?”

“Food.” He snapped his fingers and she pulled back, surprised at the sudden shift in his demeanor from comforting to strategizing. “We need food, we need shelter, and we need weapons. Preferably but not necessarily in that order. We’ll start there and we won’t worry about the rest of it until that’s taken care of. Okay?”

“But I—”

“What’s done is done. We need to focus on surviving right now.” He smiled when she peeked up at him, guilt staining her bluebell eyes. “One thing at a time, right?”

Marinette took a deep breath and forced herself to return his smile. Hers was noticeably shakier.

“Right.”

Then she looked down at her hand which had been pressed against Adrien’s hip as he held her and saw the red liquid that had been rendered invisible by the dark color of his slacks.

“Adrien! You’re bleeding!”

“Huh?” Adrien ran his hand along his side and winced when he felt a sharp pain at the top of his thigh. “What the—oh, wait…” He stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out the shard of mirror glass that had jabbed into his flesh during their escape. “Dammit, I forgot I had this…”

“Oh my god. You’re cut. You’re bleeding. It’s going to get infected and there are no antibiotics in this world probably and you’re going to die.”

“Marinette?”

“You’re going to die and it’s all my fault. And then I’m going to have to bury you. I’m going to have to dig a grave all by myself with no shovel because where am I going to get a shovel? I’ll break my wrist in the process and then—”

“Milady?”
“—so desperate I eat forest mushrooms—”

“Bugaboo?”

“—all because you died of gangrene!”

“Breathe, love bug. It’s just a scratch. No one’s dying today. Come on, let’s go find some food.”

“But—”

“Not mushrooms, don’t worry. We’ll find something else.”

***

“Da dada-dee-da dun dun daa…”

Kaibliss hummed merrily as he wormed his way through the dark tunnels that connected the Mother Mountain with the rest of the range. It felt good to finally be free of his man costume. Never again would he be forced to assume that vile appearance. He was done pretending to be a homo sapien.

Everything was going according to plan. Humans were so delightfully predictable. It had been child’s play making certain that Ladybug was close enough to the old stone well on the only day in a century that the portal was open to mortals. It had been even simpler manipulating the hospital staff so that the girl would be forced to remove her earrings. And it had been laughably easy goading her into jumping through the well of her own volition.

Kaibliss knew he didn’t have to do things this way. But it was a great deal of fun.

He hadn’t planned on Adrien following. Kaibliss knew the boy fancied himself as brave, but he’d never been strong on the follow through.

I suppose love makes fools of us all in the end.

The boy probably thought he could protect his lady love by keeping her distracted and out of trouble. Adrien would soon learn that it was even harder to avoid trouble in this world than it had been in the world he’d always known. And Kaibliss had a few ideas for how to make that trouble as entertaining as possible.

For him, obviously. He doubted the younglings would share the opinion.

It took several hours to reach his destination. The journey would have taken less time if he had been a more attentive steward over his territory for the last several centuries. Many of the neglected tunnels had caved in or flooded, rendered totally impassable even for a creature of his talents. Kaibliss was forced to take a winding, indirect route to reach the lair of the Sunset Guard. The cheerful tune he was humming under his breath grew jauntier the closer he got.

The Sunset Guard was a relic from the Great War, when the reptiles had to struggle against the mortals who, at least initially, resisted their supremacy. The Guard’s mission was to protect the Beasts of Scale and Hide from the Brutes of Hair and Skin, but it had been a very long time since any sentient warm-bloods walked on two feet in this neck of the woods. These days the Sunset Guard mostly hung out, got drunk and occasionally set things on fire. Kaibliss didn’t know who was
currently stationed at his local outpost, but whoever they were he expected they would be eager to see some action.

The tunnel widened into a gargantuan cavern when he reached the entrance to the lair. The walls were lined with opals, bewitched to illuminate the cave with a soft lunar glow. Once upon a time there would have been sentries posted in this outer cave, but those days were long gone. The cavern was a nexus point, an intersection between fiefdoms. A half dozen tunnels opened here, each connecting to a different territory ruled by a different liege. Kaibliss didn’t care much for his neighbors, a joyless stuffy bunch, which was just as well since they didn’t particularly care for him either. Kaibliss was aware that he was considered something of an oddball amongst his peers. They just didn’t understand his quest or his interests.

No matter. Members of the Sunset Guard were of a lower social caste, so he had no need to be leery of judgment here. Kaibliss approached the ornately decorated gate at the far end of the cavern with confidence.

The gate was several stories tall and made from coils of obsidian and petrified wood, warped and fused into shape by arcane magics. One large ringed amber eye swiveled at him from the shadows on the other side.

“Who goes there?” Snapped a gravelly voice. Kaibliss paused, arching his body and lifting his snout so that he was level with the Guard.

“It is I, Kaibliss, Master of the Anguidae and Lord of Sector 4.”

“How?”

“Kaibliss? I live under the Mother Mountain?”

“Oh! I know who you are! You’re that weird old conspiracy theorist everyone’s always talking abo —”

“PRIVATE ANUGAI!”

“Eep!” The young guard hiccupped nervously. “Y-yes, sarge?”

“Who the hell are you talking to, you miserable little—Kaibliss? Is it really you?”

Kaibliss smiled, relieved to hear a familiar voice. “Salutations, Sergeant Vasku. It’s been far too long since last we met.”

“Indeed it has, old friend! Come in, come in! Don’t just slump there, private, let him in! Are you too daft to recognize the lord of this sector when he comes knocking? Hurry up, you gecko. Sorry about this, Kaibliss, it’s these new recruits. They’re absolute rubbish at absolutely everything, I’d swear it by the Sister Moons.”

“No harm done. And we were all young once.”

“Ha! I wish that were the problem. But they don’t send me the fresh meat, only the gristle that someone else has already chewed up and spit out.”

The gate released a protracted squeal as it swung open. Kaibliss sized up the two Guards idling in the entranceway. These days the Sunset Guard was primarily made up of winged iguanas—20ft from snout to tail and infamous for their telepathic abilities. But there were still a handful of old wyrms like Vasku puttering around, harassing the whipper-snappers and reminiscing about the days of yore. The
sergeant’s long worm-like body was a pale fawn color in the opalescent glow, but Kaibliss knew from experience that the wyrm’s hide would turn blood red if his ire was raised. The two of them had entered into battle together often enough—though not in the last 500 years or so.

The interior of the lair was a huge circular cave, even larger than the cavern on the outside of the gate. The opals embedded in the lair walls were designed to give off heat as well as light and so the air was warm and humid, almost tropical except for the dank stench of fungus and dried blood. The Gaurds slept in narrow holes carved out of the stone and spent their leisure time languishing around a naturally-formed pool in the center of the cave. The water came from an underground hot spring, heated by the dormant volcanos that comprised the mountain range. Kaibliss spotted five reptilian forms congregating in the pungent steam.

“Come in, come in.” Vasku ushered Kaibliss through the gate. “What can the Sunset Guard do for you, old friend? Unless this is a social call.”

“It’s both. You know me, Vasku. I love combining business with pleasure.”

“That you do. But I’m afraid there isn’t much use for us these days. No pokins, no hunts, nothing to get these obnoxious green-fangs out from under my tail.”

“Then today is your lucky day. I have a job for you.”

“A job? Really?”

“You sound surprised, Sargeant.”

“Forgive me, your Eminence. It has been a long time since there was any need for our services on the Northern Continent. But of course, I wouldn’t presume to doubt you. Please, tell me all about it.”

“Two pokins have escaped my custody and are currently on the run. It will take them some time to navigate their way out of the mountain, and then I expect them to head into the forest.”

“Pokins, always hiding in the trees, am I right?”

“You are right. Now listen closely, Vasku. There is a male pokin and a female pokin. Your task is to take the male pokin, alive, but do not interfere with the female. Once you are out of her sight, you can do with the boy what you will. But it is imperative that she believes him to still be alive.”

“…This wouldn’t have anything to do with your…hobby, would it?”

“Would that be a problem?”

“No, no, of course not, we’re the Sunset Guard assigned to Sector 4, you’re the lord of Sector 4, so of course there’s no problem. It’s just…you don’t really think there’s still a threat, do you? After all this time?”

“Ladybug is not to be underestimated, Vasku.”

“You’re right, you’re right, of course you’re right, but…it’s been 500 years. Surely, after all this time…”

“Whether it’s five hundred years or five thousand, as long as Ladybug exists in this universe she is dangerous. And so long as she can draw power from her alternate selves, she will persist.” Kaibliss snapped. “But do not fret, old friend. Her destruction is near at hand.”
“But how? You can’t even get to her.”

“That’s why I brought the female pokin to our world.”

“I don’t understand…”

“You don’t need to understand, Sergeant. You just need to follow orders.”

***

Step by step, Adrien led Marinette down the riverbank. She alternated between being wracked by guilt and demanding to turn around, and hyper-vigilance, jumping at every rustle in the grass and urging him to move faster. He was doing everything he could to keep her calm, but he was just as tired and lost as she was. He tried not to let any of his own doubts show on his face.

Their clothes were soaked from the underground lake and they were both uncomfortable as they began hiking along the river in the hope of finding…something. Neither of them had any idea what to expect. Would they find some kind of human settlement or were they alone? Would the food in this universe even be recognizable to them? The trees on the other side of the river looked more or less like normal trees, but neither of them were experts. Trees were just…trees, weren’t they? The orange sun rose in the sky above them, going from pleasantly warm to drowsily baking. Adrien’s clothes dried off quickly in the sunshine, but Marinette’s much thicker overalls remained damp. Her thighs began to chafe and when they came to a fork in the river where the mountain met the valley and the rocky bank opened on a large sloping meadow, she asked to take a break. Adrien was more than happy to oblige, hovering over her anxiously as she sat down in the sweet-smelling grass.

“I knew it.” He muttered darkly once she was settled. “You aren’t fully recovered yet.”

“I’m fine.” Marinette huffed. “Look away.”

“Why?” He asked suspiciously, as if he thought she would go charging off on her own as soon as his back was turned. His lack of trust stung, but she could hardly blame him.

“Because I want to take these damn overalls off and…” Her face turned red “I d-don’t want—i mean, i-if you wanted t-to—no! I mean, uh…”

Adrien chuckled and turned around so that he was facing the river. “You don’t expect me to stay like this the whole time, do you? Won’t I see your underwear after you’ve taken off the overalls?”

“Yeah, but it feels different when I’m actually changing.” She grumbled. “More…uh…in-intimate, y’know?”

“Not really. I’m fairly accustomed to changing in front of other people.” He pointed out.

“Well, I’m not.” She muttered as she pulled the heavy black cloth off her legs. She spread the overalls out to dry and lay down in the grass next to them, closing her eyes and enjoying the feel of sunshine warming her chilled damp skin. “Okay, you can look now.”

Adrien didn’t turn around.
“Adrien?” She sat up and peered nervously at the wilderness that surrounded them. “Do you see something?”

Adrien tried to get his blush under control before turning around. Marinette’s sudden bashfulness had reminded him of her total lack of bashfulness the night before. His brain was only now registering the fact that Adrien no longer had to guess what her breasts looked like under her clothes (not that he ever would try—not that he spent much time wondering—not that he spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about it or anything…) because she’d ripped off her gown and straight up ordered him to look at her and after all those years of fantasizing he knew what was under—

Adrien jumped when Marinette rested a hand on his shoulder. His eyes immediately, and completely without his permission, dropped down to her chest. He was almost surprised to find that she was still wearing her t-shirt which hung past her hips. The damp white fabric did little to hide the shape of her breasts but now he had details in his memory like color and—

Despite his best efforts, his blush deepened as he met her eyes and found her staring at him with confused concern.

It was just the two of them now.

It might be just the two of them from now on.

Adrien smiled.

“I was wondering if we should cross the river.” He lied, forcing his train of thought onto slightly more pragmatic rails.

“The forest would give us better cover…” Marinette replied slowly, chewing her bottom lip and eyeing the trees on the opposite side of the river nervously. “But what if we get lost?”

“We’re already lost.” He pointed out.

Marinette’s heart sank and her expression darkened as the reality of their situation began to overwhelm her once again. “I’m so sorry, Adrien…”

“Hey, I thought we agreed this isn’t your fault?”

“That’s not entirely true, though, is it?” She yanked away from him and walked towards the river, scowling down at the current-smooth pebbles that dotted the bank as if they were personally responsible for their misfortune. “I jumped without thinking. Again. Even after…everything we went through last night. And now we’re both trapped in a parallel universe with no idea how to get home.”

Adrien wanted to comfort her, wanted to say she was mistaken and that she was perfect and that she had done everything exactly right, but…

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “That’s pretty much what happened.”

Marinette whirled around and glared at him, but he could tell the heated recrimination in her countenance was directed more at herself than at him. “How did you know?” She demanded. “You knew we’d gone through a portal before Kaibliss told us. How?”

“A lucky guess, mostly.” His green eyes darkened. “Also, I remembered something my mother once told me.”
As always happened when the subject of Emilie Agreste came up, Marinette suddenly felt like she was walking along a very shaky tight-rope with no safety net. “Your…your mother?” She whispered uncertainly, not wanting to push him lest she ended up pushing herself over the edge as well.

“When I was a kid I asked her if she knew anything about Kaibliss and she told me a fairy tale. About a basilisk who lived in an old stone well. It didn’t seem important at the time but when I saw you jump I remembered…” He trailed off, the violent storm of conflicting emotions that always accompanied memories of his mother locking his tongue.

“Did…” Marinette wanted to ask if his mother had known about the enthrallments but she didn’t dare. “Do you…remember anything new? About what happened to her?”

“No. And yes? I’m not sure…” Adrien sighed. “I think I understand the context better now, but all I really have are questions and she can’t answer them if she’s not…” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter now.” Then he frowned thoughtfully. “Or maybe…it doesn’t matter here? My problems with my parents seem almost silly compared to…” He waved at their surroundings. Marinette nodded glumly. She understood, but unlike Adrien she actually liked her par—

Whoa.

Where the hell did that come from?

Desperately trying to take back the half-finished ungracious thought, Marinette latched onto what she thought was actually bothering her. “Why are you so calm?” She wondered aloud.

“What do you mean?”

“I—we’ve lost everything. Family, friends, our powers, everything. You act as if this situation doesn’t even bother you.”

Adrien stared at her silently for a long time. Marinette’s eyes widened with realization.

“This…this doesn’t bother you, does it?” She didn’t mean the question to sound like an accusation but it did.

Adrien shrugged. “It’s not that bad.”

“We’re stranded in a parallel universe that we know nothing about. Of course it’s that bad.”

“Is it? Look around. It’s a beautiful day and so far the only danger we’ve come across is the thing that brought us here, and I don’t think he’s interested in hurting us anymore because if we’re dead we won’t be able to entertain him for the rest of our lives or whatever that creepy fuck actually wants. Seems to me things are looking up.”

Marinette stumbled backwards as if he’d struck her. “How can you say that?”

“Marinette…”

“No! What about Nino? What about Alya and Chloe? What about Max and Rose and Ivan and everyone else? What about Plagg? How can you just accept that we’ll never see them again?!” What about my mom and dad! She wanted to scream, but again she didn’t dare.

“I’m not accepting this situation as permanent. I just don’t see any other viable options at the moment.” Adrien moved towards her but stopped when she flinched. Stifling a surge of hurt, he tried to calm her. “Once we’ve figured out how to survive, then we can think about trying to go home.”
“How can I…” Marinette knew he was making a sound argument, but she couldn’t give up that easily. She had more to lose. “I won’t let Kaibliss get away with this.” Her fingers curled into shaking fists as the words came spitting from her mouth.

“You have to.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Marinette, listen to me!” Adrien took a few long strides forward and grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to meet his gaze. He bore down on her with the intensity of a thousand strange orange suns, and she suddenly realized that he wasn’t nearly as calm and collected as he was pretending to be. This realization made her feel a little better, a little less lonely. “We can’t beat Kaibliss. We’re on his turf now. He holds all the cards. He has all the power. If we go after him now, like this, we’ll be playing his game and we will lose.” He yanked her against his chest and held her as tightly as he could without hurting her. Never again. He vowed in his own mind. He wouldn’t let the old snake hurt her ever again. Once had been more than enough, twice was unforgivable. He wouldn’t allow a third incident to occur. He buried his nose in her hair and clenched his eyes shut as he whispered, “You have to let him go, milady.”

“But…” She murmured into his collarbone as tears burned in her eyes. “What about my Miraculous?”

“Tikki’s safe. Maybe someday we can…but not yet, because I c-can’t…” Adrien made a strangled noise in the back of his throat before shifting his arms around Marinette’s frame enough so that he could press his mouth against hers. He tried to pour as much desperation and desire into the kiss as he possibly could and it seemed to be enough, because Marinette melted into him. When they parted for air he whispered against her lips, “I can’t lose you.”

“Adrien…” Marinette wept as her tears spilled over and tumbled down her cheeks. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“Yes you can.” He said fiercely, willing her to believe in herself even half as much as he believed in her. “You’re amazing. You figured out how to be a superhero. You’ll figure out how to survive in this universe. And I’m here to help you. See? It’s not that bad.”

Marinette sniffed and inhaled shakily. She was shattered and grieving and so far beyond angry that she had arrived at shock in the most round-about way possible, but Adrien’s faith in her was like an inescapable force of gravity. She couldn’t help being pulled into his orbit, couldn’t stop herself from trying to be the person she saw in his eyes even though she was pretty sure such an incredible person didn’t exist in this or any other universe. “Just like old times, huh?” She joked with a watery smile.

Adrien smirked. “Maybe not exactly like old times…” He teased, pecking her lips with a loud wet smack that had her wrinkling her nose and giggling. His smirk eased into an adoring smile. “But close enough.”

***

They fell asleep in the sweet meadow grass. It wasn’t intentional, but their combined emotional and physical exhaustion crept up from behind and took them by surprise. The grass was soft and the day was warm and they didn’t have anywhere else they needed to be, which was a rare and coveted
experience for both of the young superheroes. Marinette found solace in Adrien’s embrace while Adrien marveled at how holding a slumbering Marinette in his arms was even better when they weren’t confined to a narrow hospital bed. They slept like that, tangled with each other and the grass and the secluded bliss, for the rest of the morning. When Marinette finally woke up, the sun was at high noon and the warm air had grown significantly hotter. It took her a few moments to realize what had drawn her from her peaceful slumber but then she heard the sound again and sat up straight with a startled gasp. Adrien was instantly alert and tensed for danger.

“What’s wrong?” He whispered. She shushed him and listened closely.

*Coo-roo! Coo-roo!*

“Hear that?” She asked, a triumphant gleam in her eye. Adrien shook his head. “Birdsong!”

“Oh.” Now that she mentioned it, Adrien could hear the distant warble of birds, but he hadn’t paid the songs any mind before. That was normal in the countryside, wasn’t it? “So?”

“So birds mean food.”

“Oh…” As realization dawned, Adrien was torn. His inner cat hissed with anticipatory agreement, but his human brain was slamming on the brakes.

This could end very poorly if they weren’t careful.

“Wait a second…” He waved his hands as Marinette stood up and began searching for her overalls. “Let’s talk about this before we go charging off into the wilderness. Do either of us know anything about hunting?”

“No, but it can’t be that different from fighting akumas, right?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never tried. That’s kind of my point.” Adrien turned his head to the side as Marinette found and donned her overalls.

She’s right. Adrien thought as he watched her get dressed in his periphery vision. *This is kind of intimate.*

“Okaaay…so are you planning on bashing the birds to death with your bare hands, Bugaboo, or are we gonna go high-tech and find a nice big rock?”

“Don’t be gross.” She laughed. “We’ll look for a nest with eggs. I have no idea how to gut or clean a wild bird, but eggs I can manage.”

“What eggs? Those don’t sound like chickens to me.”

She laughed again as she trotted over and bopped his nose with her fingertip. “Oh sweet, naïve, innocent, sheltered—”

“Okay, okay, I get it. Chicken eggs are not the only edible eggs. Har, har.” He rolled his eyes but smiled anyway. “So after we steal these unidentified eggs from these unknown birds, are we going to eat them raw?”

“I can fry them, I think.” She mused. “I don’t have any fat, but it should work…we’ll need a large flat stone and a campfire. If I heat the stone in the embers, I can use it as a cooking surface.”

Adrien arched an eyebrow, impressed. “How do you—”
“I saw it in a movie once.” She explained dismissively. “Come on, I think the birds are over that hill.” She grabbed his hand and began dragging him toward the far end of the meadow where a grassy knoll blocked the view of whatever lay beyond. He was delighted that the prospect of a meal had distracted her from her melancholy, but the less anxious she got the more worried he grew. There were so many ways this could go horribly wrong. Adrien was distracted from his mental visions of Egg Thief Extraordinaire Marinette Dupain-Cheng falling to her death from the top of a tree (not a specific kind of tree, just a general tree-like tree) by the sudden realization that they had neither matches nor lighters.

“Wait!” He cried. “Do you know how to make fire?”

“Oh…” Marinette froze. “Uh…we…rub two sticks together?”

“Does that actually work? I thought it was an urban legend.”

“Don’t you mean rural legend?”

Adrien groaned. “We’ve talked about this, milady. Your puns aren’t nearly as funny as you think they are.”

“Right back atcha, hot stuff.” She elbowed him lightly. “We’ll figure it out, remember?”

Adrien sighed and forced himself to relax, reclaiming her hand and focusing on the pleasant tinges that emanated from wherever her skin met his. He instantly felt calmer. “Yeah.” He agreed. “We’ll figure it out, one thing at a time.”

“Right. And the next thing is eggs.” Marinette said firmly. Her stomach growled loudly as if to emphasize her point and he chuckled as she turned red.

But as soon as they crested the hill, all thoughts of stolen eggs fled their minds.

“Oh my god…” Marinette breathed as they stood at the top of the hill hand-in-hand and goggled down at the vast, overgrown orchard spread out before them. The stumpy, wizened trees were neatly planted in straight rows, but the height of the weeds and the branches swung low and heavy with ripe fruit indicated it had been a long time since any sentient creature (human or otherwise) tended to the orchard. “We’re saved.”

“Lucky!” Adrien shouted in agreement, pumping his unoccupied fist in the air. “We’re not going to starve!”

With a delighted whoop and a victorious holler, the two teenagers raced each other down the hill and threw themselves at the nearest fruit tree. Greedy hands latched on to plump red and orange fruit and plucked it off shuddering, creaking branches. The flesh was sweet and tender, melting on their tongues and sending dark sticky juices dribbling down their chins. It was only on her third fruit that Marinette realized she had no idea what kind of fruit she was eating.

“Wait!” She cried, dropping her sticky orb to the tall grass. Adrien froze mid-bite. “What if they’re poisonous?”

Adrien pondered this possibility for a moment before slowly unhinging his jaw and removing the mysterious fruit from his mouth. “Oops?” He shrugged.

Marinette groaned.

“Hey, it’s okay, we can figure this out.” He said quickly. “We’ll just…wait awhile, and see what
happens, okay? It’s probably fine.”

“…right.” She agreed reluctantly, heart hammering against her ribs. “Right. It’s p-probably fine.”

“I’m sure it’s fine.” He repeated with more confidence, slinging an arm over her shoulder and guiding her away from their interrupted meal. “C’mon, we can explore the orchard while we wait.”

The orchard was beautiful and intriguing—halfway between wild and tame. It was proof that someone had been there, at one point or another, human or otherwise. Evidence that they were not as alone as Marinette had initially feared. But the state of the orchard indicated that whoever, or whatever, that someone was, they had not been here for a very long time. Years at least, decades probably, maybe longer. Marinette noticed something dark and pointy sticking out of a knot of roots and when she bent down to investigate she saw that it was an old scythe, half buried in the earth. The tree roots were twisted around the handle and when she tapped the reddish-brown blade with her fingertip it crumbled into rust flakes.

“When did you figure it out?” Adrien asked suddenly as she brushed off her hands.

“Figure what out?” She glanced at him curiously.

“My secret identity.”

“Oh. That.”

“Yes. That.” He chuckled. “Should I be offended?”

“No, no, sorry…with everything that’s been going on, I almost forgot we haven’t talked about this…I don’t know. There wasn’t one specific moment. It was…all the little moments, piling up until it felt like I’d known all along. But if I had to pick one thing, it was…the way you breathe.”

“My breathing?” He pouted, clearly not pleased with her answer. “Are you saying I snore or something?”

“No. I mean, you do, a little, but no…it’s just, one of those things you know about someone you’re really close to. How they breathe…the feel, the sound, the pauses and sighs. Everyone’s breathing is a little different, like a fingerprint. So once I noticed that, I started noticing everything else. What about you? When did you figure me out?”

“Hmm…” Adrien smiled. “I didn’t. I figured me out.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a side of me that only comes out when I’m with you, milady. You guard your secrets well, but you can’t hide from me the way I feel when I’m around you. Once I figured that out, the rest fell into place.” His eyes sparkled as he nudged her side. “You’re bluuushng.”

“Shut up, Kitty.” She gave him a playful shove. Then a shadow passed over her face. “Did you know that Plagg and Tikki had a surprise for us?”

“They did? For what?”

“To congratulate us on revealing ourselves.”

Adrien snorted. “Maybe Tikki had a surprise, but I highly doubt Plagg was involved. Surprises aren’t his style. He’s more into sarcasm and binge eating.” She didn’t respond.
The conversation moved on. Adrien tried to distract Marinette by speculating as to the history of the orchard, but he quickly realized this was making her even more anxious. He decided to change the subject.

“Do you know what this place reminds me of?”

“What?”

“That time Prime Queen trapped us in a storage closet.”

Marinette glanced skeptically at the sun-lit greenery and open sky that surrounded them. “How so?”

Adrien winked and twirled her around, catching her by the waist and pulling her close with a dramatic flair. “Because it’s just the two of us.”

She blushed and gaped up at him with startled bunny eyes for a few seconds before giggling and spinning away. “You’re ridiculous.”

He grinned wolfishly and chased after her. She yelped and dashed away and suddenly they were playing tag, darting between the ancient fruit trees and laughing themselves hoarse. Adrien set a trap for her near a scum-covered pond in the center of the orchard, hiding behind a huge gnarled willow tree that stood guard over the murky water. The golden eyes of a large frog (Toad? Salamander? Adrien knew his amphibians about as well as he knew his trees) peeked out at him from the muck for a second before vanishing back under the sludge. He ignored it and crouched so that his lady could not see him as she came racing by. He leapt out and she screamed with delight. Marinette tried to jump away but he swept her legs out from under her and caught her as she fell. They tumbled to the ground and rolled among the twisted willow roots. Marinette laughed and squealed as Adrien tickled her sides with a wicked smirk.

“M-m-mercy!” She eventually managed to eke out between giggles.

He stopped and collapsed on top of her, chuckling and winded. She began playing with his hair as they lay against the broad tree trunk and tried to catch their breath.

“I don’t think the fruit is poisoned…” She whispered after a few minutes. “I feel fine, don’t you?”

“Mmm…” He was significantly better than fine. He closed his eyes and relished the feeling of her fingers combing through his bangs. The air around them was so warm and heavy, and she was so soft, so incredibly, amazingly, awesomely soft…

Adrien felt a few of his broken pieces start to mend as he snuggled a little deeper into that softness. He had never felt so whole as he did in that moment, being cradled by his lady under the old willow tree. Birds sang in the branches and a gentle breeze whispered secrets to the leaves as the noontime sun began to sink towards the horizon. He pressed his ear flat against her ribs and listened to her heartbeat. He heard it quicken and he looked up to find Marinette staring at him with an expression that was part joy and part despair.

“I love you, kitty.” She murmured when their eyes met. She scratched her fingernails down the back of his head and gave him a smile that was so sweet it was almost sad.

Adrien burst into flames.

Every inch of him burned, but the fire was hottest wherever his body came into contact with hers. Couldn’t she feel it? Didn’t it hurt? It hurt him to feel this way, to be so transported and helpless and satisfied by a few simple quiet words dropped from her perfect lips like pearls. He ached with how
much he loved her, how much he craved her. The force of it left him breathless, speechless. Unable
to form words around the lump in his throat, he pushed himself onto his knees and slipped up her
form until he could claim her mouth for a soul-scorching kiss.

She was everything.

Everything he had ever wanted.

Everything he could ever need.

She was literally the only thing he gave a damn about in this entire universe.

Marinette, Ladybug, his princess, his lady, his friend, his partner, she was everything.

And she loved him?

It was almost too good to be true, except the proof was in the enthusiastic girl beneath him. In her
demanding kisses and her nimble fingers and her curious tongue and her surprised gasps that turned
into hungry moans. The proof was in the way she pulled him closer, in the way she pinned his knees
with her thighs, in the way she dug her fingers into his hair and surged up to meet him, matching his
fire flame for flame. He nipped at her bottom lip, coaxing forth an extremely satisfying whimper, and
felt his flesh begin to harden. He closed his eyes and tried to ignore it, just focus on how sweet she
tasted and how good she felt writhing against him and the tiny breathy noises she was making, but
that obviously made the problem worse instead of better. Or maybe…maybe it wasn’t a problem?
But they’d never talked about it and the circumstances weren’t ideal, so really he should stop and
they should have a conversation like responsible adults. But he didn’t want to stop—

“Adrien…” Marinette moaned into his mouth, cutting his thought process (if you could call it that)
short. Acting against his brain’s explicit instructions, his hands dropped down to her thighs and he
pulled her against him even tighter as she said in the most diabolically seductive voice he had ever
heard: “I never gave you your birthday present, did I?”

He knew he should stop, but how could he when she talked like that? He barely registered the
meaning of the words themselves, too far gone to say much more than “Must have slipped your
mind” before crashing back down to meet her searing kiss as they rolled their hips together. He
keened into her mouth at the delicious teasing friction, and cursed Alya to a third dimension for
dressing Marinette in such bulky, unforgiving material. He needed more, more touch, more feel,
more burn. Marinette broke away from his lips and began nibbling along his jaw and down his throat
as he hoisted her thighs higher and pulled her up so that she was straddling him with her back against
the willow. “I love you, Marinette…” He choked. She hummed appreciatively so he kept going. “I
love your eyes—you have the prettiest eyes. I love your smile—especially that smile when you’re
happy to see me. I love…” He gasped as she nipped harshly at his collarbone. “…that look you gave
me last week when I found that eyelash on your cheek—fuck, Marinette…” He lifted his left hand
and tangled it in her hair, forcing her face up so he could plunder her mouth once more. “I love
kissing you, I love tasting you, I love your mouth, I love—”

“I bet…” Marinette interrupted him in an electrifyingly hoarse voice. “I can do something that would
make you love my mouth even more.”

Whoa.


Now hold on just a darn minute.
Halting the rocking of his hips but not loosening his grip on his partner one iota, Adrien ogled at her cherry-colored face.

“Are…are you—would you—?” His own complexion flared dark red and his throat closed up before he could ask if she was suggesting what he thought she was suggesting. What if he was wrong?

“U-um, well, I-I mean, we don’t have any c-convos so—I mean—oh no—I c-could—y’know—my mouth—if to want you?” She slammed a hand over her yammering lips, nearly elbowing him in the jugular since they were pressed so close together. Adrien stared at her for a few seconds longer than was comfortable or wise under the circumstances. Marinette grew increasingly nervous and vulnerable as Adrien’s increasingly frantic libido tried to jumpstart his stalled-out brain.

Was she asking…?
Was she seriously asking if he wanted…?

Let’s see here.

Did Adrien want to get a blowjob from Ladybug or did Adrien not want to get a blowjob from Ladybug?

Wow.

That’s a real puzzler.

“No please.” He despised himself as soon as the plaintive words left his tongue, but it was far too late to take them back and say something suave instead. Something like…like…

Uhhhhhh…

Oh god. He couldn’t think of a single suave way to accept an offer of oral sex. He couldn’t think of anything at all really, his mind filled entirely by a haze of ecstatic giddiness and scorching desire. Help! He hadn’t planned for this!

That’s what you get for skipping out on us. His exasperated libido sneered. Get your shit together, Brain, because if you ruin this for us we will make your life a living hell.

It helped that Marinette seemed relieved rather than amused by his answer. She smiled and leaned in to kiss him, the touch deep and languid and bewitching. Arresting and arousing in equal measure. He pulsed and throbbed around her, for her, vibrating with energy, oscillating between the need to feel her and the impulse to melt under her touch. Every nerve ending was alive with exhilaration and anticipation. His entire body trembled as her hand slowly drifted down his chest and—

The only warning was a sense of cold dread rising in the depths of his consciousness, but it was warning enough.

“Something’s coming…” Adrien hissed as he slammed his hands against the trunk behind her head and flattened himself over her protectively, shielding her from view. Marinette blinked dazedly, struggling to adjust to this sudden change in direction, but before she could ask what was wrong she felt it too.

Pressure.

Pressure building at the base of her skull, at the top of her spine. Growing and surging and pounding and threatening. She felt something—some kind of alien sentience, an inscrutable presence, an
unknowable other-mind—brush up against her thoughts, searching and probing and demanding. All the air left her lungs in a mighty *whoosh* as the source of the mysterious influence bore down on the orchard. It was moving fast, much too fast to be anything human.

Adrien huddled closer to the tree as dark shadows swept over them and the pressure became unbearable. The things in the sky were calling out to them, ordering them to show themselves, to announce their presence, to reveal their hiding spot.

*Come out, come out, wherever you are!*  

He wanted to obey, wanted to shout out and throw himself into the open where the long dangling willow branches could not hide him from the seekers up above. The force of the command was too strong to resist and it was coming from *inside* him.

*No!*  

*Not again!*  

*I won’t let this happen again!*  

Adrien bit down on his tongue so hard he tasted blood. He risked glancing up through the branches and saw *something*. A flock of huge winged beasts with pebbled hides and sagging joints and long spiked tails and four clawed legs. The monsters soared overhead, searching and seeking. The call was strongest when the creatures flew directly over them and he felt Marinette’s resistance falter as a response to the telepathic pressure bubbled up inside her.

*Fight it!* Adrien begged her mentally, not daring to make a single sound. Her lips parted so he crashed their mouths together, swallowing her stillborn scream. He bit viciously at her lips, trying to distract them both from the unbearable urge to reveal themselves to the creatures in the sky.

And then…

It was over.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the pressure vanished and the sky was empty hazy blue once more. Adrien and Marinette slowly relaxed against each other, skin covered in sweat and hearts racing with fading terror. Adrien leaned back and they stared at each other.

“…what…was that?” Marinette whispered.

“I…I have no idea…” He replied with a shudder. “It was…they were big. There were a lot of them. I don’t…”

“We should leave.” Marinette said urgently. She pushed against his chest and he moved away, allowing her to stand up. She braced herself against the tree as she stood, her knees weak and her muscles shaking. “We need to find a better hiding place before nightfall.”

“Yeah…” He agreed. “We should—”

“Awww, you pokins have done it now!” Croaked a voice. “The Sunset Guard is gonna fry your brains!”

Marinette and Adrien immediately leapt into defensive postures, searching for the source of this new verbal attack. The only other living creature in sight was the large toad that Adrien had noticed when he hid behind the willow tree. It had clambered out of the water while they were distracted and was
sunning itself on a rock next to the pond.

“That’s what you get for stealing my mushpogs!” The toad sneered.

Marinette and Adrien slowly relaxed. The toad was very large, roughly the size of a house cat, and covered in warts, but it was still just a toad. It was hard to be scared of a toad. Even a talking one.

“Uh…sorry?” Marinette squeaked. “We didn’t mean to steal anything. Is this…uh…your orchard?”

“Of course it is. Who else would these beautiful high-quality mushpogs belong to?” The toad asked haughtily. “Do you ignorant pokins even realize to whom you are speaking?”

“Oh…” Marinette and Adrien exchanged confused looks. “No? Sorry, we’ll, uh, we’ll get out of your hair. Or…whatever…” She grabbed his hand and they turned to flee.

“Wait a second, I know you from somewhere…” The toad frowned. It was hard to tell because it was a toad, but it was definitely scrunching its face up in concentration. “…Adrikins?”

The toad might as well have struck them both with a lightning bolt.

Adrien loved physics. He was more than familiar with the multiverse hypothesis. Infinite possibilities, infinite possible universes.

But in all the multiverse, amongst those infinite variables, there was only one person who could ever possibly call him Adrikins.

Adrien turned around.

He stared at the toad.

The toad stared back.

He opened his mouth.

He closed his mouth.

He kept staring at the toad.

The toad glared at him in a way that was unmistakably, unavoidably, undeniably familiar.

He opened his mouth and tried again.

“…Chloe?”

“That’s Princess Chloe to you, soldier. And who is this? Does Larkins know about this?”

“Wha…who…wha…Chloe! What are you even doing here?!” Adrien wailed, waving his arms wildly through the air. Marinette was too stunned to speak but she managed to duck before he walloped her in the face. “Why do you look like that?!”

“Oh, that’s rich. That’s just precious. You’ve got a lot of nerve for someone who’s been dead for 500 years.”

“WHAT?!”

“What do you mean what…” The toad trailed off suspiciously and then shuddered. “Oh no. Oh no
“Don’t.”

“I—I—I—” Adrien looked at Marinette but she was no help at all. “Don’t what?”

“Nuh-uh. You’re not getting me involved in another one of your schemes. This has Ladybug written all over it and I want no part of it, you hear me?” The toad (Chloe? Princess Chloe?! TOAD Princess Chloe?!) began hopping away from them as fast as her squishy stumpy legs could propel her.

“What?” Adrien gasped. “Chloe! Wait! Come back and explain!”

“No!” The toad hollered over her shoulder as she vanished into the weeds. “Fuck you and the wench you rode in on!”

Soft serenity rang throughout the orchard once more as Adrien and Marinette carp-mouthed at each other for a few shared moments of existential crisis. Marinette was the first to snap out of it.

“Well…” she sighed. “That’s definitely Chloe.”

“But…” Adrien’s cheeks were flushed and his eyes were bulging out of his skull. “How?!"

“I don’t know. You’re the science whiz, you tell me.” Marinette shrugged. “All I know is that in this universe Chloe is a huge warty toad.” A sly grin spread across her features. “This might be the best day of my life…”

“Marinette.” He was suddenly all seriousness and her grin vanished. “She said Ladybug.”

“I heard.” Humor gone, she stepped closer and reached for his hand. He grabbed her and held on tightly as if he was terrified she would be whisked away from him at any second. “I think this is the next thing we need to figure out.”

***

Chapter End Notes

Oh, did you think Chloe was done being a total BAMF in this fic? Nope. Not even close.

To be clear, this is an alternate version of Chloe. But who better to bring our two superheroes up to speed on the last 500 years and current geopolitics of this world?

Foreshadowing Spotlight: This was what Kaibliss said when he met Chloe in the hotel: ““Oh dear. I thought you looked familiar.” He tsked. “You belong to Monsieur Bourgeois, eh? I suppose it wouldn’t do to draw attention to my hunting grounds by devouring his spawn. I’m afraid you’re going to have to settle for being ‘hypnotized’ after all, little princess.”"
The Soldier and The Sword

Chapter Summary

Remember Chapter Two?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer:

Ladybug: You can’t make us pay rent!

Author: Look, it would be one thing if you two were original characters and I owned you, but I don’t. I don’t own Miraculous Ladybug or any associated content/properties. And I can’t afford all the cheese and cookies you two go through without making some changes.

Chat: Alternatively, you could stop keeping us prisoner in your Inspiration Castle.

Author: I think we all know that isn’t going to happen.

***

The Soldier and The Sword

***

“Oh wow, look at all these bee-yew-tea-full mashrugs!”

“Mushpogs.”

“Look at all these beautiful mushpogs! Yum yum!”

“It’s a good thing Princess Chloe isn’t here! Now we can eat all these delicious mushpogs all by ourselves!”
“Mm-mmm!”

“ARGH! STOP IT YOU HEATHENS!”

Adrien smirked victoriously when the toad’s strangled wail emerged from a thicket of weeds and Princess Chloe hopped out of her hiding spot to confront the orchard thieves. The late afternoon sun fell heavy on their shoulders and the perfume wafting off the fruit had taken on the flavor of fermentation as the ripest spheres began to percolate.

“I might consider stopping…” He drawled, holding the juicy fruit high in the air. “If you answer my questions.”

Princess Chloe glared up and up and up at him from her vantage point half a foot off the ground.

“I don’t owe you anything, Adrikins.” She snarled. “Do your worst!”

Marinette took a large bite from her mushpog and let loose an exaggerated (and, Adrien couldn’t help but notice, evocative) moan of pleasure as the dark juices burst in her mouth and dribbled down her chin. Princess Chloe twitched and Adrien’s smirk widened expectantly.

“Tastes so good.” Marinette purred. “I don’t think I can stop myself from eating more.”

Twitch

“Here.” Adrien reached into the branches and plucked off another plump red orb. “Have a fourth helping, milady.”

Twitch twitch

“Why, thank you Kitty, don’t mind if I—”

“STOP!” The toad couldn’t take it anymore. “I’ll answer your blasted questions, you scoundrels, so stop stealing my mushpogs! They’re all I have!”

Marinette let the fruit drop from her hand and crossed her arms triumphantly as it rolled away in the grass. Princess Chloe huffed with irritation and focused her huge gas lamp eyes on Adrien.

“What do you want to know?” She grouched.

Adrien knelt down so he could meet her closer to her level. “First question, what were those things earlier? The Sunset Guard?”

Princess Chloe rolled her eyes. “I know you’ve been dead for a long time, Adrikins, but that’s no excuse for not knowing anything about anything.”

“Let’s just say that I’ve been out of the loop, and who better to catch me up than you? Humor me.” He replied with patient amusement. She’ll never change.

“Ugh. Fine. The Sunset Guard flies around making sure no pokins like you sneak out of the farms on the Southern Continent. You might have been able to resist their influence today, but that was only because the wards around the orchard mitigate their thrall. It won’t last. Eventually, they’ll wear you down. They’re gonna keep showing up and sooner or later they will catch you and then you’ll be sorry!”

“And they’re…” Marinette gulped. “They’re dragons?” She’d faced akumatized victims who had taken dragon form before. She didn’t fancy her chances against the real thing, especially now that
she was deprived of her superpowers.

“Dragons?” Princess Chloe laughed, a cruel and unnatural sound that emerged from the toad’s throat in a thick gurgle. “Wow. Do you believe in leprechauns too, Miss Thing? How about unicorns? Can I interest you in some magic beans?”

“Okay, not dragons. So what are they?” Adrien interjected before Marinette could snap back. He could already tell that the new context had done nothing to alter the dynamic between his friend and his lady.

“Iguanas.”

“Iguanas?” He repeated disbelievingly.

“Yeah. Iguanas. You’ve seen iguanas before, right?”


Also, they don’t usually have wings and as far as I know are not telepathic.

“They’re always that big.”

Adrien and Marinette exchanged a look and mutually agreed that there was no point in arguing.

“If you say so.” Adrien knew that with Chloe it was best to keep moving before she had time to fixate on a specific shortcoming. “Okay, next question, where are we?”

“You’re in my orchard.”

“Yes, but more generally than that.”

“You mean you don’t remember?” Princess Chloe scoffed. “Coming back to life really did a number on you, huh? Fine, whatever. You’re on the Northern Continent, Sector 4, in what is currently considered the domain of the Anguidae Tribe, in what used to be my kingdom UNTIL YOU WENT AND BUGGERED EVERYTHING UP, YOU WITLESS BLAGGARD!”

Adrien recognized the beginning of what was bound to be a most enlightening tirade and, drawing on years of Chloe-wrangling experience, he decided to nudge it along. Marinette watched with a small amount of awe as Adrien proceeded to play Princess Chloe like a piano with a few languid gestures and five simple words.

The very picture of bored arrogance, Adrien rolled back on his heels, yawned loudly and examined his fingernails with practiced detachment.

“How is it my fault?”

Even Marinette felt the urge to punch the smarm off his face.

“Ooohhhhh-ho-ho-ho. Ha. I’ll tell you. I’ll tell you exactly how this is all your fucking fault, Adrikins.” Princess Chloe croaked furiously. “Remember 500 years ago? When you died? You were the one who said we should fight. You were the one who wanted to be a god damn hero. We could have made a deal like Princess Sabrina did, and I would still have servants and opposable thumbs and SHOES, but noooo. No. You wanted to slay the blasted snakes and, of course, you failed. Now everyone is dead and I’m stuck as an eternal toad and all the remaining pokins are mind-mashed farm-raised chattel. And we might have been able to save some of them if you hadn’t gone and pissed off the reptiles at the Battle of Seven Snakes and gotten yourself heroically slaughtered in the
aftermath. *That is how this is all your fault, soldier.*” The toad panted heavily as her apoplectic ranting concluded.

“Adrien—”

“Drop it, Marinette.” He barked, his tone breaking no argument. He’d heard the clues just as loudly and clearly as she had. Snakes and 500 years and something about Ladybug. It wasn’t hard to see where this trail would lead them. *Kaibliss wants us to chase him.* He reminded himself. *For all we know, Chloe’s working with him and this is all a set up to send us to our doom.* He wouldn’t risk his lady on a wild goose chase based on opaque hints dropped by a talking animal—even if that talking animal was somehow his oldest friend who apparently had been placed under some kind of curse.

Marinette huffed in a manner that promised future discussion, but she didn’t want to argue with him in front of Chloe.

“What’s a Marinette?” The toad asked suspiciously.

*Huh.* Marinette frowned. So this universe had a Chloe and a Sabrina and an Adrien who all knew each other, but no Marinette? That didn’t sit right with her. *And according to Chloe, Adrien’s been dead for centuries already.*

That *really* didn’t sit right with her. She inched a little closer to her partner, trying to stand over him protectively without being too obvious about it.

“She’s Marinette.” Adrien pointed up at her, frowning sternly at the toad princess. “Not wench, not thing, she’s Marinette, got it?”

Marinette blushed as the toad scowled.

“Whatever. Are we done yet?”

“Nope.” He said cheerfully. “Talk to me about Ladybug.”

The toad shuddered as if a cold wind had just blown through the orchard. “No.”

Adrien frowned. “Why not? You’re the one who brought her up in the first place.”

“Her? Ugh. Leave me out of it, weirdo.”

“What the hell is that supposed to—”

“Adrien.” Marinette stopped him with a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Drop it.” He glanced up at her and she winked. *For now,* she added silently.

“Fine.” He sighed. “Next question, is there a safe place we can go?”

Princess Chloe squinted at him. “What do you mean safe? You mean someplace the Sunset Guard can’t find you?”

“For starters. Ideally we’d like to be safe from other things too.”

“Ha! Good luck with that. There is no such place.”

“You must know something useful.” Marinette argued. “How have you managed to survive all this time if it’s so dangerous?”
“Survive?!” The toad squawked. “Look at me! I’m not exactly a threat, am I? And I can’t leave the orchard. I’m a prisoner and you ask me about safety?!”

Marinette blinked. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize. Is there anything we can do to help?”

“Huh?” The toad appeared genuinely startled by this offer.

“Marinette!” Adrien yelped simultaneously, aghast.

“What?” She arched a puzzled brow.

Adrien glared up at her. “Excuse us for a moment, Your Highness.” He bowed before he stood and grabbed Marinette’s hand. Marinette could have sworn Princess Chloe was blushing at this display of decorum, though she didn’t have time to be certain before Adrien dragged her behind a tree out of the toad’s ear shot. “No.” He hissed as he released her and crossed his arms stubbornly.

“You haven’t even heard—”

“No. We’re not going after Kaibliss, Marinette. We’re not ready. We agreed on this a few hours ago, remember? Nothing has changed.”

“Are you kidding? Everything has changed! You’ve been listening to Chloe, right? Kaibliss shows up in our universe for the first time 500 years ago, and now it turns out that 500 years ago in his universe he killed you? It can’t be a coincidence.”

“Of course it isn’t a coincidence.” He growled. “Can’t you see what’s happening here?”

“What?” She bristled.

“You’re playing his game.” He took a step closer so they were standing nose-to-nose. “He wants you to go after him. He told you so. That’s how he operates—he tells you exactly what he wants you to do and then you end up doing it whether you want to or not. He’s manipulating you and you keep letting it happen. Trust me—I know what that looks like.”

Marinette winced when she heard the self-directed bitterness in those closing words. “This is different.”

“No, I don’t think it is different.” He spat fiercely. “In fact, I’m starting to think that all of it, the five Ladybugs, my enthrallments, the attack at the party, whatever the hell is going on here, all of it is one big epic tragedy and we’re staying out of it.”

“What if that isn’t an option?” She sighed.

“I’m making it an option.” He replied obstinately.

“Adrien…” She tried to make him see reason. “If we’re going to be stuck here for a long time, we’re probably going to need superpowers to survive. I need my Miraculous.”

“The Miraculous doesn’t work in this universe.” He reminded her, holding up the hand with his inactive ring. “Right now, the earrings are nothing more than ordinary jewelry.”

Marinette decided to try a different tactic. “What about the tragedy happening here and now? You’re so eager to start a new life in this world, but look around. Does this seem like the kind of place where that’s even possible? What kind of life could we even have in a world where Kaibliss is just one monster among many? A world where humans are kept on farms and even the skies are patrolled?”
“We’ll figure it out.”

“No, we won’t. We can go home—”

“Which we don’t know how to do.”

“—or we can fight—”

“Which would be a suicide mission.”

“—but we can’t survive the status quo!”

“You don’t know that!”

“Adrien, please. We don’t even know how to make fire. We are in no way, shape or form equipped to handle this situation. Chloe’s given us an opportunity. We need to take it.”

“How do you know that she isn’t working for Kaibliss?”

“HOW DARE YOU!”

The toad’s bloodcurdling roar shattered the tranquility of the orchard, sending a flock of songbirds billowing out of the treetops and into the sky. Adrien and Marinette jumped in surprise, turning around to find that the toad had followed them. Because of course she had. Princess Chloe trembled in the weeds, so angry and offended that she was in tears.

“How dare you!” She repeated bitterly. “I’m no traitor! You’re the traitor! I’m not—I wouldn’t—you have no idea what I’ve had to endure these last five centuries, Adrikins! You have no right to accuse me!” The tears bubbled over and she started to sob, a strange and extraordinary thing for a toad.

Adrien was confused and alarmed by the force of Princess Chloe’s emotions, but Marinette felt a spark of understanding and empathy.

“Chloe…” Marinette whispered gently. “Is Kaibliss the one who did this to you?”

Princess Chloe sobbed even harder, unable to answer verbally. Marinette took three steps forward and placed herself between the toad and her partner like a protective barrier.

“Chloe would never side with someone who was hurting her.” Marinette told Adrien firmly and assuredly. “She’s stronger than that. She’s stronger than anyone.”

“Maybe that’s true of our Chloe, but—”

“You’re the one who wants to stay here. Well, that makes this Chloe our Chloe. And if someone’s hurting her, they’re hurting us.” Marinette crossed her arms as the toad’s sobs faded into shocked hiccups. “If it was just us, it wouldn’t matter. But he’s hurting our friends as well. I won’t let him get away with it.”

“Great.” Adrien muttered, knowing that once Marinette got this fired up about something there was no dissuading her. “Thanks for undoing all my hard work, Klo.”

“Adrien!”

“What? Do you expect me to be on board? Well, I’m not! As far as I’m concerned, the less we have to do with this mess, the better!”
“It’s our mess!”

“No, it isn’t! We are not responsible for the actions of our alternate selves! Especially since we don’t even know what those actions were!”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“Now you even sound like Kaibliss. He’s in your head.”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all. I just think we don’t have the whole picture yet and that even if this wasn’t our problem before, it’s definitely our problem now.” Marinette sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. She didn’t want to fight with Adrien, but he had to see that they couldn’t just turn their backs on what was happening in this world. “I’m not saying we have to confront him today, but we have to start somewhere.”

“And where do you suggest we start?”

“Chloe said she’s a prisoner, right? We’ll start by breaking her free.”

“How?” Adrien demanded skeptically.

“I don’t know…” Marinette faltered. “Do you have any ideas, Your Highness?”

“…I would like to state, for the record, that I find the pair of you to be exceedingly confusing and stressful. But yes, since you mention it, I do have a few ideas…we’ll need an axe. You might be able to find one in the village.”

“What village?”

“Oh please, Adrikins. As if you don’t already know.”

***

An ancient cobbled road, so overgrown and underused it was little more than a muddy ditch, stretched from the orchard to the village by the river.

What was left of the village, anyway.

The last five centuries had not been kind to the ghost town and when Adrien and Marinette followed Princess Chloe’s directions they found themselves standing in a dusty silent ruin in the shadow of a slouching mountain of rubble that, once upon a time, was the toad princess’s castle. They made their way to what they assumed was the center of the village—though it was hard to tell since all the wooden structures had rotted away long ago—and looked around. They both doubted they would find any useful tools in the decaying ruins, but there was always the possibility that decomposition worked differently in this universe than it did in their own.

A thick layer of grime covered the village, making everything seem drab and forlorn. Heaps of stone and twisted metal marked the spots where buildings once stood. Pockmarked slabs lined the narrow streets and thick bunches of weeds thrived in the margins. The road led directly from the center of the village to the fallen castle, and when he looked up the street Adrien could see that the large bronze castle doors were the only thing still standing.
Marinette strode over to one of the closest rock heaps and swiped her hand across the scratchy surface, sending a cloud of dust wafting through the silent air. The stones beneath were scarred and blackened as if…

Clang. Slash. Warm hand, wet blood. Smoke and poison and despair…

“There was a battle here.” Even though her voice was hushed it still sounded rude and unwelcome to her ears, as if the village was no place for words spoken by the living.

“That’s what Chloe implied, yeah.” Adrien shrugged, clearly unaffected by the eerie vacuum that surrounded them.

“Adrien…”

“Yeah?”

I know this place.

The words were on the tip of her tongue, but something deep inside her stopped her from saying them out loud. The sense of knowing that came to her now was nowhere near as precise as the knowing that had come to her under the mountain, but it was equally inexplicable. Adrien was already worried enough—if she told him, he would probably insist on getting as far away from the village and the mountain as possible. Hoping this wouldn’t come back later to bite her in the ass, she decided not to tell him. Not yet, anyway.

“The castle looks like it’s in the best condition.” She set off towards the castle. “Let’s hurry.”

“Right.” Adrien nodded, falling in step beside her. “I say we only spend an hour or so searching. I want to get back to the orchard before dark and somehow…” He gave the collapsed castle a sardonic glare. “I don’t think we’re going to find what we’re looking for.”

“I’m sure we’ll find something useful, even if it’s not an actual hatchet. Chloe said we needed to be able to cut the root of a tree. There are plenty of things we can do that with, not just an axe.” She assured him. “If worse comes to worst, we can probably achieve the same effect with a sharp rock. She said the Sunset Guard won’t be back until tomorrow, so we have time to figure this out.”

“Fingers crossed your luck holds out.” He winked as they neared the massive doors. Then he cringed as he looked up at them. “Assuming we can even get in there.”

Marinette gave one of the doors an experimental push and it crumbled. The wood had long since faded into dust and only the bronze façade was left, clinging to the hinges out of habit more than structural integrity. The flaking metal was no match for Marinette’s akuma-hardened strength and the door yielded under her touch, tumbling to their feet in a heap of decay.

“Shouldn’t be a problem.” Marinette grinned.

Adrien chuckled. “After you, milady.” He said with a dramatic twirl of his hand. Marinette giggled at his antics, their earlier disagreements forgotten, as she climbed through the gap and entered the dank gloom of the castle hall. Adrien followed close behind.

The interior of the castle was in far better condition than the exterior would have them believe. The late afternoon sunshine lanced through long slits in the walls, gridding the hall with angled beams of light. The hall was mostly empty and covered in dust, a few piles of debris littered in the corners and the shadows.
“See if you can find any stairs.” Adrien suggested as they began to explore the corners of the great hall. “This was probably some kind of reception area. If there are any blades or tools left, they’re most likely in a different part of…the…castle…what the fuck…”

Marinette had been staring at the empty dais as if she’d seen it somewhere before, but she snapped out of it and focused on Adrien when she heard him switch from his Planning Our Next Move voice to his Holy Hell I Think I Need A Minute voice.

“What’s wrong?” She cried, dashing over to him. His complexion was pale and his eyes were stricken as he stared at a blackened pile of detritus in the corner nearest the doors. Fear bloomed bright and painful in her chest when he did not immediately respond and she grabbed his upper arm with both hands. “Adrien?”

“That’s…” The word emerged from his mouth in a useless puff of air. He cleared his throat and tried again. “I think that’s…me…”

Without letting go of his arm, Marinette slowly turned her head and took another look at the pile. It mostly looked like charcoal, seared and split and black as the void. The pile seemed too big to be Adrien—then again, the Chloe of this universe was a toad, so maybe physicality was not a multi-universal constant. The closer she looked, the more humanoid the pile became. She thought she could see the outline of a helmet, a twisting tendril that could be a limb, but…

“Are you sure?” She whispered hesitantly, heart hammering as bile rose from her gullet. Princess Chloe had already told them that ‘Adrikins’ was dead but this…this made it real in a way she did not care for.

“I…wow, this is weird, yeah, I’m sure.” Adrien gulped and nodded. “That’s me. I don’t know how I know, I just…know. Fuck. That’s me. I’m dead…” He released a nervous tremulous laugh and crept towards the pile. Marinette’s hands stretched after him but he slipped out of her grip. “Holy fuck. I’m a mummy…this might be the weirdest thing that’s ever happened to me and that is a high bar…”

Marinette was slightly relieved. He was taking this well if he was still cracking wise. She couldn’t find it in herself to be quite so blasé about the whole affair. The sight of the long dead soldier filled her with despair and bitterness and she didn’t know why but…it was as if…in a dream…

*A glacier came and asked her if she wanted to meet the sky.*

Adrien poked at his own petrified corpse as Marinette’s unfocused gaze drifted back towards the dais.

“Oh wow, this is so so weird…” He kept muttering. “This is me. This is definitely me. I remember—no, it’s not like memory, it’s something different. I know that I—that he was running. Not fast enough. He was trying to protect…” With a carelessness he would never dream of visiting on someone else’s corpse, he shifted his own remains to the side and found what looked like a slightly smaller skull pressed against the rusted-nearly-to-oblivion breastplate. “Damn, Marinette, I think this is you.”

*She said no thank you.*

“No…” She answered in a far-away voice. “That’s not me…”

Adrien frowned. “But—”

“But if you’re there, I must be close…” She began walking towards the dais and he rose to follow
her. “You won’t have gotten far without me, after all…”

*The glacier listened. The men did not.*

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m here…I’m here…” Marinette broke into a run. “I’m here! I’m coming! Hold on!”

“Marinette!” He cried with alarm, chasing after her as she raced to the dais. “Who are you talking to?”

“Me! Me! It was me the whole time!” She shouted over her shoulder as she rounded the platform. “Oh, *merde*—I should have realized sooner!”

“You’re scaring me, Bugaboo. What’s going on?”

Marinette ignored him and fell to the floor, hands scrabbling against the dusty stone slabs until she found the hidden latch she somehow knew was there. “I’m here! I’m here!” She was near tears as she heaved the trap door up and let it slam down on the floor. “Hold on! I’m on my way!”

Adrien yelped and lunged but he wasn’t fast enough to grab her before she dove through the opening. Again. He cursed and tumbled down after her. Again.

He hissed when he hit the earthen floor ten feet below, pain spiking up his ankles. Marinette was already running down the dimly lit corridor towards the source of the ethereal rose-hued glow that permeated the cellar.

“Marinette, wait!” He bellowed, but she did not heed him.

“Hold on! Hold on!” She kept shouting as glistening tears poured down her face. “Just a little longer! I’m almost there!”

“Where?!” He snarled as he barreled after her. She didn’t answer.

The corridor ended in a large cavern filled with old bones and suspiciously familiar pink light. Marinette flew through the entrance of the cavern with ease, but Adrien smashed into an invisible force-field and bounced back. When he looked up, he saw that the entrance of the cavern was framed by six clusters of dusky pink quartz. Five of the clusters had been smashed, but the sixth glowed with an internal fire. He shouted for Marinette to come back, but Marinette kept going, leaping in a desperate frenzy over the tangled heaps of ribs and vertebrae until she reached a humongous fanged skull—a basilisk skull, Adrien realized—in the center of the cavern. He pounded his fists against the magical barrier. Though invisible, it was warm to the touch. Something pale and bright was embedded between the basilisk’s empty eye sockets and as Marinette’s hands closed around the object Adrien heard her say:

“It’s okay now, Ladybug. I’m here. I’ve got you.”

Marinette pulled the sword out of the skull and the cavern went dark as the magical glow vanished. The barrier disappeared as well, but Adrien was too stunned and confused to do anything other than hover in the corridor and listen to her soft cries.

Marinette cradled Ladybug to her breast and wept with relief and gratitude and kinship and a thousand regrets. “It’s okay, Ladybug, it’s okay.” She kept repeating. “I heard you. I found you. It’s over.”

She understood. Now that she was holding herself in her arms, she understood.
She thought she dreamt she was a sword, but that was wrong.

She was a sword. A magic sword named Ladybug, who had always been a little bit alive, who had once been part of a mountain, who had slashed the stones in the village centuries ago, who had been lost and forgotten for 500 years until she reached deep inside herself and called out:

*I'm here! I'm here! I'm lonely and I'm frightened! Please come find me!*

And Marinette had heard her call.

And Marinette had found her.

And it was going to be okay.

Because Marinette was going to bring Ladybug home.

***

Adrien managed to keep his thoughts and questions to himself until they returned to the great hall up above. Then he whirled around and pursed his lips and placed his hands on his hips.

“*Explain.*” He demanded.

Marinette nodded, still holding the sword as if it were a newborn. “I had a dream after... when I was in the hospital. At least, I thought it was a dream. But it wasn’t. It was Ladybug.” She smiled fondly at the sword as Adrien shook his head in disbelief.

“You think that sword was—what? *Talking* to you through your dreams?”

Marinette frowned disapprovingly. What happened to the boy who was so quick to defend her honor in the orchard? “Don’t call Ladybug ‘that sword.’”

“You’re Ladybug.” Adrien didn’t like this. He didn’t like anything about this. If he had to pick one word to describe how he felt about this, that word would be ‘icky.’ “*That’s* a sword.”

“I was your sword until you left me behind in that cave and got yourself killed.”

Adrien shivered, ice-cold spiders squirming down his spine. “Nope. I’m putting my foot down. No more conflating selves. *That*…” He pointed at the mummified soldier and his dead lover. “Is not me and *that sword* is not you.”

“She is, though.”

“It’s an inanimate object. At least *that* used to be human.”

“I’m Ladybug. The sword is Ladybug. The sword is me.”

“A is C and B is C so therefore A is B *is not* a valid argument.”

“Maybe in this universe it is.”

“*Marinette!*”
“What? What’s your problem?”

“You’re—!” With a grunt of irritation, Adrien slung an arm over her shoulder and buried his face in her hair. “You’re not—I don’t think—I wouldn’t—you’re not my weapon. That’s not...right.”

“Oh, Kitty.” She smiled warmly. “I know that. But I am dangerous. And I do protect you. Besides...” She drew back and offered him the pummel. “Ladybug is a lot more than just a weapon.”

With a reluctant sigh, Adrien accepted the sword and held it up to the nearest beam of light.

The blade resembled a double-edged longsword but the point ended in vicious-looking forked tips. Too wide to be a rapier, too narrow to be a broadsword, it was somewhere in between and perfectly straight. The silver cross guard was inlaid with hundreds of tiny pearl-and-shell ladybugs, wrapping around the silver coil and meandering down the center of the blade in a swarm. The leather-wrapped grip molded perfectly to his hand and when he lifted the blade it felt exactly like lifting his baton—effortless and instinctive, with just enough heft to control the power of each movement. A thrum of heady recognition traveled up the blue-steel blade and reverberated throughout his entire body, shaking him down to his marrow.

_Dammit, she’s right._ He realized. Of course the sword was Ladybug. He’d know her anywhere. Five years of figuring it out had taught him how to recognize her presence, no matter what form she took. _Hello milady._ He thought, and he could have sworn the light reflecting off the pronged tip blushed pink at his mental greeting.

She was happy to see him.

“So...” He said eventually. “This is the universe where I’m a dead soldier and you’re a magic sword.”

“Your magic sword.” She corrected. “Personally, I prefer the universe where we’re both human.”

“Same.” He lowered the sword but for some reason his fingers refused to drop it. “What else did Ladybug tell you in this dream?”

“It’s hard to explain. She doesn’t exactly use language, at least not what I would consider language. It’s more experiential than that. She told me what happened to her. Where she comes from, how she got lost. But now...” Marinette cocked her head to the side and Adrien’s eyes widened.

“She’s talking to you right now?”

“Yeah. She’s explaining...Adrien.” Marinette’s tone was suddenly urgent, her muscles taught, her gaze intense. “Those bones in the cellar—that was his mate. Five hundred years ago, there was a war. It was the final battle and you were—”

“Not me. _Adrikins._”

“Fine. _Adrikins_ was trying to hold Kaibliss and his mate off singlehandedly. He managed to slay the mate—Bilakiss—but then...someone yo—he cared about was in danger. He had to make a choice...”

Adrien glanced at the mummified pile. “ Doesn’t seem like he made the right one...” The sword in his hand briefly glowed in agreement.

“Kaibliss wanted to destroy Ladybug too, but she cast a spell to keep him away...” Marinette
continued, listening intently to the voice that only she could hear. “She…uh…I’m not sure how to explain this, she’s communicating in raw emotion and it’s really complicated…”

“Does it have to do with those crystals outside the cave?” Adrien guessed. “Five of them were destroyed, and Kaibliss killed five Ladybugs, so…”

“Yeah. We were like…anchors? Like the power of self, only magnified? Strength in numbers? Is this making any sense?”

“Not really, but I’m used to magic not making any sense.” Adrien sighed, resigned to this particular fate. “What I still don’t understand is why he bothered bringing us here if he needed to kill you to get through the barrier.”

“Because…because Ladybug made him believe that he had to…”

“How?”

“Willpower.” Marinette replied, a smug grin spreading across her exhausted features. “Sheer willpower.”

“Why are you smiling?”

“Because I know what we have to do. Kaibliss thinks I’m going to use Ladybug to slay him, at which point he’ll kill both of us and finally end the war once and for all.”

“You’re not going to do that, right? Because, no offense, but you’re not the best fencer.”

“No, I’m not.” Marinette’s grin turned wicked. “I’m going to take Ladybug back to the mountain they ripped her out of.”

“How?”

“Because that’s how we save the world. Because if we take Ladybug home, we can slay all the monsters.”

“How?”

“I’m not sure, but Ladybug will know what to do.”

“…right. We’ll talk about it. In the meantime, at least now we have something to cut up Chloe’s tree roots. Let’s head back.”

***

500 Years Ago
(or somewhere thereabouts)

Princess Chloe stood in her room at the top of the tallest tower and surveyed her kingdom. Her domain stretched as far as she could see, from the peak of the Mother Mountain to the lush fertile
valley, down the winding river and reaching across to the wild impenetrable forest on the other side. Hers was a small kingdom, but it was beautiful and perfect and most importantly it was hers. She was proud of her people and proud of herself for governing them so efficiently. That pride made the decision before her all the more difficult.

“Read it to me again.”

“But Your Highness, we’ve already—”

“I gave you an order, Councilor Jeankins.”

Her chief advisor sighed and unfurled the scroll they had received a fortnight earlier from the pair of basilisks who lived under the Mother Mountain. The monsters had lived there as long as anyone in her kingdom could remember, but it was only recently that they had become a threat along with the rest of their ilk. Princess Chloe’s lips moved in a silent echo as Jeankins re-read their demands.

“The Age of Pokins is over and the glory of the Age of Reptiles is upon us. Out of respect for you and your station, we extend an offer of eternal sanctuary to the illustrious Princess Chloe. In exchange for the princess’ cooperation during the regime transition and for her assistance relocating all non-royal pokins to the Southern Continent, we will take her as one of our own and keep her well and happy for the rest of her days in an eternal garden we will design especially for her. Rejection of this offer will be considered tantamount to forfeiture of princess status and will be dealt with accordingly. We shall come for the pokins and the princess under the light of the blue moons. Expect us.”

Even though it was high-noon, a shadow had fallen over the room as Chancellor Jeankins recited the missive. The assembled advisors avoided meeting each other’s eyes, bitterly aware of the empty chairs around the table. There were too many who should have been there that day, too many who had already been lost to the reptiles. Once upon a time, one of Princess Chloe’s Council Meetings would have been standing room only, every jumpstart in the kingdom trying to get a word in edgewise. Today it was just Councilor Jeankins and High Priestess Rosekins and Adrikins—who was only a foot soldier and really had no business being part of such an important conversation but as the only member of the Royal Guard to survive the last reptile attack he had been promoted by default. The other two were blatantly frightened, but not Adrikins. He was leaning back in his chair, arms crossed, brow furrowed, a stubborn kink in his jaw that Princess Chloe recognized from their childhood sojourns. She sighed internally, already able to guess what his counsel would be.

It was so like Adrikins to think he could single-handedly save the world. Even after all the despair and suffering of the last few years since the Reptilian Revolution began, he hadn’t abandoned his steadfast conviction that everything would turn out alright in the end. Childhood friend or not, some people had no talent for politics. Princess Chloe hadn’t the heart to tell him that the war was already lost and the reptiles had won. Let him continue to believe, if that meant hope still existed somewhere on this miserable planet.

Princess Chloe turned to continue staring out the window. The blue moons would be rising in a few hours. The time for deliberation was almost over. “Options?”

“We’ve already been over—”

“You’re my advisors, aren’t you? Advise me.”

“Your wellbeing is our first and foremost priority, Princess.” Chancellor Jeankins said with a determined nod that contrasted sharply with his ashen pallor. “We should make the deal, as Princess Sabrina did six months ago. At least then you’ll be safe.”
“But what of the villagers? Or have you forgotten that all of Princess Sabrina’s subjects were taken prisoner?” High Priestess Rosekins argued, her lyrical voice tremulous and aching with sorrow. “We should flee into the forest on the other side of the river, where the reptiles will not think to search for us.”

“But even if we run away now, they will find us eventually.” Chancellor Jeankins frowned at her. “We have this one chance to save the princess at least. We should take it.”

“But the villagers—”

“Understand that Her Highness is more important than their freedom.”

“How can you even say that?”

“Because I, for one, am willing to sacrifice my freedom and, if need be, my life for Princess Chloe.”

The Chancellor’s voice flared and rasped with emotion. “Are you?”

High Priestess Rosekins was about to burst into tears when Adrikins spoke for the first time since arriving at the meeting.

“You lot can do what you want. I’m going to stay here and fight.”

Princess Chloe rolled her eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous, Adrikins. You can’t take on two basilisks alone.”

Steel sang a high clear note as Adrikins drew his sword from its scabbard and placed it affectionately on the table. “I’m never alone. Not so long as I have Ladybug.”

Not for the first time, Princess Chloe felt a surge of irrational dislike for the sword. She glared at it as she returned to her throne at the head of the table. “Your sword might be able to glow in the dark and guide you through the Mother Mountain, but that means diddly squat to a basilisk.”

“Don’t underestimate her.” Adrikins smirked.

Her. Princess Chloe repressed a shudder. The way Adrikins talked about his sword, you’d think the young soldier loved it more than he loved his blushing bride Larkins, maybe even more than he loved his monarch. It left a sour taste in Princess Chloe’s mouth.

“And what about the next time?” She countered. “Even if you do manage to beat Kaibliss and Bilakiss, there are thousands more exactly like them.”

“If we can make it through tonight, Ladybug and I have a plan to turn the war around.”

“Yes, I’m familiar with your theory that the reptiles draw their power from the same source as your sword.” The Chancellor rolled his eyes. “And who knows, maybe you can use that link to effect their telepathic abilities. But making it through tonight is where you lose me, soldier, because the basilisks are coming to kill us tonight. We don’t have time for your convoluted magical experiments.”

“It’s better than giving up without a fight!”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but you fought with the Ladybug sword at the Battle of Seven Snakes, did you not?” The Chancellor sneered sarcastically. “If you were not able to defeat the basilisks with a thousand trained and tested warriors at your side, what makes you think now will be any different?”
“Because it’s the final showdown.” Adrikins shrugged. “And the odds are a million to one against us. Which means we have to win.”

“That’s…not a very strong argument…” High Priestess Rosekins pointed out.

Adrikins ignored her, leaning forward so that he could stare Princess Chloe directly in the eyes—an obscene breach of etiquette that under any other circumstances would have gotten him banished from her kingdom for a year and a day. She glared back at him. His plan was a suicide mission, any fool could see that, and yet…

She couldn’t help but think that if anyone could save them, it was him.

Sensing her momentary weakness, Adrikins rose to his feet and picked up the Ladybug sword. A warm pink glow filled the room as he rounded the table and knelt before the princess, never breaking eye contact.

“Ladybug and I are an unstoppable team.” He said. “We can do it, Princess. Trust us.”

It was impossible. She knew it was impossible…

Princess Chloe didn’t want to see any more of her subjects slaughtered by the insatiable reptilian menace, but she also did not want to sell her subjects in exchange for her own safety. Nor did she want to spend the rest of her days as a kept pokin, a basilisk’s pet, someone else’s status symbol. The very notion filled her with a rage so fierce and consuming she feared it would burn her alive.

It was an impossible, improbable plan…

So impossible, so improbable, that it just might work.


***

Sunset painted the sky with streaks of carnation pink and royal purple and goldenrod orange as they traipsed along the track that led from the village to the orchard. Adrien eyed Marinette out of his periphery with discomfort. “Would you please stop doing that?”

Marinette momentarily stopped whispering sweet nothings to the sword and lovingly caressing the blade to arch an eyebrow in his direction. “But she likes it. She’s been stuck in that skull for five hundred years. She needs attention.”

“I just think you shouldn’t be so quick to anthropomorphize a magic sword. There could be unforeseen consequences.” He thought about this for a few seconds. “I mean more unforeseen consequences.”

She laughed, but allowed the sword to droop by her side as they walked since it seemed to make him more comfortable. “Are you okay? I feel like you kind of drew the short straw in meeting alternate selves today.” He had also been in a blatantly foul mood since they left the castle, but she was trying to be diplomatic.

She wondered if he had thought at all about what they had done (or been about to do) under the
She wondered if he regretted being interrupted earlier as much as she did…

She really hoped so. It would be deeply embarrassing otherwise. That’s why she wasn’t going to bring it up, not unless he did first.

“It’s not that.” He hastened to assure her, but then he heaved a dejected sigh and shrugged. “I dunno. Maybe that is what’s bothering me. Nothing forces you to confront mortality like poking your own mummified corpse in the face, I guess.”

“I thought you weren’t conflating.”

“You know what I mean. It’s frustrating. I suddenly feel like I want to experience more of the world before it’s too late, but we’re…I keep thinking about all the things I wanted to do, that I wasn’t allowed to do, that I’ll never have the chance to do now. I keep telling myself to stop thinking about it but…I can’t. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be dumping this on you right now.”

“I don’t mind.” The truth was, finding Ladybug had done wonders to resolve her anxiety. But she didn’t think he would appreciate hearing that right now. “Talking about it might help. What kind of things?”

“Just things.”

“Like what?”

“Like…Ethiopian food.”

“Ethiopian food?”

“Yeah. There was this little restaurant about ten minutes from the mansion that I was never allowed to go in and it always smelled amazing. It looked like fun too—every time I walked by, it was always full with big groups of happy people sitting on the floor and sharing plates and eating with their hands. Which I guess we can still do here, but it won’t be the same…oh! And gumbo! Alya told me about it once. I’m not sure I understand what it is, but it sounds incredible.”

Oh dear. Marinette stifled a fond smirk. He’s hungry.

Adrien always got cranky when he was hungry. She made a mental note to focus on procuring him some protein in the morning, or she’d have a patented Adrien Agreste Low Blood Sugar Meltdown on her hands, and no one wanted to see that.

“Ah! And xiao long bao! Never had them, but I’ve read blogs. They’re dumplings, but there’s soup inside. Blows my mind every time I think about it. No idea how they do it.”

Marinette opened her mouth to tell him that she actually did know how to make xiao long bao and once they had figured out a cooking system she could try and recreate the dish, but he was so busy rattling off different types of cuisine that she couldn’t get a word in edgewise.

“I wanted to try Canadian poutine and Mexican food and Indian food and Thai food—which Nathalie has for lunch every single day practically and she never let me try even one bite. And—”

He kept rambling but she wasn’t listening anymore. The words ‘Thai food’ had pinged something in the depths of her memory, something she couldn’t quite put her finger on, something important.
Thai food, Thai food, something about Thai food…

Wait.

Hadn’t someone, somewhere, mentioned something about a Thai restaurant sometime recently?

Wait…

No…

It couldn’t be…

It wasn’t possible…

No way…

No fucking way…

Marinette gasped as her surroundings—the sunset, the looming orchard up ahead, even the gorgeous boy turning to ask why she had stopped walking—blinked away and all she could see was an old woman with a billy-goat beard and a snaggle-toothed grin winking at her across time and space.

To anyone besides yourself, the pamphlet will look like an ordinary take out menu from a Thai restaurant.

The last few missing pieces fell into place with a final, fatal click.

“MOTHERFUCKER!”

If Adrien had been transformed, his cat ears would have drooped. “I’m sorry. You asked so I thought it would be okay. I’ll stop talking about it if this is stressing you out.”

“No you.” She snarled, a harried frenetic expression stealing over her features. “Not you, not you, it’s her—oh. Oh my god.” She turned porcelain white and stumbled back a step, gripping Ladybug so tight her entire arm shook. “Did you know about this?” She snapped at the sword.

I was aware of the Founder’s awareness. The sword communicated. But as neither of us operate along linear timelines, planning ahead is a fool’s errand.

“Fuck! Oh my god! This is the medieval universe ruled by telepathic reptiles—THAT FUCKING BITCH OH MY GOD!”

Ladybug fell in the ditch with an offended clang as Marinette began ripping at her hair and screeching with wordless fury.

The fuckers did it on purpose.

The realization that her invitation to the Union of Unidentified Colleagues on Friday had been issued with the express intent of preparing her for this experience sent all other considerations careering from her mind. Was the internship just a ruse after all? An excuse to get her in the building so they could give her their riddles and instructions and wish her happy hunting? Lucky she’d already turned it down, then.

Adrien took a cautious step towards her.

“I need you to calm down, princess. Whatever’s wrong, we’ll fix it, but I need you to calm down
first.” He said, voice gentle yet firm. “You’re still recovering, remember? You need to take it easy.”

“Don’t tell me to take it easy when that goddamned jumped up fortune teller warned me days ago that nigh’al pa’al—” Her anguished cry dissolved into a series of unintelligible vowels and consonants. Adrien’s blood ran cold and he grabbed her wrists, dragging her hands out of her hair before she could remove any clumps of raven tresses.

“Are you speaking Aramaic or are you having a stroke?” He demanded urgently, trying not to panic with only partial success. “Marinette, smile for me so I can check if your face is drooping.”

Marinette didn’t know which superhero she was more furious with—Ladybug or Magic Mirror. How could she have been so naïve? She knew the Founder didn’t waste words on idle chit-chat. Each and every syllable that crossed her lips was carefully considered and all possible ramifications evaluated. Just how many clues had she missed? She could think of at least three.

Yeah, so, parallel universes, huh?

By the way, let me mention some very specific parallel universes, all casual-like. No biggie. Nothin’ to see here, folks, nothin’ to see.

And before I forget, here’s a document explaining what to do once you get stuck there.

Good luck out there, kiddo! Knock ‘em dead!

She could almost hear the old woman’s smug laughter from a universe away.

The Founder had even explained her own role—that she could only see in possibilities and not in certainties. She’d mentioned several possible alternate realities because she didn’t know exactly which one Marinette would end up in. But the Founder had definitely known this would happen, even if she was fuzzy on the details. Of course she had, she was a clairvoyant. Knowing what would happen before it happened was her basic job description. And so, knowing what was in store for Ladybug and Chat Noir, she had reached out as one former Protector of Paris to one current Protector of Paris. She had warned Marinette about what was coming, she had handed Marinette all the tools she needed to figure it out and get back home, and then she had sent Marinette on her merry way. And Marinette hadn’t picked up on any of it until it was far, far too late.

They were going to have words when she returned.

But first…

First she had to convince her overprotective partner.

The pamphlet was still in her purse where she’d stuffed it on Friday. And even though she could remember the title at the top of the page, could see the words ‘In The Event Of Being Stranded In An Unknown Dimension/Universe/World/Timeline/Metaphysical Plane’ floating in front of her like a mirage, she couldn’t recall the rest of the instructions. What came next? Dammit, what came next?!

She couldn’t remember.

Which meant that she really needed to get her purse back after all.

She couldn’t wait until she had learned how to survive in this universe and could confront Kaibliss from a position of strength.

They had never really been able to afford that luxury anyway, it was nothing more than an idle
haphazard dream that passed away with the dwindling daylight.

Kaibliss had her purse. They had to go after Kaibliss. Holding back and playing it safe weren’t options anymore. People were counting on them, waiting for their signal. But Adrien wasn’t going to be happy about this and she wasn’t going to be able to explain any of this to him. She braced herself for the inevitable blowback.

“We need to get my purse back from Kaibliss. Before we do anything else.”

Adrien scowled, the concern in his eyes darkening into frustrated anger. “We’ve been over this and over this. We’re not ready. You said it yourself—”

“Adrien! Listen to me!” She smashed her hands to his cheeks and held him in place, pinning him with a glare so fierce and determined that for an instant he thought he saw a red mask. “We need to get my purse back. I can’t explain this to you—by which I mean literally incapable of explaining this to you or anyone else—so I really need you to trust me without arguing. I understand your concerns, I promise I truly do sympathize with where you’re coming from, but…” She took a deep breath, all too aware of how absurd her next words were going to sound, all too conscious of the fact that there was too much riding on this for him not to take her seriously despite the absurdity of the situation. “We need to get my purse because inside my purse there is a ebed bara’ el—ugh—there is a take out menu for a Thai restaurant.” The pressure of her hands on his face increased. “We need that menu, Adrien. It is our one and only chance of ever going home.”

Adrien stared at her in inscrutable silence for a long time, long enough for the sun to dip under the horizon and dusk to fall over them like a warm blanket. Neither of them moved an inch, scarcely daring to breathe while the wheels in his brain turned. At long last he repeated skeptically, “A take out menu?”

She gulped and nodded. It sounded even sillier when he said it. “Yes.”

“A take out menu is our ticket home?”

“Yes.”

“And you can’t explain why?”

“No, I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“I’m supposed to just trust you on this, implicitly and without question?”

“Yes.” She chewed her lip nervously. “Do you?”

Normally she wouldn’t even have to ask, but she’d been through hell over the last few days and he was holding on to his last scrap of chill by the skin of his teeth. They were so far off the map she didn’t know what was up and what was down. She hated to ask, but she needed to ask because honestly Marinette wasn’t sure how much she trusted herself right now. She’d made so many mistakes, and even though she knew she was right about the pamphlet and her purse, she wouldn’t move forward unless he was onboard.

It was up to him.

His emerald eyes glittered like a challenge under the fading sun and the rising moon.

“Always.”
Aaaaand exposition is *hard.*

This section of the story is very heavy on plot and action, but we've got the final showdown in sight and I'm brewing a whole cauldron of feels for the wrap up.

Also, I finally get to bring the Union back into the fray! They are one of my favorite parts of this story, even though they only show up at the beginning and the end.

Next chapter, we delve deep into some identity questions.

FRIDAY EDIT: Hey folks. I'm dealing with some life stuff that has really slowed me down. Not sure when the next chapter will be up, might be as late as Monday. Sorry for the delay! Good stuff is on the way!
The first few years were hard.

It had all been new then, her body unfamiliar, her confinement unbearable. The first year of being a toad, she had tried to break her curse. The second year of being trapped in the orchard, she had tried to break free. The third year, she raged indiscriminately against the whole of existence, and that continued for quite some time.

Somewhere around Year 14 she realized that none of it really mattered because the world outside the orchard was just as miserable and rotten as the bland lukewarm monotony of the eternal garden.

The thing they don’t tell you about the end of the world is that you don’t necessarily end with it. The world stops and, if you are very lucky or very unlucky depending on your point of view, you keep going. And that’s what Chloe did; she continued. Year after year, decade after decade, century after century. The worst of it was around Year 375 or so, when she thought the hopelessness and boredom would squash her like an insect—only it didn’t. Somehow, she kept going. She didn’t have much of a choice. Suicide wasn’t an option in an eternal garden. You just woke up the next morning, just as lonely, just as miserable, with nothing to show for your troubles except a pounding headache.

The last 50 years hadn’t been so bad, relatively speaking and all things considered. Kaibliss was hardly ever around and as the Sunset Guard grew obsolete their reign of terror turned into more of a drizzle of negligent incompetence. Chloe spent her days sunning by the pond and counting the birds in her orchard. She knew all the birds by name, all 246 of them. The birds were prisoners, just like her, but by accident and not by design. They were the same birds that happened to be in the orchard the day Kaibliss cast his spell, trapping the princess and the random songbirds amongst the mushpog groves for all eternity. The same thing had happened to the mice and the worms and even the mayflies, but Chloe figured she’d need at least another 500 years before she was desperate enough to
Sometimes, when Chloe slept and dreamed, she saw a tall beautiful woman standing alone in the shadow of the Mother Mountain. The woman had long blonde hair and ice blue eyes and she was always screaming. Sometimes with fear and sometimes with rage, but always screaming. In her dreams, Chloe couldn’t tell who the woman was, and if she tried to get closer the screaming pokin would lash out and attack her. Only upon waking would Chloe remember that the woman was her as she used to be, before the curse that turned her into a toad, before she was trapped in the orchard.

Those dreams always left her feeling exposed and on edge for weeks afterwards.

But that was nothing compared to how she felt the day Princess Sabrina came to pay her respects.

Princess Chloe was used to Kaibliss’ occasional visits. The old snake was lonely and sometimes he came to talk to her—or talk at her, since Chloe refused to acknowledge him. Sometimes he mocked her for her circumstances, sometimes he ranted about his adventures in other worlds, and sometimes he just watched her, brooding and silent. In the beginning this had bothered her greatly, but she had learned to stay aloof and unruffled by his gloating, at least on the outside. Refusing to give him the satisfaction was one of the only weapons she still had in her arsenal.

So on the day Princess Sabrina came (in the summer of Year 403), Princess Chloe initially assumed it was the basilisk come to torment her and she hid in the pond. She was shocked when she realized the visitor was her former rival and an attaché of lizards-in-waiting. The five-foot-tall slender lavender reptiles were more minders than chaperones, not that Princess Sabrina seemed to understand the difference. She clearly believed that she was more than a pet, while also believing that Princess Chloe was less than a prisoner. Their reunion was explosive and brief. Princess Sabrina had come to rub Chloe’s face in her misfortune and, for her part, Chloe was disgusted that Sabrina had maintained her pokin form.

Chloe had always known that she was the only princess who had resisted to the bitter end. Her toad form was punishment for her persistence. And intellectually, she knew that the eternal garden binding spell didn’t work on pokins.

But it was one thing to be faced with the reality that even though they were technically in the same boat, Princess Sabrina was free to come and go as she pleased, whereas Chloe hadn’t seen the outside of the orchard in (on that particular day) 403 years.

You were only allowed to stay a pokin princess if you sold out your vassal pokins. Chloe had opinions about princesses who did such things.

“You should have made the deal!” Princess Sabrina had crowed with cruel amusement. “You’re the only princess who had to be muzzled like a temperamental dog!”

“I’d rather be muzzled than complicit!” Chloe croaked back.

They had not parted on amicable terms.

Kaibliss stopped by a few years after that, to tell her that he was moving to the other world full time until he had completed his quest, and after that Princess Chloe didn’t see anyone at all until a stranger and an old friend came blundering into her orchard and eating all her mushpogs like the greedy little thieves they were.

It would be a lie to say that Princess Chloe wasn’t a little happy to see Adrikins again after all this time, but it was only a little. He wasn’t exactly as she remembered, though she supposed she had
changed as well over the last five hundred years. Besides, it was his fault that she’d been turned into a toad. Him and that thrice-blasted mind-meddling sword of his. Honor was one thing, but no matter what she’d told Princess Sabrina, Chloe really wanted to leave the eternal garden. She wanted to go inside, sleep in a bed, eat food that didn’t spring back into existence the next morning and was also not primarily composed of insects.

And Chloe didn’t know what to make of Adrikin’s companion. The Marinette creature was hard to pin down. She seemed to veer from extremes at the drop of a ripe mushpog (hats were another thing Chloe missed about being pokin. She had always looked amazing in hats). One second she’d be blatantly and irritatingly smitten with everything Adrikins said and did, and the next second she’d be telling him to go to hell and stay out of her way. The second after that she’d become totally despondent, her recriminatory gaze turned inward, and then all of a sudden she’d be smirking and laughing as if this was all a big game and she held all the cards.

It was very confusing.

If she was being completely honest, Chloe wasn’t even sure they were real. She’d had hallucinations like this before. She’d been doing okay recently, but trauma had a way of sneaking up on you when you least expected it.

Part of the reason she’d suggested they go to the village to search for tools was because she hoped, if they were hallucinations, they wouldn’t come back.

Imagine her surprise when not only did they come back, but they returned with her least favorite magical object in the entire multiverse in tow.

It had been five hundred years since Princess Chloe last encountered Ladybug, and time had done nothing to soften her opinion.

Chloe didn’t know how the sword had first ended up in Adrikins’ possession. She was sure it was a harrowing tale of daring deeds, but the world was filled with such tales. As a young child, perhaps Chloe would have still been naïve enough to take an interest, but as you grew up you learned to roll with the punches. There were too many magic swords in the world to worry unduly over any particular blade.

But Adrikins had always insisted that Ladybug was special, and after the last five hundred years Princess Chloe was inclined to agree.

Just not in a good way.

“What is that doing here?”

Adrien and Marinette glanced between the affronted toad and the sword in Marinette’s arms.

“Why?” Adrien asked. “Is something the matter with it?”

“Her.” Marinette corrected with a frown.

“Marinette…” He whined, but Marinette was firmly in Go To Hell mode.

“Adrien. We’ve been over this. Ladybug is a person. She uses she/her pronouns and you will respect that.” Marinette snapped. “I don’t want to have this conversation again.”

Adrien looked annoyed, but he knew better than to argue with his partner when she got like this.
Night had come to the orchard, bathing them in the soothing light of the Sister Moons. The perfumed breeze meandered through the treetops where all the little songbirds had settled down for the night. The temperature had dropped enough to cool but not enough to chill. All in all, the weather was pleasant and temperate. Adrien hoped that meant that this particular part of the world—Sector 4 or whatever—was experiencing a summer-like season. If the weather got any cooler or warmer it could be problematic. As Marinette took a seat under the willow tree next to the pond she started to cradle the Ladybug sword in her lap and pet its blade, thickening the sour taste in Adrien’s mouth.

The whole situation continued to give him the heebie-jeebies, but it was increasingly obvious that Marinette was not going to be dissuaded from bonding with her alternate self. He tried not to feel bitter and to keep an open mind, remembering that he had felt the same way when Ladybug first brought Rena Rouge on board. The feeling had dissipated quickly.

Okay, but at least Alya’s a person—an awesome one, too. That, on the other hand, is a magical object that apparently has been messing around in Marinette’s dreams.

Maybe he should say something after all…

“Could you NOT with that THING?”

Chloe beat him to it.

Good ol’ Chloe.

“We need to make a plan, and Ladybug is part of that conversation.” Marinette said patiently, but she noticed the look in Adrien’s eye and so she stuck the sword forked-tip-down in the soft earth next to her. “She has a lot to contribute.”

“I’m sure it does.” Princess Chloe sniffed. “But in my royal opinion, which is also the law of the land or at least it used to be, it’s already contributed enough to our collective misfortune. Now get it out of here. Go on, shoo shoo.”

“No.” Marinette replied, calm and assured.

“Oh come on!” Princess Chloe thumped her webbed foot in exasperation, excruciatingly aware of the fact that there was very little she could do about it other than whine. “This way is even worse! At least when you were holding it, it didn’t have its own seat!”

“Don’t even think about it.” Adrien interrupted with a wag of his finger before Marinette could pick up the sword again. “No more weird sword snuggles for you. Ladybug can be part of the conversation but the creepy affection stops now.”

“Also its taller than me which is completely unacceptable!”

Marinette’s full-belly laughter irritated both of them, which only made her laugh harder when she saw their identical expressions.

“What about this is funny?” Adrien scowled down at her, hands on his hips.

“You are.” Marinette snorted through her giggles. “New universe? No sweat. Chloe got turned into an immortal—”
“Technically the term is eternal, thank you very much.”

“—toad? No problem. You’re even on board with the whole take out menu thing, and believe me, I know how that must sound. But the fact that an infinite multiverse includes non-human variations of self? That’s a bridge too far?” Her giggles faded and she smiled at him with fond amusement. “You realize this means that I’m the only thing you’re truly scared of, right?”

“You’re not a thing.” Adrien grumbled. “That’s my whole point.”

“I’m not threatened by it.” She shrugged. “So why are you?”

“Because it’s weird.”

“Says the teenage superhero.”

“This is weird even by our standards, Bugaboo, and don’t think you can get away with this just by acting cute.”

“Get away with what, exactly?” Marinette arched a skeptical brow.

“You’re not being careful.”

“I’m being plenty careful.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well, I haven’t started hacking down all the trees in the orchard yet.” Marinette said lightly, her tone bordering on playful. “And I’m even considering getting some sleep before we make any moves. That’s way more careful than I’ve been over the last week.”

“You’re also giving a magic sword unfettered access to your brain. Maybe you never played enough D&D to already know this, but that’s usually a bad idea.”

Marinette groaned and flopped back on the grass, staring up at the night stars through the twining willow branches. “It’s not that I don’t understand where you’re coming from, kitty, but I also understand where she’s coming from. She’s not telling me what to do, and I don’t think she’s messing with my thoughts. When I was in the hospital, she contacted me through my dreams but it wasn’t a…message, exactly. It was…her life. And it was so sad, Chat. She’s so sad…”

“She’s a sword, milady.”

“She never asked to be a sword. She was kidnapped and broken and reformed into something she never wanted to be. And somehow, she still managed to find a new life with someone who loved her, but even that was taken away in the end. Now, she just wants to go home.” Marinette tilted her chin down so she could meet Adrien’s eyes. “It’s not just that she’s me. It’s that she’s just like me. Empathy isn’t manipulation.”

Empathy…

Empathy was hard for Adrien right now. The shattered pieces of himself were held together by spirit gum and the memory of waking up with Marinette in his arms. He could barely hold himself together, he didn’t have much strength left over for empathy. But he loved her, and as she sat up to get a better look at him and the moonlight dappled her face and hair the shattered pieces held together a little tighter, a little stronger.
As long as they were together, what was the worst that could happen?

What was the worst that could happen that hadn’t already happened?

Adrien suddenly decided that it was a little chillier than he had initially believed after all. He sat down on the grass next to Marinette and casually looped his arm around her waist. She gave him a mixed look of amused forbearance as he pulled her closer and subtly angled his arm to put an extra barrier between her and the sword at her side. That probably wouldn’t be enough to disrupt the strange communion between the sword and his lady, but a superhero could dream. He didn’t think she realized his intention. He was very sneaky about it. He even yawned for greater effect.

They made quite a picture—a toad, a magic sword and two teenage superheroes who were starting to get noticeably pungent from the day’s adventures, all sitting in a circle beneath the stars. All they needed now was a campfire and a bag of marshmallows to complete the scene.

The marshmallows weren’t going to happen, but maybe they could do something about the campfire.

“Chloe?” Marinette asked. “Do you know how to start a fire?”

“I’m a princess.”

“So?”

“So no.”

Adrien rested his chin on Marinette’s shoulder. “You want to try the rubbing two sticks together thing?”

“Might as well.” Marinette decided. Then she felt a wave of assurance and forewarning.

Her human brain interpreted Ladybug’s message as:

_I’ve got it._

All of a sudden the blade glowed red hot and the grass surrounding Ladybug burst into flames. Princess Chloe shrieked and jumped into the pond as the teenagers yelped and scrambled to their feet.

“Not yet!” Marinette scolded Ladybug as Adrien tried to stomp out the flames, which were spreading fast. “Let us set up first!”

The blade faded from red-hot to a bashful pink.

_Sorry._

Marinette moved to help Adrien smother the flames, but she froze when he growled and pointed at her bare feet. She nodded and stepped away, letting Adrien and his thick-soled dress shoes handle the situation.

She knew he was doing the best he could under the circumstances, and she was delighted that he still trusted her, but he wasn’t very patient with her right now. She understood why he was on edge, it was necessary given the dangers they faced, but she didn’t appreciate being protected from herself on top of everything else.

They were _her_ feet. She could risk singeing them if she wanted to.
Once the fire was put out, Marinette dug a shallow pit in the soft ground next to the pond as Adrien pulled rocks out of the murky water to place around the hole. They collected dry leaves and sweet grass for kindling and built a twig teepee in the pit. Marinette placed Ladybug’s prongs in the heart of the twigs and the blade glowed red once again, though the pummel remained cool to the touch. Before long they had a cheerfully crackling campfire to gather around.

“Okay…” Adrien said thoughtfully. “So in this universe Ladybug’s powers include glowing light, force fields, telepathy and now fire. What’s that about?”

“I think it has to do with her power source.” Marinette shrugged as she stuck Ladybug in the earth next to her.

“Which is?” Adrien asked as he reassumed his position at her side.

“She’s talking about the Mother Mountain.” It was Chloe who answered. She eyed Adrien suspiciously. “At least, that’s what you used to tell me. How could you forget something so important?”

Adrien tilted his head to meet Marinette’s eyes and she gave him a go-ahead nod.

It was time to tell Princess Chloe the truth.

The trick was going to be how he told her. He needed to be careful and clever in order to avoid ruffling her easily-ruffled feathers—or drying her skin, or pickling her warts, or de-webbing her toes or—

Adrien was getting sidetracked by puns. He forced himself to concentrate.

“Chloe, how long have we been friends?”

“Since we were adorable little pudgekins. Well, I was adorable, anyway.”

“I completely agree. You’ve always been there for me, even when I tried to push you away. I probably wouldn’t still be alive today if it weren’t for your help and support. I want you to know how much I value and respect you, because the truth is I’m not the same Adrikins you used to know. But I really hope you’ll still consider me a friend.”

Princess Chloe gave him a rock-hard inscrutable stare for a few long seconds before asking, “Then who precisely are you supposed to be?”

Adrien offered her a rueful half-smile and an outstretched hand to shake.

“The name’s Chat Noir. I’m from another universe. Nice to meet you, Princess Chloe.”

“What the hell kind of name is Chat Noir?” She asked as she placed a webbed appendage in his palm and shook.

“A super cool one.” He winked. Marinette groaned, attracting Chloe’s attention.

“Is she from another universe too?”

“Yes.”

“The same one or a different one?”

“The same one.” Marinette responded, smiling at Adrien. “We’re Marinette and Chat Noir, the
unstoppable team.”

“Does that make Ladybug our new sidekick?” Adrien smirked.

Princess Chloe had no idea why this comment caused the two strangers to dissolve into semi-hysterical giggles, but she took advantage of their tomfoolery to fully process this new information.

It didn’t take her long to reach the conclusion that this didn’t really effect her and was therefore irrelevant.

“So about the eternal garden wards…why haven’t you broken them already?”

“You haven’t actually explained what we need to do yet.” Adrien pointed out as his chuckles died away.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Not to us.” Marinette replied patiently.

“This place was a royal orchard before it became an eternal garden.” The toad explained. “Look around. One of these things is not like the others.”

Adrien looked around the orchard and didn’t see anything out of the ordinary, but Marinette immediately realized what Chloe was referencing.

“The willow tree?”

“Bull’s eye. Destroy the roots, and the binding spell over the orchard will be broken.”

“It can’t be that easy.” Adrien was dubious.

“Easy for you to say. You’re both pokins. I’m a toad. Lumberjack isn’t in my repertoire.”

“Once we break the binding spell…” Marinette asked slowly, her mind whizzing through potential scenarios. “What effect will that have on you?”

“Why? Not having second thoughts, are we?” Chloe challenged her.

“No.” Marinette fired back. “But we need to be prepared.” Adrien nodded approvingly.

“Well, the truth is I don’t know. Could do nothing. Could drop dead on the spot. Probably something inbetween.”

“And you’re willing to take that risk?” Adrien questioned.

Princess Chloe knew all the birds in the orchard by name, all 246 of them.

“Absolutely.”

“Okay, next question…” Marinette waved at the midnight sky. “What are we going to do about the Sunset Guard? Will we still be able to resist them without the protection from the binding spell?”

“Probably not.” Chloe shrugged. “But that’s really more of a You Problem.”

“Won’t you be in danger as well?”

“Why would they waste their time hunting an amphibian?”
“I…I don’t know enough about interspecies dynamics in this world to know how to respond to that…”

“Didn’t you say Ladybug had a plan to deal with the reptiles?” Adrien asked Marinette.

“Something like that.” She sighed. “She communicated it as a sense of nostalgic recognition tinged with disgust that became so overwhelming it was painful until suddenly there was only emptiness. I think she meant that she’s going to use the spiritual link she has with the reptiles through their shared power source to overload and shut down their telepathy.”

“Kind of like a DDoS attack?”

“Uh…maybe? Let me ask…”

Adrien watched with affection and a small amount of strain as Marinette attempted to explain ‘distributed denial of service’ and why such a thing would be weaponized to a magic sword, with Chloe providing running commentary from the peanut gallery.

They had three goals they needed to accomplish, and in the end it would all come down to timing.

Goal #1: Free Chloe.

Goal #2: Reclaim Marinette’s purse.

Goal #3: Take the Ladybug sword deep under the Mother Mountain and somehow, through a suspiciously vague mystical process, overthrow the world order.

Easy peasy.

Except, no, not easy peasy, more like hardy pardy, because:

A: Kaibliss was waiting for them under the mountain.

B: Flying telepathic iguanas coming to suck their brains as soon as the eternal garden spell was broken.

“What if we take Ladybug under the mountain first, before we break the spell and get the purse.” Adrien suggested, interrupting a heated debate between Marinette and Chloe as to the existence of electricity (which, apparently, had yet to be harnessed in this world). “That way Kaibliss and the Sunset Guard will be powerless.” They’d still be big, but he’d fought bigger.

Marinette shook her head. “Ladybug says that won’t work. She says that if there’s anything we want to do, we’d better get it done before because it won’t be possible after.”

“Why not?”

Marinette shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know. She’s trying to tell me something, but I’m not sure what it means. It reminds me of the feeling you get right before a thunder storm, after the sky gets dark and the wind picks up, but before it starts to rain. Only this is a lot more powerful than that. By magnitudes.”

“Well, that’s a problem.” Adrien sighed. “Because as soon as we bust Chloe out the Sunset Guard is going to be on our asses. And we can’t get your purse back from Kaibliss without Chloe.”

“Why’s that now?”
“So we’ll deal with the Sunset Guard first.” Marinette ignored Chloe’s question and disgruntled glare. “Then Kaibliss and my purse, then bringing Ladybug home.”

“How, though? There’s at least a dozen of them and only two of us.”

“Maybe we don’t have to fight them. Maybe we can trick them into flying so far away they won’t be able to make it in time to stop us.” Marinette pondered. “They must have some weaknesses. Something we can exploit. Thoughts? Chloe?”

“Oh sure, now you acknowledge me.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“Stuff it and go back to the part where you need me to retrieve your belongings from Kaibliss. That was never part of the deal.”

“The deal was we would free you and you would help us.” Adrien reminded her. “This is how you can help us.”

“You’ll have to come up with something a lot more valuable than my freedom if you expect me to go anywhere near that disgusting old pile of so-and-so.”

Adrien and Marinette’s eyes met and he shook his head ever so slightly. He recognized that tone of voice. At the moment, it wouldn’t do any good talking to Chloe about their plans for what Marinette had dubbed Operation Purse Snatch. They would have to wait and try again later, after she had some time to get used to the idea.

“Let’s try taking stock of our resources.” Marinette suggested. “We have the sword, which means we also have fire. There’s a lot we can accomplish we a sword and fire. Chloe? Anything to add?”

“All I’ve got are pond rocks and mushpogs, both of which you have already stolen.”

“Chat?”

Adrien reached into his pocket and pulled out the shard of mirror glass. Though it was currently the only thing to his name, he had mostly forgotten about it until that moment.

“Perfect!” Marinette clapped her hands excitedly. “That’s exactly what we need!”

“Really?” Adrien asked dubiously.

“Is that mirror glass?” Chloe asked with keen interest as she hopped over to get a better look. “It is! Why didn’t you say something earlier, Noirkins? This changes everything.”

“Really.” Adrien repeated, even more dubious than the first time, as Marinette whispered Noirkins under her breath with glee.

“Do they not have schools in your universe or something? Mirror glass can reflect telepathic waves back at the sender. It’s even worse for the higher reptiles like basilisks and wyrms, it turns them to stone. This is why the reptiles destroyed all the mirrors in the world as soon as they came to power. But here you have a nice shiny piece! If we’d had this five hundred years ago, you might still be alive.”

“But it’s a tiny piece…”
“It’ll have to do. If they can see their own eyes in the glass, that will be enough.” Chloe nodded firmly.

“Alya’s research backs that up.” Marinette agreed. “The folklore is vague, but mirrors are definitely one of Kaibliss’ weaknesses and the same is probably true for the iguanas.”

“That’s what I just said.”

“I know. I was agreeing with you.”

“And yet the words ‘Chloe is right’ never crossed your lips. Funny.”

“Oh my god, seriously? Are you really that insecure?”

“How dare you. I’ll have you know that—”

“Okay, next question.” Adrien interrupted quickly before two of the most important people in his life could get into another argument over how similar they were. “How are we going to get close enough to Kaibliss or the iguanas for them to see their own eyes in the mirror without being eaten or captured in the process?” He began holding the shard at arms length from his face and moving his head around, investigating angles and distances.

“Chloe, if we gave you the mirror, would you be willing to get close enough to Kaibliss to use it?” Marinette asked.

“How am I supposed to hold it? My feet aren’t great for gripping. I’m not a frog, you realize. And how am I supposed to hide it from him? I don’t have any pockets.”

“Maybe we can tie it to your belly or something.” Marinette suggested. “We’ll pretend to exchange you for the purse—”

“What?!?”

“Oh, do you think that won’t work?”

“No, it will probably work. I’m an extremely valuable hostage. But this is the first I’m hearing of it!”

“Well…is it a problem?”

“Like I said, you’ll need to come up with something a lot more valuable than my freedom before I’ll even consider agreeing to such an obviously doomed scheme.”

“Okay, so we have a plan for Kaibliss and the purse.” Adrien sighed, confident that they’d find some way of bribing Chloe before the inevitable battle began. “But that still leaves us with the Sunset Guard. How are we going to trick them?”

“Well, they’re looking for us, aren’t they?” Marinette reasoned. “So we’ll make them think we went somewhere else.”

“Like where?” Adrien frowned. “The village?”

“No, that’s too close to the Mother Mountain.” Marinette frowned thoughtfully. “How about the forest across the river?” Her eyes darted around the orchard, seeking anything, no matter how small or insignificant, that could potentially be utilized to their advantage. They landed on a cluster of reeds growing at the edge of the pond. The stalks were narrow but strong and slotted like bamboo, and they were topped with cattail-like heads with purple tassels coming out of the top. Marinette couldn’t
be certain since botany was not her area of expertise, but they didn’t look like plants that grew in her world. Still, they would do the trick. “In the morning, we’ll swim across the river and start a fire. Then we’ll swim up the river towards the Mother Mountain. We can use those reeds as snorkels so the Sunset Guard won’t see us as they go to investigate the fire. We’ll have to find Kaibliss quickly, and get under the mountain before they come back, but I think we can do it.”

“And after Ladybug does her thing?” Adrien asked, still unsure as to what that ‘thing’ was. “What then?”

“Then I’ll…use the take out menu.” Marinette’s mouth twisted bitterly. It was deeply frustrating not being able to explain the Founder’s cryptic warning or the existence of an inter-dimensional search-and-rescue team to her partner. “And we’ll go home.”

“And what about you?” Adrien turned to face Princess Chloe. “After we go home and the reptiles can’t use their telepathy anymore, what will you do?”

Chloe had spent many decades fantasizing about that very turn of events and she already knew exactly what she was going to do.

“I’m going to hunt down Princess Sabrina and rub it in her smug pokin face.”

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Adrien and Marinette added more twigs to the fire and settled down to sleep on the grass nearby. They lay face-to-face, nose-to-nose, not touching but somehow still entwined.

“Are you scared?” He whispered.

“Yes.” She blinked. “Are you?”

“Yes.” He admitted.

“I think it’s scarier to do nothing.” She told him.

He sighed and shut his eyes. “I think it’s scarier to go home and have to do anything.”

“I’ll be with you. And Nino and Alya and everyone else will be there too.”

“I know, but what if it isn’t enough?” He sighed again and rolled onto his back without opening his eyes. Marinette pushed herself up slightly to watch him. “What if I can’t cut it? It’s not just the superhero stuff, it’s the life stuff. I’m sure as fuck not living there again, so that means I’m on my own. Job. Bills. Taxes. I don’t know how to do any of it. I don’t know if I can. I haven’t even graduated yet. And that’s what really scares me…” He opened his eyes when he heard a faint rustle and found Marinette leaning over him, her bluebell eyes burning. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, Marinette.” He confessed brokenly. “What if I never figure it out?”

Marinette wanted to tell him that of course he’d figure it out. But how could she, when she had all the same doubts and fears about her own future? She settled for leaning down and pressing her lips against his, a searing promise that formed between them without any words being spoken. He welcomed the kiss, drawing her closer with a caress and a spark of understanding. This language was new to them, a new unexplored aspect of their relationship, but they were proving to be quick
“I’ll be with you.” She promised again when she pulled away.

Adrien stared up at her and marveled at how beautiful his partner was. It wasn’t the first time he’d been struck by her light, and he’d do anything to guarantee that it wouldn’t be the last time either. Always unexpected, always unpredictable, always coming out of nowhere to smack him in the face with the full force of her star. He only doubted himself, never her, but she acted as if there wasn’t a meaningful distinction. As if to doubt himself was to doubt her by extension. And the way she was looking at him now…it was the same way she looked at him when he found an eyelash on her cheek and told her to make a wish. As if he were something entirely wonderful, wholly marvelous, and completely miraculous.

“Always?” He asked.

“Always.” She nodded.

Adrien’s hands slipped around her waist and he pulled her back down for another scorching kiss. Marinette melted on top of him, a mixture of adrenaline, exhaustion and desire driving all other considerations from her mind as he nibbled on her bottom lip and she explored his mouth. They were interrupted by an extremely disgruntled throat-clearing sound from the other side of the campfire.

“Don’t start that up again.” Princess Chloe huffed. “It was bad enough the first time.”

***

Marinette and Adrien slept huddled together for warmth, though the night was balmy and the wind a mere kindly whisper in the leaves. The toad watched over them and the sword, mightily suspicious of the pale rose glow emanating from the hilt. Princess Chloe wouldn’t have been able to sleep even if she tried. After five hundred years, she’d never have to spend another night in this orchard again. She memorized every detail that she hadn’t already memorized for lack of anything else to do. The sound of the grass under her legs, the constellations of the ant hills, the plop of a ripe mushpog releasing its twig and falling to the ground. The orchard had always been one of her favorite places in her kingdom, and it had been a beautiful and comfortable prison, but it was still a prison. Princess Chloe couldn’t wait to move on.

Under the light of the crescent Sister Moons, Ladybug sang to Marinette and told her many secrets.

Ladybug showed Marinette a vision of the orchard—or rather, what was underneath the orchard. Earth and worms and roots. Thousands upon thousands of roots, some as thick and sturdy as her torso, some as slender and delicate as a cat’s whisker. Each knobby tendril pulsed with life. Marinette could see it flowing through the root system like a golden river. But then the vision moved deeper into the orchard towards the pond. As her perspective grew closer and closer to the willow tree where she slept, the golden hue began to dim, turning grey and stagnant. Marinette cried out in her sleep when she saw the willow roots—startling Princess Chloe in the waking world who gave the glowing sword an especially accusatory glare. There was no life in these roots, no gold, no river. These roots were decay. These roots were ash. These roots were chains.

_The tree is the cage._ Ladybug whispered. _Plunge me into its heart to break the monster’s spell and the princess will be free._
Will she still be a toad? Marinette wondered.

*I honestly have no idea what to do about that. It’s fine the way it is, right? Being a toad suits her.*

*Good. We’re on the same page, then.*

Ladybug spoke to Marinette of power.

Not force, not control, not violence. *Power.*

The power to change the course of destiny. The power to change the world. The power to create a new world, from ruins, from dreams, from wreckage, from hope, from nothingness. The power that was needed, the power to be what people needed.

Before Ladybug was a sword, she was ore and stone in a mountain. But there was a time before that as well—a time of pressure and collision and heat. Primordial, tectonic and evolving. A time of combination and transformation and *change.* Calamitous change, catastrophic change, *cataclysmic* change.

The moment of creation.

The source of her power, the same source the monster drew his power from.

Ladybug told Marinette where to find that power and how to turn it against him.

Marinette awoke as the rosy fingers of dawn crested the horizon, one final whisper dancing in her mind.

*Bring us home, hero.*

The willow tree burned.

As soon as Marinette woke up, she grabbed Ladybug and plunged the blade straight into the heart of the trunk while Adrien was still rolling over and rubbing the crust out of his eyelashes. The blade immediately glowed red-hot and the willow tree burst into flames. Adrien finally opened his eyes when he felt the heat blast him. He took one look and leapt to his feet with a strangled scream.

“Oh.” He muttered darkly after realizing what had caused the fire. Waking up a moment after Marinette unleashed hell was not nearly as much fun as waking up with her snoozing in his arms. “Are we starting?”

“Sorry.” Marinette winced as she yanked the blade out of the trunk and stumbled away from the burning tree. “Reflex.”

“How? How is ‘tree stabbing’ a reflex?”

“Ladybug was messing around in her dreams again.” Princess Chloe informed him, sounding both smug and snide. “But I’m not complaining if it moves things along.”

“Why do I constantly surround myself with bloodthirsty magic users who like to set things on fire?” Adrien muttered as he went to wash his face in the pond, thinking back on Plagg’s numerous adventures with matches when he was bored or felt that Adrien was being too stingy with the cheese. Marinette collected some mushpogs to share and the three of them ate their breakfast in silence, watching the tree burn and considering the tasks that lay before them. It was very clearly a magical fire. For one thing, there wasn’t any smoke. It didn’t spread to the grass or the other trees. Instead it
appeared to gradually move deeper inside the tree, turning the trunk into a glowing ember as the trailing branches withered away to ash and sparks. Adrien didn’t say another word until Marinette stood up and started taking off her overalls.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to trim the legs to make them easier to swim in. May I, Ladybug?” Marinette waited for assurance from the sword before picking up the blade and slicing the pant legs off the overalls. When she put them back on, the fraying edges only came down mid-thigh. “What do you think?” She asked, giving Adrien a twirl. “I’m going for the Sweaty Kid From A Coming Of Age Movie Who Has Been Lost In The Woods For About A Week look.”

“You’re adorable.” He told her honestly. Marinette blushed and grinned at her feet. Warmth filled his stomach at her expression and he couldn’t help but tease. “The lopsided pigtails are what really sell it.” She laughed and stuck out her tongue.

It took about half an hour for the willow tree to burn out, by which point dawn had turned to morning and they were all fully awake and ready for the day. Chloe made a lot of noise about how slow they were, but Adrien could tell that she was nervous. The closer they got to the edge of the orchard the tenser the toad became. He offered to carry her, but she dismissed him with an offended huff.

This was something Princess Chloe needed to do on her own.

Would it work, they all wondered. Ladybug was confident that it would, but even Marinette wasn’t sure if the sword’s definition of success matched theirs.

And if it did work, that meant the clock was ticking and they only had so many hours to defeat the enemy and save the world before…

Before…

Well, it was probably best not to think about that.

Before long, they reached the edge of the orchard and the moment of truth had arrived. Marinette and Adrien hung back as Princess Chloe hopped up to the invisible line that she had not been able to cross in five hundred years.

Five hundred years of hoping and wishing and despairing and waiting…

Princess Chloe took a deep breath, closed her eyes…and hopped.

She landed on soft dewy grass, eight feet away.

She opened her eyes and looked down at a tiny black beetle scurrying over her foot. She’d never seen it before in her life.

The air erupted in triumphant whoops and squeals as Chloe and Marinette exploded. Marinette jumped up and down and punched the sky with her fist. Chloe just jumped. Adrien slumped over with relief. The binding spell was broken. But that meant it was time to go, tick tock. He took a deep breath to steady himself as Marinette rushed forward and swooped Princess Chloe up in her arms. They whirled around the hill that bordered the orchard, laughing and crying with relief and delight.

“Thank you, Marinette.” Chloe wept.
“I’m so happy for you, Chloe.” Marinette smiled through her tears and, without thinking about it, bent her head and pecked the toad on the lips.

The toad’s golden gas lamp eyes widened with surprise and then…

Princess Chloe vanished in a cloud of golden sparkles.

*THUMP*

Adrien’s jaw dropped as his brain tried to process what it had just witnessed.

One second he’d been watching Marinette twirl a large toad around in circles. Then they kissed, which, *why did he keep seeing that happen?* The next second he was watching a very human-shaped, very *naked* Chloe straddle his lady in the grass. Both women were clearly just as surprised by Chloe’s sudden transformation as he was, gaping at each other with wide eyes and red cheeks.

“Dark Cupid…” Marinette murmured, which made about as much sense to Adrien as anything else happening right now. “I should have known!”

“THANK YOU MARINETTE!” Chloe shrieked ecstatically, grabbing Marinette’s face between her hands and smooching her with a loud wet smack.

*Poof*

“Dammit! Now I’m a toad again!”

“Luckily, I know how to fix that.”

*smek*

Adrien felt faint as he watched them kiss for the third time in under a minute, his mental faculties huffing and puffing to keep up. Since his brain was still stuck on *naked girl on top of Marinette* the first thing he did was pull off his shirt to offer it to the princess.

Chloe rolled off of Marinette as he walked towards them and stood up, her long legs shaky from shock and neglect. She spread out her arms and flexed her non-webbed fingers, taking extra delight in twirling her thumbs. She ran her right hand through her long blonde hair and slid her left down the curve of her waist. She looked back and saw how small the orchard really was. She turned around again with tears of joy in her ice blue eyes.

“Thank you, Marinette…” She took a trembling step forwards as Marinette rose to her feet.

“STOP!” Adrien sliced his arm through the air between them. “The two of you are *not* allowed to kiss anymore. It’s a vicious cycle and also, Chloe, I know this really isn’t fair and also kind of immature, but we *talked* about this.” He shoved his shirt towards the princess’s bare stomach while glaring reproachfully at a ruthlessly smug Marinette. Chloe took the shirt, which would barely reach her hips, with a look of curious disgust. Then she glanced slyly at Adrien, leaned up on her tippy toes and grabbed his chin, kissing him firmly on the mouth.

“Mmph!”

“Hey!”

*Poof*

“Chloe!” Two voices shouted at the same time.
“What? I wanted to see if it would work with anyone else.” The toad shrugged. The shirt had disappeared with her hair. Adrien really hoped it would come back. “Now one of you kiss me so that I can get down to brushing my hair. It’s been ages.”

“I’ll do it.” Marinette and Adrien said in unison. They stopped, turned and glared at each other. “You’re not doing it.” They chorused.

Marinette sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Adrien, you’re being childish.”

“So are you.” He pointed out. “And since we’re both being childish, we should settle this like reasonable children. I’ve had to watch you kiss Chloe four times now, you’ve only had to watch me do it once. It’s my turn.”

“No, because just now only counts as once and when have you ever seen me kiss Chloe?”

“At the party!”

“Oh yeah…” Marinette sighed. “That was an illusion though.”

“Still counts though.”

“Fine. I mean, you’re wrong, illusions do not count and that is a ridiculous precedent to set given our line of work, but fine. Do your worst, monsieur.”

“As you wish, Bugaboo.”

Marinette pouted as Adrien bent over and kissed the toad, turning her back into a beautiful princess. He was relieved to see that his shirt came back with her. “What happened to your clothes the first time around?”

“I think that’s what the golden sparkles were.” Marinette commented as Chloe shrugged on the shirt and ignored him.

“Oh snap.” Adrien gasped, eyes wide.

“What?” Marinette asked.

“Anything she’s holding disappears with her human form and then comes back, just like with our transformations. This is how we get the mirror glass close enough to Kaibliss for him to see his own eyes in the reflection.”

Chloe’s ice blue eyes narrowed in a fierce glare, slightly crinkled around the edges from lack of use. “Noirkins…if this ends with me kissing that monstrous slithering brute, I will behead you myself for even suggesting it.”

“I’m not suggesting. I’m just asking, do either of you have a better idea?” Adrien stuck his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “And I don’t know if this is better than your freedom, but it’s definitely more than we bargained for. You owe us, Chloe. Time to settle up.”

Chapter End Notes

So, as you’ve probably noticed this chapter was a) late and b) a little shorter than usual.
Also, I haven't been able to do a final edit. And that's why there's no disclaimer for this chapter, I didn't have the spoons to write one.

(Sidenote: Here's a link to the article that started spoon theory, which is a very useful thing that everyone should know about: https://butyoudontlooksick.com/articles/written-by-christine/the-spoon-theory/)

I'm dealing with some temporary mobility limitations that have effected my ability to type. I have the rest of the story written as a VERY rough typed draft and a bunch of rewrites in my notebook. I'm working on getting everything typed up, but I'm down to a couple paragraphs a day and sometimes less. So it's very slow moving. There are three, maybe four, maaaaaaybe five more chapters in this story. I'd like to keep to my update schedule but it might not be possible and I don't want to compromise on quality. So hopefully I'll update on Thursday, but I might not be able to and I can't guarantee a set schedule. Updates *will* come regularly, though that might mean shorter chapters (which is why I'm not sure how many chapters are left, since I might break things into smaller chunks). If a chapter is going to be *really* late, I'll edit the end notes of the most recent chapter to give a time frame on when I think it will be up.

Thanks for your patience! And thanks for reading.
Lucky Charm

Chapter Summary

In which our heroes jump the shark in a most eruptive fashion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Disclaimer:

Chat: Banng, this is completely unreasonable!

Ladybug: We demand better treatment!

Author: What do you want me to do, write more often?

Chat: For starters.

Ladybug: We’d also like to get the wifi password.

Author: Hey, I don’t own you and you can’t tell me what to do!

Mr. X: I can give you the wifi password.

Author: Mr X! Don’t encourage them!

Mr. X: Look, if you’re going to keep them trapped in your Inspiration Castle even when you’re on hiatus, you should at least let them watch Netflix or something. Sheesh.

***

Lucky Charm

***

Once upon a time, in a world quite similar to our own but also extremely different in several critical ways, there lived a nameless little girl with no friends or family that she knew of.
The little girl lived in a cage.

She had been put there by monsters who did not look the way she looked, who did not speak her language, who laughed when she cried and took satisfaction in her fear. They fed off her anxiety, drank her terror like an aphrodisiac, consuming every care, worry and woe until she had nothing left save memories.

But she was such a little girl, she didn’t have many memories to begin with.

She couldn’t remember the sound of her mother’s voice, but she remembered the night they took her away. She couldn’t remember the color of the sky, but she could remember the warmth of sunshine on her face.

Now the world was cold. Now the world was dark.

Now the little girl believed, because this was what the monsters had told her to believe, that she was alone.

The monsters lied.

Beyond the windowless walls of her cage were hundreds and thousands of identical cages, each containing a frightened lonely child. The underground plantation spanned for miles and miles beneath the vast desert of the Southern Continent. It was a fear factory, a place where the reptiles could produce and preserve the telepathic energies so many of them fed upon. When the children grew up and their fear lost that youthful vibrancy, they were gradually moved on to the pokin farms, for meat or stock. The lucky ones would spend the rest of their days frolicking in the pastures along the coast. The unlucky ones would be slaughtered, preserved in honey or salt, and shipped out to hungry reptiles across the globe.

This was the way of the world.

This was the system, the global order, fueled by supply and demand. The exploitation of emotion powered the advancement and development of civilization. The children were chattel, as their parents had been before them and presumably as their own children would be after they were grown.

The world had not always been this way, but it had been this way long enough for the memory of freedom to dwindle and disappear. Terror and darkness was the status quo, unquestioned, unchallenged, unmitigated.

The monsters had taken control of the earth, and they would not relinquish their hold until the earth itself fought back.

Alone in her cage, the little girl waited for a hero.

***

The river was wide, winding and nameless. It carried the snowmelt from the Mother Mountain and her Daughter Hills to the Sea of Scales, one hundred and one miles away. Large flakes of mica, plentiful as a school of minnows, made the sleepy currents glint with silver in the sunshine. Marinette and Adrien dove into the water as soon as they reached the bank, but Chloe hesitated on the shore. Adrien bobbed in the brisk waters and looked askance at her as Marinette continued paddling
towards the opposite bank.

“What’s wrong?” He asked.

“I don’t want to get my hair wet.” She confessed, eyeing the water with trepidation.

“Ten minutes ago you were still a toad and you didn’t even have hair.” Adrien pointed out, struggling to keep his temper. “Is now really the time to start worrying about this?”

“Absolutely.” Chloe crossed her arms stubbornly. “Now that I’m a pokin again I have to adjust my priorities.”

Adrien wanted to scream. Of all moments to turn chicken, of course Chloe would choose now, when they didn’t have a single moment to spare. He could probably talk her around, but he wasn’t exactly in the right frame of mind to sate her vanity. He tried anyway.

“You hair will still look fine even if it’s wet.” He said impatiently.

“That’s sweet of you to say, Noirkins, but it’s obvious you have no idea what you’re talking about.” Chloe rolled her eyes.

“Right now your hair is tangled and lifeless, due to neglect.” Adrien’s tone had graduated from impatient to snappish. Despite what the princess thought, keeping up appearances was a subject he knew something about. “If you get it wet, it will appear longer and healthier and—turn around for me please? Yeah, see, once it’s wet it’ll reach to the backs of your knees, off-setting the shorter length of the shirt and drawing attention to the willowy lines of your figure. It’s the perfect look for a cursed princess, trust me. Now get in.”

“Are you sure?” Chloe asked doubtfully, though she was clearly intrigued by the picture he’d painted. “It won’t make me look like a wet sewer slug?”

Adrien didn’t have time for this. Marinette and Ladybug had already reached the other side of the river. He dragged himself out of the water, muttering curses under his breath. Princess Chloe didn’t realize his intentions until it was too late, and before she had a chance to scream he had swept her up in his arms and tossed her in the river. She landed with a loud splash and an offended squawk. She bobbed to the surface and sputtered furiously at him, too outraged to form words. Adrien smirked and dove back into the deep waters. The princess was ready for him. As soon as he was within arms reach, she grabbed his hair and dunked his head, screeching “YOU TREACHEROUS SLIME WEEVIL!”

Instead of struggling, Adrien went with the flow and sank to the bottom of the river, where he could see the princess standing on her toes. He swam towards her long legs with a wicked grin and dragged his fingernails across the soles of her feet. The princess once again erupted with unintelligible squawking as Adrien swam away from her, breaking the surface of the water with laughter on his lips.

“You’re gonna pay for that, Noirkin—”

“A-hem.”

The two blondes froze mid-splash and turned to look sheepishly at Marinette, who was treading water a few feet away and glaring at them. She had three reeds in her hand and Ladybug strapped to her back with a sash made from her old pant legs. The opposite bank was already aflame, smoke billowing out of the dense trees. The blanket of evergreen needles on the ground sparked and crackled as if each tiny strip of plant matter were a cabaret dancer and this forest fire was the big
break they’d been waiting for.

“If the two of you are quite finished,” Marinette sniffed disapprovingly. “We should keep moving.”

She was right, of course. It was only a matter of time before someone or something noticed the fledgling fire and the Sunset Guard arrived to investigate. Properly abashed, Adrien and Princess Chloe accepted the reed straws that Marinette offered them and the trio began swimming upstream as fast as they could. Marinette stayed close to Adrien, ready to intervene if he lost his rhythm in the current. They had been paddling in determined silence for about ten minutes when Adrien felt the tell-tale pressure building at the base of his skull.

“Dive!” He grunted, and they all ducked beneath the surface of the water. They kept swimming as the iguanas passed by overhead, using the reed straws to breathe as they continued through the glittering currents. The telepathic thrall that accompanied the Sunset Guard was mitigated by the water and the iguanas’ distraction. Even still, Adrien and Marinette had to struggle against the urge to surface and turn themselves in. The princess fared a little better, thanks to centuries of concentrated meditation on Not Giving A Fuck. The mental faculties she had been forced to develop in order to survive her monotonous imprisonment had granted her a certain level of invulnerability to telepathic assaults.

It took them another half hour to reach the foot of the Mother Mountain. Though he was glad to be out of the water, Adrien couldn’t help but wish they’d never arrived. He’d almost rather they kept swimming forever and ever, that the river was the eternal garden instead of the orchard, that this moment never came.

Because this was the moment when they had to split up, and of all the many components of their plan that made him nervous, this was the part that had him breaking out in a cold sweat.

Adrien stood on the riverbank at the foot of the Mother Mountain and wondered how he got himself into these situations in the first place. Following Ladybug’s lead, same as usual. He didn’t want to be here. He would rather be anywhere else—the orchard, the castle, the village ruins, the forest on the other side of the river. Now that he had a chance to reflect on the matter, the Southern Continent didn’t sound that bad either.

But the place he most wanted to be was Paris, and if this was what it took to get back there…

Then he didn’t really have a choice in the matter, did he?

“The path that leads to the abandoned mines is that way.” Princess Chloe pointed towards a shadowy hole in the base of the mountain about fifteen yards from where they stood. “Most of the tunnels are probably flooded or caved in, since it’s been centuries since any pokins went in there. You’ll probably be trapped forever, assuming you can even get in that way.”

“I’ll figure it out.” Adrien replied through gritted teeth. ‘Figuring it out’ had become another mantra, part self-reassurance, part resigned helplessness. He glanced at Marinette. “Have I mentioned how much I don’t like this plan?”

“Several times.” She gave him an understanding smile. “I don’t like splitting up either, but it’s the only way to get the purse back and awaken the Mother Mountain before we’re completely outnumbered.”

“I’m still not completely clear on what ‘awakening the Mother Mountain’ actually entails though…”

“Don’t worry about it. Just get Ladybug to where she needs to be and she’ll take care of the rest. Are
you ready?"

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” He had Ladybug gripped tightly in his left hand, the sword practically humming with anticipation. Marinette thought that was all he needed. He hoped she was right. He’d run towards danger countless times before, but this charge seemed different. He felt naked without his mask.

At least he still had his ring, even though without Plagg its value was purely sentimental. Marinette didn’t even have her earrings, let alone her superpowers. She didn’t have a magic sword or a mirror shard. All she had was a grumpy princess and her wits.

Adrien looped the arm that wasn’t holding Ladybug around Marinette’s waist, pulling her into a fierce one-armed embrace. She smelled like soil and sweet grass and exertion. Her arms circled around his torso as she buried her face in his chest and inhaled deeply. They clung together for a few moments, trying to say with touch what they couldn’t say with words. The enormity of the task before them. The enormity of what they could lose. The enormity of what they stood to gain. Neither of them dared move away, even though they knew the moment could not last.

“Marinette…”

“Yeah?”

“This…”

This could be goodbye…

It was a thought they were both having, though neither could force themselves to say it out loud. At least not in so many words.

“Don’t get killed.” Adrien whispered hoarsely, blinking against his tears.

“Same to you.” She replied, her voice muffled by his shirt and her own emotions.

Princess Chloe cleared her throat. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. We don’t have all day, y’know. The Sunset Guard could show up at any minute.”

Adrien rolled his eyes and ducked his head to nuzzle Marinette’s cheek with his nose. She peeked up at him questioningly and he snagged her lips for a lingering kiss. “For luck.” He said when they parted.

She smiled and pecked his cheek. “You have Ladybug.” She reminded him. “You have all the luck you need.”

“A little more won’t hurt.” He argued, pressing countless fervent kisses along her brow.

“I guess not.” Marinette agreed, grabbing his chin and pulling him back down to meet her lips.

Princess Chloe made gagging noises until they finally separated.

As Adrien walked towards the tunnel that would lead him into the deepest depths of the Mother Mountain, he kept looking over his shoulder and trying not to think that this was the last time he would ever see his lady’s smile.

Marinette watched him leave with longing in her eyes, wishing she could go with him. Princess Chloe watched Marinette watching Adrien (who was still watching them over his shoulder even as
he vanished into the tunnel) with incredulous disgust.

“Hell-oooh? Can we please focus on our own imminent peril?” Chloe snapped her fingers under Marinette’s nose. “It’s incredible we’ve managed to do anything given all the time you two waste making moon-eyes at each other.”

“Oh, lighten up.” Marinette sighed, snapping back to the present.

“What is the deal with the two of you, anyway?”

“What do you mean?”

“What are you to each other?” The princess crossed her arms and arched a skeptical eyebrow. “Are you betrothed or what?”

“We’re…” Marinette hesitated. Though she and Adrien had established an overtly romantic commitment during their reunion at the hospital, they had not discussed terminology. Furthermore, Marinette had no idea how to translate the terminology she and Adrien had not previously discussed into terms Princess Chloe would understand. “We’re partners.”

“And what precisely does that mean?”

“I don’t know.” Marinette shrugged, uncomfortable with the princess’s scrutiny. “Why do you care?”

“Because I deserve an explanation for all the obscenity I’ve had to tolerate from the pair of you.” The princess sniffed haughtily. “I certainly hope the Princess Chloe of your universe doesn’t have to put up with such egregious displays of affection.”

Marinette was one second away from telling the blonde that it was none of her business when something about Chloe’s expression stopped her. A slight crinkle around her eyes, a stiffness in her posture. The princess was trying to pass off concern as offense. Typical Chloe.

“Are you…are you trying to ask me what my intentions are?” Marinette asked, unable to disguise the amusement in her tone.

“You mean Noirkins?”

“Sure. Noirkins is…everything to me. He’s my most important person. We didn’t choose this life, someone else picked us for it, and I probably would have given up a long time ago if it weren’t for him.” Marinette sighed as she realized that even now, she couldn’t find the perfect words to express how she felt. Maybe she never would. She tried anyway. “He’s my reason. My reason for being here. My reason for going home. My reason for doing the work I do. I… I can’t imagine life without him. I don’t really have any intentions. I don’t really know what we’re going to do next. But I know we’ll do it together.” She smiled at the princess. “Does that answer your question?”

“That doesn’t explain all the unnecessary touching.”

“That part’s just for fun. Speaking of which…”

Princess Chloe sighed and looked at her reflection in the mirror glass shard clutched between her
hands.

She’d seen this sight before, more or less, on numerous occasions over the course of her long lonely years in captivity. For so long, she’d been dreaming of finding herself in the shadow of the Mother Mountain, but now that the dream was finally a reality it wasn’t at all what she’d expected. The woman in the glass was paler, gaunter, clearly older even though she had not aged, than the woman in her recurring dream. It was startling to look in the mirror and see a face she did not recognize; it was disturbing to realize that the face she did not recognize was her own.

But at least she was not screaming.

Chloe had expected to feel some fear, but to her surprise she didn’t even feel angry. She just felt… ready.

Ready for it to be over.

Ready to end it once and for all.

“Lay it on me.” The princess commanded. Marinette nodded grimly and puckered up.

Poof

As Chloe transformed back into a toad, the mirror shard in her hands vanished along with Adrien’s shirt and her opposable thumbs. When she returned to her human form, the shard would reappear as well. They only needed to get close enough to Kaibliss for the sight of his own reflection to be unavoidable, which was no mean feat considering how small the shard was. Marinette knew she would have to keep her cool, so she steeled herself as best she could as she picked up the toad and began walking up the river bank. She also sent a quick mental thank you to Caline Bustier for responding to Hawk Moth’s reign of terror by incorporating mindfulness, meditation and self care into her curriculum. She measured her breathing as she walked, remaining calm and alert to her surroundings.

Focus. She told herself.

Marinette walked along the river until she could see the collapsed mound from which she and Adrien had emerged the day before. She figured it was as good a location to call Kaibliss out from as any, and it had the added benefit of being well-removed from the tunnel system Adrien had ventured into.

“Ready, Your Highness?”

“Why? Do you plan on snogging me too?”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Heart hammering, palms clammy, veins frozen and sluggish with fear, Marinette squared her shoulders.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with me to yell at Princess Sabrina instead?” The toad asked nervously. “Last chance to not be snake food.”

Marinette ignored her. She had no intention of being eaten.

“Kaibliss!” She shouted in a loud clear voice that echoed across the mountainside like the beating of a war drum. “I want to talk to you!”

Marinette and Princess Chloe held their breath and waited. Nothing happened. Marinette grit her teeth and snarled, before taking a deep breath and forcing her temper back in line.
“Kaibliss!” She shouted again. “I know you can hear me, you slimy bastard. Get out here and face me!”

“That’s what I love about superheroes. You always come back swinging.”

Marinette gasped as the basilisk’s massive head reared out of a rocky crevice high above her head. This was her first time seeing Kaibliss in his true form, and that one glimpse was enough to make her doubt herself.

For an instant.

And then she pulled herself together, because she didn’t have a choice, and glared at him.

“Give me back my purse, you creep!” She roared.

“Oh. You mean this?” Kaibliss lifted his tail. Marinette’s purse dangled from the tip. “Are you ready to finish learning the rules of our game?”

“I’m not here to play games. I’m here to make a deal.” She brought the toad out from behind her back so that Kaibliss could clearly see her alleged captive. “You have something of mine, but I have something of yours as well, you see.”

The look of genuine surprise filtering through his pale blue eyes as the basilisk slinked closer gave Marinette a surge of courage. If he was surprised, that had to mean her plan was working, right? He was definitely distracted, but would it last?

Princess Chloe played her role with aplomb. Thrashing and squirming in Marinette’s grip, her bumps limbs flailed uselessly as she screamed, “Unhand me, vile miscreant!”

“Princess Chloe?” Kaibliss sounded more than surprised. His languid hiss held a distinct note of shock. “How, by the light of the Sister Moons, did you manage to escape your eternal garden?”

“It wasn’t quite so eternal after I set fire to the willow tree.” Marinette laughed scathingly. She was immensely gratified when the basilisk’s milky gaze flickered in the direction of the orchard, as if expecting to see a thick plume of smoke rising over the rolling hills.

“You’re bluffing.” He hissed.

“If I were bluffing, Princess Chloe wouldn’t be here.” Marinette countered. She made a show of tightening her grip and the toad released a squawk of faux-pain. “Now hand over my purse or your precious pet gets it.”

“That doesn’t seem at all like something you’d do, my dear.”

“Don’t underestim view what humans are capable of when we have nothing left to lose.” She growled.

“I see that you are alone, other than Her Highness of course…” Kaibliss’ thick forked tongue, purple and dripping with poison, darted out of his mouth as he tasted the air. “I certainly hope nothing unsavory happened to prince charming. If only you had remained under the mountain with me, I could have guarded against such misfortune.”

“So it was you who told the Sunset Guard to come looking for us.” She wasn’t surprised, she just wanted to keep him talking as long as possible. If the monster realized what Adrien was planning before he finished the job…
She didn’t want to think about it.

Kaibliss was much nearer now, barely 20 feet away. But she needed him much closer for her plan to work.

“Only him, my sweet. You, on the other fang, they were under strict orders not to touch. We have no need of him, and Adrien has always been so receptive to the mental touch. He is far more valuable as brain food in the Southern Continent than as your hapless paramour.”

Marinette’s vision tinted ladybug red. “How dare you speak of him that way.”

“With all due respect, Mademoiselle, you are the hero. What do you need him for?”

Princess Chloe’s pained yelp wasn’t faked this time as Marinette shook with rage and her grasp unconsciously tightened. “Adrien Agreste proved he was a hero the day he met you and threw a shoe in your face when he was six years old.” She spat fire and ice. “Chat Noir is an important part of the reason Ladybug became a superhero in the first place. He is the only reason I didn’t drown myself in that river yesterday. How dare you denigrate him, you sniveling worm.”

“It is not my intention to denigrate him.” The basilisk shrugged by arching his midsection. He was close enough now that she could smell his breath. It smelled like old blood and decay.

“Oh my, Grandma, what big teeth you have…

“Try to see things from my perspective. Adrien would have whisked you away to some dank forgotten corner of the globe to hide. But now, with him captured, you will have to rescue him, no? The journey will be long and treacherous, and you are bound to encounter marvels and mysteries beyond your wildest dreams. I wonder how far you are willing to go to rescue him? To the ends of the earth? To hell and back? I look forward to spending many years watching the thrilling tale play out.” His hiss slipped into a purr. “Which reminds me…Rule #3 is the game does not stop until I say it is over. You cannot run. You cannot hide. You have no choice but to play along. Because you owe me.”

He was almost upon them now. Chloe had fallen silent, but Marinette could still feel her trembling. Whether from fear or rage, it was impossible to tell. He circled them slowly, victoriously, a gleeful twinkle in his milky eyes. Marinette was slightly disgusted by his overconfidence, though it certainly worked to her advantage.

He was huge. His monstrous hide closed them in, surrounding them entirely with a wall of scaly muscle. There was nowhere to run, no turning back. It was kill or be killed. He towered over her as he hissed:

“Give me the princess.”

“Give me my purse first.” Marinette snapped back, undaunted. Sure, he was big, but she’d fought bigger. “That’s the deal, you can either take it or leave it.”

He lowered his snout until he was so close that his breath ruffled her hair. She could see tiny bubbles of black ooze bursting with anticipation at the tip of his fangs. Marinette grit her teeth and kept her expression blank, refusing to give into his intimidation tactics.

“You do realize I could simply eat you now?”

“Oh course.” She replied, her voice steady. “But we both know you won’t. Because I’m the only one who can give you what you really want.”
“And what is it that I want?” Every word carried the stench of death. Marinette feared she would choke on it but she forged on.

“Ladybug.” She bit out. “Give me my purse, and I’ll bring you Ladybug.”

“…how did you find out about Ladybug?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“I see. And the princess?”

“I like to think of her as insurance.”

“Hey!” Princess Chloe squawked, genuinely offended. Kaibliss chuckled.

“My, my, my. You’ve got it all figured out, haven’t you, Miss Lucky Charm?” The basilisk cocked his head to the side, causing the greasy black feathers on the top of his skull to bob back and forth.

“Very well, I agree to your proposal. I’m sure you have some clever trap already planned, but I am intrigued by the possibilities. Let the games begin.” The end of his tail appeared over the swell of his massive coils, Marinette’s purse dangling from the tip. Marinette forced herself not to move as he lowered it over her and it fell to the pebbled mud at her feet.

“Now…” Rumbled the basilisk, his coils shuddering as he gathered himself. He was about as close as he could be without eating her. “Give me the princess.”

He was right where she wanted him.

Marinette moved with purpose, lifting the toad up towards the snake as if she were about to place her captive on top of his snout.

“Farewell, princess.” Marinette whispered as she gave the toad one final kiss. “Good luck.”

The snake rolled his eyes at this display of affection. “Yes, yes, that’s all well and good, but we don’t have all—”

Poof

Kaibliss didn’t have a chance to react, it all happened so fast. Chloe was already moving before her woman form had finished reconstructing. Without even leaving Marinette’s embrace, the princess spun around and plunged the shard of mirror glass directly into the monster’s huge milky eye.

Everybody screamed. Marinette in surprise, Kaibliss in agony and Princess Chloe in bloody vicious triumph.

For a second, the basilisk’s eyeball swiveled wildly in its socket, black blood welling along the lid. His whole body writhed with pain. Marinette flinched, fearful that his death throes would crush them, but the princess merely watched with grim satisfaction as the monster began to change. It started with his ruined eye, a sudden stillness, a coarsening of texture, a deadening of flesh and hide and scale. Marinette’s breath caught in her throat with awe as, before her very eyes, Kaibliss turned to stone, the mirror glass shard forever embedded in his now-granite eye.

This all happened in a second. It took another few seconds for Marinette to recover from her shock enough to realize that Princess Chloe was still screaming.

“Chloe! It’s okay! It’s over! He’s dead!” Marinette grabbed the screaming princess by the shoulders
and hugged her from behind. It was awkward since they didn’t have a lot of space to move around. The basilisk’s coils had turned into stone walls, surrounding them completely. “He’s dead, it’s over, you killed him…” Marinette kept whispering as Chloe’s screams petered out into panting, gulping gasps. When at last the princess had stopped screaming, Marinette allowed the breath she’d been holding to leave her body in a mighty whoosh. Her sweat-drenched brow fell against Chloe’s river-damp hair.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going to do that?” Marinette whispered. She still hadn’t loosened her embrace and she could feel Chloe trembling under her fingers. “I thought the reflection would be enough. You didn’t have to…”

“I wanted to.” The princess spat defiantly.

It wasn’t that Marinette had a problem with how things had gone down, exactly, but she still felt quite strongly that any and all stabbing ought to have been discussed beforehand. It was the principal of the thing.

“Would it have changed anything if I’d told you of my intentions?” The princess added bitterly.

“Did…did you have to stab him?”

“Yes.”

“Would the reflection alone have been enough to turn him to stone?”

“Yes.”

Marinette thought about this for a moment.

“You know what? This is your trauma. It really isn’t any of my business how you cope with it. Forget I said anything, princess. You do you.”

“I’m glad we finally agree on something.” Princess Chloe rolled her shoulders to signal that she had reached her limit for physical contact. Marinette released her, stepping back the full foot of space allowed by the stone coils.

Finally, Marinette allowed herself to look down at the purse lying on the ground by their feet. Her hands trembled as she picked it up and popped the clasp. A brittle sob of relief elbowed its way out of her mouth when she slipped her fingers into the secret side pocket and found her earrings, safe and secure and right where she’d left them. Marinette swiftly returned her Miraculous to her earlobes. The comfort of their familiar weight was somewhat lessened by the fact that Tikki did not immediately materialize in a bubble of brilliant light. Nevertheless, Marinette immediately felt calmer and more in control, as if a veil had been lifted and she was thinking with a clear mind for the first time since—

“Ohhhh fuck me with a flying broomstick…”

“What?” Princess Chloe had been trying to figure out the best way to climb over the petrified monster but now she was completely focused on Marinette. “How and why?”

“Huh? No, I didn’t mean it literally, please don’t do that.” Marinette began pushing the princess to climb up on Kaibliss’ snout. “C’mon, we need to get you the fuck out of here as fast as possible.”

“What about the Sunset Guard?” Princess Chloe asked as she used the basilisk’s gaping maw, forever locked in a silent scream of agony, as a stepping stone. She pulled herself onto the top of his
head and slipped down the other side.

“No time.” Marinette grunted as she followed. “Everything is about to go to hell in a couple minutes. Hurry up.”

“What are you on about now?” Princess Chloe asked as Marinette dragged her towards the river.

“I think Chat was right.” Marinette kept one eye on the mountaintop and a hand on her purse as she kept pushing Chloe towards the water. “I think Ladybug has been messing with my head, keeping me from seeing the full picture. But as soon as I put on my Miraculous, I knew what she was planning…and if we don’t get out of here fast she’s going to kill us too.”

“I thought you already knew what her plan was!” Princess Chloe squawked. Then she groaned and smacked her forehead. “I mean it. What its plan is. Ugh, you pokins are so annoying!”

“I didn’t think it through all the way.” Marinette snapped. A sudden swell of knowledge was surging up her feet from the ground below. She could sense the rumbling starting way down deep. “Now listen to me, Chloe. Swim down the river until you see an oak tree, the biggest oak tree you’ve ever seen in your life. There’s a hollow in the trunk, climb in there and the forest spirits will protect you.”

Princess Chloe blinked and crossed her arms. “How do you know that? And protect me from what? Is Ladybug still telling you things?”

“No.” Marinette shook her head. She knew herself, and the wisdom flowing into her from the land wasn’t coming from herself. But it seemed to Marinette that whoever it was who was communicating with her right now, it was someone she knew very, very well. Someone she was eager to see again. “This isn’t Ladybug. I think it’s Tikki. Now go!”

“What about you? What about Noirkins? And what is Tikki?”

“Don’t worry about us, we’ll be fine. Probably. Maybe. We’ll figure something out. Now please go, Chloe!”

“Marinette—”

“Chloe! Leave now! Don’t make me say it again!”

“I’m going, I’m going, sheesh. But I thought you might be interested in knowing that I can see the Sunset Guard flying this way.”

“Aw shit.”

***

Ladybug guided Adrien through the heavy darkness deep under the mountain. The air was dense and acrid, trapped in the caves for centuries. The deeper they got, the hotter the temperature and the thicker the sour odor of sulfur became. Ladybug’s soft pink light lit the way and whenever Adrien came to a split in the tunnels he held the blade aloft and followed the direction in which the glow shone brightest. As they walked, he spoke to her.

“For the record, I’m still not okay with you traipsing around Marinette’s head, even if you are
counterparts. She says it’s fine, but I think you’ve been messing with her and I’m not comfortable with it. That being said…I’m sorry that he left you behind. You didn’t deserve to be trapped in that skull for 500 years. And…and I’m glad we found you.” Was it his imagination, or did the pummel suddenly feel colder in his hands? “Uh…are you…are you mad at me?”

You had to make a choice. Me or her. The answer arrived in his mind, uninvited but not unwelcome. You chose her. And you died anyway.

Adrien frowned. “That wasn’t me. I don’t care about genetics or souls or string vibrations or whatever it is that makes us reflect ourselves across the multiverse. I’m defined by my experiences far more than I am defined by anything else. We may both be Adrien or Adrikins or whatever, but we are not the same person. That goes for you and Marinette as well. I’m less sure about Chloe, but she’s…y’know, Chloe. Normal rules do not apply.”

The actors change, but the story stays the same.

Adrien stumbled when the implication hit him. “Do you think I’m going to do the same thing to Marinette?” His eyes widened as the metal froze and nipped his palms. “You do! You think I’m going to leave her behind because that’s what he did to you!”

Am I wrong?

“Of course you are!” He snarled. “I’d never do that! If anyone’s going to leave it’ll be Ma—” He cut himself short and came to a sudden standstill in the tunnel. “No, wait, that’s not what I…I only meant that I wouldn’t…I’d never…” The pink light sparkled off his silver ring and nearly blinded him. “I can’t…I can’t walk away from this, because it’s my parents and it’s my life, so I can’t…but Marinette’s different. Her family isn’t all wrapped up in magic and secrets. She has this whole other life that she wants and that she’s invested in. So now that Hawk Moth’s out of the picture, why wouldn’t she…oh, fuck me, Ladybug, am I scared that Marinette’s going to decide to stop being a superhero?”

Ding ding ding! Someone give the boy a prize.

“But that’s…she wouldn’t…even if she did, she’d still be Marinette. It’s not like I’d never see her again…oh my god, is this why I’ve been so mad at her for not wanting to reveal our identities? It always felt like she was buying time. Like our superhero selves didn’t matter as much. Because even though she knew, she didn’t want to make it real and I thought—”

You still don’t get it, do you?

“If you’re going to force me to have painful self realizations, the least you could do is be a little patient.” He huffed.

I am Ladybug. Marinette is Ladybug. Ladybug does not exist because a boy asked her to exist. Ladybug does not exist because your father lost himself to despair and desperation. Ladybug does not exist because an old man handed her some magic jewelry. Marinette is a superhero because that is what she needs to be. She cannot stop being a hero anymore than she can stop loving you, in this or any other universe.

Adrien began walking again as he mulled the sword’s message. Her gentle glow lit his way as he wandered ever deeper into the mountain.

“Back home, people don’t ask why there’s two of us.” He said eventually. “Even other superheroes don’t ask. Ladybug has a partner who helps her. That’s all people need to know, and for the most
part they don’t question it. They don’t ask why. It took me a long time to understand, but the reason I’m Chat Noir, the reason our Miraculouses always come as a pair…it’s so that there’s someone who can stop her if she ever goes too far. We’ve never talked about it, but she keeps getting stronger and her powers are…impossible. Unbelievable, unstoppable. Far beyond anything our world could deal with, if it ever came to that. Which is why I’m there, just in case the world needs someone to stop the unstoppable. Every superhero needs a reason, right? That’s mine, and I’ve never been comfortable with that but I’m stuck with it.” The sword didn’t feel cold anymore. Instead the metal felt pleasantly warm. Ladybug was listening. “I am scared, Ladybug, but I don’t think I’m scared of her giving up her Miraculous. I’m scared because I don’t know who I am without her. And maybe…maybe that’s something I should try to figure out. But if you’re right, and Marinette is Ladybug no matter what, then that means I’m Chat Noir no matter what. Not because I love her, not because I want to be, but because that’s what our world needs from us. And I think that’s what it means to be a superhero. It’s not a choice. It’s a responsibility.”

Which is why she didn’t want to tell me her name all these years. He thought. Because it was never about us. And it also means that she’s going to keep jumping first and thinking second, no matter how many times she promises to be more careful. Because that’s the person I fell in love with.

“But I think it’s different now.” He finished with a content smile. “There’s been so much going on we haven’t had a chance to talk about it, but I think she’s decided to stay. And I won’t leave her. Not unless she needs me to.”

Good. Ladybug sighed happily. That’s what I wanted to hear. We’ve arrived, by the way.

Adrien stopped walking and looked around. “This is the place?”

Yes. This is home.

It didn’t look like much.

In fact, as far as Adrien could tell there was no discernable way to differentiate this particular section of craggy dank tunnel from the rest of the maze they had already wandered through. But if Ladybug said this was the right spot then he had to trust her.

See that crevice right there?

Adrien spotted a long diagonal split in the rock.

Plunge me in there, like Marinette did with the willow tree. Then get ready to run.

“How am I supposed to get back to the surface without you?” He muttered apprehensively as he approached the crevice.

Mother Mountain will guide you until you reach the surface. Do not be afraid.

“I’m not.” He grumbled, holding the sword aloft. The pink light grew brighter and brighter, stunningly, blindingly bright, until it was like holding up the sun. “Goodbye, Ladybug. It’s been a wild ride.”

Farewell, my love.

Adrien stabbed the sword into the stone.

The resulting explosion killed him instantly.
At least, he thought it did, but then it occurred to him that being dead couldn’t possibly hurt that much.

“Ow.” He groaned, rolling over as more rock and dust fell on his head. “Couldn’t you have warned me that would…happen…” Adrien looked up and saw what appeared to be hell itself surging up the tunnel to get him. “Oh fuck.”

Adrien ran.

***

Whump whump whump

Leathery wings beat the air, creating a gut-throbbing bowel-clenching rhythm that grew into an overpowering crescendo as the Sunset Guard bore down on the Mother Mountain. It took every ounce of her remaining strength for Marinette to remain upright as the massive iguanas circled in the sky above her. There was no time to run, nowhere to hide, and she was being held in place by their thrall anyway. Marinette braced herself for the inevitable assault and prayed that Princess Chloe had been successful in her escape.

Marinette’s mind raced. Analyzing, calculating, plotting her next move. She didn’t have to survive long, just long enough to find Adrien and send out the distress signal. That seemed doable.

They’re not dragons, they don’t breathe fire. Weapons include claws, tails, telepathy. Don’t get close. Keep moving. They’re too fast in the air so get them down. Those wings look delicate, if I move fast maybe I can get them to run into each other, even the numbers a little bit. Telepathy will probably be an issue but there’s not much I can do about—

BOOM

The entire world froze in its tracks.

As one, Marinette and the dozen or so flying iguanas turned to look at the mountaintop as the first waves of snow sloughed down the peaks. They saw the thick black smoke billowing from the summit.

BOOM

“What have I done?” Marinette whispered as the ground beneath her feet buckled and groaned and the iguanas in the darkening sky began to panic, beating their fragile wings as hard as they possibly could in their haste to flee. Even though he wasn’t there, she heard Adrien’s voice answer loud and clear:

Well, it looks like you sent your boyfriend to set off a volcano using a magic sword, Bugaboo. But let’s look on the bright side, at least you got your purse!

BOOM

Marinette jerked back a few paces as the mountaintop exploded, stopping when her bare feet landed in the muddy river shallows. A geyser of lava shot into the air and began pouring down the cliffs. Marinette’s blood ran winter-cold even as the tips of her hair began to shrivel and burn in the
volcanic heat. As she beheld the full force of nature, she forgot about her plan, about her victory, about Ladybug’s promises, about take out menus and even about her homesickness.

There was only one thought in Marinette’s mind as she ran towards the raging mountain, stumbling as the earth rippled beneath her.

“Adrien…”

***

Adrien ran, but without Plagg he was nowhere near fast enough to outrun the flood of magma nipping at his heels. “Dammit Ladybug!” He roared. “Where’s that help you promised?!”

**HERE.**

The stones beneath his feet moved and shifted, lifting him up towards the tunnel ceiling. Adrien screamed and braced himself for the inevitable bone-pulverizing impact, but it never came. He opened his eyes and lowered his hands from his scalp. He could see nothing but darkness. He could still feel movement, could still hear the earth around him shifting and shaking, but he couldn’t see anything at all.

Then he thought he heard an only-recently-but-very-distinctively-familiar laugh.

“Tikki?” Adrien gasped.

**NOT EXACTLY.** The Mother Mountain answered. **BUT CLOSE ENOUGH. HOLD ON TIGHT, LITTLE CAT.**

*Hold on to what?* Adrien wanted to ask, but he never got the chance. A burst of angry red light appeared above him and the next thing Adrien knew he was being thrust out of the mountain and was flying through the smoky sparkling atmosphere. He hit the ground hard and slid to the base of a hill, gravel ripping his pants and scraping his skin as he fell.

“Adrien!”

**Ladybug?**

Cool hands wrapped around his forearms and dragged him to his feet. “Come on!” Marinette shouted in his ear. “We have to run!”

Adrien shook his head as she yanked him towards the river. “It’s too late.” He rasped, his throat and lungs filling with ash. “We don’t have enough time…”

“We have to try!” She screamed. “We have to—”

**BOOM**

It was like a blockbuster movie about a natural disaster. Like that scene when the average run of the mill family-next-door is rushing to get the dog and the stroller in the backseat of the car and you think they’re going to make it if they hurry, but then all the sound cuts out and a hush falls over the suburb as the toddler turns to look out the car window and sees The End looming on the horizon.
Except those people were actors and the thing they were looking at was a camera. It wasn’t real.

The tidal wave of lava about to crash down on Marinette and Adrien was very, very real.

Adrien didn’t think. He didn’t have time. Instinct took over as he wrapped left arm around Marinette’s waist and pulled her flush against him. With his right arm he raised his open palm against the wave, his silver ring reflecting the blood-red gleam of certain death.

“Cataclysm!”

Pain.

Fire.

Burning.

Help.

Lava was pretty fucking hot, but it was nothing compared to the soul-slaughtering scorch that ravaged Adrien’s body as black fire poured out of his ring and shot towards the wave. The Cataclysm arched over them, creating a shield of darkness that turned the lava to obsidian as soon as it made contact. The obsidian formed a shell around them, sheltering them from the lava as the wave made landfall and left them trapped on a tiny black island in a sea of red and gold and bright hot white.

Adrien screamed and collapsed on the cracking, sweltering rocks, dragging Marinette down with him.

“Adrien!” Marinette cried, struggling to process what had happened. Did he…did he just use the Cataclysm?! But he isn’t…I thought we couldn’t…is this because he was transformed when he jumped through the portal? Such concerns were shoved from her mind when she saw what the magic had done to him.

His entire right arm was blistering and raw, ripped apart from the inside and wracked by the aftershocks of the Cataclysm. Wounds flickered across his flesh, magically appearing and then vanishing and then reappearing on another part of his arm. There was nothing Marinette could do but watch as he suffered. His flesh trembled, the muscles in his arm straining and bulging as if trying to escape the confines of his skin. Trickles of blood dripped from sores that opened and closed as she sat there and barely remembered to keep breathing.

“Adrien…” Marinette’s eyes filled with tears as he whimpered and pressed his face into her thigh.

“Where’s your…” He hissed through gritted teeth. “…Lucky…Charm?”

“Right. Right. It’s here.” Marinette dug into her purse with shaking fingers and pulled out the pamphlet she had received from the Union of Unidentified Colleagues. It had only been a few days since Alya took her to meet the Founder. It felt like a few lifetimes. She flipped the pamphlet over to read the instructions on the back cover. “Hold on, okay? Please? For me? I don’t…I don’t know how long this will take.”

Adrien groaned and flinched as the sores on his arm began to ooze a black, foul-smelling puss.

There wasn’t a moment to lose.

Marinette bit down on the delicate flesh on the inside of her wrist, blanking her mind and forcing her
jaw to close hard enough to draw blood. Using a shaking finger tip, she smeared her blood on her eyelids and her lips before quickly doing the same to Adrien. He cringed away from her touch, but luckily he was too far gone in his own agony to realize where the strange sticky substance came from, or he would have put up a fight. Crouched over him protectively, Marinette closed her eyes, kissed his sweat-drenched brow and recited the incantation.

“Magic Mirror hear my call
Part the veil and break the wall
Search the stars and stranger ground
For I am lost and must be found.”

Adrien opened his eyes a sliver when she finished. “That’s…it?”

“That’s it. Now we wait.”

“How…long?”

“I…” She bit her lip. I don’t know. “I love you.”

“Mari…”

“I love you, I love you, I love you so much.”

“…love you…milady…”

“I love you, I love you, I love you, I have always loved you, I will always love you, I love you…”

She kept telling him how much she loved him until the ash clogged her throat and the fumes stole her sight. Marinette collapsed on top of Adrien and they drifted together into the darkness.

For a long time…

There was nothing…

And then…

“—te!”

“—en!”

“—ette!”

Voices.

“Marinette!”

“Adrien!”

Someone…
“Maybe we should try using their superhero names. Oy! Ladybug! Chat Noir! It’s okay—we’re friendly! We’re from the Union! We got your distress signal! Are you two still alive?”

“This is a real mess, isn’t it? Looks to me like this world is in for some good ol’ fashioned climate disruption. I’m picking up readings of sulfur dioxide in the atmosphere like I’ve never seen before. And there are some major psychic disturbances emanating from the volcano. Ouch!”

“Yeah, news flash Lazer Strike, lava’s hot.”

“Har har.”

Who?

“Over here! I think I’ve found something!”

“Is it them?! Are they—OH MY GOD MARINETTE! Outta my way, Chamelion. Marinette? Marinette!”

Warm hands pulled Marinette out of her drift and she opened her eyes. Her vision was blurred and her mind was dull, but she knew that pointed mask, knew those hazel eyes…

Alya?

No…

“Rena?”

“Oh, thank god, Marinette, I thought…” Rena Rouge choked as she cradled her best friend in her lap. “It’s okay now. I’m here. I got you, girl, I got you.”

“Ad-Adrien…hurt…”

“He’ll live.” Said another voice, the voice that had found them. She turned her head and saw a tall figure in a lime green onesie. She couldn’t see their face, but she didn’t think this was someone she had ever met before.

“Don’t worry, Mademoiselle Ladybug.” The figure said as consciousness reclaimed her. “We’re Union Search and Rescue. We’re here to bring you home.”

***

Once upon a time, a little girl heard a noise from outside her cell.

At first she feared it was a trick. The monsters sometimes liked playing tricks on the children. It was a good way to keep them scared.

But then she heard it again and again, and it sounded closer each time.

The noise sounded like her name.

She couldn’t be sure, since it had been a very long time since anyone had called her by her name, but she thought the noise was very similar to her name.
And then the noise was right outside the door, and the little girl was afraid.

And then the door opened, and the little girl was afraid.

And then a woman came in, a woman who cried and laughed and ran into the cell and swooped the little girl up in her arms and held onto her for dear life.

The little girl could not remember her own name or the sound of her mother’s voice, but she remembered the warmth of her embrace.

And the little girl was not afraid anymore. And she never returned to that cell.

The world had changed. And it was hard and difficult and sometimes she was still scared, but every night before she went to bed her mother told her stories about the brave Princess Chloe who had vanquished the monsters and her mysterious helpers from another world.

Of all the stories her mother told, the little girl’s favorites were the ones about the superheroes Marinette and Noirkins.

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Chapter End Notes

I'm back! I'm really excited to post the last few chapters of Basilisk. I'm not going to commit to an update schedule right now, but the next chapter should be up soon.

Remember the very first line of the fic? It was Nino saying:

“Hey Adrien! You’re coming to the street fair with us, right? It’s got a medieval mythology theme. It’s gonna be lit like a supervolcano.”

Because I figured, if I'm going to write a scenario where they go to another universe and destroy a world order of evil telepathic reptiles by setting off a volcano, I should probably mention that as a possibility sooner rather than later. I put a lot of foreshadowing into this story, but I'm hoping some things were still a surprise.

And we still have a few more surprises to go! More drama! More romance! More protective Nino and Alya scenes!

Stay tuned.

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